



Maldives: Reverse the decision to dissolve the Maldivian Democracy Network

(Bangkok/Geneva/Kathmandu/Paris, 6 November 2019) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) and the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders – a partnership between International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) – strongly condemn the decision on 5 November 2019 of the Maldivian authorities to dissolve the prominent human rights organisation, the Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN). We urge the Government to immediately reverse this decision. MDN is a member organisation of both FORUM-ASIA and FIDH.

The Government's move was instigated by a protracted smear campaign against MDN, its members and staff. Recent developments have occurred in connection with a report, 'Preliminary Assessment on Radicalization in the Maldives', which MDN published in 2016. MDN has since issued an apology for the 'unfortunate use of language in some sections of the report' and has retracted the report for further review in consultation with Islamic scholars.

MDN's dissolution was announced by the Registrar of Associations under the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Community Empowerment based on Articles 19 (a) and (b), and Article 32 of the 2003 Associations Act.

The announcement to dissolve MDN comes as the organisation is already facing a 'temporary' suspension order issued by the Registrar of Associations on 10 October 2019, pending a recent police investigation into the 2016 report.

According to the announcement about the dissolution of MDN, the investigation found that parts of the 2016 report were 'contrary to tenets of Islam', which amounted to blasphemy in the Maldives.

The investigation lacked fairness and transparency, and did not abide by a due process. The finding of blasphemy was based on the Maldives Police Service's review of the report's content in cooperation with the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, which filed the initial complaint against MDN. No details concerning the investigation – nor its findings – have been made available to MDN and the general public.

Under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which the Maldives is a state party, the Government has an obligation to respect and protect the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the right to freedom of association. These rights are guaranteed by Articles 19 and 22 of the ICCPR, and can only be subjected to certain restrictions that are 'necessary' for the respect of the rights or freedoms of others, and for the protection of national security, of public order (*ordre public*), or of public health or morals. The Government's measure to dissolve MDN is inconsistent with the strict test of necessity and proportionality required by Article 19 and 22 of the ICCPR.

We urge the Government to uphold its legal obligations under human rights instruments to which the Maldives is a state party and to avoid further shrinking of civic space in the country. We also urge the

Government to meaningfully engage with civil society organisations to address the serious issue of the radicalisation in the Maldives.

MDN is a respected and legitimate human rights organisation that has a role of great significance in upholding democracy and human rights in the Maldives. Its dissolution should be reversed immediately, and MDN should be allowed to do its work without any constraints or fears of reprisals.

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