

Maldives: Dissolution of the Maldivian Democracy Network is violation of fundamental human rights

(Bangkok/Kathmandu, 25 December 2019) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) strongly condemns the announcement by the Maldivian authorities on 19 December 2019 that the Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN) has been dissolved. MDN is a prominent human rights organisation, and a member of FORUM-ASIA.

On 19 December 2019, the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Community Empowerment announced through a press statement that MDN had not responded to the Ministry's communication of 5 November 2019, which announced the banning of MDN. MDN has denied this, and has called it a 'blatant untruth' in a press statement issued on 20 December 2019. In the communication from the Ministry, MDN was given 45 days to settle its assets. The deadline expired on 19 December 2019.

The Government of the Maldives had earlier said that the decision to ban MDN was made based on an investigation conducted by the Maldives Police Service and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, to review a 2015 research report on radicalisation in the country.

On 8 December 2019, MDN officially requested the Maldives Police Service to share a copy of the investigation report. As of today, the report has not been shared. No due process was followed, and no opportunity was provided to MDN to learn of, reply to or make clarifications on the allegations. The investigation lacked even the most basic level of transparency.

The Government's investigation was instigated by a protracted smear campaign against: MDN; the four authors of the report; and MDN's staff. The attacks and harassment have continued, even though MDN has 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.

FORUM-ASIA reiterates that 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 20 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; 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 20 of the ICCPR.

MDN has worked tirelessly to protect and promote democracy and the fundamental rights of the people of the Maldives over the past 15 years. MDN has established itself as a credible and reputed organisation. Its dissolution will have a disastrous impact on civic space in the country.

FORUM-ASIA, along with its members, urges the Government of the Maldives to withdraw the dissolution immediately, and to allow MDN to continue its work without any constraints or fear of reprisals.

About FORUM-ASIA:

FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 81 member organisations in 21 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA has offices in Bangkok, Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratisation.

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