



Upcoming UN review critical moment for Maldives to address civic freedom gaps

(Bangkok/Geneva, 2 November 2020) – CIVICUS and the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) call on United Nations (UN) member states to urge the Government of the Maldives to protect civic freedoms as its human rights record is examined by the UN on 4 November 2020 as part of the 36th session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

At the country's second UPR five years ago, UN member states made 16 recommendations that directly related to civic space. The Maldives subsequently committed to taking concrete measures to guarantee freedom of expression and the media, to ensure laws, policies and mechanisms that recognize and protect the work of civil society and to create and maintain a safe and enabling environment, in which human rights defenders can operate free from hindrance and insecurity.

In a [joint submission](#) to this UPR cycle, our organisations assessed the implementation of these recommendations and compliance with international human rights law and standards over the last five years. Despite reforms and the opening up of civic space following the November 2018 elections, in particular with the repeal of the draconian Anti-Defamation and Freedom of Expression Act, existing legislation and regulations fall short of the country's international obligations to guarantee fundamental freedoms and protect human rights defenders. These laws and regulations continue to stifle the legitimate work of human rights defenders and civil society.

The joint submission highlights concerns around the Freedom of Peaceful Assembly Act 2013 which imposes undue limitations on assemblies and gives the police wide discretion in granting permission. The 2003 Associations Act similarly contains provisions inconsistent with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which the government has failed to address.

Despite commitments in the last UPR to ensure freedom of association and a safe an enabling environment for civil society, in December 2019, the government arbitrarily [dissolved](#) human rights organisation Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN), and seized their funds, amid pressure from Islamist groups for alleged blasphemy. The decision was based on a 2016 report on the impact of growing radicalisation on human rights and a protracted smear campaign against the organisation and its staff by Islamist groups.

Similarly, in June 2020, [extremist groups](#) launched a social media campaign against the country's main women's rights organisation, Uthema – calling for it be banned for being anti-Islam – over its 2020 report to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Islamist groups and criminal gangs with alleged links to prominent politicians continue to threaten and attack human rights defenders, journalists and civil society organisations with impunity. The police have often failed to investigate such threats or have done so only cursorily, even when violent attacks have followed the threats.

The enforced disappearance of journalist Ahmed Rilwan in August 2014 and the murder of blogger and human rights defender Yameen Rasheed in April 2017 are stark reminders of the serious consequences of threats and the extent of impunity for violence against human rights defenders. Despite the establishment of a Presidential Commission in November 2018 to probe enforced disappearances and murders, both victims' families raised [serious concerns](#) over the government's lack of commitment to pursuing the perpetrators.

'While the space for civic freedoms has opened up under this government, much more needs to be done to protect human rights defenders from attacks and smear campaigns and to bring the perpetrators to justice. The authorities should ensure the family and friends of Yameen Rasheed and Rilwan Ahmed do not have to wait any longer for justice,' said Lisa Majumdar, Advocacy and Networks Officer from CIVICUS.

UN member states must use the upcoming UPR of the Maldives to call on the government to protect human rights defenders and civil society organisations and to undertake the necessary legal reforms to guarantee civic freedoms.

'The Universal Periodic Review of Maldives is an important opportunity to hold Maldives accountable to their commitments including to reform laws related to freedom of assembly and association that are still inconsistent with international standards. States must also use the opportunity to speak up against the arbitrary dissolution of leading human rights group MDN as well as the government's failure to adequately respond to threats to human rights defenders and organisations from nationalist and Islamist groups,' said Ahmed Adam, UN Advocacy Programme Manager of FORUM-ASIA.

The examination of the Maldives will take place during the 36th Session of the UPR. The UPR is a process, in operation since 2008, which examines the human rights records of all 193 UN Member States every four and a half years. The review is an interactive dialogue between the State delegation and members of the Council and addresses a broad range of human rights topics. Following the review, a report and recommendations are prepared, which is discussed and adopted at the following session of the Human Rights Council.

About FORUM-ASIA:

The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is a Bangkok-based regional network of 81 member organisations across 21 Asian countries, with consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. Founded in 1991, FORUM-ASIA works to strengthen movements for human rights and sustainable development through research, advocacy, capacity-development and solidarity actions in Asia and beyond. It has sub-regional offices in Geneva, Jakarta, and Kathmandu. www.forum-asia.org

About CIVICUS:

CIVICUS is a global alliance of civil society organisations and activists dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society throughout the world. The CIVICUS Monitor is a research tool that provides close to real-time data on the state of civil society and civic freedoms in 196 countries. The data is generated through a collaboration with more than 20 civil society research partners. <https://monitor.civicus.org/>

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