

Press Statement
6 April 2016

Absolute infringement on Freedom of Expression and Media Freedom alarming and intolerable

The systematic obstruction of media freedom and the freedom to express in the Maldives is an intentional and direct attempt by the government to eliminate all forms of political dissent, revelation of truth and the expression of opinion that does not promote the façade of a democracy that the Maldives has seen over the past few years.

Attacks on freedom of expression and media such as the murder attempt at journalist (Asward) Ibrahim of Raajje Television (February 2013), the arson attack on Raajje Television (October 2013) and disappearance of journalist Ahmed Rilwan of Minivan News (August 2014) remain “under investigation” with no substantial progress. This lagging behind in performance by the Maldives Police Service shows an attitude of deliberate delay tactics while other cases related to politicians are quickly sent for prosecution. Moreover, the press conference by the police on 3rd April shows that the police have not been forthcoming with accurate information regarding Rilwan’s disappearance, and merely relayed information that was made public by this organisation (MDN) 18 months ago.

The ignorance of oversight bodies such as the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives and the Police Integrity Commission in treating complaints over police negligence and misconduct over the above-mentioned cases demonstrates a clear disregard for fundamental rights and democratic norms, and raises the question over the independence of these institutions. The recent comments made on social media by the Vice Chair of the National Integrity Commission mirror a similar sense of lack of independence.

The parliament, led by the ruling Progressive Party of Maldives has effectively removed or limited freedom of expression and media freedom through legislation; the bill on freedom of expression and criminalisation of defamation awaiting deliberation at this time.

Lawyers have faced harassment for speaking out and for representing certain individuals and entities. Such harassment of lawyers have been subjected by both the police and the judiciary, taking away the right to timely legal assistance of their clients. Authorities have been known to obstruct timely meetings for lawyers with detainees, at many instances resulting in lawyers being unable to assist or prepare detainees before remand hearings. The repeated use of the threat of contempt of court charges against lawyers have become a norm, with several lawyers being suspended from practicing in courts.

The judiciary has banned and removed certain media access to court proceedings, used different excuses not to allow journalists to have seats in the galleries, failed to share information related to court proceedings and at times conducted trials without notice. Constant threats of “legal action” and charges of contempt of court against journalists, warnings and threats given to journalists prior to some trials and harassment of some journalists by way of body checks and the refusal to allow entry based on clothes worn with short sleeves are petty and unacceptable tactics used by the judiciary to instil fear in journalists. The recent ban of notebooks, pens and recording devices obstruct media from bringing factual information to the public confidently. By the obstruction of media in court proceedings the judiciary is in effect removing the right to access timely and accurate information.

The forced discontinuation of *Haveeru*, a newspaper over 36 years in circulation, is yet another blow to free media in the country. We do not believe that an ownership conflict should have evoked an order to shut down the newspaper. It can only be perceived as a politically motivated act against the paper.

MDN applaud the efforts of journalists who have continued to express and share information despite the obstacles in their way, and those journalists who have come forward to protest against all the injustices they face.

It is with great dismay that we observed the brutal, inhumane and degrading treatment subjected to the protesting journalists by the Maldives Police Service.

At this time where the State has wholly failed the right to freedom of expression, assembly and media freedom in the country, we call upon the international community to take necessary steps to hold this government to account and to assist in the restoration of peace and humanity in the Maldives.

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