

Maldives

Though most famous internationally as a popular tourist destination, Maldives has been described as undergoing a battle between liberal and literal interpretations of Islam, with serious human rights violations linked to fundamentalists, and attacks on perceived atheists and homosexuals in recent years.

Constitution and government	Education and children's rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
<p><u>Religious authorities have supreme authority over the state</u> <u>State legislation is largely or entirely derived from religious law or by religious authorities</u></p>		<p><u>Government figures or state agencies openly marginalize, harass, or incite hatred or violence against the non-religious</u> <u>It is illegal to register an explicitly Humanist, atheist, secularist or other non-religious NGO or other human rights organization, or such groups are persecuted by authorities</u></p>	<p><u>Expression of core Humanist principles on democracy, freedom and human rights is brutally repressed</u> <u>'Apostasy' or conversion from a specific religion is outlawed and punishable by death</u> <u>It is illegal to advocate secularism or church-state separation, or such advocacy is suppressed</u> <u>It is illegal or unrecognised to identify as an atheist or as non-religious</u></p>
<p><u>The non-religious are barred from some government offices (including posts reserved for particular religions or sects)</u></p>	<p><u>Religious or ideological instruction is mandatory in all or most state-funded schools with no secular or humanist alternative</u></p>	<p><u>The non-religious are persecuted socially or there are prohibitive social taboos against atheism, humanism or secularism</u> <u>Prohibitive interreligious social control (including interreligious marriage bans)</u> <u>Religious control over family law or legislation on moral matters</u></p>	<p><u>'Blasphemy' is outlawed or criticism of religion is restricted and punishable with a prison sentence</u></p>

Constitution and government

Education and children's rights

Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals

Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values

<u>There is an established church or state religion</u> <u>State-funding of religious institutions or salaries, or discriminatory tax exemptions</u>	<u>There is state funding of at least some religious schools</u> <u>Religious schools have powers to discriminate in admissions or employment</u> <u>Religious or ideological instruction is mandatory in at least some public schools (without secular or humanist alternatives)</u>	<u>Discriminatory prominence is given to religious bodies, traditions or leaders</u>	
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Legend

Constitution and government

There is not even formal freedom of religion or belief in the constitution of the Maldives. The constitution designates Islam as the official state religion, and other articles in the constitution appear to make the practice of Islam mandatory. The government and many citizens at all levels interpret the constitution as imposing a requirement that all citizens must be Muslims. While freedom of expression is guaranteed by the constitution, it is not respected in practice.

The government follows civil law based on Islamic law, and this civil law is subordinate to Islamic law. In a situation not covered by civil law, and in certain cases such as divorce and adultery, Islamic law is applied.

Mosques are required to register with the government. The government maintains and funds most mosques.

The constitution stipulates that the president must be Sunni. The constitutional language on the fundamental rights and duties of citizens does not provide for the right to freedom of religion or belief. Furthermore, the constitution precludes non-Muslims from voting and holding public positions.

The constitution does not prohibit discrimination based on religious preference; religion is excluded from a list of attributes for which people should not be discriminated against.

Education and children's rights

Article 36 of the constitution states that it is imperative for parents and the state to provide children with primary and secondary education and section (c) of that article states schools are required to "inculcate obedience to Islam" and "instill love for Islam."

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs mandates Islamic instruction in schools and funds salaries of religious instructors.

Older schools in particular are traditional Islamic or Quaranic schools.

<classbase.com/countries/Maldives/Education-System>

Family, community and society

The government certifies imams, who are responsible for presenting government-approved sermons. By law, no one may publicly discuss Islam unless invited to do so by the government, and imams may not prepare sermons without government authorization.

Family law

By law, a Maldivian woman cannot marry a non-Muslim foreigner unless he converts to Islam first. A Maldivian man, however, can marry a non-Muslim foreigner, if the foreigner is from a religion that is allowed under Islamic Shariah, i.e., Christianity and Judaism. A Maldivian man cannot marry a non-Muslim foreigner from a religion not allowed under Islamic Sharia unless that person converts to Islam prior to marriage.

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

The constitution guarantees freedoms of expression and the press. However, journalists and media outlets routinely face legal harassment and physical assault for reporting anything critical of the government.

Suspension of Maldivian Democracy Network 2019

In early October 2019, the Adhaalath Party issued a statement about the necessity to investigate the activities of the NGO Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN) following a report published by the latter in 2016, titled 'Preliminary Assessment of Radicalisation in Maldives'. The MDN report criticised the Maldivian education system and claimed that the rhetoric used in certain textbooks encouraged extremism and highlighted certain passages of the Quran. The Adhaalath Party condemned the report accusing the MDN of deriding Islamic religion, and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs also stated that the report contradicted the tenets of Islam, handing the case to the police and launching an investigation. Members of the public also condemned MDN's report, with some demanding the NGO's closure.

<edition.mv/news/12791>

<edition.mv/news/12772>

On October 10th, the government issued a statement imposing MDN's temporary cessation of activities "due to [the report's] content slandering Islam and the Prophet Mohamed (PBUH)". The statement assures that the government continues to be committed to "upholding the democratic rights of our citizens including those of expression and peaceful assembly" as recognised by the ICCPR, however emphasises that "these rights cannot be exercised maliciously, in the form of hate-speech, or in a manner that contributes to public discord and enmity". The statement also reminds that the government condemns "those who foment hatred, send out threats, and call or violence against others in the name of defending religion", but nonetheless reminds that "Islam is one of the fundamental sources of our country's democratic framework as well as a source of unity and peace within our community."

<twitter.com/MoFAMv/status/1182285209204510722/photo/1>

While the investigation of MDN is still ongoing as of October 2019, the government's move to demand a cessation of MDN's activities has been heavily criticised by several human rights organisation including the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation Against Torture, as well as by former Maldivian politician and current UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief, Ahmed Shaheed, who tweeted: "How on earth is this

action justified under Article 19 and Article 22 of the ICCPR? How is this government any different from the government of Abdulla Yameen? The government must always act within the law and uphold the rights of everyone!”

<twitter.com/ahmedshaheed/status/1182298625210245120>

<fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/maldives-lift-restrictions-against-maldivian-democracy-network>

Atheism and criticism of Islam

While many religious ‘crimes’ are not individually spelled out under the penal code, wide berth is given for the prosecution of ‘*hudud*’ crimes under Sharia law. The penal code grants judges discretion to impose Sharia penalties, including apostasy and blasphemy

<state.gov/documents/organization/281272.pdf>

The law prohibits public statements that are contrary to Islam and violators face penalties ranging from two to five years in prison or house arrest.

In 2014 police officials confirmed that they were investigating atheist social media for non-compliance with this prohibition (see “Highlighted cases”, below).

Kidnap and intimidation of atheist Facebook users

In June 2014, around 40 men, including known religious extremists and local gang members, abducted several young men who had advocated for secularism and/or gay rights, in a spate of kidnappings in Malé City, with the apparent aim of intimidating online secular activists and taking over “blasphemous” pages. (See “Highlighted cases” below).

Analysts have raised concerns over the growing threat of extremism in the Maldives. A recent report by the US State Department expressed concern over radicalization of youth groups and said funds are being raised in the Maldives to support terrorism abroad. Maldivian media have also said they feel threatened by religious extremists and gangs.

<jihadwatch.org/2014/06/maldives-muslims-kidnap-atheists-force-them-to-accept-islam>

In November 2017, the government launched a new initiative, under which people making fun of Islam on social media will get house calls from government officials to “educate” them about Islam.

<maldivesindependent.com/society/government-house-calls-for-maldivians-insulting-islam-on-social-media-134124>

Highlighted cases

Human rights defender and blogger **Yameen Rasheed**, who work as an IT professional, was found stabbed to death in the stairwell of his apartment in April 2017. He had been an ardent campaigner for justice in the case of the apparent ‘enforced disappearance’ of his friend Ahmed Rilwan (see below). Yameen had also made a series of satirical posts about the spread of radical Islam and the Maldivian government through his blog The Daily Panic. And he was previously arrested along with others in 2015 after taking part in an anti-government rally in the capital. Mr Rasheed had in the past reported receiving regular death threats to police, but had failed to get a response and often his complaints were dropped without investigation. Four men on trial for the murder denied the charges in November 2017.

<nytimes.com/2017/04/23/world/asia/yameen-rasheed-dead-maldives-blogger-dead.html>

<theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/23/maldives-blogger-yameen-rasheed-stabbed-to-death-in-capital>

<raajje.mv/en/news/21058>

In a series of kidnappings in June 2014, **several perceived atheists and homosexuals in Malé city** were detained and intimidated by large gangs of approximately 40 men. The abductees were interrogated on their beliefs, tested on passages from the Quran, and asked to recite the Shahadha (Islamic creed). The men were accused of atheism and homosexuality, and threatened with death. They were forced to hand over their Facebook account passwords and pressured to identify the administrators of the 'Secular Democratic Maldives Movement' and 'Maldivian Atheists' on Facebook. The Maldivian Democratic Party made a statement on the kidnappings, saying, "The extremists blindfolded the young people, took them to remote locations against their will, threatened them with sharp weapons, threatened them with death, issued sentences in a vigilante trial and are now implementing these sentences..." Sources suggest all individuals were later released, but were locked out of their social media accounts and warnings about "blasphemy" appeared on the commandeered pages. Minivan News reported that members of the vigilante group had been photographed in a meeting with Islamic Minister Sheikh Mohamed Shaheem Ali and youth groups who were protesting against homosexuality and the "harassment" of Islam, along with a meeting with the Home Minister Umar Naseer.

<minivannewsarchive.com/politics/perceived-atheists-and-homosexuals-targetted-as-campaign-of-attacks-continues-86753>

During the period of the kidnappings, a group of men including a man referred to in Minivan News by the pseudonym **Adam Ghafoor** were attacked by a mob of eight at a café. The attackers accused them of atheism and homosexuality. (The group had met for breakfast after having been at a gym, and so were dressed in shorts and t-shirts, which attire seems to have sparked the accusation of homosexuality.) One of the attackers is reported as having said, "You homosexual atheists are destroying our country - we will not stand back and watch you do it." He asked Ghafoor to recite the Shahada. Members of the group then attacked Ghafoor and threatened him with further violence or death if they saw him again.

<minivannewsarchive.com/politics/perceived-atheists-and-homosexuals-targetted-as-campaign-of-attacks-continues-86753>

One of the Facebook Pages hijacked on 8 June 2014 was named '**Colourless**'. It had been run by liberal activists, and had 4,865 members, with the aim of bringing a "divided nation to a common ground as a platform to advocate peace, love and harmonic co-existence." Having stolen passwords, the new administrators changed the group's banner to the black Shahadha flag, and the whole page was later deleted. One of the administrators, **Jennifer Latheef**, said that she and the other administrators had received death threats along with warnings from Facebook users over the preceding months to remove comments they found offensive. The group decided to allow free speech but asked members not to attack or insult the religious beliefs of others. Another Facebook group called 'Shariah4Maldives' then posted pictures of the administrators.

Having covered the kidnappings, a Minivan News journalist **Ahmed Rilwan** who had himself been linked to the Maldivian Atheists Page, then disappeared in August 2014. Reports suggest that he was abducted at knife point from outside his apartment building. Minivan News, an independent online publication, subsequently received a death threat in the form of a machete through their premises door and an SMS text reading: "You will be killed next". Minivan News and Raajje TV were then issued with arson threats and evacuated by police. A report commissioned by the Maldivian Democracy Network NGO, linked radicalised gangs to the disappearance. The Maldives Police Service subsequently announced the arrest of three suspects in connection with Rilwan's disappearance, but also criticised marches protesting their slow handling of the case. Journalists for a number of news publications that covered the story have received anonymous threats warning of further violence if they don't drop their coverage. Meanwhile, Rilwan's family, friends and

colleagues have continued to raise concerns about the speed and current conclusions of police investigations.

<independent.co.uk/voices/comment/voices-in-danger-in-the-maldives-its-not-just-knives-that-journalists-are-being-threatened-with-9791754.html>

<ifj.org/uploads/media/South_Asia_Press_Freedom_Report_2013.pdf>

There were rumours that Rilwan was connected to the Maldivian Atheist Facebook Page, thought prominent fellow blogger Hilath Rasheed (see also Rasheed's own case below) said in September 2014 that he knew the admins at least by nickname, and that Rilwan was not one of them. The accusation was a "cheap trick", he said, to turn the public against Rilwan so they would move on and forget that the authorities had failed to bring anyone to justice in connection with his disappearance.

<vnews.mv/25749>

In 2019, an investigator confirmed that Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla was killed by a local Al-Qaeda affiliate, publicly acknowledging for the first time the existence of the hardline group and its efforts to silence liberal voices in the Maldives, which had previously been consistently denied by officials. The investigator also argued that government officials, including the former President Abdulla Yameen and his Minister of Tourism Ahmed Adeb, attempted to divert the focus of the investigation, and has recommended charges of obstruction of justice against Ahmed Adeb.

<<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/missing-maldives-journalist-rilwan-killed-al-qaeda-affiliate-190901121511620.html>>

Officials confirmed in March 2013 that they were investigating "anti-Islamic" social media activity. Though the "investigation" had a broader purview, the Facebook Page "**Dhivehi Atheists/Maldivian Atheists**" appears to have been at the forefront. The Page had been accused of "insulting God" and posting "offensive" cartoons, by the religious conservative Adhaalath party. Liked by 300 users, the majority of the posts were in local Dhivehi language, and the page encouraged Maldivians to leave Islam and "choose the path of science and reason". Several posts made by visitors accused various people of being behind the Page and threatened to kill them. Many visitors have stated that the administrator had been identified as a woman.

<sun.mv/39714>

<minivannewsarchive.com/politics/police-investigating-anti-islamic-activity-on-social-media-80245>

A closed (i.e. private) group called "Against Dhivehi Atheists / Maldivia"

<facebook.com/groups/standagaistdhivehiathiest/> says of itself: "The main purpose of this group is to report to facebook about the page [Dhivehi-Atheists-Maldivian-Atheists] Please add as much friends as you can, and spread the message". This tactic may have worked, since as of December 2015 the original page <facebook.com/pages/Dhivehi-Atheists-Maldivian-Atheists/> is not accessible.

On 2 June 2012, **Ismail Khilath 'Hilath' Rasheed** was attacked with a knife outside his house, narrowly escaping a fatal injury. Rasheed, an openly gay blogger and journalist who advocates for freedom of religion and a fierce critic of Islamic fundamentalism, had previously been threatened online in an article published on Muraasil.com. Rasheed was also the main victim in an attack by Islamist extremists on a silent protest in 2011. Rasheed has since left the Maldives.

<minivannewsarchive.com/news-in-brief/democracy-suffers-in-maldives-in-the-face-of-rising-fundamentalism-asia-sentinel-39978>

<minivannewsarchive.com/politics/perceived-atheists-and-homosexuals-targetted-as-campaign-of-attacks-continues-86753>

<minivannewsarchive.com/society/maldivian-journalist-threatened-with-beheading-4438>

In June 2010, **Mohammed Nazim** asked a Muslim preacher, at a large public event, how Islam

viewed people such as himself who had tried to believe in Islam but could not. The preacher replied that Islam requires the death penalty for those who leave Islam. Several members of the enraged crowd attempted to attack Nazim and he was hustled away by the police. The Islamic Ministry arranged for Nazim to receive “religious counseling” before determining if he should be executed for apostasy. During this prison counseling, Mohammed saved his life by assenting to embrace Islam.

One month later, **Ismail Mohamed Didi** faced the same choice as Mohammed Nazim: believe or die. On July 13 2010, the 25 year-old air traffic controller was found hanged from the control tower of the Maldives international airport, after killing himself to escape persecution for his rejection of religion. Shortly before his death, Ismail Mohamed Didi wrote that he had “foolishly admitted my stance on religion” to work colleagues and the news had “spread like wildfire.” He added that “A lot of my close friends and girlfriend have been prohibited from seeing me by their parents. I have even received a couple of anonymous phone calls threatening violence if I do not repent and start practicing Islam... Maldivians are proud of their religious homogeneity and I am learning the hard way that there is no place for non-Muslim Maldivians in this society.”

<examiner.com/article/atheist-asylum-seeker-commits-suicide-maldives>