



## THE MALDIVES A GOLDEN YELLOW DAWN

It was a dramatic year for the Maldives. In the space of 12 months the country endured a cycle of political crises under the autocratic rule of long-running President Abdullah Yameen, only to emerge at year's end with a new president, a new governing party and new hope for democracy.

Prompted by a rising tide of social discontent and a showdown with the judiciary earlier in the year, the Yameen government which ruled the country with blunt force from 2012, tried at all costs to keep political power in check in the tiny troubled island nation. But the cracks were showing.

Following a government imposed 'state of emergency' declared earlier in the year in February, Yameen's usual suspects – political opponents, independent media and activists – remained firmly in the firing line for the 45-day crisis and beyond.

Hefty fines were dealt out to media, especially those affiliated with the opposition. Journalists continued to be detained and threatened. Meanwhile, international observers watched on cautiously at the roll out of events through the year.

As the election neared, so too escalated fears of a larger political crisis embroiling overseas business interests, as well as the

prospect of western-led political sanctions if all hell broke loose.

Despite the political uncertainty and upheavals, the country's planned presidential election took place on September 23 without any major incidents of violence. In a shock outcome, Yameen was roundly defeated by the opposition candidate, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih whose Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP)-led Joint Opposition (JO) formed government. He took oath on November 17, 2018.

It was lauded internationally as a win for democracy and the rule of law. Almost immediately reforms were announced, including new investigations of suspected missing and killed cases, and the repeal of the country's controversial Anti-Defamation and Freedom of Expression Act.

Five months on, Solih and his alliance secured a landslide two-thirds majority in the 87-member assembly at the country's national elections on April 6. The country's former president Mohammed Nasheed, who had returned from exile after Solih's win in November, was there by his side and vowed for sweeping reforms and an end to government corruption.

Amid a sea of yellow, the colour of the party, he declared the Maldives was headed for a "golden yellow dawn".



Maldivians living in Sri Lanka wait to cast their votes at a polling station for the country's parliamentary election at the Embassy of the Maldives in Colombo. The Maldives on April 6, 2019 held its first parliamentary election since former strongman leader Abdulla Yameen was forced to stand down in 2018. CREDIT: LAKRUWAN WANNIARACHCHI / AFP

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two years earlier which documented waves of restrictions and attempts to muzzle the media dating back to 2012. This included hefty defamation cases to intimidate journalists with the prospect of jail and their media outlets with bankruptcy.

### HALF-PARADISE, HALF-HELL

After 30 years of control under former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, the Maldives 2008 constitution was intended to protect "the right to freedom of the press, and other means of communication including the right to espouse, disseminate and publish news, information, views and ideas". But it was a case of democracy derailed under Yameen rule.

Legislation was manipulated and butchered to critical and devastating effect, to jail opposition activists and politicians. Meanwhile the country's new anti-defamation laws were frequently wielded against the media and social media activists.

Restrictions on assembly continued to prevent peaceful rallies and protests and the formation of unions, including that of journalists and media workers. Too many feared the repercussions.

In 2018, journalists suffered at the hands of the State and its cadres. The re-criminalization of defamation was facilitated and enabled by the Maldives Broadcasting Commission (MBC), which operated with a fairly clear mandate of legal haranguing and harassment of media workers.

For those that chose not to take the safer path of self-censorship in the fractious and volatile space for freedom of expression, the daily reality was brutal. Few could blame journalists for toning down reporting in the tiny media ecosystem that largely operates in the epicentre of the capital, Malé, home to just 142,000 people.

Media outlets seen as being aligned to the opposition were key targets of the 2018 attacks.

### CONTROLS AND LEGAL INTIMIDATION

In a long-running pattern of harassment Raajje TV endured another year of physical and legal threat due to its content.

On August 8, the MBC fined Raajje TV USD 130,000 for live broadcasting a politician's speech from an opposition demonstration after it was deemed defamatory to the President Yameen and a threat to national security. Raajje was given 30 days to pay the fine or risk losing its broadcast license. This was the fourth time the station was fined for its content since 2016.

In a statement, Raajje TV said the MBC report was filled with fabrications and was "a calculated and well-coordinated attack to obstruct efforts to make President Yameen's government accountable" ahead of the presidential elections.

### DEMOCRACY DERAILED

The contradiction of the Maldives domestic chaos to its outward public persona cannot be underplayed. This is why this current political reckoning is so critical for this tiny chain of islands southwest of India.

Its international image is that of an idyllic luxury tourist destination; popular with honeymooners, cashed-up celebrities, dubious business tycoons and Instagram influencers. Comprised of 1192 islands and 26 coral atolls, an estimated 1.4 million tourist visitors were lured to its white sandy shores and romantic resorts in 2018 alone.

But the Maldives has also witnessed an increasing tide of its own, as climate change and political refugees continued to flee the country. Among them, journalists and political opponents, including the country's only democratically-elected president Mohammed Nasheed, who fled to the UK in early 2018.

In its 2018 report, *Crushing Dissent in the Maldives*, Human Rights Watch documented how the Yameen government continued to use "decrees and broad, vaguely worded laws to silence dissent and intimidate, arbitrarily arrest, and imprison critics". That echoed findings of the IFJ's own situation report just

## THE MBC FINED RAAJJE TV USD 130,000 FOR LIVE BROADCASTING A POLITICIAN'S SPEECH FROM AN OPPOSITION DEMONSTRATION AFTER IT WAS DEEMED DEFAMATORY TO THE PRESIDENT YAMEEN AND A THREAT TO NATIONAL SECURITY

On August 15, a Civil Court rejected RaajjeTV's appeal to suspend the payment of the fine. Less than a month on, President Yameen sought to take action against the station over the press conference footage. Held the previous December by the opposition MDP, speakers had alleged the president's involvement in illegal oil trade with North Korea. On September 10, with no alternative, Raajje had little option but to settle the fine. That added to previous fine tallies served to RaajjeTV totalling over USD 240,000 in five separate incidents.

As well as controls on journalists internally, tensions increased as the election neared with international media.

On August 30, the Immigration Department issued a press release stating that the elections would be open to monitor by foreign media, but warning foreign journalists of "punitive measures" if they did not seek appropriate visas. On September 12, the joint opposition issue a statement expressing concerns over reports that several international journalists had applications for visas to cover the presidential elections rejected.

Police violence against journalists increased sharply during the first half of 2018 but, not surprisingly, was heavily reduced by the year's end.

### GROWING ISLAMIC RADICALISM

The rise of dangerous radicalism among the ranks of the country's 340,000 Sunni Muslims has with little doubt been one of the most deadly elements for media operating in the country.

Religious extremists and criminal gangs (many enjoying political protection under Yameen's rule) assaulted and murdered dissenters with impunity, including journalists. The key targets were those critiquing government on social media, seen to be publishing material deemed as offensive to Islam, promoting the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people or supporting non-state aligned causes.

On May 1, the IFJ reported on cadres of a political party offering up to USD 9,000 to a local gang to stab Raajje TV's CEO, Hussain Fiyaz Moosa.

The station said in a statement that it was one of the "lowest, scariest, most dangerous and un-Islamic acts carried out by anyone to undermine the station". Raajje TV did not name the political party, the politicians or the gang involved due to fears of an escalation of threat.

Ironically, as incoming tourist hordes continued to flow into the Maldives in 2018 despite diplomatic warnings, there was an outward flux of would-be Islamic combatants. An *ICSR report on Women and Minors of Islamic State* published in July 2018, said that around 200 Maldivians, including 12 women and five minors, were fighting in Syria and Iraq. This made the Maldives the world's second largest number of foreign fighters 'per capita', after Tunisia, it said.

So seemingly entrenched was religious extremism that even the country's judiciary system came under question when terror suspects were freed on apparently trivial grounds.

In October 2018, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs controversially



The shock winner of the Maldives' leadership vote, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih was declared president-elect on September 29, with election authorities saying they received death threats to delay the final announcement of strongman Abdulla Yameen's decisive loss. CREDIT: AHMED SHURAU / AFP



Former Maldives president Mohamed Nasheed addresses a press conference in Colombo on September 21, 2018. “Mathematically, it is not possible for Yameen to win because all opposition parties are united against him,” he told reporters. Credit: LAKRUWAN WANNIARACHCHI / AFP

issued a press release expressing solidarity for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia over the disappearance of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

But change seems to be afoot – certainly at least in political dialogue. On February 26, 2019, while urging its citizens not to advocate religious extremism, the country’s new president asserted that “ideologies that support radical Islam could upset the peace and security of the nation.”

## FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE

Unperturbed, the fight for justice for journalist attacks continued, led by the family, friends and colleagues of abducted journalist Ahmed Rilwan and murdered blogger Yameen Rasheed.

Police are yet to find Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla, a journalist who disappeared in August 2014, who was known for his pointed critiques on radical Islam and the government. They have also so far failed to identify his abductors despite a long-running and determined campaign by his family and friends.

On August 2, the Maldives criminal court acquitted two men of terrorism, over the alleged abduction of Rilwan. The judge called the investigating police and prosecution negligent and careless, and said they had failed to conduct a thorough investigation.

During the hearing, Judge Adam Arif noted that, though the prosecution’s witnesses had testified to seeing a man being forced into a red car near Rilwan’s home in the suburb of Hulhu, Malé, neither had they claimed the man was Rilwan nor had they spoken of Aalif Rauf and Mohamed Nooradheen’s involvement.

At a campaign rally on August 7, former President Yameen, who had repeatedly refused to meet with the journalist’s family over the years, bluntly declared that the journalist was dead. The president’s remarks stirred uproar in the public, since no investigative authority had yet declared his death.

In strong rebuke at the statement, incidentally made on the eve of the anniversary of his disappearance, protesters marched in the streets of the capital city Malé on August 8 to mark the four years since his abduction.

On November 5, the Maldives Police Service (MPS) announced its decision to review the case of murdered blogger Yameen Rasheed, and abduction of journalist Ahmed Rilwan. Soon after taking office, Solih also announced a commission to investigate murders and enforced disappearance that occurred between

January 1, 2012, and November 17, 2018 in the country.

On March 18, 2019, Husnu Al Suood, President of the Commission on Investigation of Murder and Enforced Disappearances, announced that four high-profile cases assigned to the Commission for investigation were successfully completed.

In a discussion with CPJ, Husnu Al Suood did not reveal the name of the group involved but accused the previous Government of being aware of the group as early as 2011, but failing to go after them for political reasons, CPJ said.

The Commission is currently probing a total of 24 such cases, including the four high-profile cases of the murder of Ungoofaaru Parliamentarian and religious scholar, Dr Afrasheem Ali on October 1, 2012; the abduction of Ahmed Rilwan, on August 8, 2014; the murder of, Yameen Rasheed, on April 23, 2017; and the murder attempt on blogger and human rights activist, Ismail Hilath Rasheed, on June 4, 2012.

All were known as vocal advocates on social issues, human rights, and religion. And all had popular online followings. Suood said the attacks were masterminded by one group and were motivated by religious, militant elements, with gang involvement.

In the case of Yameen Rasheed, who was brutally stabbed to death more than 36 times in the stairwell of his apartment building, seven suspects were arrested and stood trial, though this was initially held in secret. While the trial has been opened up, attendance is limited and there has been little progress.

In Rasheed’s case, authorities were also accused of negligence, though the civil court threw out a case filed by the family in 2017.

One of the biggest challenges ahead and a test of the new government will be the media’s long running fight to secure justice for crimes against these journalists and others.

## A BLUEPRINT FOR MEDIA REFORM

There is no doubt that the Maldives media industry has suffered the dire consequences of this period. Great efforts are now needed to rebuild not only media houses, but the representative organizations and advocates that were decimated in this period.

Every year, more and more outlets closed as a result of economic losses or political intervention of revocation of licenses. Many others have scaled down operations as a means of survival.

Citizens of the Maldives filled the streets to celebrate the election result. CREDIT: RAAJJE MOHAMED SHARUHAAN



**THE MALDIVES HAS ALSO WITNESSED AN INCREASING TIDE OF ITS OWN, AS CLIMATE CHANGE AND POLITICAL REFUGEES CONTINUED TO FLEE THE COUNTRY. AMONG THEM, JOURNALISTS AND POLITICAL OPPONENTS . . .**

Individually, journalists have lost their livelihoods or left the profession after one too many death threats by text or the occasional machete thrown at the workplace, as happened in 2014 at Minivan News (now Maldives Independent).

After former president Mohammed Nasheed was deemed ineligible to run in the September election because of his prior prison sentence, his colleague Solih stood for a platform to restore democratic freedoms. True to his word, within two months, on November 13, the Anti-Defamation and Freedom of Expression Act was repealed.

And if the wheels of justice are slowly beginning to turn again for democracy, there is more to be done.

In early 2019, former president Yameen was imprisoned over a graft scandal involving the country's tourism board. He denied the accusations and was released on bail in late March just days before the parliamentary elections.

Beside repealing the criminal defamation law, again, there is also a concrete need among journalists to have their access to information law strengthened. Somehow the Maldives' leaders need to figure out a way to beat the country's deeply-entrenched bent for secrecy. Some reforms in the RTI commission itself may be beneficial.

Reservations also remain on the way in which the Maldives will deal with blasphemy laws, which can still too easily be used against journalists who may take up issues linked to Islam. As a country that has touted itself as 100% Muslim, Solih is still known as a man who stands with the 'people of faith' line.

The Male-centric media ecosystem is also deeply entrenched, much like the country's political parties. Journalists in the Maldives need to be supported to overcome this if they are to strengthen independence into the future.

This calls for initiatives that can help build the media landscape and a professional media community that is not reliant on political parties.

## RENEWED HOPE

In the evening of Tuesday, April 23, the *Maldives Independent* reported that the hectic traffic of Malé was interrupted by "defiant chants" as about 200 people marched across the capital.

Together they marked two years since the brutal murder of Yameen Rasheed, a blogger and human rights defender who fought relentlessly to seek answers for his abducted friend Ahmed Rilwan.

While previous marches saw family members arrested, pepper sprayed and sacked from their jobs, the tone this year was different. Amid renewed hope for answers, President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih marched in solidarity with the families and parents of Yameen and Rilwan. Yameen's father and Rilwan's mother addressed the president directly with appeals for justice. Others spoke about hate speech, tolerance and pluralism.

For media, it may well be the turning point in a bleak chapter of repression and control. Yet it is also a story of bravery and survival by the country's small army of journalists who have had to eyeball their enemies on a day to day basis.

A senior journalist from Villa TV, Ali Sulaiman summed it up: "The fact we were able to march peacefully today and (the) president marched with us, renews hope that we can get justice. I hope that the people who carried out this attack on Maldivian journalism would be brought to justice. We may not get Rilwan back, we may not get Yameen back, but we can make sure it does not happen to anyone else."

## THE END OF FEAR

It began with name-calling and harassment, with politicians and religious hardliners at rallies and on social media singling out journalists, news outlets and bloggers for their critical coverage. Then came the death threats and attacks - stabbings, near-fatal beatings, abductions - and finally, amid growing impunity for these crimes - a disappearance and a killing.

Over the past decade, journalists and dissident writers in the Maldives have gone to great lengths to report and write about the Indian Ocean country's slide to authoritarianism and the growing threat to free speech from criminal gangs and conservative Islamist groups. Several were arrested, put on trial, and beaten, and others forced into exile. A journalist was disappeared and a blogger murdered. Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla, a reporter with the Maldives Independent, was abducted in 2014 and has not been seen since, while Yameen Rasheed, who ran the *Daily Panic*, a satirical blog, was killed in a brutal knife attack in 2017.

"The fear was pervasive," says Moosa Latheef, a veteran journalist. "I've worked as a journalist for more than 30 years, and never before have I felt that kind of insecurity."

But that could change now.

In November 2018, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih defeated then-President Abdulla Yameen in a contentious election, ending the autocratic leader's five-year rule. Yameen, who assumed power in 2013, a year after the country's first democratically elected president was removed in a coup d'état, presided over a wide-ranging crackdown on dissent and press freedoms.

Yameen's tenure saw an increase in threats and assaults against journalists and their offices, often by members of criminal gangs in the capital, Male. But the police failed to investigate most of the incidents. And even in the few instances where prosecutors filed charges - such as in the near-fatal beating of Raajje TV's Asward Ibrahim Waheed in 2012 and the torching of the station's headquarters the following year - judges are yet to hand down sentences.

Moreover, Yameen's party passed a new law criminalising defamation and used it to exact nearly USD 250,000 in fines from the popular opposition-aligned Raajje Television, mostly on allegations of slandering the former president. The country's oldest newspaper, *Haveeru*, was shut down following a murky court battle over ownership, while the CNM news website was taken offline amid government pressure over reports levelling corruption allegations against Yameen's wife.

## WINDS OF CHANGE

Solih, the Maldives' new president, has vowed to reinstate freedoms, promising to "ensure Maldives is a modern democracy with extensive press freedoms".

The first step to reinstate both democracy and press freedom, Maldivian journalists say, is ensuring accountability for past crimes.

The signs are positive. Solih has set up a presidential commission to investigate the disappearance and the murder. But much more needs to be done, says Ismail Naseer, a former editor at *Haveeru*.

"There have been numerous attempts to silence journalists, through physical assaults, as well as legal threats," he says, alleging political influence behind the stalling of investigations



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in attacks on the press. "We need a public inquiry to find out who was behind it all, especially to establish which government officials were involved."

The second step Solih's government must take is ensuring the independence of the state broadcaster Public Service Media (PSM) as well as media regulatory bodies.

During Yameen's tenure, supporters of the ruling party, including some who were part of his re-election bid, were appointed to PSM and the Maldives Broadcasting Commission. The state broadcaster became a mouthpiece for the government, while the commission, tasked by law to issue broadcasting licenses and uphold journalists' conduct, began implementing the draconian defamation law and punishing radio and television stations that criticized the former president or reported on government corruption. Raajje TV's journalists had to walk door to door to raise funds to pay off immense fines.

That law has since been repealed, but Hussain Fiyaz Moosa, the station's former chief executive officer, says all the members of the Commission "must be sacked and the parliament must hold them to account for shielding the former president by preventing reporting on government corruption".

Government offices must begin to comply with requests for information under the existing Right To Information Act, he says. "We also need protections for whistle-blowers," he adds.

The third measure must come from the local media community.

At the height of media repression in the Maldives, journalists did not have a union or a professional body to advocate on their behalf, a move that stymied collective action.

The Maldives Journalists Association, set up in 2008 as a media workers' union, was rendered inactive because of infighting among journalists. "It's very important that we have a professional body not just to advocate for our rights, but also develop the media here," says Fiyaz.

"The signs are encouraging, but there is a lot to do to. I am hopeful," he adds.