

Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative

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The Decline of Democracy in the Maldives

- Maja Daruwala

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The Commonwealth preaches taking human rights and the rule of law seriously, to the extent that these are listed in the Harare Principles, the list of principles that countries agree to abide by in order to be a member of the Commonwealth. How disappointing then, that certain countries' records in this area have fallen to dismal lows and yet the Commonwealth publicly does little...

Recent events in the Maldives are the culmination of the suppression of dissent that has grown over the past 26 years. President Gayoom may have originally been welcomed as a hero in this small island nation, but his increasingly autocratic style has caused him to be likened with him with dictators of international disrepute. Over the years his grip on power has tightened and opportunities for his citizens to express their political will have virtually disappeared.

As you will read in the article by the Friends of Maldives on page 7 of this newsletter, the rule of law has become an empty statement with Gayoom's allies being treated well while opponents wither in jail. Expression of disparate views is limited, with the media controlled by the President and associates, and the use of the internet being stifled to the extent that Reporters Sans Frontiers lists the Maldives as the third most restrictive country in the world on electronic media freedom. Civil liberties have also been curtailed, including: the President's refusal to register an opposition party, despite this being allowed in the Constitution; arbitrary detention; numerous allegations of

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The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) is an independent international NGO mandated to ensure the practical realisation of human rights in the Commonwealth.

national as well as democratic interests. It is believed this shifted the bulk of the cost burden the UK which, in light of an impending financial loss, felt it could not maintain the scale of support a CTUC secretariat needed.

We are very much indebted to the CTUC. It and the Commonwealth Journalists Association and the Commonwealth Lawyers Association were first to act

on the need for a human rights body to serve the Commonwealth. They became prime movers in pioneering the establishment of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative at the Vancouver CHOGM in 1987. Other NGOs have subsequently joined the team to great effect. We send our thanks to all at the CTUC for their support over the years and most particularly to Annie Watson who has been so closely involved for so many years. ■

Contd...from the coverage

torture; peaceful protests being dispersed with rubber bullets and teargas... The list could go on.

The recent increase in the levels of public dissent – the start of which were protests about deaths in prisons in September 2003 – shows that the people of the Maldives have had enough. On the positive side, President Gayoom has recognised the level of discontent and has publicly promised change. He, for instance, announced the establishment of a National Human Rights Commission on December 10th (Human Rights Day) 2003, and in June 2004 announced constitutional reform. While these are welcomed, the clamp-down that ensued when Maldivians met to discuss potential reforms, indicates that Gayoom's promises were far from genuine. Declaring a state of emergency is no way of sending a message of inclusive, participatory governance.

The Commonwealth has an important role to play in the Maldives, especially considering the association's commitment to small states. Part of this role needs to be a supportive one, by assisting the government with their promised reforms. It is not enough just for the President to promise respect for human rights and the rule of law, effective mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure that



Pro-democracy demonstrators, Male', 13th August 2004.

the current situation doesn't reoccur in the Maldives and that there are genuine limits on power for the future. The Commonwealth can and should assist with these efforts – and if Gayoom is serious about his desire for change, he will welcome such assistance.

While this behind-the-scenes assistance is provided, a more public monitoring role also needs to be taken by the Commonwealth. The association cannot publicly state that all members abide by the Harare Principles, while a member is so blatantly violating the very principles that the Commonwealth holds dear. Fortunately the Commonwealth has a mechanism in place which monitors serious or ongoing violations of the Harare principles – the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG). It is time for CMAG to add the Maldives to its agenda and send a message to the country that such behaviour is unacceptable and will lead to suspension from the Commonwealth and even potentially expulsion. Considering the situation in Zimbabwe, where the Commonwealth has witnessed the near-collapse of a member state, the association as a whole and individual member countries must act immediately to ensure that the situation in the Maldives does not further deteriorate. ■