Press Statement
16 October 2016, New Delhi

Maldives decision aimed at stifling democracy

A group of Human Rights organizations and activists from South Asia, expressing
disappointment at the decision of the Maldives to leave the Commonwealth, says this
could lead to greater authoritarianism in the island nation.

The following is the text of the statement:

We, the undersigned, regard the decision of the Maldives government to leave the
Commonwealth as a smokescreen to prevent further scrutiny and censure and deter
the possibility of suspension.

By opting out of the Commonwealth, which the Maldives joined voluntarily in 1982, it
has demonstrated its determination to stifle democracy and rule through
authoritarianism.

The decision follows the meeting of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group
(CMAG) on 23rd September 2016 that placed Maldives on its formal agenda and called
for “substantive progress” across specific priority areas, failing which it warned of its
suspension from the Councils of the Commonwealth by March 2017.

The warning followed a long period of patience with the Maldives government’s
continued resistance to take visible steps to repair its democratic credentials. Male’s
assertion that that this “penalizes” the Maldives stands in stark contrast to CMAG’s
largely conciliatory approach. Despite compelling evidence of the continued curbs on
fundamental rights and persecution of Opposition leaders, CMAG allowed the
Maldives six more months, and again offered technical assistance.

Our view is that the Maldivian Government’s defence of 94 laws that “directly relate
to the core values set out in the Commonwealth Charter” misrepresents the facts. In
reality, several of these laws limit and violate fundamental rights including the
freedom of expression, assembly and core fair trial rights. In the worst cases,
constitutional rights have been withdrawn altogether.

Key democratic institutions have been systematically undermined. Swift convictions
of several Opposition leaders through deeply flawed trials point to a politicized
judiciary. The Parliament, dominated by the ruling Progressive Party of the Maldives,
has been reduced to a rubber stamp. The space for dissent and informed political
debate has been curtailed through legal and administrative measures. Politicized
appointments and systemic attacks on their autonomy have crippled independent
bodies.

We are deeply disappointed that the government has chosen to reject the
Commonwealth’s technical assistance centered on strengthening democratic
institutions and promoting political inclusivity. Walking away from the
Commonwealth indicates a refusal to hold to its core standards and poses a serious danger that the Maldivian people may now face greater authoritarianism and impunity.

Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI)
Asian Centre for Human Rights (ACHR)
South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR)
Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (Forum-Asia)
Kishali Pinto-Jayawardena, Senior Advocate, Sri Lanka, and member of CHRI Fact Finding team to the Maldives
Asad Jamal, Lawyer, Pakistan, and member of CHRI Fact Finding team to the Maldives

For more information please contact Devyani Srivastava, Senior Programme Officer, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative.

Devyani@humanrightsinitiative.org