

23 December 2019

Maldives: Maldivian Democracy Network formally banned

On 19 December 2019, the Government of the Maldives finalised its decision to ban the **Maldivian Democracy Network** after giving the organisation 45 days to settle all its assets and bank accounts.

The [Maldivian Democracy Network \(MDN\)](#) is a non-partisan NGO which aims to promote human rights and the values and principles of democracy in the Maldives. The organisation has a broad mandate and works on reporting, monitoring and advocating human rights issues. In addition, MDN conducts human rights awareness workshops and trainings around the country. Over the years, MDN has earned a place within the civil society sector as a strong voice that works effectively to uphold its mandate. The organisation is recognised as an important entity in the promotion of democratic values and standards, and human rights.

On 19 December 2019, MDN was officially banned by the Government of the Maldives. The organisation came under scrutiny for its 2015 report, the “Preliminary Assessment of Radicalisation in the Maldives”. Excerpts from the report were alleged to be anti-Islam, resulting in smear campaigns, protests and calls for harsh punishments of MDN staff and the shutting down of the organisation. Following the attention that the report received, and with the added pressure from conservative religious groups, a complaint was filed against MDN by the Islamic Ministry on 3 November 2019.

On 5 October 2019, the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Community Empowerment decided to suspend MDN indefinitely. The Government informed MDN that it was being banned under subsections (a) and (b) of Section 19 of the Associations Act, dealing with elements “contrary to the tenets of Islam”. In addition to this, the police also launched a criminal investigation, accusing the four authors of the report of “blasphemy”.

Following the suspension, on 8 December 2019, MDN approached the Maldives Police Service requesting a copy of the investigation report that the police officials sent to the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Community Empowerment that had resulted in the decision by the Ministry to ban the organisation. While the Constitution of the Maldives grants the accused the right to be informed of allegations, with clarity, and to be given the right of reply, until its suspension, MDN had not been informed of the allegations and neither were any enquiries made at any stage of the investigation process. The organisation was therefore denied the right to prepare an adequate defence.

The shutting down of the MDN comes at a time of rising religious extremism in the relatively new democracy. Human rights defenders, especially those who express their support for religious tolerance are being increasingly targeted. Online news outlets, social media pages and channels have been the preferred platforms for religious extremists to attack human rights defenders and label them as anti-religious or apostates. These platforms have facilitated a rise in the amount of hate and threats directed towards human rights defenders for their work.

Front Line Defenders condemns the banning of the Maldivian Democracy Network, as it believes that the ban is solely motivated by the organisation’s peaceful and legitimate work in defence of human rights. It urges the Maldivian authorities to investigate the growing problem of religious intolerance in the country. Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned about the restrictions to

freedom of expression as they are contrary to the provisions of international human rights instrument to which the Maldives is a party.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in the Maldives to:

1. Lift the ban on the Maldivian Democracy Network;
2. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of the staff of MDN;
3. Support the work of human rights defenders who counter religious intolerance and extremism as part of a strategy to reverse this trend;
4. Cease targeting all human rights defenders in the Maldives and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.