

**DUBLIN**

Front Line Defenders – Head Office  
First Floor, Avoca Court  
Temple Road, Blackrock  
Co. Dublin, A94 R7W3, Ireland

info@frontlinedefenders.org  
www.frontlinedefenders.org

phone +353 1 212 3750  
fax +353 1 212 1001

**BRUSSELS**

Front Line Defenders – EU Office  
Square Marie-Louise 72  
1000 Brussels  
Belgium

euoffice@frontlinedefenders.org  
www.frontlinedefenders.org

phone +32 2 230 9383  
fax +32 2 230 0028

12 April 2023

## **Maldives: Civil Court of Maldives upholds the de-registration of Maldivian Democracy Network by The Maldivian Government**

On 28 March 2023, the Civil Court of Maldives ruled in favor of the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Community Empowerment (MoYSCE) upholding the decision to de-register the Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN) on 19 December 2019. MDN was arbitrarily de-registered in 2019 by the MoYSCE amid a violent smear campaign against the human rights organisation and its staff. **Shahinda Ismail**, woman human rights defender and Executive Director of MDN filed action before the Civil Court of Maldives challenging the arbitrary de-registration. The ruling of the Civil Court on 28 March 2023 is extremely concerning as it legitimises the arbitrary ban on MDN, and further states that the report published by MDN in 2015 that led to the ban, contained blasphemous content.

The [Maldivian Democracy Network \(MDN\)](#) is a human rights organisation founded in 2004 following the mass arrest and torture of 300 protesters at a pro-democracy protest against former President Moumoon Gayyoom. MDN has been a staunch advocate on behalf of victims of violations, especially arbitrary detention and torture. It has been part of the pro-democracy movement in Maldives and in recent years has contributed towards effective transitional justice and accountability mechanisms in the country. In 2015, MDN published a study on countering violent extremism titled 'Preliminary Assessment of Radicalisation in the Maldives', (2015 Report). The study named individuals and entities that were responsible for propagating religious extremism in the country. The backlash against MDN is linked to this report, and proposed amendments to the Anti Terrorism Act (ATA) in 2019. The amendments were to repeal draconian provisions of the law and include provisions on countering violent extremism.

In August 2019, the day the ATA amendments were proposed, a smear campaign was launched via social media targeting MDN and the authors of the 2015 report, including [Shahinda Ismail](#), of blasphemy and of being responsible for perceived attacks on religious groups. Police action was initiated against MDN and the report authors in November 2019 in response to a complaint filed by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. While investigations were ongoing, and amidst serious threats to MDN and its staff, Maldivian authorities arbitrarily de-registered MDN and subsequently froze its assets and transferred the funds to an unknown location. MDN has been denied any protection from those threatening harm to its staff and instead became the target of state reprisal. The organisation was not permitted any right of response or transparent information relating to its de-registration or the transfer of organisational assets.

On 16 September 2020, Shahindha Ismail, founder of Maldivian Democracy Network, filed a civil case against the MoYSCE, challenging the de-registration. The Court repeatedly denied requests for a hearing/trial to be set and MDN has raised a complaint regarding this with the Judicial Service Commission of Maldives. On 28 March 2023, the Civil Court ruled against MDN upholding the conduct of the MoYSCE. The court further held that the content of the 2015 report was clearly blasphemous.

The upholding of Maldivian Democracy Network's ban highlights the targeted persecution human rights defenders and civil society organisations face in Maldives. Organisations working to combat religious extremism and promote democratic values are subjected to violent attacks including on social media. Human rights defenders, especially women, are working in an extremely hostile

environment, where the state protects rather than prosecutes perpetrators of such violence. Online doxing, attacks can result in offline threats and reprisals including the initiation of criminal actions and de-registration.

Front Line Defenders condemns the banning of the Maldivian Democracy Network, and the court's decision to uphold the ban as lawful as it believes that the decisions are solely motivated by the organisation's peaceful and legitimate work in defence of human rights. Front Line Defenders is also deeply concerned about the restrictions to freedom of expression as they are contrary to the provisions of international human rights instruments to which the Maldives is a party.

**Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Maldives to:**

1. Immediately and unconditionally reverse the decision to ban human rights organisation Maldivian Democracy Network and drop all the charges against the organisation;
2. Immediately cease all other forms of harassment, including judicial harassment, defamation, and incitement against members and staff of Maldivian Democracy Network;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Maldives are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.