

Maldives

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Following the landslide victory of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) in the Parliamentary Elections in April, several laws were passed or amended by the MDP majority party with the aim of improving the country's human rights and political situation. This includes the Presidential Commissions Bill, which granted legal authority to the Commission on Corruption and Asset Recovery, and the Commission on Unresolved Murders and Disappearances. A gender quota was introduced, reserving one-third of the 980 seats for female candidates for the upcoming Local Council Elections (April 2020). The government announced new regulations that would allow six months paid maternity leave and one month paid paternity leave. Two bills related to the protection of children and adolescents were also ratified. Positive steps were taken for civil society and media through the ratification of the Bill on Protection of Whistle-blowers and improvements in media freedoms.

As judicial reform was a key campaign pledge ahead of both the presidential and the parliamentary elections, several judges were assessed or investigated by the reorganised oversight body Judicial Services Commission (JSC). Several court cases targeted corruption. Former President Abdulla Yameen was convicted of money laundering and sentenced to 5 years in prison and fined USD 5 million in November. The Anti-Corruption Commission released a detailed investigation report on the country's largest corruption case, exposing the theft of over USD 90 million from state coffers.

Following reports of abuse in prisons, the Home Ministry vowed to end torture and inhumane treatment. The UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment conducted a visit and submitted preliminary findings in November. This visit confirmed the government's willingness to engage with the international community on reform. The Maldives has since signed the declaration in relation to Article 22 of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

At the same time, certain developments have caused particular concern. Leading human rights NGO Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN) was dissolved over allegations that its 2016 report 'Preliminary Assessment on Radicalisation in Maldives' contained content deemed contrary to the tenets of Islam. Hate speech appeared on social media after the Supreme Court overturned a death by stoning verdict issued by an island magistrate to a woman charged with giving birth out of wedlock.

2. EU action - key focus areas: In 2019, the EU actions and activities in the Maldives focused on the EU priority areas for political engagement and development cooperation and notably on:

(i) Promoting transparent, inclusive and credible elections: In January, the EU Election Follow-up Mission (EFM) conducted a mid-term assessment of the election framework and the state of play of the implementation of the 2014 EU Election Observation Mission (EOM) recommendations. The EU and Member States partially funded the local chapter of Transparency International in its nationwide election observation effort in September;

- (ii) Strengthening the respect for civil and political rights: The EU and Member States continued to work closely with civil society, having regular meetings with CSOs, human rights defenders and media during all visits. Since February 2017, the EU has funded a Transparency International (partnering with Transparency Maldives) project aiming at building capacity and empowering local authorities and civil society actors;
- (iii) Reinforcing the rule of law, the independence of judiciary and the separation of powers: the EU urged authorities both publically and privately to restore the normal functioning of the parliament, and offered assistance for judicial reform. In October, the EU offered the President-Elect assistance in areas such as reform of the judiciary, strengthening respect for human rights, and the rule of law;
- (iv) Promoting the political representation and economic empowerment of women, the advancement of women's rights and ending discrimination, abuse and violence against women: the EU and Member States continued to work closely with civil society actors and human rights defenders working on women's issues through regular meetings.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: In June 2019, the EU Foreign Affairs Council decided to revoke the framework for restrictive measures against the Maldives that it adopted in July 2018. The decision was taken in light of the improvement in the political situation and the government's commitment to consolidate democracy, ensure good governance, and promote respect for human rights. Political dialogue was therefore framed around expressing support to help Maldives consolidate democracy and strengthen its human rights situation.

Several high-level political dialogues took place throughout the year by EU and Member States officials. The fourth annual EU-Maldives policy dialogue took place in March 2019 with the participation of 11 Heads of Mission. A number of thematic areas related to the priorities were discussed, including democracy and governance, strengthening the justice sector, promotion and protection of human rights and the environment. EU and Member States were also present at the Maldives Partnership Forum in June, where the government elaborated on its key priorities and challenges. During the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator's visit to the Maldives in July 2019, meetings were held with government representatives focusing on security and human rights. HR/VP Mogherini visited the Maldives in August 2019 for high level political dialogues including with the President, and addressed members of the Parliament. The HR/VP announced the allocation of EUR 2.5 million for the Maldives to counter-terrorism and violent extremism, and underlined EU's ongoing support and readiness to provide support to strengthen Maldives' institutions provided that these efforts are compliant with international human rights standards.

4. EU financial engagement: As an upper middle income country, the Maldives have graduated from EU's bilateral development assistance but can benefit from other financial instruments. The Maldives benefits from a project on climate change (EUR 10.5 million) where gender is mainstreamed and promotes equal access for women to participate in governance processes, education and economic opportunities.