



In Focus

State of Emergency in the Maldives

On 4 November 2015, the President of the Maldives, Abdulla Yameen, [declared](#) a 30-day state of emergency. President Yameen has cited citizen's safety and national security as justifications for the emergency, and it comes alongside an [announcement](#) that Maldivian security forces had found and defused a bomb near the President's residence. As reported in the *Guardian*, his [decree](#) has "suspend[ed] all basic rights and [given] the security forces sweeping powers to arrest suspects". The state of emergency was also [declared](#) two days before the main opposition party, the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), had planned to hold an [anti-government protest](#). Its leader, former President Mohammed Nasheed, was [jailed](#) for 13 years in March 2015 after being found guilty of [ordering](#) the arrest, forceful abduction and detention of a judge while in office.

The state of emergency has been the subject of [international condemnation](#), with the UK and US Governments both calling for its end. A US State Department [statement](#) called for the Maldives Government to immediately restore "full constitutional freedoms for its citizens", and to end political motivated prosecutions, including that of Mr Nasheed. Amnesty International has also [condemned](#) the move, arguing that it "must not be a precursor to a further crackdown on dissent or other human rights violations", and observing the Maldivian authorities have a "disturbing track-record of suppressing freedom of expression and any form of opposition, which has intensified over the last two years".

Background

Between 1978 and 2008, the Maldives was [ruled](#) by an authoritarian government headed by former President, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. While [boosting](#) the country's tourist industry, President Gayoom reportedly suppressed any [opposition](#) to his rule. The Gayoom [regime](#) came to an end in 2008 following international pressure, mounting domestic dissent and opposition protests led by Nasheed's MDP party. Responding to these pressures, Gayoom had passed a new constitution that allowed for the country's [first democratic presidential elections](#) to be held in October 2008. Nasheed subsequently defeated Gayoom in that poll, and was [inaugurated](#) as President in November 2008.

However, Mr Nasheed's presidency was marred by a number of [political crises](#), and arguably by opposition from an [entrenched conservative lobby](#) of business figures and parts of the population still loyal to Gayoom. Moreover, Eric Randolph, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, [notes](#) that the Maldives' institutions were "particularly resistant to change", including the police and judiciary. Indeed, it was Nasheed's efforts to reform the Maldives' judiciary which arguably brought an end to his presidency. When the Chief Justice of the criminal court, Abdullah Mohamed, refused to prosecute Gayoom's son—who had been detained for attempted murder in October 2011—Nasheed eventually ordered the judge's arrest in January 2012. This prompted anti-government protests, which were reportedly joined by elements of

the security services. On 7 February 2012, Nasheed then announced his [resignation](#), although he later argued that he was forced to [resign](#) at gunpoint. Yet, a Commonwealth-backed report into the situation, supported by the US and UN, argued Nasheed had stepped down voluntarily. [Presidential elections](#) were held October 2013, and Abdulla Yameen, half-brother of former President Gayoom, was elected.

Recent Developments

The state of emergency comes amid ongoing political instability in the country. On 28 September 2015, there was an explosion on board President Yameen's boat, which injured his wife and two aides. The *Financial Times* [reported](#) that, while it was initially believed to have been an accident, the Maldivian Government later announced that it had been an [assassination attempt](#). Yameen's Vice-President, Ahmed Adeb (along with three others), was [arrested and charged with treason](#) on 24 October 2015, in connection with the explosion. [International forensic experts](#)—including the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)—were brought in to help investigate the blast, with the FBI subsequently [announcing](#) in that it had found no evidence of a bomb. Nevertheless, the Maldivian Parliament subsequently [voted](#) to impeach Vice-President Adeb on 4 November 2015.

In addition to the arrest and sentencing of former President Nasheed cited above, which has prompted opposition [protests](#) and attracted [criticism](#) from a number of countries including India and the US, in July 2015 former Vice-President, Mohammed Jameel, was also accused of treason and [sacked](#) by the country's Parliament. The *Guardian* [reports](#) that a number of other government officials have also recently been fired—including a former police chief, defence minister, and government spokesperson—a move some observers argue is a “purge of individuals whose loyalties may be in doubt”.

The *Financial Times* [reports](#) that the political situation in the Maldives “has prompted international lawyers, lobbyists and entrepreneurs...to take sides in the dispute”. For example, the human-rights lawyer, Amal Clooney, is [working pro bono](#) for former President Nasheed, alongside Jared Genser of the [Freedom Now](#) group. Meanwhile, the Maldivian Government has hired Cherie Blair QC and her international law firm, [Omnia Strategy](#), to defend the Government at the UN. On 5 October 2015, the [UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention](#) announced that it had found Mr Nasheed's detention both arbitrary and in violation of international law, and suggested that it was “politically motivated”. The Working Group [rejected](#) arguments from the Maldivian Government's legal team that it had acted within the law.

Commentators have also noted the rise in radical Islam in the Maldives. According to the *Telegraph*, the Maldives—a Sunni Muslim country—has the [highest number of jihadists per capita](#) travelling to fight in Syria and Iraq. It suggests a number of [reasons](#) for the rise in Maldivian jihadists, including that they have been actively encouraged by some politicians, and that increasing numbers of young Maldivians had been radicalised after being sent to study in madrassas in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Equally, the *Guardian* [reported](#) in February this year that most of the recent departures to Syria have been from those living in the capital Malé, where “radical preaching, organised crime and social problems have created a toxic mix”.

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