



# MALDIVES

## Quick Facts

Population: 391,904 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 298 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Homogeneous mixture of Sinhalese, Dravidian, Arab, Australasian, and African

Government Type: Presidential republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$4.505 billion (2017 est.)

*Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated July 2020)*

## INTRODUCTION

*The Republic of Maldives, a tourist paradise in the Indian Ocean, has recently faced a number of internal challenges, ranging from economic and environmental concerns to political infighting and religious dissent. The Maldivian government does not allow freedom of worship, and its constitution denies non-Muslims citizenship rights. It has also struggled with Salafi-jihadi ideology, which has gained support among large swaths of the population (in particular the nation's youth). The Maldives has become a safe haven for radical strains of Islam and fertile ground for transnational jihadist recruitment and indoctrination. Simmering religious dissent, growing Islamic radicalization, and Maldivians returning from jihad hotspots like Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan remain major stumbling blocks to stability in the island nation.*

## ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

### *The Islamic Foundation of the Maldives (IFM)*

IFM was founded in April 2009 by Ibrahim Fauzee, who was previously detained at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba for his links to al-Qaeda. According to its current website, the IFM aims “to promote and preserve the religion of Islam as well as religious unity, to enact Islamic principles, to raise awareness of religious precepts and to organize social activities in adherence with Islamic precepts and laws.”<sup>1</sup> The IFM’s Islamic activism was highlighted when Mohamed Nazim, a Maldivian, was assaulted on May 28, 2010 after he expressed scepticism of Islam during a meeting with Islamic preacher Zakir Naik. The IFM urged the government and the courts to strip Nazim of his citizenship and sentence him to death in accordance with *sharia* and the Maldivian constitution.<sup>2</sup> Nazim subsequently repented (reportedly under duress) and publicly apologized.

The Rohingya conflict in Myanmar and subsequent humanitarian crisis provided ample opportunities

for groups like IFM to work charitably. In October 2017, a team of IFM-affiliated volunteers, together with Fauzee and former Maldivian Minister for Islamic Affairs Dr. Abdul Majeed Abdul Bari, visited a number of Bangladeshi refugee camps. The group claims to have donated over 1 million Maldivian Rufiyaa (approximately \$65,000) to Islamic Relief Worldwide, an international humanitarian organization, in order to aid the Rohingya.<sup>3</sup> The IFM subsequently promoted its charity work throughout the Balukhali and Hakimpara refugee camps in the Bangladesh-Myanmar border region via its social media platforms.<sup>4</sup>

### *Jamiyyatul Salaf (JS)*

While public figures regarding its size and the composition of its membership are not available, JS is a prominent non-governmental religious group that propagates an ultra-conservative strain of Islam. It has Wahhabi Salafi leanings and a strong anti-secular ideology. It supports Islamizing education and promotes intolerance toward other religions, especially Christianity. Many JS members were educated in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The group regularly invites Islamic preachers and scholars to Maldives in conjunction with the country's Ministry of Islamic Affairs.

JS is actively engaged in moral policing: in 2008, it declared music to be *haram* (forbidden) and forced a school library in Malé, the capitol of Maldives, to close because it contained Christian books.<sup>5</sup> In 2012, pressure from religious groups like JS prompted the country's Islamic Affairs ministry to issue guidelines on permissible public behavior, including prohibiting mixed-gender dance events.<sup>6</sup>

In November 2011, JS activists demonstrated against UN Human Rights chief Navi Pillay's comments on flogging and the country's "discriminatory" constitutional provisions.<sup>7</sup> JS received some political support in its anti-UN campaign, especially from political parties such as the Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (DRP) and the PPM. JS recommended Saudi-style beheadings and firing squads over lethal injections for a convicted murderer in accordance with the Islamic principle of *Qiyas* (equal retaliation).<sup>8</sup>

JS remains at the forefront of pro-Islamic activities in Maldives. It issues religious edicts and guidelines intermittently to enforce various grievances. For example, in June 2016, JS member Sheikh Adam Sameem issued an edict through social media discouraging Maldivians from participating in International Yoga Day, which is not permissible for Muslims because the practice is connected to Hinduism.<sup>9</sup> JS also voiced its opposition to the ban on face-veils in the workplace and schools because banning face-veils was a violation of women's rights in an Islamic nation.<sup>10</sup> The group has also criticised the government for backing public entertainment events to mark the new year, and condemned such gatherings as "irreligious."<sup>11</sup> On this basis, JS has urged Maldivian citizens to refrain from taking part in activities like dance, music, and entertainment.<sup>12</sup>

### *Adhaalath Party (AP)*

Often identified as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Adhaalath (Justice) Party is one of the most significant Islamist political parties in Maldives.<sup>13</sup> The party holds conservative views on gender issues – opposing, for instance, the eligibility of women to stand in presidential elections. Under its influence, the country's Ministry of Islamic Affairs has regularly invited foreign scholars and preachers with extreme religious views to Maldives.<sup>14</sup> One such invitee, a "televangelist" who runs the satellite television channel "Peace TV" named Zakir Naik, is known for his preaching sessions and his inflammatory comment that "every Muslim should be a terrorist."<sup>15</sup> Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the controversial Egyptian Islamist scholar and Muslim Brotherhood ideologue who has defended suicide bombing and advocated in favor of the death penalty for apostates in the past, to have significant followers in Maldives.<sup>16</sup>

AP has banned its members from visiting Sufi tombs and shrines because its leadership has deemed praying there to be un-Islamic. The party supports reinstating a ban on public visits to the Medhu Ziyaaraiy, the tomb of Abu Barakat Berberi, who is credited with introducing Islam to Maldives (the Ministry of Islamic Affairs keeps the shrine open on the condition that no flags would be hoisted in or around it).<sup>17</sup>

AP has urged the government to ban music and songs deemed harmful to Maldivian youth. According to the party, “Cigarettes, music and Internet are gateways to higher addictions like alcohol, pornography and hard drugs. Attack root cause and save our kids.”<sup>18</sup> Malé has refrained from imposing any legal proscription on music or dance, however.<sup>19</sup>

Members of JS and AP criticized former President Mohamed Waheed Hassan Manik when he asked for a review of the conviction of a minor who was sentenced to flogging on February 26, 2013.<sup>20</sup> According to AP, flogging is the penalty for fornication under *sharia* and the group has argued that the “purpose of penalties like these (flogging) in Islamic Sharia is to maintain order in society and to save it from sinful acts [...] and no one has the right to criticise any penalties specified in Islam.”<sup>21</sup>

### *Al-Asr*

Al-Asr was created in 2013 to provide a platform for education and training of Maldivian youths. While its mission statement avoids words like “Islam” or “religion, Al-Asr is an overtly Salafist network and focuses on teaching Islamic tenets and to guiding children toward Islam. Founded by Sheikh Adam Shameem, a firebrand Salafi cleric with an extensive social media presence, Al-Asr hosts religious educational events across Maldives with visiting foreign Islamic scholars and clerics. Adam Shameem, a controversial Salafi preacher previously associated with both AP and JS who now runs Al-Asr, made several remarks against democracy, secularism, and remains an avid critic of music and entertainment shows in Maldives. Shameem was educated at Jamia Salafiyya in Pakistan, Medina Islamic University in Saudi Arabia, and the International Islamic University in Malaysia. He held important posts during President Abdullah Yameen’s administration and was a member of the Fatwa Majlis, the body responsible for adjudicating religious disputes in Maldives.

In September 2013, Shameem blamed the downfall of Muslim Spain (Moorish Spain) on Muslims only for developing relations with non-Muslims.<sup>22</sup> His widely publicised and televised *Al Andalus* (Muslim/Moorish Spain) sermon, organised by JS, advocated for Maldivian national religious purity: “If we want to maintain peace in this country, we must never allow any other religion here. If we do, we will face the fate of Andalus tomorrow.”<sup>23</sup> During another speech in January 2015, Sheikh Adam Shameem said that it is treasonous “to bring foreign musicians to Maldives” without considering Islamic *sharia*.<sup>24</sup> In April 2017, Shameem issued a message through social media that mocking Islam “is a characteristic of an apostate.”<sup>25</sup> In October 2018 he was briefly detained by Indian authorities and denied entry into the country for security reasons.<sup>26</sup>

### *Malé Terrorist Attack*

The first and, to date, only Islamist terrorist attack in Maldives took place in Malé in September 2007. A crude bomb blast injured 12 foreigners, including tourists from the UK, Japan, and China. The attack perhaps targeted the tourism industry for its alleged un-Islamic practices and sinful influence on local culture.<sup>27</sup> Subsequently, a massive crackdown prompted extremists to flee the country, mostly to neighbouring Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Three terrorists – Mohamed Sobah, Moosa Inaz and Ahmed Naseer – confessed to the crime and were sentenced to 15 years in jail.<sup>28</sup> They have reportedly admitted during the trial that the goal was to “target, attack and injure non-Muslims to fulfill jihad.”<sup>29</sup>

The search and sweep operation that ensued after the bombing uncovered an illegal Dar-ul-Khair mosque located on an isolated island in October 2007, where many extremists were hiding. The situation erupted into a violent confrontation between radical members of the mosque and security forces, footage of which was featured in a November 2007 al-Qaeda propaganda video. The propaganda video, titled: “Your brothers in Maldives are calling you” was made by a hitherto unknown group known as *Ansar Al Mujahideen* and posted on an al-Qaeda-linked web forum so as to attract recruits and raise capital.<sup>30</sup> Maldivian authorities eventually unearthed similar Islamist outposts, such as an island located in North Ari atoll that provided safe heaven to extremists.

A subsequent al-Qaeda video circulated in November 2009 and featured Ali Jaleel, a Maldivian national who fought alongside pro-Taliban forces in Pakistan. Soon thereafter, another recruitment video featured a previously unknown al-Qaeda cell operating covertly in unregulated madrasas in Maldives, and exhorted jihadists to travel to the country.<sup>31</sup>

### *The Pakistan Connection*

Some Maldivian citizens have travelled Pakistan to engage in terrorist activities. In 2009, nine Maldivians were arrested in Pakistan's Waziristan tribal region during security raids at the militant training camps there. They were later repatriated to Maldives.<sup>32</sup> According to national police, the nine suspects had ties to the bombing that took place in Malé's Sultan Park in September 2007, and they may have left the country for Pakistan via Sri Lanka for further training and indoctrination.<sup>33</sup> Later that year, Abu Jaleel and two of his associates carried out a suicide attack on Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence Agency headquarters in Lahore.<sup>34</sup> They were repatriated by the government to Maldives for de-radicalization. The suspects included Yusuf Izaadhy (who, according to a leaked U.S. cable, was planning to establish a terror group in Maldives with the assistance of a Pakistan-based group), Easa Ali, and Hasnain Abdullah Hameedh.<sup>35</sup>

The offer of free education in Pakistani *madrasas* is widely acknowledged as a core means of radicalizing Maldivians locally.<sup>36</sup> Though there are no statistics regarding the number of Maldivians students presently studying at such institutions, bilateral ties in the sphere of education were boosted with an Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) during Maldivian President Abdullah Yamin Abdul Gayoom's visit to Pakistan in May 2015.<sup>37</sup> Former President Mohamed Nasheed admitted in October 2009 that Pakistan-based terrorist groups have successfully recruited hundreds of Maldivian Muslims to fight against Pakistani government forces.<sup>38</sup> In 2016, Mohamed Abdul Rahman was charged with terrorism and participating in a foreign war; in 2007 he had travelled to Pakistan under the pretext of continuing his studies while, in actuality, participating in militant activity.<sup>39</sup> According to media reports, he had a ties to a top Al Qaeda –IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) operative Abu Usman Adil who died in a U.S. drone strike in Waziristan in April 2012. Despite his links to al-Qaeda and stint in Pakistan's *jihad* heartlands, the criminal court in Maldives dropped all charges in August 2018 because prosecutors could not prove Rahman had taken part in fighting after the country's 2015 Anti-Terrorism Act came into force.<sup>40</sup>

### *Al Qaeda outreach*

In recent years, Maldivian youth have reportedly been joining al-Qaeda affiliates *Jabhat Fateh al-Sham* or *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (formerly known as the Al-Nusra Front), as well as the Islamic State (IS, or *Daesh*).<sup>41</sup> In March 2016, three Maldivians were arrested in Turkey while attempting to illegally cross over into Syria. All three, charged with traveling abroad with the intent of joining a terror group, were acquitted in October 2017.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, in September 2017, three Maldivians were arrested in a joint operation carried out by Maldivian and Turkish law enforcement. They were planning to cross the border into Syria to join an unidentified *jihadi* group there. Several Maldivians who attempted to cross into Syria to join *jihadist* factions have also been arrested and repatriated from Turkey. In August 2017, two Maldivians were among 19 suspected militants with links to IS arrested in Malaysia before heading to Syria to join the Islamic State.<sup>43</sup>

In September 2017, Maldivian authorities again arrested two IS sympathizers for planning suicide bombings.<sup>44</sup> This plot came amid government efforts to counter grassroots Islamic extremism in Maldives.

One explanation for the interest among Maldivian youth in becoming foreign fighters is targeted media. The Bilad Al Sham Media (BASM) is an online media forum, presumably run by Maldivians in Syria, that propagates and publicizes Maldivian *jihadists* and their battlefield accomplishments.<sup>45</sup> It has detailed the experiences of Maldivian *jihadis*, mostly young university students, as they travelled to Syria.<sup>46</sup> One October 2017 BASM blog post, for instance, focused on the best and the most honorable way to die and the virtues of martyrdom.<sup>47</sup>

### *Islamic State footprints*

Another Maldivian pro-Islamic State media group, Haqqu Media, releases literatures and songs to attract youth. It released a video *nasheed* (chant) in local Dhivehi language urging Maldivian Muslims to participate in *jihad*. One in particular features Abu Yusoof, a suicide bomber from a 2008 attack in southern Waziristan, who, in the video, questions who have not participated in *jihad*.<sup>48</sup>

Reports of an Islamic State of Maldives (ISM) emerged in July 2014, coinciding with the country's Independence Day celebrations. An Islamic State flag was hoisted for the first time in the Raalhugandu area of the national capital. ISIS flags flew during the early August 2014 protest march against Israel's military operations in the Gaza Strip, with protesters burning both American and Israeli flags. There were banners and flags clearly displaying the Maldivian flag crossed out with a message in the local Divehi language stating: "This flag is directly under the slavery of America. If there was any independence, it would have been possible to implement Allah's Shari'a. Don't mock yourself, talking about independence."<sup>49</sup> The other banner with ISIS's flag depicted the message: "If you want real independence, try and get under the shelter of this flag. That will be the day when we break free from the shackles of the Kuffar and celebrate. Insha Allah."<sup>50</sup>

ISM was active on social networking sites popular for *jihadist* propaganda. The primary purpose of ISM propaganda on social network sites was to promote the group, to create awareness about the Islamic State, and to convey its messages to the Maldivian people. It has urged Maldivian youth to: "strive for the Caliphate and to stand up against the existing democratic system of governance," which, according to the ISM, has "ruined Maldives."<sup>51</sup> In early September 2014, hundreds of Islamists demonstrated in Malé, calling for the enforcement of *sharia* in Maldives.<sup>52</sup> A poster with the tagline "Soldiers of the jihadist group are active in Maldives" depicted Islamic State members; it circulated online and during a protest rally near the skating ground of the artificial beach in Malé in in early May 2017.

Some young people in Maldives appear to have gravitated to radical Islamist ideals in recent years, using social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, to propagate violence and intolerance, and to display the flags and insignia of *jihadist* groups. There have also been repeated incidents of Islamist vigilantes abducting and interrogating young men in Malé and elsewhere, forcing them to identify online activists advocating secularism or professing atheism. Soon after the abduction of journalist Ahmed Rilwan in August 2014, the ISM released a video on YouTube that depicted the execution of U.S. journalist James Wright Foley. It also contained a message threatening to kill Maldivian atheists, stating, "We shall borrow your heads."<sup>53</sup> While Rilwan's mysterious disappearance remains unsolved, his friend and fellow blogger Yameen Rasheed was threatened and later killed in April 2017.<sup>54</sup> Friends of Rilwan went into hiding after they were threatened for their "anti-Islamic" views.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, death threats and fatal attacks against liberal or secular individuals have become routine in Maldives. In early 2019, "*Murtad* Watch MV," a Telegram channel run by a covert Islamist group, began posting pictures and information of people that they have labeled as Apostates, "enemies of Islam" or "*laadheenee*" (irreligious or secular) for speaking against archaic practices of Islam including the death by stoning verdict. This Telegram channel currently remains active, with over 100 subscribers.

### *Foreign Fighters and Returnees*

Over the past five years, some 69 Maldivians (excluding women and children) are known to have joined militant groups fighting in Syria and Iraq.<sup>56</sup> While the Maldivian government has engaged in an effort to restrain radicalized youths from joining *jihadist* groups in Syria and Iraq, people returning from fighting in these conflicts pose a novel problem to the Maldivian government.

On February 21, the country's elite counter-terrorism agency, the National Counter-Terrorism Center (NCTC), announced that six women sought to return to Maldives with their families.<sup>57</sup> These women were

widows of Maldivian militants who died fighting alongside *jihadist* factions in Syria and Iraq. Agencies in Maldives remain largely clueless about what may happen when these women return home. The ruling Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) government under president Ibrahim Mohamed Solih set up two high level committees, the Counter Terrorism Steering Committee and the Counter Radicalisation Committee, to deal with present radicalisation and reintegration problems.<sup>58</sup> Most recently, Mohamed Nasheed, former President of Maldives and a key member of ruling MDP, has called for thorough screening of Islamic priests and preachers visiting the island nation in the wake of Sri Lanka's Easter 2019 terror events.<sup>59</sup>

## ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

The culture of Maldives has become increasingly influenced by Wahhabi ideology. In January 2011, an investigative report citing Maldivian intelligence officials concluded that Maldivian youth are increasingly attracted to the idea of transnational *jihad*.<sup>60</sup>

The Maldivian penal code states that punishments in accordance with Islamic law must be meted out to persons found guilty beyond a reasonable doubt of committing a crime proscribed by *sharia*.<sup>61</sup> A 2009 investigation found that Maldivian *sharia* courts sentenced almost 146 women to be flogged for adultery (nearly 38 men had also been accordingly sentenced) between 2006 and 2009.<sup>62</sup> 67 women were flogged for adultery in 2010. 93 were found guilty of fornication in the courts in 2011. A young woman was raped by her stepfather and then convicted of premarital sex in a juvenile court. She was sentenced to 100 lashes and eight months of house arrest in February 2013.<sup>63</sup> In 2015, a mother of five was convicted by a local judge of adultery and giving birth out of wedlock, and sentenced to death by stoning.<sup>64</sup> Again in early January 2019, a local magistrate in Naifuri Island sentenced a 25-year-old woman to death by stoning on adultery charges. However, the Maldivian Supreme Court annulled both rulings on procedural grounds, observing that the judgment violated judicial and legal procedures.<sup>65</sup>

Intellectuals, writers, and activists that have challenged the strict implementation of Islamic practices have been targeted for assassination. Dr. Afrasheem Ali, a renowned liberal religious scholar and lawmaker, was killed in early October 2012.<sup>66</sup> There were attempted assassinations against anti-*sharia* activists Aishath Velezinee, Khilath Rasheed and Yameen Rasheen in January 2011,<sup>67</sup> June 2012,<sup>68</sup> and April 2017,<sup>69</sup> respectively. After taking over the Presidency in September 2018, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih ordered new investigations into the killing of Yameen Rasheed and the disappearance of another activist, Ahmed Rilwan.<sup>70</sup>

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs claims to have developed de-radicalization methods and has been taking measures to curb the activities of the various transnational Islamic organizations that have recently arrived in Maldives.<sup>71</sup> However, radical interpretations of Islam and calls for *jihad* against non-believers are increasingly supported. Islamist hardliners have called for the adoption of "Arabesque" alternatives in all aspects of life, including determining the age at which women reach puberty and proscribing how convicts should be executed in an "Islamic way."<sup>72</sup> Hundreds of Maldivians took to the streets in September 2012, protesting against a film made by a U.S. based independent producer. Titled *Innocence of Muslims*, the film was widely perceived as offensive to the Prophet Muhammad and sparked protests. During the protests, an American flag was burned amidst signs and placards displaying anti-American and anti-Jewish slogans like "May Allah Curse America" and "Maldives: Future Graveyard of Americans and Jews."<sup>73</sup>

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Under the constitution of Maldives, adopted in 1997, Islam is the state religion undergirding an Islamic government.<sup>74</sup> Non-Muslims are forbidden from worshipping in public in Maldives. The Maldivian population is almost entirely Muslim, with citizenship strictly confined to practitioners of the Islamic faith;

any Muslim who converts to another faith is breaking *sharia* law and thus can lose his or her citizenship. The government also prevents the importation of non-Muslim books and other religious items. However, people from other religions are given permanent residence permits to work, mostly in the country's hospitality industry. Despite its economic benefits, many radical Islamic groups active in Maldives have denounced what they view as tourism's negative influence on local Islamic culture.

In December 2017, a government ministry stated that "Allah does not accept any other religion but Islam. And he has said anyone who believes any other religion than Islam will be amongst the perishable on Judgement Day."<sup>75</sup> The statement in Divehi warned citizens against "spreading unnecessary sayings in the society that imply giving space for any other faiths but Islam."<sup>76</sup> The statement sought to repudiate comments by Shahindha Ismail, a human rights activist who urges religious cohabitation.<sup>77</sup>

After almost three decades of authoritarian rule, Maldives became a multi-party democracy in 2008 with the election of Mohamed Nasheed as President. Although Nasheed's party, the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), has progressive views on religion, its main ally, the Adhaalath Party, does not. According to one official, there were at least seven Islamist radicals running in the 2008 elections (all of whom lost).<sup>78</sup> Nasheed did not remain popular for long, however; due to his economic strategy and anti-Islamic policies, discontent reached a highpoint when Nasheed's government arrested Judge Abdulla Mohamed on January 16, 2012 on charges of corruption. In fact, Judge Abdulla Mohamed was targeted by Nasheed's MDP led government due to the release of Mohamed Jameel Ahmed, one ardent government critic and politician who suggested that Nasheed was undermining and conspiring 'against Islam with the help of Christians and Jews.'<sup>79</sup> In February 2012, Nasheed was ousted in a bloodless coup and replaced by then-Vice President Mohammed Waheed Hassan Manik.<sup>80</sup> Nasheed claimed that he was forced out of office by security personnel at the behest of opposition political parties, though that has never been proven.<sup>81</sup>

Nasheed's MDP government had resisted calls from extremists to shut down the country's luxury resorts, which serve alcohol, pork, and facilitate "pleasure tourism."<sup>82</sup> Since Nasheed's ouster from power, the Ministry for Islamic Affairs has proposed the adoption of "Islamic tourism" without these basic elements, arguing that it works in Saudi Arabia where alcohol is not available, even at posh hotels frequented by Westerners.<sup>83</sup> Political parties like the Gayoom-led PPM call for an alternative economy based on oil, rather than the country's long-standing dependence on what has been termed the "anti-Islamic" tourism industry.

In the post-Nasheed era, there was a renewed call for *sharia* in Maldives. His immediate successor, President Mohammed Waheed Hassan, was seen as more favorable to radical Islamist ideas in that he was complacent regarding proselytizing extremists.<sup>84</sup> The Ministry of Islamic Affairs has only mildly admonished young *jihadis*, stating that "No Muslim scholar in Maldives has called on Maldivians to participate in foreign wars, but there are youth, who get emotional from what they see, of the suffering of Muslims, there are Maldivian youths who want to avenge that." The October 2015 *Anti-Terrorism Act* criminalized the act of leaving Maldives to fight in a foreign war or joining a banned terror group, subjecting violators to jail terms of up to 20 years.

Under Waheed Hasan's administration, Islamic Affairs minister and Adhaalath party member Sheikh Mohamed Shaheem Ali Saeed waged a virulent campaign against Christians and what he termed "Freemasons" for conspiring to erase Islam from Maldives.<sup>85</sup> Sheikh Shaheem indeed appears to be working toward this goal, as has made significant efforts as a Minister to steer Maldivian foreign policy towards Arabic countries while distancing it from the West.<sup>86</sup> Islamic Minister Ahmed Ziyad said at the time that the Saudis would help maintain Maldives' 100 percent Muslim status. In late 2015, Saudi Arabia and Maldives agreed to maintain religious unity between their two countries.<sup>87</sup> Subsequently, in 2017, Maldives became the first non-Middle Eastern country to back the Saudi Arabia-led coalition of five Arab countries who severed diplomatic relations with Qatar, and thereafter joined the 34-nation regional bloc led by Saudi Arabia to pressure Qatar to, among other things, sever its ties with Iran.<sup>88</sup>

Beginning in 2013, the administration of President Abdulla Yameen backed away from support of a more Islamised Maldives despite criticism from various Islamic organizations and opposition political parties. In April 2016, the country's parliament amended the 1994 Religious Unity Act to set up Fatwa Majlis (a Supreme Council for Islamic affairs) with the authority to issue legal opinions on religious disputes.<sup>89</sup> It is to be noted, however, that the Fiqh Academy of Maldives, a council of religious scholars, drew criticism for issuing a *fatwa* that prohibits participation in foreign civil wars.<sup>90</sup> In April 2018, the country's Ministry for Islamic Affairs published a paper about religious freedom, mocking religion, going to war in the name of religion, committing murder, and acts of war in the name of religion.<sup>91</sup>

The present MDP government under President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih has vowed to take necessary measures to halt Islamic radicalisation and extremism in Maldives. In mid-November 2018, President Solih formed the Commission to investigate murders and enforced disappearance of at least 24 cases, including high profile assassination of Dr. Afrasheem Ali and Yameen Rasheed. Further, Solih repealed the *Anti-Defamation and Freedom of Speech Act* which was enacted in August 2016. This controversial law introduced fines up to MVR 2 million (US\$130,000) and closure of media outlets found guilty of 'slander', 'breaching social norms' and breaking 'any tenet of Islam'. Failure to pay the fine can lead to a jail sentence of up to six months for journalists and individuals found guilty of slander.<sup>92</sup> President Solih further urged all Maldivians not to advocate religious extremism or promote ideologies that support radical Islam.<sup>93</sup>

In the wake of terror events in neighbouring Sri Lanka in the Spring of 2019, the Maldivian government is working to cooperate with other regional countries on counter terror measures. In early May, Maldivian military and police forces conducted an emergency response exercise to beef up interagency coordination during crisis events. Maldivian authorities aim to strengthen domestic surveillance and border security amid mounting local perceptions of a heightened threat.<sup>94</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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