

American Foreign Policy Council

MALDIVES

QUICK FACTS

Population: 395,650

Area: 298 sq km

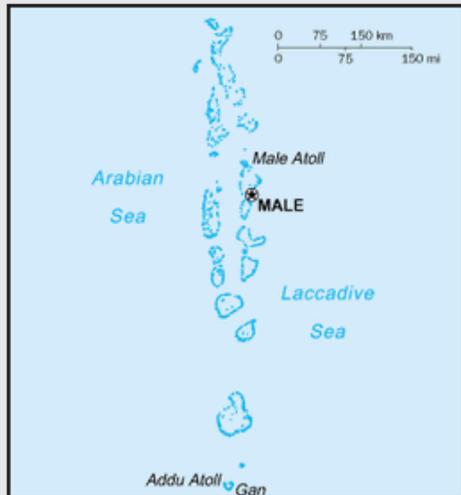
Ethnic Groups: South Indians,
Sinhalese, Arabs

Religions: Sunni Muslim 80%,
Shi'a Muslim 19%, other 1%

Government Type: Islamic
Republic

GDP (official exchange rate):
\$13.47 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of
the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated July 2010)



Although the population of the Maldives is one hundred percent Muslim, mostly Sunni, and the government prohibits the practice of other religions, Maldivian society was largely moderate and tolerant until comparatively recently.¹ Today, however, Islamic clerics and lay preachers disseminate a radical strain of Islam across the country, mostly in impoverished and secluded locales such as Ukulhas (in North Ari atoll). Islamist organizations, including Jamiyyatul Salaf (JS) and the Islamic Foundation of Maldives (IFM), have proliferated as well, growing to dominate the socio-cultural landscape and dictate the way of life. Even mainstream political parties in the Maldives, such as Adhaalath (Justice), now support the strict implementation of Islamic law in all walks of life.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The process of grassroots radicalization in the Maldives is comparatively recent, and can be traced back to 2003, when posters of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden began to appear on walls in Edhya-fushi Island, the capital city of Baa Atoll. Then, in 2005, Islamists attacked a shop in the national capital, Male, for displaying an image of Santa Claus in its window.² Subsequently, in the early months of 2007, a religious faction in Himandhoo began issuing death threats to locals who refused to collaborate with them. The same year, Islamists warned people in Himandhoo not to send their children to local schools because of the impure influence of “foreign” teachers, the English language and non-Islamic subjects. In reaction, Islamists established competing Islamic schools that teach the *Koran* and *Hadith*.³

This growth in grassroots activism has been mirrored by the establishment of several notable Islamist outposts. One is the Dar-ul-Khair mosque on the island of Himandhoo, which has served as a major source for the propagation of conservative Islam. After ignoring the Dar-ul-Khair mosque for years, authorities in Male ordered its demolition in October 2006. The ensuing government action met considerable local resistance, resulting in the arrest of at least 16 people.⁴ Soon thereafter, the Himandhoo residents rebuilt the mosque and it resumed disseminating Islamist ideology. The Ukulhas Island in North Ari atoll also harbors extremists; many inhabitants there have been influenced by self-proclaimed Islamic scholars, and further radicalized through access to extremist literature and CDs.⁵

The first Islamist terrorist attack in the Maldives occurred in Male in September 2007, when a crude bomb wounded 12 foreigners, including British, Japanese and Chinese tourists in Male’s Sultan Park. The attack was obviously aimed at the country’s thriving tourism industry and the so-called “alien influence” of tourism on local culture. Following the bombing, security agencies rounded up over 50 suspects, including two Bangladeshi nationals. Many more suspects fled to Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Three terrorists, all in their early 20s, were ultimately sentenced to 15 years in jail in connec-

tion with the attack, after confessing to their roles in the incident during the trial. All three have reportedly admitted their goal, was to “target, attack and injure non-Muslims to fulfill jihad.”⁶

The bombing prompted authorities to crack down on extremist elements holed up in the illegal Dar-ul-Khair mosque in October 2007. The situation erupted into a violent confrontation between members of the Dar-ul-Khair mosque and security forces when the latter attempted to carry out a search and sweep operation. Both Maldivian police and the Maldives National Defense Force (MNDF) successfully put down the violent uprising, arresting more than 50.⁷ The incident at Dar-ul-Khair was subsequently mentioned in an al-Qaeda video.⁸

Taliban-style public flogging is also emerging in the Maldives. A 2009 investigation found that Muslim courts in the country had sentenced almost 150 women to public flogging for adultery.⁹ The prevalent thinking appears to be that public flogging will deter immoral practices in society.

Radical political parties, such as *Adhaalath* (Justice), which is now part of the government’s ruling coalition, have long clamored for the strict implementation of sharia in all parts of the Maldives. *Adhaalath*, which is sympathetic to the Taliban, also controls the nation’s Ministry of Islamic Affairs. *Adhaalath* favors the Islamization of the Maldives, and holds conservative views on gender issues—opposing, for instance, the eligibility of women to contest Presidential elections. Under its influence, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs has regularly invited foreign scholars and preachers with extreme religious views to the Maldives to address large and small groups on religious matters. The party has also proscribed visits to Sufi tombs and shrines because its leadership deemed praying and making wishes there to be un-Islamic. The *Adhaalath* Party also supports reinstating a ban on public visits to the *Medhu Ziyaaraiy*, the tomb of Abu Barakat Berberi, who is credited with introducing Islam to the Maldives, citing religious justifications.¹⁰ (The country’s Islamic Ministry, however, has ordered the shrine to remain open on the condition that no flags would be hoisted in and around it.) The cur-

rent government in Male has one representative of *Adhaalath* as the minister for religious affairs, and the party exerts considerable pressure on the administration of current President Mohamed Nasheed (on account of its support for Nasheed in the last election in his successful bid against sitting President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom).

Maldivian society also boasts a number of Islamist organizations. The most prominent among them is the *Jamiyyatul Salaf* (JS), a non-governmental religious group which propagates an ultra-conservative strain of Islam. JS boasts Wahhabi/Salafi lineage, and a strong anti-secular ideology. It supports Islamizing education in the country and promotes intolerance towards other religions, especially Christianity. Many of its members are known to have been educated in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. As part of its campaign to raise Islamic awareness and promote the values of Islam, the group regularly invites Islamic preachers and scholars to the Maldives in conjunction with the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. The JS is also actively engaged in moral policing; in 2008, it declared music to be *haram* (forbidden) and forced a school library in Male to close because it contained Christian books.¹¹

The Islamic Foundation of the Maldives is a relatively new non-profit organization, similar to JS, that was registered in April 2009. It was founded by Ibrahim Fauzee, an Islamist previously arrested in Karachi, Pakistan and detained at Guantanamo Bay for his links to al-Qaeda. According to its website, the IFM aims to “promote and protect Islamic tenets and ethics, create religious awareness, and to uphold social events within the boundary of Islamic principles and [the] Religious Unity Act in the Maldives.”¹² After Mohamed Nazim declared himself a Maldivian and not a Muslim, the IFM implored the state both to revoke Nazim’s citizenship and execute him if he did not repent.¹³

While there are no known organized *jihadi* groups operating in or out of the Maldives, the country has proven a fertile ground for *jihadist* recruitment. *Lashkar e-Taiba* (LeT) and al-Qaeda have both successfully recruited youth already radicalized in Islamic schools there.¹⁴

The December 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean provided an opening in this regard. In the aftermath of the disaster, radical Islamists gained a foothold in the country in the guise of humanitarian charities. The most significant of these was the *Idara Khidmat-e-Khalq* (IKK), which is affiliated with the Pakistan-based *Jamat ud Dawal/Lashkar-e-Taiba*. The IKK is linked to the *Jamaat Ahl-e-Hadith* sect active in the Maldives, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Many *Ahl-e-Hadith* groups are known to be involved in the *jihadi* struggle in South Asia, and most are affiliated with Kashmir-centric terrorist groups such as *Lashkar-e Taiba* and *Harkat-ul Mujahideen*. Its followers prefer to call themselves Salafis, in order to stress their closeness to the Saudis. Intelligence sources confirm that the IKK has spearheaded LeT's activities in the Maldives, which prioritizes youth recruitment.¹⁵ The IKK claims to have spent 17.2 million Pakistani Rupees (roughly \$282,000) on tsunami relief in the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Indonesia during 2005 as post-tsunami relief although the Maldivian government denies that the organization provided any relief.¹⁶ Ostensibly as part of that aid, the IKK reportedly facilitated trips for many Maldivian youth to Pakistan, enrolling them in various radical *madrassas* (Islamic seminaries) there.

Sporadic incidents of *jihadi* activity within the Maldives have also occurred. In April 2005, for example, Indian police arrested Maldivian national Asif Ibrahim who allegedly frequented the Indian state of Kerala to procure arms and ammunition for the LeT's Maldives operation. Ibrahim confessed to planning to blow up a government-run mosque and assassinate then-President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. An official release from the Maldivian government indicated that Asif Ibrahim had become a member of the UK-based extremist Islamic group *Jama'ah-tul-Muslimeen* in 2001.¹⁷ More recently, in the early weeks of February 2010, nine alleged Maldivian terrorists arrested in Pakistan's troubled South Waziristan tribal region in March 2009 were repatriated to the Maldives.¹⁸ According to national police, the nine have ties to the bombing that took place in Male's Sultan Park in September 2007, and may have left the country for Pakistan via Sri Lanka for further training and indoctrination.¹⁹

The current Maldivian government admits that Pakistan-based terrorist groups have successfully recruited hundreds of Maldivian Muslims to fight against government forces in Pakistan.²⁰ The bin Laden network has done so as well; an al-Qaeda video circulated in November 2009 featured Ali Jaleel, a Maldivian national who fought alongside pro-Taliban forces in Pakistan.²¹ Soon thereafter, another recruitment video featured a previously unknown al-Qaeda cell operating in the Maldives, and exhorted *jihadists* to travel to the country, stating “Your brothers in the Maldives are calling you.”²²

International concerns over the growth of Islamic extremism in the Maldives have risen since the May 2002 arrest of Ibrahim Fauzee. Fauzee, a Muslim cleric (now heading the Islamic Foundation of Maldives), was arrested in a suspected al-Qaeda safe house in Karachi, Pakistan and subsequently held in the Guantanamo Bay detention camp until his release and repatriation to the Maldives in March 2005.²³ The incident sparked concerns about the spread of radical Islam and the penetration of international terror groups like al-Qaeda and *Lashkar-e-Taiba* into the social fabric of this Indian Ocean archipelago.

The Fauzee case was not an isolated event, however. There is growing evidence of Maldivian youths frequenting Pakistan for reasons unknown or suspicious in nature, though enrollment in various *madrassas* (Islamic seminaries) is usually cited as the prime reason for their travel.²⁴ Intelligence agencies of the United States and India have noted this development with concern, and believe that growing religious extremism in the Maldives is a Pakistani import.²⁵ Additionally, the Maldives’ Controller of Immigration and Emigration, Sheikh Ilyas Hussain Ibrahim, believes that expatriates from Bangladesh now under surveillance have been instrumental in spreading religious extremism in the country.²⁶

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Persian travelers and Islamic preachers brought Islam to the Maldives in the 12th century.²⁷ It was then that Sheikh Yusuf Sam-suddin of Tavrezh (now Tabriz, Iran) converted King Darumavanta

Rasgefanu and his subjects to Islam. Another account by the Persian traveler Ibn Batuta indicates that Abu Barakat Berberi, a Sufi saint, converted the Maldives' then-Hindu (Buddhist) King and his subjects.²⁸ After this phase, known as the Spiritual Revolution in the annals of the Maldives, Islam was embraced and widely disseminated by successive Sultans. Under their direct patronage, Islamic laws were enforced and mosques and *madrassas* were built across the country. Islam became the foundation of the state and the fount of its laws, customs and traditions. This trend was more formally institutionalized in the 20th century, with the constitution of 1932, adopted during the rule of Sultan Muhammed Samusuddin Iskandar III, which made *sharia* the basis of all administrative and political governance.

Islam in the Maldives has traditionally been very moderate, as evidenced by the freedoms enjoyed by women and their comparatively high status in Maldivian society. The country is completely Muslim, with citizenship strictly confined to practitioners of the Islamic faith. Of these, most belong to the Shafi school of Sunni Islam.

However, the culture of the Maldives has undergone a sea of change in recent years, and is progressively being Arabized (or Wahhabized). Today, the influence of external, and more extreme, Islamic ideology can be seen in changing dress codes for women, the increasing frequency with which men sport beards, and in the name changes adopted by foreign-funded mosques around the country. And although the full veil is illegal in the Maldives and even headscarves are banned for female television anchors, many women on Himandhoo Island have begun to cover themselves completely.²⁹ Full headscarf and Arabic-style robes, meanwhile, have become the dress code for women in general.

Spanish scholar Xavier Romero-Frias observed at the end of the 20th century that, “[t]he changes brought about have been of such magnitude and in such a short time, that there is now a whole young generation who, having not known how things were previously, take for granted that their home nation has always been so orthodox and impersonal.”³⁰ He further noted that Maldivian religious practices

have changed “significantly and irreversibly since the beginning of the 1980’s.”³¹

This radical undercurrent has at times broken into the open, as it did in December 1998 when the country’s Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (which later became Ministry of Islamic Affairs) appealed to the national Police Service to impose a ban on night clubs and discotheques on the eve of New Year celebrations.³² That same year, the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs barred Maldivians from listening to Christian missionary radio.³³ Other incidents of state-backed religious intolerance and discrimination came to light when Christians were imprisoned in June 1998 on religious grounds and held captive at the notorious prison on Dhoonidhoo Island.³⁴ The arrests followed government-sanctioned search and sweep operations of homes of Christians living in the country (some, but not all, have subsequently been released). The government reportedly expelled nearly 20 foreigners as part of that crackdown.

In July 2000, then-President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, reportedly under pressure from radicals, declared in a public address that the Maldives have no room for any religion but Islam. He subsequently reiterated his stance on numerous occasions, and went on to accuse foreigners of destroying religious unity by introducing other faiths.³⁵ Gayoom claimed that the Maldives achieved and sustained its sovereignty by adhering only to Islamic principles.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

With the adoption of the country’s 1997 constitution, Islam became the state religion and the chain of nearly 1,200 coral islands was declared 100-percent Islamic.³⁶ Non-Muslims are forbidden from proselytizing and conducting public worship in the Maldives. Any Muslim who converts to another faith is breaking *sharia* law and can lose his or her citizenship. Migrant workers of other faiths are denied the ability to practice their faith. The government also prevents the importation of non-Muslim books and other religious items. However, people from other religions are given permanent resident permits to live and work, mostly in the country’s thriving hospitality industry, which serves as the economic lifeline of

the Maldives. Notably, despite its economic benefits, many radical Islamic groups active in the Maldives have denounced what they view as tourism's negative influence on local Islamic culture.

During the reign of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, himself an alumnus of Cairo's famed Al Azhar University, where he was a student of Islamic jurisprudence, the country experienced a new Islamic revival. In the 1980s and early 1990s, intense indoctrination was undertaken and mosques were built en masse. During that time period, Koranic schools also emerged as major educational institutions. In November 1984, the president of the Maldives laid the foundation of a major Friday Mosque complex; the estimated \$7 million cost of the project was funded in large part by the Persian Gulf states, Pakistan, Brunei, and Malaysia.³⁷ Today, the golden-domed mosque, named *Masjid-al Sultan Mohamed Thakurufaanu-al-A'zam*, is a testament to the growing Arabian influence over Maldivian society.

Gayoom has been accused of having brought Islamic fundamentalism into the country, and of using "Islam as a tool of governance,"³⁸ Under the Gayoom regime, Islamic preachers and *madrassas* received unconditional political and financial support, paving the way for the rise of Islamism, which has obstructed movement toward democratization.³⁹ After almost three decades of authoritarian rule, the Maldives became a multi-party democracy in 2008 with the election of the liberal Mohamed Nasheed as President. Although Nasheed's party, the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), has progressive views on religion, its main ally, the *Adhalaath* Party, holds conservative views on religious and cultural matters. Gayoom's right-wing party, the *Dhivehi Rayyithunge* Party (DRP), often accuses the ruling government of being too liberal in cultural and religious matters. The DRP's leader, Ahmed Thasmeen Ali, once alleged that the current government intended "to wipe out Islam in the Maldives."⁴⁰

Since 2009, the Maldivian government has been working on a counterterrorism bill with the help of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Interpol. The drafting committee includes officials from the Maldives Police, National Defence

Force, Attorney General's Office, Prosecutor General's Office and Maldives Monetary Authority. This bill, which will replace or supplement the existing Prevention of Terrorism Act,⁴¹ would provide adequate legal standing against growing radicalism in the country and empower security agencies to "act preemptively on matters of national security, including terrorism." The proposed bill has been vehemently criticized by the IFM for its potential use against religious activities in the name of preserving national security. The IFM fears that the law would target Muslim religious scholars, enabling their extradition and obstructing the preaching of Islam in public.⁴²

Many in the Maldivian political establishment feared that renewing diplomatic ties with Israel would expose the Maldives to terrorist attacks. Nevertheless, the Maldives reestablished diplomatic relations with Israel in 2009, and allowed a team of Israeli eye doctors to perform free surgery in the country during a visit in early December 2010. This development, however, was condemned by the Islamic Foundation, which urged the government to "shun all medical aid from the Zionist regime." It also accused Israeli doctors for illegally harvesting organs from non-Jews around the world.⁴³

Increasingly, the Maldives has been grappling with Salafi *jihadi* ideology, which is gaining currency among the population at large and among the nation's youth in particular. In January 2011, an investigative report, citing Maldivian intelligence officials, concluded that Maldivian youths are increasingly attracted to the idea of transnational *jihad*. According to one official quoted in the report, there were at least seven radicals running in the 2008 elections, though all of them lost the electoral battle.⁴⁴

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 arrived in the Maldives in recent years.⁴⁵ However, radical interpretations of the religion and calls for *jihad* against non-believers have many more supporters in the Maldives now than in the past, and threaten to continue inducing Muslim youth in that country to join global *jihadi* groups.

ENDNOTES

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