

Maldives

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: Since the election of President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih in November 2018 in the country's third democratic elections, there has been a noticeable improvement in the human rights and democratic situation in the Maldives. However, challenges remain. During its third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review in November, the Maldives provided an overview of its main challenges, and reiterated its commitment to key pledges such as judicial reform, anti-corruption, prison reform, and gender equality.

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictive measures, there was an increase in reports of domestic and gender-based violence, leading to protests and rallies by women's rights groups demanding shelters and reallocation of funds for the protection of victims. A national campaign against domestic violence was launched in July.

The government received criticism and public backlash over reports of a number of cases of sexual abuse of minors, leading to the resignation of the Minister of Gender, Family and Social Services in February. A number of measures have been taken in this area. The Child Rights Protection Act came into effect in February and a Presidential Commission to Inquire into Child Rights Violations was established subsequently. A Child and Family Protection Service was established in March, while the first Children's Ombudsperson appointed in July.

Misinterpretations of a report on the Maldives' commitments to uphold the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women led to a social media campaign against a leading women's rights NGO, Uthema, highlighting the continued threats against human rights defenders and civil society actors and persisting restrictions to freedom of expression.

COVID-19 exacerbated the vulnerabilities of migrant workers. The government established dedicated COVID-19 clinics for migrant workers and worked together with foreign embassies to repatriate thousands of undocumented expatriate workers. At the same time, authorities attracted criticism for cracking down on protests by migrant workers who were demanding months of owed wages. Remaining in the Tier 2 Watch List for Human Trafficking for a third consecutive year, the Maldives aimed to address the issue by amending the Anti-Human Trafficking Act and passing the National Anti-Human Trafficking Action Plan (2020-2022).

The Maldives continued to make progress in terms of media freedom, moving up 19 ranks to 79th position in the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) Press Freedom Index. No charges have been pressed yet in the 2014 abduction and murder of journalist Ahmed Rilwan, due to insufficient evidence. Foreign experts are being brought in to assist with the probe.

A number of developments highlighted continued security challenges facing the country. These included: the stabbing of three foreigners in Hulhumale' in February by suspected jihadists; an arson attack on speedboats in a harbour in March which was claimed by ISIS; and the arrest of six suspected extremists following a counter-terrorism operation in November. The Maldives also detained the first local insurgent who returned from a foreign warzone, suspected of taking part in the Syrian conflict.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU continued to focus its action in the following priority areas: strengthen the respect for civil and political rights; reinforce the rule of law, independence of judiciary and the separation of powers; and promote the political representation and economic empowerment of women.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: Several high-level political dialogues took place throughout the year by EU and Member States officials. The first senior officials meeting took place in Malé in February, discussing, inter alia, governance, democracy, human rights, rule of law, security, and sectoral cooperation. The fifth annual EU-Maldives policy dialogue was held in November 2020 with the participation of 17 Heads of Missions at which all matters of concern were addressed. The EU and Member States issued a number of press releases - individual or jointly with the Maldives - throughout the year, focusing on the strategic priorities. The EU continued to work closely with civil society, having regular meetings with CSOs, human rights defenders, and media.

4. EU financial engagement: As an upper middle income country, the Maldives have graduated from EU's bilateral development assistance but has benefited from other financial instruments. The EU has allocated an EUR 3 million grant for the Maldives' COVID-19 response in the spring 2020.

5. Multilateral context: The Maldives continued to demonstrate its commitment to multilateralism through engagement with international and regional fora. President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih and Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid were involved actively in high-level meetings throughout the year. A high-level delegation consisting of cabinet members and senior officials, including three Ministers and the Attorney General, took part in the third cycle of the Maldives' Universal Periodic Review in November. The Maldives announced its candidacy for the 76th UNGA Presidency (2021-2022), and Human Rights Council (2023-2025), and its intention to present a candidate for the position of Secretary General of the UN World Tourism Organization (2022-2025). Supreme Court Justice Aisha Shujune Muhammad was elected to the UN Subcommittee on the Prevention of Torture in October, further illustrating Maldives' renewed commitment to engage with international treaty bodies and human rights mechanisms.