

Maldives: Presidential elections must not overshadow the need to restore and promote human rights

Amnesty International is calling on President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom -- who has already served four consecutive terms in office -- to declare a clear and unequivocal commitment to restoring and upholding human rights. He has now been nominated by the Maldivian parliament as the sole candidate in presidential elections.

Election preparations are taking place in an atmosphere of fear and intimidation which may prevent the country's intellectuals from voicing their opinion freely. Political parties are not allowed to function and the government deals severely with any expression of political dissent. The parliament and judiciary also appear to be prone to heavy influence from the executive.

Dozens of political opponents have been placed under house arrest or taken to detention centres in recent years for prolonged periods without trial. Some of them are prisoners of conscience.

Even when political prisoners receive a trials they do not conform to international fair trial standards. According to reports, in some cases prisoners are not even present in court when the verdicts are announced. Some are only informed of the verdicts through their relatives who approach the authorities for clarification.

Prisoners continue to be held in conditions that in many instances amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. Cells are small, hot and overcrowded, and lack adequate sleeping space.

Among the possible prisoners of conscience is Ismail Saadiq, a Maldivian businessman who has been in detention or under house arrest intermittently since July 1996. Earlier this year he was transferred from house arrest to Dhoonidhoo detention centre on the allegation that he had talked to a foreign journalist. However, Amnesty International fears that the real reason may be to stop him play a role in the forthcoming elections. His officially accepted nomination to stand as a candidate in the parliamentary by-election for North Ari Atoll was cancelled by the Ministry of Defence and National Security earlier this year.

It is high time for the authorities in the Maldives to take human rights seriously. Amnesty International urges President Gayoom to order the release of all prisoners of conscience, to guarantee fair trial of political prisoners and to ensure that no one is subjected to torture and ill-treatment in custody.

The human rights organization also calls on the president, as the sole candidate in the presidential elections, to state his long term program for measures to promote and protect human rights, measures that will allow Maldivian citizens not to be subjected to human rights violations.

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