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Muslims force expat Christian teacher to flee Maldives

Mistaking compass she drew for a cross, parents of students threatened to expel her

By Vishal Arora

Compass Direct (05.10.2010) / HRWF (05.10.2010) – <http://www.hrwf.net> - Authorities in the Maldives last week had to transport a Christian teacher from India off one of the Islamic nation's islands after Muslim parents of her students threatened to expel her for "preaching Christianity."

On Wednesday night (Sept. 29) a group of angry Muslim parents stormed the government school on the island of Foakaindhoo, in Shaviyani Atoll, accusing Geethamma George of drawing a cross in her class, a source at Foakaindhoo School told Compass.

"There were only 10 teachers to defend Geethamma George when a huge crowd gathered outside the school," the source said by telephone. "Numerous local residents of the island also joined the parents' protest."

The school administration promptly sought the help of officials from the education ministry.

"Fearing that the teacher would be physically attacked, the officials took her out of the island right away," the source said. "She will never be able to come back to the island, and nor is she willing to do so. She will be given a job in another island."

A few days earlier, George, a social studies teacher, had drawn a compass to teach directions to Class VI students. But the students, who knew little English, mistook the drawing to be a cross and thought she was trying to preach Christianity, the source said. The students complained to their parents, who in turn issued a warning to the school.

Administrators at the school set up a committee to investigate the allegation and called for a meeting with parents on Thursday (Sept. 30) to present their findings. The committee found that George had drawn a compass as part of a geography lesson.

"However, the parents arrived the previous night to settle the matter outside the school," said the source.

According to local newspaper Haveeru, authorities transferred George to the nearby island of Funadhoo "after the parents threatened to tie and drag her off of the island."

The teacher, who worked at the school for three years, is originally from the south Indian coastal state of Kerala. Many Christians from Kerala and neighboring Tamil Nadu state in India are working as teachers and doctors in the Maldives.

Preaching or practicing a non-Muslim faith is forbidden under Maldivian law, which does not recognize any faith other than Islam. The more than 300,000 citizens of the Maldives are all Sunni Muslims.

A string of 1,190 islands in the Indian Ocean off Sri Lanka in South Asia, the Maldives is the only country after Saudi Arabia that claims to have a 100 percent Muslim population. As per its constitution, only a Muslim can be a citizen of the country. Importing any literature that contradicts Islam is against the law.

Many of the more than 70,000 expatriate workers in the Maldives are Christian, but they are allowed to practice their faith only inside their respective homes. They cannot even get together for prayer or worship in each other's houses – doing so has resulted in the arrest and deportation of expatriates in the past.

The Maldives was ruled by an authoritarian, conservative Muslim president, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, for 30 years. The nation became a multi-party democracy in 2008 with Mohamed Nasheed – from the largely liberal Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) – as the new president.

Gayoom's right-wing party, the Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (DRP), however, managed to win a simple majority in the People's Majlis – as the parliament is known in the Maldives – in the 2009 parliamentary election. The Maldives follows the presidential system.

The DRP-led opposition often criticizes Nasheed's government, accusing it of being liberal in cultural and religious matters, which DRP leaders claim will have a bearing on the country's sovereignty and identity.

A key ally of the MDP, the Adhaalath Party, also holds conservative views on religion and culture.

Many in Maldivian society, along with religious and political leaders, believe religious freedom is not healthy for the nation's survival, although the Maldives does not perceive any threat from nearby countries.

Prospects of religious freedom appear grim in Islamic Maldives

Two years after political reforms, freedom of faith nowhere in sight.

By Vishal Arora

Compass Direct (10.08.2010) / HRWF (11.08.2010) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> – Visitors to this Islamic island nation get a sense of religious restrictions even before they arrive. The arrival-departure cards given to arriving airline passengers carry a list of items prohibited under Maldivian laws – including “materials contrary to Islam.”

After Saudi Arabia, the Maldives is the only nation that claims a 100-percent Muslim population. The more than 300,000 people in the Maldives, an Indian Ocean archipelago featuring 1,192 islets 435 miles southwest of Sri Lanka, are all Sunnis.

This South Asian nation, however, has more than 70,000 expatriate workers representing several non-Islamic religions, including Christianity.

Also, around 60,000 tourists, mainly from Europe, visit each year to enjoy the blue ocean and white beaches and normally head straight to one of the holiday resorts built on around 45 islands exclusively meant for tourism. Tourists are rarely taken to the other 200 inhabited islands where locals live.

Nearly one-third of the population lives in the capital city of Malé, the only island where tourists and Maldivians meet.

While the Maldivians do not have a choice to convert out of Islam or to become openly atheist, foreigners in the country can practice their religion only privately.

In previous years several Christian expats have either been arrested for attending worship in private homes or denied visas for several months or years on suspicion of being connected with mission agencies.

According to "liberal estimates," the number of Maldivian Christians or seekers "cannot be more than 15," said one source.

"Even if you engage any Maldivian in a discussion on Christianity and the person reports it to authorities, you can be in trouble," the source said. "A Maldivian youth studying in Sri Lanka became a Christian recently, but when his parents came to know about it, they took him away. We have not heard from him since then."

The source added that such instances are not uncommon in the Maldives.

"I wish I could attend church, but I am too scared to look for one," said a European expat worker. "I have not even brought my Bible here; I read it online. I don't want to take any chances."

The British reportedly translated the Bible into the local language, Dhivehi, and made it available in the 19th century, as the Maldives was a British protectorate from 1887 to 1965. Today no one knows how the Dhivehi Bible "disappeared."

"A new translation has been underway for years, and it is in no way near completion," said the source who requested anonymity.

Religion Excluded from Rights

The 2008 constitution, adopted five years after a popular movement for human rights began, states that a "non-Muslim may not become a citizen of the Maldives."

Abdulla Yameen, brother of the former dictator of the Maldives and leader of the People's Alliance party, an ally of the opposition Dhivehi Raiyyathunge Party (Maldivian People's Party or DRP), told Compass that the issue of religious freedom was "insignificant" for the Maldives.

"There's no demand for it from the public," Yameen said. "If you take a public poll, 99 percent of the citizens will say 'no' to religious freedom."

Maldivians are passionate about their religion, Yameen added, referring to a recent incident in which a 37-year-old Maldivian citizen, Mohamed Nazim, was attacked after he told a gathering that he was not a Muslim. On May 28, before a crowd of around 11,000 Maldivians, Nazim told a visiting Indian Muslim televangelist, Zakir Naik, that although he was born to a practicing Muslim family, he was "struggling to believe in religions."

He also asked Naik about his "verdict on Islam." The question enraged an angry crowd, with many calling for Nazim's death while others beat him. He received several minor injuries before police took him away.

"See how the public went after his [Nazim's] throat," said Yameen, who studied at Claremont Graduate University in California. When asked if such passion was good for a society, he replied, "Yes. We are an Islamic nation, and our religion is an important part of our collective identity."

Asked if individuals had no rights, his terse answer was "No." Told it was shocking to hear his views, he said, "We are also shocked when a nation legalizes gay sex."

Mohamed Zahid, vice president of the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives, told Compass that the country has its own definition of human rights.

"It is to protect people's rights under the sharia [Islamic law] and other international conventions with the exception of religious freedom," he said. "We are a sovereign nation, and we follow our own constitution."

Zahid and several other local sources told Compass that the issue of religious rights was "irrelevant" for Maldivians. "Not more than 100 people in the country want religious freedom," Zahid said.

Politics of Religion

Former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, a virtual dictator for 30 years until 2008, is generally held responsible for creating an atmosphere of religious restrictions in the Maldives, as he sought to homogenize religion in the country by introducing the state version of Sunni Islam. He also led a major crackdown on Christians.

The Protection of Religious Unity Act, enacted in 1994, was an endeavor to tighten the government's control over mosques and all other Islamic institutions. The Gayoom administration even wrote Friday sermons to be delivered in mosques.

In 1998, Gayoom began a crackdown on alleged missionary activities.

"A radio station based out of India used to air Christian programs via the Seychelles, but the government came to know about it and ensured that they were discontinued with the help of the government in the Seychelles," said a local Muslim source.

That year, Gayoom reportedly arrested around 50 Maldivians who were suspected to have converted to Christianity and deported 19 foreign workers accused of doing missionary work. A source said Gayoom apparently wanted to regain popularity at a time when his leadership was being questioned.

When the archipelago became a multi-party democracy in October 2008, new President Mohamed Nasheed, a former journalist and activist, was expected to pursue a liberal policy as part of the country's reforms agenda.

Although Nasheed is the president, his party, the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), has only 28 members and the support of four independents in the 77-member People's Majlis (Maldives' unicameral Parliament). Gayoom, now in his 70s and the leader of the largest opposition party, the DRP, has a simple majority – which presents difficulties in governance. Nasheed pleads helplessness in implementing reforms, citing an intransigent opposition.

Today Gayoom's party accuses President Nasheed of not being able to protect the country's distinct identity and culture, which the opposition says are rooted in Islam. The

Gayoom-led parliament recently sought to impeach the education minister for proposing to make Islam and Dhivehi lessons optional – rather than mandatory – in high school.

To pre-empt the impeachment move, the whole cabinet of Nasheed resigned on June 29, which caused a major political crisis that led to violent street protests. The Nasheed administration allegedly arrested some opposition members, including Gayoom's brother, Yameen. Political tensions and uncertainties continued at press time.

Now that President Nasheed's popularity is declining – due to perceptions that he has become as authoritarian as his predecessor – it is feared that, amid immense pressure by the opposition to follow conservative policies, he might begin to follow in Gayoom's footsteps.

Growing Extremism

Both the ruling and opposition parties admit that Islamic extremism has grown in the country. In October 2007, a group of young Maldivians engaged government security forces in a fierce shootout on Himandhoo Island.

Nasheed's party alleges that Gayoom's policy of promoting the state version of Sunni Islam created an interest to discern "true Islam," with extremists from Pakistan stepping in to introduce "jihadism" in the Maldives. The DRP, on the other hand, says that behind the growth of extremism is the current government's liberal policy of allowing Muslims of different sects to visit the Maldives to preach and give lectures, including the conservative Sunni sect of "Wahhabis."

Until the early 1990s, Maldivian women would hardly wear the black burqa (covering the entire body, except the eyes and hands), and no men would sport a long beard – outward marks of Wahhabi Muslims, said the Muslim source, adding that "today the practice has become common."

Still, Islam as practiced in the Maldives is pragmatic and unlike that of Saudi Arabia, he said. "People here are liberal and open-minded."

As extremism grows, though, it is feared that radical Islamists may go to any extent to extra-judicially punish anyone suspected of being a missionary or having converted away from Islam, and that they can pressure the government to remain indifferent to religious freedom.

How long will it take for the Maldives to allow religious freedom?

"Maybe after the Maldivian government legalizes gay sex," the Muslim source joked.

Legislators seek to increase pressure on non-Muslims

Barnabas Fund (11.01.2010) / HRWF (12.01.2010) – Email: info@hrwf.net – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - "In the midst of the 'furore' over the Swiss referendum to ban the building of any new minarets, a harshly restrictive piece of legislation to ban all non-Muslim places of worship was passing through the Maldivian parliament," says Dr Patrick Sookhdeo, International Director of Barnabas Fund. "How tragic it is that this serious development should go virtually unreported. It was the same in 2008 when the Maldives introduced a new constitution that prevents non-Muslims from becoming Maldivian citizens, and no one noticed or cared."

The People's Majlis (Parliament) of the Maldives have been debating a bill to ban non-Muslim places of worship. According to Maldivian sources the bill, proposed by Ibrahim

Muttalib MP, would make it illegal to build non-Muslim places of worship or to practice non-Muslim faiths in public, although foreigners would be allowed to worship in the privacy of their homes. Punishment would be a jail term of three to five years or a fine of between US\$2,800 and US\$4,700.

Muttalib's rationale

When presenting the bill, Muttalib said that its purpose was to maintain Islamic principles in the country and to prevent the spread of non-Muslim faiths. He also said that the government had received enquiries about establishing places of worship and there was nothing yet in the law or constitution to prevent this. He mentioned too the phenomenon of "wedding tourism" and said that this would "indirectly set up churches in this country". Muttalib has explained that he proposed the bill because at present there is no legal barrier to the establishing of non-Muslim places of worship. He referred to Article 19 of the 2008 Maldivian constitution, which states that "No control or restraint may be exercised against any person unless it is expressly authorized by law." His argument was that a law was therefore needed explicitly prohibiting non-Muslim places of worship.

Muttalib's assumption that having non-Muslim places of worship would be unacceptable reflects the strongly Islamic nature of Maldivian society. His concern is how to safeguard against this happening.

What next?

The bill has now been sent to committee.

President Mohamed Nasheed has said that, before ratifying the bill, he will seek advice from Islamic religious scholars about what sharia (Islamic law) teaches on allowing non-Muslims to worship in an Islamic society.

According to sharia, Jews and Christians are allowed to keep their existing places of worship in an Islamic state but not to build new ones. "Pagans", such as Hindus, are not even allowed to keep existing places of worship.

Debate in the Majlis

According to Maldivian news agencies, the debate in the Majlis does not centre on whether or not non-Muslims should be allowed places of worship in the Maldives; it is taken for granted that they should not.

Sheikh Mohamed Shaheem Ali Saeed, the Minister of State for Islamic Affairs, has commented that non-Muslim places of worship are necessary only in countries where there is religious diversity. This, he said, did not apply in the Maldives, which he claimed is 100% Muslim and whose constitution does not permit Maldivians to follow a non-Islamic faith. He also said that there is no reason for non-Muslim worship places to be built for foreigners.

The background to the Sheikh's comments is the 2008 constitution, a document that introduced many democratic changes but contained no guarantee of freedom of conscience or religion. Furthermore, Article 9d stated that "a non-Muslim may not become a citizen of the Maldives". It is not yet clear how this will be interpreted, but the most alarming scenario is that non-Muslims could be stripped of their existing Maldivian citizenship, leaving them without any protection from the law, vulnerable to imprisonment without trial or any other kind of abuse.

Several MPs have argued that the proposed new law is too narrow in scope and more comprehensive legislation is needed to protect Islam. Some want, for example, to

increase the penalties to ten years in prison, with foreign violators to be deported and not allowed back for ten years.

Some have called for the bill to ban non-Muslim worship even in private homes, on the basis that this conflicts with Article 10 of the Constitution. Article 10 states that Islam shall be the basis of all laws in the Maldives and that no laws contrary to any tenet of Islam shall be enacted. Ahmed Abdullah MP warned about the repercussions of allowing non-Muslim foreigners to worship in private. He said that, given it was impossible to check and monitor what was happening, how could anyone be sure that Maldivians did not join in such worship?

Other MPs have argued that Maldivians travelling abroad have freedom to practice Islam, so non-Muslim foreigners should also be able to worship in private while in the Maldives. One MP pointed out that Muhammad, the founder of Islam, had allowed Jews and Christians to practice their faiths in Medina, and that therefore this should be allowed in the Maldives so long as it did not adversely affect Maldivian society. Ibrahim Muttalib rejects this argument, quoting Islamic scholars who say that the example of Medina was superseded by later commands of Muhammad.

Alhan Fahmy MP said that the bill was unnecessary, as traditional and cultural norms were more powerful than laws, but that he would still vote for it to ensure that in the future there would be no possibility of advocating freedom of religion. In the same vein, Nazam Rashid MP said that the bill was important because human rights organizations were trying to impose freedom of religion on the Maldives.
