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## **Maldives orders hundreds of luxury resorts to close spas after religious protest**

Associated Press (30.12.11) / HRWF (18.01.12) - Maldives ordered hundreds of its luxury resorts to close their spas nearly a week after a protest led by opposition parties demanding a halt to "anti-Islamic" activities, the government said Friday.

A statement from the president's office said "the government has decided to close massage parlors and spas in the Maldives, following an opposition-led religious protest last week calling for their closure."

An official from the president's office said the tourism ministry notified the resorts Thursday but hasn't confirmed if the spas have been closed. He spoke on condition of anonymity as he was not authorized to speak on the matter.

The Indian Ocean archipelago with 1,192 tiny coral islands is known for its exquisite resorts.

Thousands at last week's protest called on the government to halt what they called "anti-Islamic" activities. Sunni Islam is the official religion in the Maldives and practicing any other faith is forbidden.

Last week's protest was called by the opposition Adhaalat, or Justice, Party and several other groups that accuse President Mohammed Nasheed's government of compromising principles of Islam and want strict Islamic law.

The protesters also want authorities to stop the sale of alcohol in the islands, shut down brothels operating in the guise of massage parlors and demolish monuments gifted by other countries marking a South Asian summit last month because they see them as idols.

They also wanted to halt a plan to allow direct flights to Israel.

Though the country does not allow stoning or executions, it is under scrutiny for its absence of religious freedom and for punishments such as public flogging.

Debates on religious issues have emerged since a group vandalized a monument gifted by Pakistan marking a South Asian summit last month with the image of Buddha.

Buddhism was part of the present Islamic republic's history.

An angry protest last month followed a call by U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay for the Maldives to end floggings of women being punished for adultery.

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## **Thousands demonstrate in Maldives for and against strict Islamic law**

Associated Press(23.12.11) / HRWF (18.01.12) - Thousands in the Maldives protested Friday, calling on the government to halt what they called "anti-Islamic" activities, including a plan to allow direct flights to Israel. More moderate supporters of the president rallied as well as debate swells over the future of the state's religion.

The Indian Ocean archipelago of 300,000 Muslims prohibits practicing any other faith.

The protesters want authorities to stop the sale of alcohol in the islands, shut down brothels operating in the guise of massage parlors and demolish monuments gifted by other countries marking a South Asian summit last month because they see them as idols.

More than 3,000 people heeded a protest call by the opposition Adhaalat, or Justice, Party and several other groups that accuse President Mohammed Nasheed's government of compromising principles of Islam and call for strict Islamic law.

"Islamic Shariah is equal to peace," read some placards carried by protesters.

Though the country is known more for its exquisite island resorts and does not allow stoning or executions, it is under scrutiny for its absence of religious freedom and for punishments such as public flogging.

Debates on religious issues have emerged since a group vandalized a monument gifted by Pakistan marking a South Asian summit last month with the image of Buddha.

Buddhism was part of the present Islamic republic's history. An angry protest last month followed a call by United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay for the Maldives to end the punishment by flogging of women who are found to have had sex outside marriage.

Other residents also rallied Friday in support of the president, who said he stands for a brand of moderate Islam traditionally practiced in the country and that it is vital to preserve the country's economic lifeline, tourism.

"To build our economy we need foreign investments and we need to create an environment in which foreigners can invest," Nasheed said.

"We can't achieve development by going backwards to the stone age or being ignorant," he added.

"Should we ban music? Should we mutilate girls' genitals? Should we allow 9 year-olds to be married? Should we forbid art and drawing? Should we be allowed to take concubines? Is this nation building?" he asked.

One blogger who has called for religious tolerance has been detained for more than a week by authorities who accuse him of blasphemy and of promoting anti-Islamic concepts such as gay rights.

Khilath Rasheed, whose website was blocked last month, has said he was being victimized because he belonged to the Sufi sect of Islam and not the majority Sunni branch recognized by the authorities.

London-based human rights group Amnesty International has called for his immediate release.

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## **Intolerance grows in the Maldives**

By Sudha Ramachandran

Asia Times Online (23.11.2011) / HRWF (24.11.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> - The rising tide of religious intolerance in the Maldives is threatening the country's young democracy.

Monuments donated by Pakistan and Sri Lanka were vandalized last week as they were seen to be "idolatrous" and "irreligious".

Member-countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) donated monuments to mark the just-concluded 17th summit of the regional grouping that the Maldives hosted.

The monument gifted by Pakistan consisted of an image of its founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, and also featured figures, some of them drawn from seals belonging to the ancient Indus Valley Civilization. Historians have argued that these figures of animals and human beings point to early religion. The Sri Lankan monument was of a lion, the country's national symbol.

On the eve of the unveiling of the Pakistan monument, a mob reportedly led by the opposition Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM), the party of former president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, toppled the bust of Jinnah. A day later, the monument was set ablaze and the bust stolen. The Sri Lankan monument was found doused in oil with the face of the lion cut off.

Sources in the Maldivian government told Asia Times Online that the vandalization was driven by political motivations rather than religious beliefs. "This is the opposition's way of damping the success of the SAARC summit," a member of the ruling Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) said.

The PPM has hailed the vandals as "national heroes" and promised to "do everything" it can to secure the release of the two men arrested over the incidents.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs has ordered the government to remove the monuments as they "breach the nation's law and religion". Islamic Affairs Minister Abdul Majeed Abdul Bari told the local media that the Pakistan monument was "illegal" as it "represented objects of worship of other religions".

Adhaalath Party president Sheikh Imran Abdulla told Minivan News that the monument "should not be kept on Maldivian soil for a single day" as "it conflicts with the constitution of the Maldives, the Religious Unity Act of 1994 and the regulations under the Act" as it depicted "objects of worship" that "denied the oneness of God".

Sunni Islam was declared the official state religion of the Maldives under the 1997 constitution. This was retained in the 2008 constitution. Article 9-d says that "a non-Muslim may not become a citizen of the Maldives". While the constitution allows non-Muslim foreigners to practice their religion privately, they are forbidden from propagating or encouraging Maldivians to practice any religion other than Islam.

The island nation in the Indian Ocean is formed by a double chain of 26 atolls has a population of about 314,000. It is the smallest Asian country in both population and land area. With an average ground level of 1.5 meters (4 foot 11 inches) above sea level, it is the planet's lowest country.

Although religion plays an important role in the daily lives of Maldivians, the kind of Islam practiced here has never been puritanical or rigid and it is suffused with local cultural practices. Faith in Islam has co-existed with belief in spirits and djinns. Traditionally, Maldivian women did not veil their faces or even cover their heads and men did not grow beards. That is now changing with a puritanical version of Islam taking root.

Religious conservatism has grown dramatically in recent years, as has intolerance. A small but vocal group of religious radicals espousing Wahhabi or Salafi Islam has campaigned for inclusion of sharia law punishments like flogging and amputation in the penal code, used intimidation to force women to veil themselves and declared listening to music as haram (forbidden).

Maldivians who are atheist, agnostic or profess the milder Sufi Islam have been hounded by radicals. In May last year, 37-year-old Mohamed Nazim, who professed in public to be non-Muslim, was threatened by the Islamic Foundation of the Maldives, a non-governmental organization.

Three days later, he went on television and asked for forgiveness. Two months later, 25-year-old Ismail Mohamed Didi, who admitted to being an atheist and had sought political asylum abroad, was found hanging at his workplace.

Some blame the recent spurt in religious radicalism on the country's nascent democracy. A Maldivian political analyst who Asia Times Online spoke to in 2009 pointed out that "unlike Gayoom, who jailed people like [controversial religious preacher] Sheikh Fareed for their views, under the new democratic government extremists are able to advocate their version of Islam without fear of being arrested and detained."

Others blame what they describe as President Mohamed Nasheed's "appeasement of religious elements". Indeed, not only did Nasheed create a Ministry of Islamic Affairs but he also put it in under the control of the Adhaalath Party, a party of religious conservatives.

Although Adhaalath parted ways with the ruling MDP in September, Nasheed has retained Bari, who is a member of Adhaalath, as his minister of Islamic affairs. Independent journalist Ismail Hilath Rasheed, an outspoken critic of the religious fundamentalists, told Asia Times Online that the Ministry of Islamic Affairs was "still effectively run by Adhaalath, though unofficially".

Nasheed's reluctance to take on religious radicals has eroded his support among young Maldivians who voted for him not only because they wanted to see the end of four decades of Gayoom's authoritarian rule but also because they expected him to put in place real freedom, including the right to religious freedom. Their hopes seem to have been dashed by the government's flirting with the fundamentalists.

"I was under the impression that the MDP after coming to power would launch an education and awareness campaign to gradually inculcate in people the value of freedom of religion granted by the Koran so that in the end people would become aware that no real change can come to a civilization unless there is freedom of thought.

"Hence, I was under the [false] impression that the MDP would dare to break the Islamic theocracy and feudal system that Maumoon [Gayoom] used to keep the Maldives' population under his tight grip," Rasheed wrote in his blog less than a month ago. "But now it has become clear that what the MDP was talking about was only about unseating Maumoon," and not real change.

Rasheed's blog has been shut down by the Communications Authority of the Maldives on the order of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. "The reason they gave was that my website is anti-Islamic. But the real reason is that the Wahhabi-leaning Islamic Ministry cannot digest my Sufi Muslim ideals," he told Asia Times Online.

Death threats calling for Rasheed's beheading appeared on a popular website that publishes content in the Divehi language. A couple of months later he was found unconscious on an uninhabited island in the Raa atoll.

While the action against Rasheed's blog or the order to remove the "irreligious" monuments came from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, it is the MDP's commitment to democratic values and individual freedoms that now stands exposed.

The past three years have not been easy for the MDP government. It has had to keep moderate Islamists from moving to the fringes; hence the alliance and "appeasement" of the Adhaalath party.

This cautious approach is evident in the new regulations under the Protection of Religious Unity Act of 1994 that were published in the government gazette in September.

On the one hand they seek to control religious extremism by forbidding unlicensed preaching of Islam. They forbid preachers from creating hatred towards people of other religions and requires them to refrain "from passing off as Islam one's personal stand - that may result in obstruction of human progress and development and hinder modern findings and intellectual advancements".

Besides, in what appears to be an attempt to prevent outsiders from fomenting trouble in Maldives, it forbids foreign scholars from criticizing Maldives' social norms, domestic policies or laws.

While the new regulations go some way in keeping extremism under check, they fail to take even a small step towards according to the individual his or her right to freedom of religion.

Thus propagation of any religion other than Islam remains illegal under the new regulations as is the "use of symbols or depiction of another religion other than Islam for a common purpose and to generate public interest in it [is] forbidden". The regulations also prohibit use of any website, blog, newspaper or magazine that contradicts Islam or expresses any opinion that disagrees with Islamic scholars.

The new regulations have thus created space for the attack on the Pakistani monument and the blocking of Rasheed's blog.

"I think this is just the beginning," Rasheed said in a statement issued on Monday.

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## **Arrests, deports Indian teacher for owning Bible**

### ***Island nation cracks down on preaching unofficial Islam, non-Islamic faiths***

By Vishal Arora

Compass Direct News (21.10.2011) / HRWF (26.10.2011) - <http://www.hrwf.net> – Police in the island nation of Maldives held a teacher from India for about 15 days before deporting him on Oct. 14 for having a Bible in his house, a source said.

Shijo Kokkattu, a 30-year-old Catholic and teacher at the Raafainu School in Raa Atoll, had been arrested in late September after police found a Bible and a rosary in his house during a raid, a foreign source in the capital city of Male told Compass by phone.

Charging that Kokkattu was preaching his Christian faith in the Muslim nation, which recently tightened restrictions on preaching and practice of non-Islamic faiths, police took him to another island for interrogation and kept him in custody for more than two weeks, said the source, who requested anonymity.

Police raided his home after Kokkattu's colleagues found Christian materials on a school computer he had used and reported it to authorities. While downloading material from his pen drive, Kokkattu had mistakenly downloaded some Catholic songs in the Malayalam language (used in a south Indian state) and a picture of the Virgin Mary.

"The videos were in Indian, so I don't know what they were saying, but the images were Christian," school principal Mohamed Shiraj told Minivan News, an independent news portal based in the Maldives.

Kokkattu, a parishioner from Tellicherry Archdiocese in the south Indian state of Kerala, had been teaching at the school for two years.

"He was a very good teacher, we've not had any complaints of him in the past," the principal reportedly said.

Last year, Maldivian authorities rescued another Christian teacher from India when Muslim parents of her students threatened to throw her into the sea for "preaching Christianity" after she drew a compass in class, which they alleged was a cross. (See [www.compassdirect.org](http://www.compassdirect.org), "Muslims Force Expat Christian Teacher to Flee Maldives," Oct. 5, 2010.)

The Maldives, a string of 1,190 islands boasting numerous white beaches in the Indian Ocean, is regarded as a tourist paradise visited by tens of thousands of Westerners each year. But it's also a country that claims, like Saudi Arabia, that all of its more than 300,000 citizens are Sunni Muslims.

The country's 2008 Constitution states that a "non-Muslim may not become a citizen of the Maldives." Expatriates following other religions can practice their faith only individually and within their respective homes.

#### New Restrictions

Last month, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs published new regulations under the Protection of Religious Unity Act of 1994 in the government gazette, signaling a renewed commitment to control unlicensed preaching of Islam and propagation of non-Islamic religions in the country.

The Act outlaws promotion of anything that represents a religion other than Islam or any opinion that disagrees with Islamic scholars. It also prohibits use of any website, blog, newspaper, or magazine that contradicts Islam. Any violation under the Act is punishable by an imprisonment of between two and five years, banishment or house arrest. Foreigners who are found proselytizing are to be deported, it says.

The new set of regulations maintains a longtime ban on propagation, display and expression of any religion other than Islam. It also prohibits translation of books with such content into the local language, Dhivehi.

The regulations state that only preachers licensed by the government are allowed to speak in public, and they must not create hatred towards people of any other religion – the latter stipulation has been criticized by members of Islamic organizations such as the Islamic Foundation of Maldives, who say that because the Quran speaks against Judaism and Christianity, they too should have the right to do so.

The regulations require foreign scholars to abstain from criticizing Maldives' social norms, domestic policies or laws. And media must not disseminate any information that "humiliates Allah or his prophets or the holy Quran or the Sunnah of the Prophet [Muhammad] or the Islamic faith."

The nation's tight control over religion is seen as a legacy of former authoritarian President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who ruled for 30 years until 2008, keeping religion and its institutions under his grip. He was particularly known for insulating the country against Wahhabi influence from Saudi Arabia and for checking alleged missionary activities by Christians.

President Mohamed Nasheed seeks to deviate from Gayoom's policies but has not been able to introduce any major reforms or ensure religious freedom. Any advocacy for

individual rights is seen as a Western conspiracy to attack Islam in the country. Maldivian conservatives do not allow citizens to become atheists, and leaving Islam can attract violence and harassment by authorities.

Nasheed's moderate Maldivian Democratic Party does not have a majority in the parliament. In 2009, the main opposition party, the Maldivian People's Party led by Gayoom, won a majority in the parliamentary election.

Decades of carefully exercised political control over religious narrative in the Maldives has left in its wake a culture of intolerance among the general public unsympathetic to wider views on non-Islamic religions and hostile to Islamic academics and Muslim religious scholars who espouse a more humane form of Islam.

A Maldivian author wrote last month that many Maldivian lawmakers and senior government officials privately admit "their hands are tied when it comes to the issue of freedom of religion." The author asserted that advocating universal human rights "is the easiest way of committing political suicide in the Maldives."

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