

# Newsletter

*Maldivian Democratic Party*

15 - 30 June 2004; Issue 14

## Maldives reforms proposed

By Adam Mynott  
BBC South Asia correspondent

The President of the Maldives has outlined a programme of what he says are historic changes to the country's constitution. President Abdul Gayoom has ruled the small island nation in the Indian Ocean for the past 26 years, in what many have described as a "despotic totalitarian regime". President Gayoom has suggested changes to the constitution which would limit his powers and permit political parties in the country. Opponents of the regime say they are very sceptical of any proposed changes.

### Radical changes

They say the changes have come after the media spotlight was directed at human rights abuses in the Maldives in the past few months. The proposed changes to the constitution do look radical.

If carried through, the powers of the president would be significantly curtailed.

The president would not be able to serve more than two five-year terms. He would lose the right to appoint eight members of the 50-seat parliament. The office of prime minister would be created.

The powers of the executive and legislature would be separated. There would be freedom of association. According to the present constitution, political parties are allowed.

But members of an opposition party set up last year say they are banned in the Maldives. Mohammed Latheef, leader of the banned party, the Maldivian Democratic Party, welcomed the proposed changes, but said he was unsure whether they would work.

"It is not the constitution which needs to change it's the political cadre which runs the country," says Mr Latheef.

"So long as the government continues to arrest and lock people up on trumped charges simply because they dare to say something which is critical, then any proposed reforms will be viewed with great cynicism."

Mr Latheef says the present constitution gave people of Maldives "a wide range of fundamental rights". "(But) none of them are honoured by Mr Gayoom."

Opponents of the government say it is responsible for arbitrary arrests, detention without trial and torture in prison.

The government says there is no repression and that it has no political prisoners in its jails.

Story from BBC NEWS

## Pinning down on words

For many the President's pluralism speech of 9<sup>th</sup> June 2004 came as a surprise. Very few thought that Mr. Gayoom would utter the words, even as rhetoric, claiming himself to be a staunch believer of pluralism. There seems to be total disbelief. Belief mainly in it being a Government conspiracy to wiggle out from a difficult situation seems to have gained more currency.

This may be so. Many times in this Newsletter we have raised our concerns on the real intentions of the government's reform programme. We have also worked hard to bring the government on a proper reform course. We have argued vehemently for political pluralism, freedom of association, assembly and speech. We have raised our concerns at different quarters. Friendly and sympathetic governments have registered our concerns which are by no means exaggerated.

We have always maintained that we are not asking for the sun, moon and the stars. All what we want is to be able to safely conduct our legal political activities in the Maldives as a political party. This by no means in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century is asking for much. One hopes that this simple message- that they will have to listen - is getting into the government's thinking.

Going by President Gayoom's words, his thinking on pluralism has changed or he has found a reason for having to say that he has a new outlook on life.

Again judging by their words, President Gayoom and the present ruling elite in the Maldives in their former look

never believed in political pluralism. Their idea of a perfect government is of single party rule, where all political power is concentrated within a small circle of family and friends.

Alluding to the subject in the 1980's President Gayoom said that "...our laws do not bar anybody from forming a political party if they want to. Yet no one seems to be thinking on those lines. In my personal opinion, in a small, closely - knit society like ours, parties may create more problems than they would solve." His words are clear. The laws allow it but I don't like it.

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The present government has maintained this line of resistance against pluralism all-through-out the 27 years of its rule. The idea of a society without political disagreements and debate is just not their kind. Given even half a chance, reformers calling for freedom of political association become more vocal and increasingly loud. It happened in 1990 and again in 2000. This is 2004. Government-backed candidates lost heavily in the last 28<sup>th</sup> May elections. Many who won were either members of the Maldivian Democratic Party or supporters of pluralism.

It is obvious for anyone to see that Pluralism is bursting out at the seams. Suppression is increasingly failing, especially since opposition and dissident groups have opened shop abroad. The government is pressed from all sides to relent, and the words have finally come out. They may still have other intentions. The government now, needs to be pinned down on every single word that has been uttered by its Chief Executive Officer.

# REAL INTENTIONS OR A PR EXERCISE?

By a Councillor

Amidst much speculation, Gayoom has made a very public and bold announcement: that he is going to recommend to the Special Majlis to alter the constitution to reflect true democratic principles. MDP welcomes this move by the President, and commends him for having the courage to move against ultra conservative groups and creating this opening for those of us who are pursuing this dream.

Public sentiment in Male' ranges from delirious happiness to moody skepticism, none of which is without reason. Delirious happiness, because there are still some optimists who believe in Gayoom to deliver his mightily-delayed-for-25-years-promises of democracy in the country, and skepticism because, Gayoom has been unable to deliver his promises on so many past occasions.

The facts as MDP sees them are:

1. In the 1979 convened Special Majlis, Gayoom proposed more or less similar reforms, and most of them were actually passed in Majlis, when the tide turned, and he deliberately delayed the process (for 18 long years), until he got a clear majority in the Special Majlis when the whole thing was turned around once again to give him unlimited powers.
2. He still holds a majority in the Special Majlis, through which he could easily influence the whole process.
3. There are many in senior government posts, close and dear to him, who are also in the Special Majlis, and stand to lose personally, should the status quo change. The question is: can Gayoom override these people who have served him so well for so long, and put them at risk?

The implications of these are quite complex. Clearly Gayoom knows what the public sentiment is, an indication of

which is the resounding applause he received from the gathered general public for every point he proposed in this speech, and the standing ovation he received at the end of it. It would be difficult to pull a stunt now in the Majlis and claim that "I did propose the changes but the public rejected it." No one in their right frame of mind would believe it. It should be noted that the candidate for Male', Ibrahim Ismail put out only one pledge in his election campaign, which is **standing for democratic reform**, and the overwhelming majority he received for it.

We do not have to stand in suspense to know Gayoom's real intentions. He has 16 members in the Majlis appointed by him, and all we have to do is listen to what they say in the Majlis and see how they vote, to know his actual intentions. **MDP CALLS ON GAYOOM TO INSTRUMENT HIS APPOINTED MEMBERS AND MEMBERS OF THE CABINET APPOINTED BY HIM IN MAJLIS TO DEFEND THE PRINCIPLES HE OUTLINED.**

Clearly if Gayoom cannot do this, then he never had any noble intentions. MDP is ready to give him the benefit of the doubt (yet again). It should not be difficult for him to prove himself.

## MDP meets in Male'

The Maldivian Democratic Party has enthusiastically embraced President Gayoom's calls for political reform in the country. This is illustrated in the unprecedented event that took place last night. Over 70 members of the Party attended an informal gathering at Al Fresco Restaurant, Male, to once again meet with each other and to exchange ideas on steps forward given the newly envisaged political environment.

In attendance were most of the initial 42 signatories to the party petition in 2001 and many new members.

In short, a great assortment of people, gathered in an attempt to say, yes this is what we want. This is what we have been demanding. In an exchange of views and more importantly in an exchange of experiences one fundamental call arises. Step down Mr. President. Let the parliament practice their mandatory obligations, and pass the new constitution. Let the people enjoy their fundamental rights. Back

your talk with action and give us true political pluralism. Reform those institutions that have been manipulated far too long at the hands of one man and give us the free and transparent political culture you talk of, but make it genuine.

What this gathering of members shows is that despite the intimidation and despite life-long oppression, we know our rights, and this time we will not settle for anything less. In earnest, in the spirit of the new constitution proposed, it is time for the presidency to change, this time in the hands of the people and our vote.

## Letters

On the night of Wednesday the 9th of June with disbelief and shock once again I listened to Maumoon Abdul Gayoom the president of Maldives for the nth time pull the wool over the eyes of the people of the Maldives. This time in his attempts to isolate himself from all the atrocities that's been perpetrated under his 25 year rule he even discredited the parliament which had been pushing his agenda and had voted him into power for a 6th 5 year term. People around looked shocked and there was disbelief on their faces too. There was this thought ... that this is yet again another eye-wash by Maumoon Abdul Gayoom

**He said:** That all the reforms he is putting forward are his own suggestions based on his 25 years of experience.

**I wonder:** As he took sole responsibility for the reform points he was putting on the table last night, he must also take sole responsibility for all the atrocities that he and his government committed on the people of the Maldives for the last twenty five years.

**He said:** That there should be a limit on the number of times one person may be elected to the office of President, suggesting that it might be two terms of 5 years each

**I wonder:** Did it take his 6th five year term and extreme pressure both nationally and internationally for him to realize that that is too long a time to rule a country?

**He alluded:** That because the current constitution is ambiguous regarding the legality of political parties the parliament could in essence decide that such parties are illegal.

**I wonder:** Does he really expect the public to believe that it was the parliament that does not allow political parties in this country while he has been supporting it all along?

**He called for:** Separation of powers.

**I wonder:** Did it take 25 years for him to realize the all the powers of this country has been vested in his hands for the past 25 years and that he has been misusing it for as long?

**He said:** He wants reform and also alluded that he has always wanted such but the special majlis and the parliament did not back him.

**I wonder:** Are the people of the Maldives so gullible as to believe that he really means all this, or will the people of the country take this for the publicity gimmick it is and realize that he will again blame the special Majlis for not agreeing to his reforms while he will not allow for that reform? ■

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## Letters

### Jaded

I enjoyed reading "Gayoom's 'Perfect Constitution'". Though a touch too cynical, the article raised some important issues - including how Gayoom willfully and by design usurped all the powers of the state. Well the nation has gone back to the drawing board and - once again - Gayoom is leading the way. Makes you wonder, does it not, why he wastes everyone's time and the country's money to write a constitution whose author at the end of the day, is just Gayoom anyway. I am much too jaded to be excited about this call for a new constitution. Like the article points out, what good is a constitution - however well drafted - if Gayoom is neither willing nor able to respect it? I agree we need to have change in our political culture, we need to inculcate in our leaders respect for fundamental rights before we start getting excited about constitutions. ■

### My Plea

Like most Maldivians I have known no other President than Maumoon. He has destroyed my generation with drugs and a sense of hopelessness. We have no proper jobs nor training and skills to take the jobs on offer. While over 30% of the workforce are expatriates, most of those who sit for the GCE are jobless and without hope. Should one wonder we revert to drugs or crimes or both. In the meantime the mean streets of Male are getting meaner by the day. The cops used to think that torturing the drug addicts will solve the problem. Now they just release them - even the violent ones - without giving protection to society. From one extreme to another. With such immediate, pressing problems facing the country why should my generation feel that a new constitution will solve our problems? What my generation needs is not empty words in a

constitution but meaningful help. I am not an addict but I have many friends - and relatives - who are. We need help. We need a proper rehabilitation program that works. If Maumoon allocated the millions of Rufiyaa he spent to bail out his drugged and drunk-driving son to solving the problem at home it would have helped. What Gayoom spent on his son is more than what the country spent on drug rehabilitation for that entire year. Once cured, we need a means to live a useful life with a reasonable future. That could happen only if he would stop his stealing. No, I am not interested in constitutions. I am interested in keeping my friends off drugs. Believe me If this menace is not controlled fast the capital could slip into violence and anarchy. Why cannot Maumoon address that issue instead of fiddling with a constitution? As always he is just buying time. ■

### The Long Road to Perfection

In 1990, a mere decade into the process, impatient reformist MPs were complaining about the slow pace of compiling the Constitution. Gayoom's head religion "spinner" in the Majlis expressed outrage at the complaint, pointing out that it took even more years for the Koran to be completed. The Sheik ignored the humble suggestion that perhaps it was not so much God's incompetence or dilly dallying as Arab ignorance and stubbornness that the revelation took so long in completion. Understandably the Majlis was quite stunned by the blasphemous implication. In the 100% Muslim country, the Constitution does not officially recognize Gayoom as God's equal. Finally the Word of Gayoom took just as long as the Word of God. Muslims believe that the Koran is the perfect Constitution for the Muslim Ummah. Muslims believe their Constitution of God is immutable, perfect and for all time. Gayoom believes he can improve on his constitution which, a few years back, he claimed was perfect. The question is if perfection took 17 years how long would improvement on perfection take? At least another 17 years if we are to hazard a generous guess? That would make the Dictator officially (yes, Gayoom lies even about his age) 84 years young. If we go by past experience it would take double the time, making the Dictator 101 Damnation years. A whopping sixty years in power! Old dictators neither die nor fade away. The have to be removed like a cancer from body politics. We're told that the dictator is grooming Miss Cruella to take over. Depend on it: Gayoom will improve on perfection. ■

### Time for a Change

Most people I know have a negative, apathetic attitude towards the constitution. The feeling is that it is just a piece of paper with no relevance to our

*"I also believe that Maumoon is ready for change."*

lives, just words that will be discarded whenever it suits the President. While I agree that Maumoon has not always followed the constitution, I do not see the advantage of giving in to despair by not supporting the effort to have a better constitution. Many competent reform-minded people were elected this time and I think they will contribute their ideas without fear. I also believe that Maumoon is ready for change. Perhaps he may not like it, but the rest of the world is watching him and I think even to show them he is ready for change. Maumoon will accommodate a more liberal and democratic constitution. I believe human rights abuse also will stop. As for the trials against MDP members, they are not yet over and it is wrong to assume that they will be found guilty. There are many people in the government who are working on the rule of law and they are, I know, winning the battle against hardliners. So let us think more positive.

### Political Pluralism in the Maldives

By Rosa

We should not be discussing whether or not political parties are constitutional or whether they may be functional in the Maldives. If this remains an issue for debate, we can no longer profess to be a democracy. Political pluralism is the *sine qua non* of democracies. No democracy can succeed without a party system, and no government can truly succeed without an opposition. Where an opposition to the ruling/majority party is absent, the government then is not a democracy. An opposition is a prerequisite for the absolute functioning of a democratic constitution. Political parties need to be regarded as an integral part of the Maldivian Constitution, and not seen as an option. Opposition, or parties in opposition to the government in place cannot be seen as an enemy of the government but rather as its aide. Opposition will not obstruct the smooth running of government but will use constructive criticism to ensure that the inevitable flaws and failings of government policies are brought to light. A government can only be kept alive if it can rectify its mistakes, and this can only be done in the face of criticism. In short, the role of political parties is to ensure the government does not stagnate, does not become lethargic and above all does not become insensitive to the populace it has contracted to serve. Political parties, in a democracy will work in agreement. A party, as long as it has been given a majority through a public vote will be guaranteed that it will be allowed to govern. Governing will thus be more effective, being fuelled by opposition and criticism. Political pluralism need not mean, in fact in any operational democratic state, it does not mean political chaos. In effect, opposition will be coherent and responsible in its opposition; any party with fair prospects or hope of coming in to power will be positive and remain accountable just as the party in government must be.

What is crucial however is that this cannot take place in an institutional void. The bedrock of the Maldivian democracy must be our institutions. Institutions need to be beyond manipulation and corruption. Institutions need to be transparent, just, equitable and constitutional. Given this, political pluralism will succeed, safe and sound. The Article 27 of the Maldivian constitution stipulates "Persons shall be free to form societies and associations, unless prohibited by law in the interest of the protection of sovereignty of the Maldives and the maintenance of public order." Political pluralism will not shake our sovereignty nor our public order.

**Open, free and fair elections: the pathway to reform!**

# Updates...

## New Members

This month Friends has been busy welcoming new members and there will be a meeting on 19<sup>th</sup> June in London for the UK members. All those wishing to attend should contact the new email address

friends@friendsofmaldives.co.uk. At the meeting members will have the opportunity to voice their concerns about the new constitutional promises, the prospect of on-going torture of Maldivian political prisoners and the return of MDP to Maldives to contest the election. The meeting will identify ways in which members in the UK and abroad can continue to support MDP in their return and of course keep a media spotlight on the events that follow.

## Amnesty International

To this end Friends is working closely with Amnesty International local groups to make sure that any council members who do return to their country to lawfully contest will be guaranteed a safe return with no repercussions to their safety of their families. This will include council members who are already in Male' who are being threatened or under house arrest.

## The role of FoM and the new Constitutional Reforms.

The work of FoM has taken on a new importance as a result of the promises from Gayyoom last week. While it is possible that the President is bowing out gracefully before international pressure forces him to stand down, it is also true that he has a track record of using the Constitution as an excuse for his prosecution of any attempt at a pluralistic democracy. Now is the time, more than ever, to monitor the actions of the President and the NSS and encourage the reforms to be made democratically. This means that:

**All prisoners of conscience** should be immediately released with no repercussions to their families or their future involvement in politics, or whatever field they were in when considered a threat

## New Member Alison Poole brings her expertise to Friends of Maldives.

Miss Poole spent one year teaching in Tanzania, in a village situated below the face of the rift valley, before going on to complete an Honours degree in Geography at Durham University in 2002. She has since returned to Africa to set up volunteer project Tenteleni in Kenya with other students from Durham University. The project involves volunteers bringing their individual areas of expertise to remote areas of both Kenya and South Africa to share their skills with small communities.



## Tourism Concern

The Campaign with Tourism Concern is hotting up as the Steering Committee meeting is approaching. From our research, it is clear that there are a number of important issues relating to tourism, the major economic earner in the Maldives. This includes a severe lack of distribution of economic benefits throughout the local population from tourism and poor working conditions within the tourism industry.

International statistics highlight the Maldives as a successful country, but there is evidence that tourism income is not being distributed adequately and that benefits are only being dispersed through a small group of elites. The UN released statistics in 1998 and 2002 stating that 42% of the Maldivian population live on less than US\$ 1.17, barely over the international poverty line, whilst 22% of this lived well below the poverty line.

As tourism is the major earner, it has a huge influence on poverty and local living conditions. For the purposes of the Steering Committee then we need to include a wide representation of experience, consisting of people and organisations with expertise and insight within this area.

- **Torture and deaths in prisons** should no longer be tolerated by the State and compensation should be given to those with permanent physical, psychological or financial damage; an unconditional acknowledgement and apology must be made by the government
- **The Judicial system** must now be independent and out of the control of Gayyoom and his cronies
- **The military** must be independent and its members should not be afforded any immunity from the consequences of their actions
- **Freedom of Association** must no longer be punishable with torture. All members of MDP must be allowed to return immediately without fear and contest the elections as a legally registered party in September. MDP must be recognised as a legitimate political party and allowed to function as such in Maldives immediately.



**Look out for the Friends of Maldives article appearing in <http://www.thetravelrag.com> next week. Friends of Maldives T-Shirts will soon be on sale at a discount to members - visit the site for details.**

If these are not followed with immediate effect, there will be international outrage and more pressure put on Gayyoom than ever before. Friends of Maldives, and other groups working with us including MP's and MEP's, have set in place the procedure for such an eventuality - and the regime of Mr Gayyoom will no longer be tolerated by the British Government or the European Parliament.

## Hussain Shihab

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Maldives in the UK met last week and discussed issues with the Deputy Foreign Minister Hussain Shihab. Robert Key MP has been crucial to this work and has ascertained the guarantee that, according to Hussain Shihab, members of MDP will not be arrested on their return to Maldives. Mr Shihab also promised he would consider inviting Commonwealth Election Observers for the September elections. The Minister assured Robert Key that as far as they knew no members of the MDP in the UK were under suspicion for crimes and that they can return freely to the islands.

Miss Poole has managed to do all this and fit in a Mount Kilimanjaro climb in the process - raising hundreds of pounds for Oxfam. Her interests range from the outdoor - she has just returned from a Coast to Coast walk in the UK - to Geography. Particularly in Maldives she hopes to discover the ways in which gender differences coincide with religion in Maldives - whether the Matriarchal structure is unique to the islands or is found in other Islamic Nations. She has project experience in gender and will work with FoM to further her knowledge in this area. Friends of Maldives welcomes Miss Poole.















