



MADULU



12 May 2010

Dear Sir/Madam,

In two days, the UN will elect four members to represent Asia in its Human Rights Commission. The Maldives, as one of the candidates, is widely expected to gain a seat since only four member states are running for the four seats.

But is the Maldives ready for a human rights position at the international stage?

Here in the Maldives, human rights activists and civil society groups have been raising concerns about the threat to freedom of expression, gender equality and child rights from a sustained campaign being waged largely by the government's Ministry of Islamic Affairs.

Headed by leaders of the religious right wing Adhaalath Party, which formed an alliance with the ruling Maldivian Democratic Party in 2008, the Islamic Ministry has unlimited access to state TV and radio, and an annual budget of 16 million US dollars.

We are concerned that the Islamic ministry is using these resources to campaign against human rights and to spread hatred and intolerance. Here's a glimpse of its handiwork:

- The Islamic ministry's new Religious Unity Regulation, currently awaiting implementation, would make it illegal to promote personal views on religious matters, including views expressed on blogs and websites; prohibit advertisements contrary to "Islamic codes of conduct"; and give the ministry power to order relevant authorities to deport foreigners it suspects of preaching other religions and deport foreigners it suspects of propagating any beliefs that contravene Sunni Islam.
- Last year, the religious NGO Jamiyathul Salaf brought preacher Bilal Philips, with the blessing of the Islamic ministry, who told Maldivians on live television that it was alright to marry off girls who had had their menarche, even if they were only nine years old.
- In an episode of the Islamic ministry's daily TV show *Thehdu Magu* (The Righteous Path), the Minister Abdul Majeed Bari categorically stated that Islam required girls to help in domestic chores because "a woman's role is that of a mother". The minister and his colleagues at the Adhaalath Party have continuously opposed the appointment of female judges and said it was un-Islamic for women to become heads of states.
- The Islamic Ministry granted a preaching license to the radical cleric Ibrahim Fareed, who has repeatedly told congregations that more women than men will go to hell because women sin more.

- When the online newspaper Minivan News exposed the judiciary's flogging sentences, overwhelmingly passed against women, the religious right held a protest against the online newspaper and called for the deportation of its editor.

This sustained campaign has created a culture of fear and intimidation in the Maldives, one in which women who don't wear the veil face open threats and harassment every day; death threats against dissenting writers and bloggers are commonplace; and a growing number of infants are being denied vaccination and children are being deprived of primary education.

Recently the Ministry of Islamic Affairs declared on its website that the earthquake that struck Haiti was a wrath from God because of the wrongdoings of Haitian people. Even though the outrageous remarks were later removed from the website following an outcry from liberals in the society, such incidents prove that hatred and disrespect are being spawned by the government of the Maldives. We are alarmed that the government of the Maldives seems to be more interested in preserving a political coalition with a religious conservative party rather than adhere to international human rights obligations and democratic principles, despite civil society groups repeatedly raising this concern with the government.

We call on UN member states, international donors, and human rights organizations to put pressure on the government of the Maldives to scrap the drafted Religious Unity Regulation. We urge the international community to put pressure on the government to withdraw all state resources from being used to spread hatred, intolerance, and regressive ideologies and to show genuine commitment to its international human rights obligations, particularly the Convention on the Rights of Children and the Convention Against All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

We believe with your assistance we can still prevent the infant democracy of the Maldives from regressing to a theocracy.

This letter is from three civil society organizations in the Maldives: Madulu, Rights for All, and Strength of Society (S.O.S). For inquiries please send an email to info@madulu.org