

Leasing islands without a competitive bidding process is a gateway for further corruption and loss of public funds

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Transparency Maldives (TM) notes with concern the increasing intimidation and challenges faced by watchdog bodies, activists and media outlets reporting on corruption in the Maldives. Bypassing principles of transparency and accountability with complete impunity is becoming a common trend in the Maldives with changes made in legal mechanisms to facilitate corruption.

The recent amendment made to the Tourism Act to lease islands without a competitive bidding process contravenes principles of transparency and accountability. Instead of addressing the issues identified in the Maldives Marketing and Public Relations Corporation (MMPRC) corruption scandal, where islands were given away for resort development, allegedly through corrupt deals, this new amendment builds on past corrupt practices and seeks to legalise similar corrupt behavior. In submitting and passing this amendment the Government of Maldives and the People's Majlis has blatantly disregarded public concerns as well as concerns raised by the ACC over the lack of transparency, accountability and integrity in the leasing of islands for resort development. It appears that the Government has not learned any lessons from the MMPRC corruption scandal where an estimated USD 72 million of state fund was lost, and plans to continue on the same track and engage in legalised corruption. TM reminds the Government to honour its obligations under UN Convention Against Corruption and ensure transparency, competition and objective criteria in decision-making on public matters and resources.

TM condemns the continued persecution of anti-corruption actors in the Maldives, including media outlets and anti-corruption activists. The most recent example is the closing down of the online news website CNM, which recently reported on corruption allegations against First Lady Fathmath Ibrahim regarding the distribution of dates given by the Saudi Government and the fixed Hajj quota allotted to the First Lady. The minority shareholder and editor-in-chief of CNM cited political pressure as the reason for closing down CNM. The closing of CNM comes amidst increasing restrictions on press freedom and threats against journalists.

The on-going case against Gasim Abdul Kareem, former Manager at Bank of Maldives F. Nilandhoo branch, is a case where a possible whistleblower is being persecuted. Gasim revealing information related to the bank transactions of SOF. Pvt Ltd.—the company accused of stealing USD 80 million of public money obtained through MMPRC resort leases— may amount to whistleblowing. As a consequence of revealing this information, Gasim has been in detention on charges of unlawful acquisition and disclosure of private information, since February 2016. Before any formal charges were made against him, Gasim was held in detention for over three months. TM believes that disclosure of information in public interest and in good faith by any individual to expose corruption should not amount to criminal prosecution.

TM calls on the People's Majlis to provide legal safeguards for whistleblowers by enacting and enforcing comprehensive whistleblower protection laws based on international standards. The Government must provide protection for those who engage in anti-corruption activism, and ensure that the ACC is able to conduct their investigations into corruption cases, particularly the MMPRC case, free from intimidation and political coercion.

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