

# Transparency Review

Issue 5/November 2017

A group of approximately 15 people, including men, women, and children, are standing in shallow water in a mangrove forest. They are holding a long white banner with blue text. The background shows dense green mangrove trees under a clear blue sky. The water in the foreground is calm, reflecting the banner and the people.

**Protect Kulhudhuffushi**  
**Save Mangroves**  
**#SaveKulhudhuffushiKulhi**



## *Executive Director's Note*

Welcome to the 5th edition of Transparency Review as we try to sum up some of the key human rights and governance issues during the last three months. The political and social environment in the Maldives continue its unpredictable spiral as the human rights situation deteriorates. As we move towards to 2018, hence edging closer to the Presidential Elections, the political pledges and aspirations also become more pronounced. The days of manifestos, promises and a desperate bid to win the hearts and minds of the people are inevitably upon us. It is also a time for the people to bear in mind the five years that are almost over and consider what decisions we will take based upon that insistent experience. The time to vote is coming.

This Edition of Transparency Review continues its focus on why asset declaration continues to fail in the Maldives despite an insistence by the public. It reiterates the need to have a stronger legal framework governing the asset declaration regime in the Maldives and how the failure to do so will inadvertently lend credence to corruption and abuse of power. The 5th Edition will also talk about the cloak of secrecy surrounding state institutions and how that concealment disallows the public from holding officials and institutions accountable. The article on the secrecy surrounding state institutions also discusses how the change in governments only changes the colour of the cloak but fails to ever remove it completely. In addition the issue also features an article by late Yameen Rasheed about the modern day dumbing down of the young, a write up focusing on the dangers of selling parts of Maldives to foreign investors, an article that underscores the discrepancy in the perception of Maldives between its citizens and those who come here as tourists. Finally this Edition also features an article on the impact of climate change on the reed farmers of Gaafu Dhaalu Fiyolari.

It is our hope that you not only find the issues raised in this issue interesting but also worthy of your time to think about possible solutions.

Executive Director  
Mariyam Shiuna



Transparency Maldives, national contact for Transparency International, is a non-partisan organization that promotes collaboration, awareness and undertakes other initiatives to improve governance and eliminate corruption from the daily lives of people. Transparency Maldives views corruption as a systemic issue and advocates for institutional changes that will punish and prevent corruption.

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# *Asset Declarations: Why it does not work in the Maldives*

## **Part II – Lack of Clarity and Uniformity**

Many countries have adopted laws and regulations requiring public officials to declare their assets and liabilities upon entry into public service or promotion into a position with potential for illicit enrichment. An effective income and asset declaration regime can help prevent abuse of power, reduce corruption and increase public accountability in state institutions.

The United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), to which Maldives is a signatory, states that:

“Each State Party shall endeavor ... to establish measures and systems requiring public officials to make declarations to appropriate authorities regarding, inter alia, their outside activities, employment, investments, assets and substantial gifts or benefits from which a conflict of interest may result with respect to their functions as public officials.”

Part I of this series on the asset declaration looked at the background of the legal framework and its shortcomings.

This part aims to look at one of the shortcomings in detail: the lack of clarity as to what assets, liabilities and interests public officials are to disclose, and the subsequent lack in uniformity in the level of declarations by different public officials.

The Maldivian Constitution states that the President, Cabinet Ministers, Members of Parliament, and Judges have to submit a statement of all properties and monies owned by them, and their assets and liabilities. In addition, the Constitution also requires the President, Cabinet Ministers and Members of Parliament to submit details of their business interests, and the Members of Parliament to include details of any other employment and obligations of such employment in their asset declarations. Further enabling legislations require members of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), the Elections Commission (EC), the Judicial Services Commission (JSC) and the Prosecutor General to submit their assets and



‘Members of parliament must declare all details of any other employment, and obligations of such employment in their asset declarations.’

liabilities.

Apart from the general requirements in the Constitution and the enabling legislations, the Maldives does not have any specific legislation or regulation that governs the asset disclosure regime in the country, and hence no uniform single set of guidelines that relates to the President, Cabinet Ministers, Members of Parliament, Judges and members of Independent Institutions equally. Also there is no single body that receives and monitor these submissions. The Constitution and other enabling legislations states that the President, Cabinet Ministers, Prosecutor General and members of ACC, EC and JSC have to submit their statements to the Auditor General’s Office, whilst

the Judges have to submit to JSC, and Members of Parliament to the Secretary General of the Parliament. As a result of this different rules have been set for different officials detailing the disclosure procedures.

The Judges Act specifies that all judges have to annually submit a statement of all properties and monies and assets and liabilities to the Judicial Service Commission in a format subscribed by that Commission. In January 2010 the Judicial Service Commission published the format in which judges have to submit their financial statements.

Apart from the Constitutional clauses there is no legislation or regulation governing the submission of financial

statements by the President and Cabinet Ministers. However the Audit Office website states that the asset declarations 'can' be made by filing the 'Asset Declaration Form'. This form is fairly similar to the format for submission required by the Judges.

Although the format is fairly comprehensive there is no mention in the format, nor in any other circular or guideline in the public domain, that indicates the annual deadline for submission of the statements.

In contrast, the submission guidelines for Members of Parliament as indicated in the Parliament Regulation of 2010, provides details on the deadline for the submission and which period the submission have to cover. However, the Regulation also goes on to state that a Member of Parliament has to submit his/her financial statements only after serving one year, and that Parliamentarians does not have to submit there statements if they lose their seat before serving a year.

The Regulation puts the obligation of formulating and implementing the guidelines for the submission of financial statements by the Members of Parliament on the Parliamentary Ethics Committee. The Parliament website hosts a format in which Members of Parliament has to submit their financial statement, but the format has very general requirements and does not go into detail as to what has to be declared. The format only requires the Parliamentarians to disclose the monies and properties currently belonging to them, details of businesses carried out

under their name, details of shares held at businesses, income earned and expenses incurred under their own name, and details of other employment carried out or being carried out. Unlike the disclosure format for the President, Cabinet Minister, members of Independent Institutions and Judges, this leaves out major details such as gifts, loans or other liabilities, personal guarantees, bonds, debentures, etc.

For a credible disclosure regime to work, the country needs a single body to monitor the statements as well as a uniform policy applicable to all public officials. And such uniform policies and regulations needs to spell out clearly what assets, liabilities and interests public officials must declare. In addition to personal and business assets disclosure, it is considered good practice for public officials to disclose sources of income, positions held in profit and non-profit entities, debts, gifts, payments for travel, advances, reimbursement as well as assets and income of spouse and dependent children.



## *Reference*

1. United Nations Convention Against Corruption, Article 8.5
2. Constitution of the Republic of Maldives 2008, Article 120
3. Constitution of the Republic of Maldives 2008, Article 138
4. Constitution of the Republic of Maldives 2008, Article 76
5. Constitution of the Republic of Maldives 2008, Article 153
6. Judges Act, Article 65
7. <http://jsc.gov.mv/2010/01/129> (Dhivehi)
8. <http://www.audit.gov.mv/submission-process.aspx>
9. [http://www.majlis.gov.mv/di/wp-content/uploads/Gavaid\\_Updated\\_9.10.2017\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.majlis.gov.mv/di/wp-content/uploads/Gavaid_Updated_9.10.2017_FINAL.pdf) (Dhivehi)
10. 4:00PM on 31st October (Article 56(b) of the Parliament Regulation)
11. From 28th May of the preceding calendar year to 27th May of the current calendar year (Article 56(a) of the Parliament Regulation)
12. Parliament Regulation, Article 56(c)
13. Parliament Regulation, Article 97(e)

## *The Colours of the Cloak*



A sustainable democracy is built on the foundation of efficient institutions serving the people in a manner that achieves the democratic objectives and fulfills the human rights obligations. A governance system cannot label itself a democracy by merely portraying itself to be for the people, by the people and of the people. A proper democracy needs to fulfill a significant amount of de jure as well as de facto principles to be considered properly democratic. It is of course possible that a perfect democracy is a myth. A utopian ideal that we all aspire to but can never truly be achieved. But in the absence of this imagined reality, there are however very real and very achievable principles that every democratic country needs to adhere to. The separation of powers, the realization of fundamental human

rights, strong and transparent public institutions, an incessant insistence on anti corruption, progressive realization of economic and social rights, rule of law and an independent judiciary and free and fair elections to name a few. But as one mulls over the democratic system of the Maldives its often difficult to truly slot the government into a technical definition of democracy. One may, of course, argue that deciding on whether a country is democratic or not is not a litmus test or an 'on' 'off' switch. That a democracy exists within a spectrum based on the inherent principles and that the best one can do is to measure how much of these principles have been embraced by any given system. And that would be true. But even then, it becomes tedious to evaluate the Maldivian democratic

system within that spectrum for one very significant reason. A thick cloak of secrecy and concealment that covers all its democratic institutions. This discussion will focus precisely on that secrecy and argue vehemently that changes in the government will not remove that cloak but instead simply change its colour.

The present colour of the cloak that wraps around the institutions in the Maldives is magenta. It is thick and allows no room for anyone to peek into the inner workings of the democratic institutions. Therefore, it is almost impossible to tell whether their functioning is in fact democratic or not. Yes the presence of the cloak is a telling sign of an eroding democratic system, but how does one tell the extent when the information is never allowed to seep out from under the silky pink fabric. It is gently laid over the Parliament as 85 members elected by the people to represent the voices of the respective constituents debate, argue, fight, harass, abuse, bribe, commit arson and occasionally pass a Bill or two. We are indeed privy to the Parliament meetings and witness their theatrics and circus like antics, but do we really understand and have any knowledge of what really happens behind the four grand walls of the huge foreboding building almost at the center of the Capital? Do we know what underhand dealings occur daily for political gains and consolidation of individual as well as party power? Do we really know our Parliamentarians and what they are truly capable of?

The cloak that surrounds the Parliament makes it impossible to gauge the real behind the scenes goings on inside the single most important democratic institution in the country. The cloak is fastened and secured by an arbitrary impunity allowing Parliamentarians to excuse themselves from the key legal and administrative mechanisms to ensure accountability and transparency. A proper asset declaration regime is disallowed by deliberately jeopardizing any attempts by the public and the civil society calling for Parliamentarians to declare and disclose their wealth. They take it upon themselves to be completely exempt from Right to Information applications and declare a kingdom beyond reproach. Attempts to insist on the disclosure of their assets are often met with cynical intimidation of those that call for it and even those that give in and disclose do so quite half-heartedly in a manner that doesn't really serve the purpose. In the absence of a system to compel Parliamentarians to declare their assets or amidst the non-existence of an income tax system, the presently pink cloak with hues of yellow, orange, red, green and white sits comfortably over our Parliament.

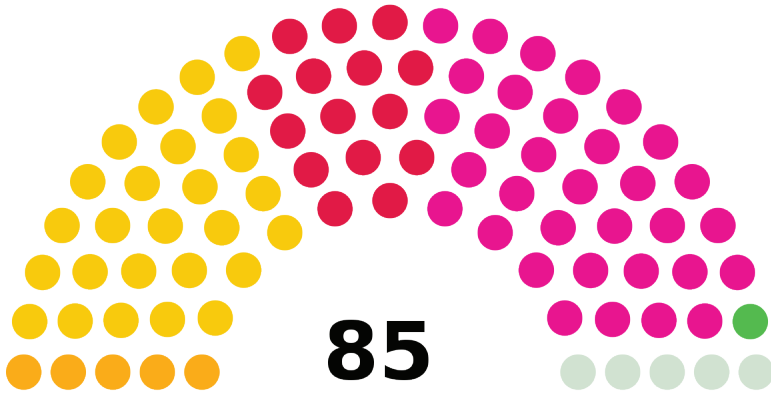
What of the judiciary? A much thicker cloak of colours that are difficult to identify fit nicely over institutions covered under the larger and more insidious judicial umbrella. Any asset declaration, anti-corruption, anti-illicit enrichment or a transparency regime will never be allowed to even touch the second power of the State. The judiciary is a greater paradox than the Parliament.

Most Maldivians being quite politically aware, almost everyone understands the major Constitutional provisions and the concept of right and wrong from a judicial standpoint. They understand the fundamental rights and that the Constitution specifically insists that anything that is not explicitly prohibited under the law is never a crime. But with all this understanding, the people still have no clue as to why and how the gross miscarriages of justice seem to be taking place so openly. No one seems to see past the cloak when elections are taken over by the Courts. We are all none the wiser as to how the fundamental rights of those on trial – like the right to defend themselves or the right to remain silent or the innocent until proven guilty – are so easily curtailed during the trial process. The cloak is faithful and to anyone who tries to lift it even slightly or even comment on the presence is held firmly together by the fear of the contempt of a system that we are uncertain about in the first place. The judiciary is also more complex in its behavior and plays out like a family feud with the father commanding the sons and daughters as to what they are supposed to do. But the father and the mother and their entire siblings are all paid by the people. And yet it seems that the taxpayers have no right to see beyond the thick cloak that protects the judiciary from prying eyes, ears, mouths and hands.

A proud and gleaming magenta cloak shrouds the Executive from any investigations or public scrutiny. It extends eerily to the ministries and

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departments controlled by the Executive. It vehemently guards public information from the very public that seeks it. It mistakenly believes in impunity so that they can thrive under the garb of secrecy and total misinformation. They field questions from the public and the media and pull out draconian legislations from under the cloak of the Parliament, meant only to consolidate their power over the people. They use the might of the Police and the military, who themselves have the cloak protecting them from any questions or inquiries or even investigations, to curb the enthusiasm of the people and to intimidate those that might choose to stand up for what is right and just. But unless armed with information about the reality of life underneath the cloak, the public can do little and finds it difficult to call out the government for what they constantly get away with. They use public money to build supposedly public housing schemes only to allocate the houses to arbitrary numbers without any real information about the process. But you see that is how things work under the cloak. They only create a purposefully false narrative to hoodwink the people and then call out reporters for asking the right questions. They convince the people that their secrecy only protects the rights of the people and to question the



government is but to betray their trust. The cloak is held steadfast by corruption, political rhetoric and weak oversight mechanisms that we shall see in the next part.

Independent Institutions is a misnomer in Maldives if there ever was one. The same pink cloak covers them all and acts as the many nails that hold the cloak of the government in place. Underneath the hood of these institutions are loyal supporters of the magenta cloak who have sworn to allow the cloaks over the Parliament and the Executive to remain so as long as they remain shrouded in the same dearth of information and accountability. They are quick to dismiss allegations of government affiliation using euphemisms, long-winded statements and/or complete and utter silence and indifference. Their purpose somehow seems to be to legitimize the cloak over the government and to vehemently deny the existence of a cloak that prevents the people from seeing the real goings on inside.

*What of the judiciary? A much thicker cloak of colours that are difficult to identify fit nicely over institutions covered under the larger and more insidious judicial umbrella. Any asset declaration, anti-corruption, anti-illicit enrichment or a transparency regime will never be allowed to even touch the second power of the State.*

But will this secrecy and darkness about the public institutions and officials be lifted if we change the existing order? Can a free and fair election be the key to reverse these concealed powers of the State? Unfortunately experience does not really allow us to look positively at a free and fair election alone. Or to pin our hopes on an opposition to tear up and destroy the cloaks forever. Yes a free and fair election is an absolute necessity, but the cloak of secrecy and the hesitancy to peep out of it if not to remove it entirely has not been the favoured method of any government we have seen so far. It



begs the question then why should the opposition, who had once been in power and yet failed to entirely do away with the cloak be any different should they get elected now. Granted there were aspects where the insistency on the cloak and the thickness of it was slightly less than it is now. But the fact of the matter is that the same lack of accountability and transparency prevailed then as well. So, what is the solution?

This article cannot outline a proper solution to the problem of the hidden agendas within state institutions. But what can be articulated is the importance of making public participation more meaningful and sustainable. An election is absolutely necessary. A free and fair election. But an election only brings the most voted candidate to power. It only brings the most favoured 85 people to be in the Parliament. It does not guarantee what they will do in the next five years.

That can only be ascertained through proper public participation and an environment of meaningful engagement in public affairs. To ensure that the cloak is forever removed and never placed over the state institutions again, the people need to vote based on the actual policies manifestos. They need to ask the tough questions about actual implementation and call out obscure political rhetoric for what it usually turns out to be. They need to make the politicians understand that they will never vote for illusions, magic tricks and circus acts. If the engagement of the people stop at the ballot and the insistence is more on the popular candidate than the policies, what we will see in 2018, when we once again hope to be at the polls, will be a simple change in the colour of the cloaks that lie comfortably over the Institutions and powers paid for by the people.

## *Comment: Ghettos of the mind*

*By Yameen Rasheed*

*Published in Minivan News on June 19, 2011*

They say the wealth of volumes it  
contains  
Outnumbers the stars or the grains  
Of sand in the desert. The man  
Who tried to read them all would lose  
His mind and the use of his reckless eyes.

... said Caliph Omar, describing the  
Great Library of Alexandria before  
commanding his soldiers to destroy it, in  
Jorge Luis Borges poem 'Alexandria, AD  
641'

Over a thousand years later, modern man  
finds himself, much like the legend of the  
book-burning Caliph, face to face with all  
the world's knowledge – the manuscripts  
and parchment now replaced by signal  
bits flowing through the electronic veins  
of the World Wide Web into which the  
globe has become intricately interwoven.

The volume of information generated  
every 48 hours now exceeds the sum of all  
the words uttered by mankind since the

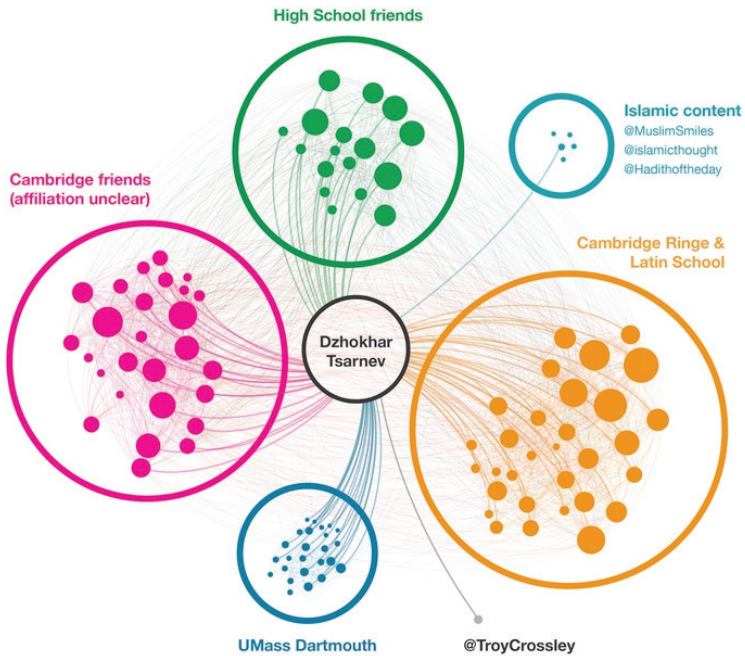
beginning of time until the 21st century,  
according to Eric Schmidt, former CEO  
of Google – an Internet behemoth  
consumed by the idea of indexing “all the  
world's knowledge”, having taken up the  
challenge of painstakingly scanning every  
book ever printed, capturing every image,  
collecting every video, and recording  
every musical note.

If informed debate is the catalyst  
that strengthens democracy, and  
communication the antidote to war,  
then the Internet has provided an  
inexhaustible source of illumination, and  
an unprecedented platform for billions of  
people to engage with each other.

And yet, a curious thing has happened.  
The avalanche of papers, viewpoints,  
analyses and thoughts has left in its wake  
a society that appears to be increasingly  
unreceptive to fresh ideas.

### **Reality distortion field**

The discerning Caliph's observation that  
“The man who tried to read them all



would lose his mind” is especially true of the Internet.

Recently, Google rolled out a feature by which a person’s search results would return content recommended by friends and family who are likely to share his opinions. Unknown to the user, his search results are already being tailored based on a number of other factors, including his reading habits, location and previous search terms.

Perceptive users of social networks like

Facebook would notice algorithms carefully designed to weed out content posted by non-like-minded ‘friends’ from appearing on their activity feeds – resulting in their ‘Wall’ being plastered with views they largely agree with.

In other words, the web is increasingly becoming a deceptive mirror, telling one exactly what he wants to hear.

This collateral censorship due to skewed results tends to create a bubble around users, steeping them in a confirmation



bias that results in highly polarized views, which is evident from volatile, emotionally charged comments on the Internet, often over trivial matters.

As with real life, polarised extremities can rarely engage in healthy, democratic debate.

It is easy to observe the balkanisation of the web simply by identifying the cartels of blogs and personal websites. Liberal bloggers link to one another. Islamist websites feed off each other's content. Christian blogs share gossip in their own closed loops. Creationist networks cite each other as sources. Atheist campaigners pat each other on the back.

**Environmentalists.**  
**Conservatives. Anarchists.**  
**Nationalists.**

Not only are people becoming increasingly isolated in self imposed online ghettos, but the gated communities are becoming mutually hostile and blindly dogmatic than ever before.

The scepticism of climate change deniers towards easily verifiable statistics demonstrates this phenomenon, as does the fanatic's contempt towards established science.

The Internet has made it incredibly easy to find out and learn about other peoples and cultures, other religions and perspectives, other views and opinions. And yet, the Internet is also where racists, bigots and supremacists have found

refuge.

Despite thousands of scholarly articles, research papers, scientific publications and public archives available freely online, the Internet is also a place where conspiracy theorists continue to thrive, carefully avoiding the zones of enlightenment.

In other words, users intimidated by the bewildering expansiveness of available information can become ensconced in a comfortable, personally tailored reality that the Internet is happy to provide.

## Thought Control Protocol

Cult leaders, dictators and fanatics are known to confiscate and burn books by dissidents and 'heretics', in order to ensure their followers' unwavering adherence to ideology.

The combined knowledge of antiquity went up in flames in Alexandria, and plunged civilization into darkness and wasted centuries. While the modern-day Caliphs cannot quite burn down the intangible web – they have figured out that it can be regulated or, even better, replaced.

The People's Republic of China effectively hides one-fifths of humanity behind their Great Firewall, blacking out entire concepts, ideas, and incidents from history.

The famous satellite photograph of the Korean Peninsula taken at night, that shows an isolated North Korea plunged

in darkness, in stark contrast to the brightly lit South illuminated from coast to coast, also accurately illustrates the North Korean regime's absolute black out of information from its citizens, cloaking them in a terrible darkness.

In the aftermath of the "Twitter revolutions" across the Middle East, Iran is reportedly pressing ahead with plans to move its entire online population to a "private, regulated Internet" within two years, cutting them off from the rest of the world.

As with political mullahs elsewhere, the Iranian clergy deny they have any political motives (perish the thought!) Instead, they have put forward the honourable, time-tested justifications of "protecting Islamic values" and "preventing corruption of the youth from evil, Western influence".

Myanmar and Cuba also have private nation-wide networks, designed similarly with noble intentions of preventing their innocent citizens from eating from the forbidden tree of knowledge.

The unrestricted, untamed power that the Internet bestows into the hands of ordinary people has made it the bane of theocracies and other dictatorships seeking rigid control.

The collapse of a brutal, 30 year old dictatorship in two weeks bears testament to its immense capabilities – and the reason why politicians are increasingly clamping down the Internet, including in the West.

Even young democracies like the Maldives have shown symptoms of this malady, with the present government banning several websites deemed to be critical of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and the political party that controls it.

The desire to control and censor information in the Internet age is the surest sign of authoritarianism, and should rightfully alarm proponents of democracy.

Even when the censorship is self-imposed and cultivated by a desire to live in a tailored reality, then also, democracy is equally threatened.

Democracy thrives on free flow of information. To achieve this, it is not sufficient to just bring down authoritarian regimes, but one also must break down mental barriers that form the walls of the Internet ghettos and reach out to the other side.

For democracy to survive, one must boldly confront views that are often unpleasant, patiently hear out ideas that are uncomfortable, and acknowledge voices that disagree with oneself – because, as it turns out, it is exceedingly easy to be wilfully ignorant, despite having the world's knowledge at your fingertips.

## *Maldives: the dangers of selling paradise*



Faafu Atoll is spectacularly beautiful, consisting of 23 palm-fringed islands. It is one of the 26 atolls in the Maldives that are home to the history and heritage of around 400,000 people in the Indian Ocean. It's not surprising that people come here for holidays or that foreigners want to buy a piece of paradise. But the latest potential investor is raising alarm bells.

The government of the Maldives, led by President Yameen Abdul Gayoom, has announced plans to develop Faafu atoll, with the help (and money) from Saudi Arabia. The Saudi King was expected to visit the islands on 18 March but cancelled it at the last minute amidst criticism from local NGO's, opposition and people of the Atoll.

The government promised the mega project would benefit the country and the region, but offered no details as to what the project was, or how it would be implemented. And no one bothered to ask what the 4,000 plus people of Faafu wanted.

The current government has been promising "mega projects" as part of its economic agenda. To facilitate such projects it has changed the Constitution to allow for foreign freehold, passed new laws to speed up development and amended the Tourism Act to allow leasing of islands without a bidding process. The problem is that it has also moved away from good governance in the process.

***The three branches of government in the Maldives do not act as checks and balances. Both the judiciary and the parliament are seen as being in cahoots with the government.***

Speculation is rife that the Saudi project in Faafu atoll will not be based upon loans and investment, but rather the entire atoll will be leased to the Saudis for a period of 99 years – effectively selling off a significant portion of the Maldives from under the feet of its citizens with no public say in the matter.

Pressed for more details from concerned citizens on the back of several social media campaigns organized by Transparency Maldives and social media activists, the Defence Minister Adam Shareef Umar simply said, “trust your President”.

If the government had a track record of listening to its citizens or for selling public land for the good of its people, there might not be so much concern.

The sale of Faafu is set against the backdrop of a backsliding of democracy in the country and alleged corruption.

There is no space for dissent and political persecution has effectively debilitated opposition political actors. This was seen when many opposition MPs also voted in favour of the constitutional amendment to approve freeholds, in what was seen as a quid pro quo arrangement to facilitate the release of the main opposition leader,

former President Mohamed Nasheed<sup>1</sup>, who has since received political asylum in the UK.

Sadly, for the residents of Faafu, the release of Mohamed Nasheed is scant consolation for the potential loss of their islands and homes.

The great worry is that there are no details of the Faafu deal. Will it be a private sale to the Saudi Royal Family, or an investment from the Saudi sovereign wealth fund? What are the plans for the residents of Faafu? Will they be allowed to stay in their homes, or forcibly moved to another atoll?

The government have indicated that residents will not be forced to move, but such comments are set against historical government policy aimed at moving populations from small islands to larger ones ostensibly to allow for the more efficient provision of basic services. Maldivians are understandably nervous. Successive governments in the capital, Male' City have had a long history of financial underinvestment and political domination over the provincial atolls.

Successive governments have also been actively wooing Saudi Arabia often by enforcing a kind of cultural shift towards a more conservative form of Islam. Whilst the Maldives is still seen as a tolerant Islamic nation, it also has a growing problem of religious extremism, with the Maldives reportedly providing more Jihadist fighters to Syria and Iraq

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1 <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/1857>

per capita than any other country in the world. This tide towards Islamic fundamentalism cannot be disconnected from Wahhabi influence in the country stemming from Saudi Arabia.

The government line on Faafu is that the investment will be good for the country, but very recent history in the Maldives has uncovered grand corruption in the sale and leasing of islands. For example, Ahmed Adheeb, the ex-Vice President now languishing in jail, is accused of siphoning off some \$79m from leasing islands for tourism. The money has still not been recovered and the investigation has taken over two years, amid claims that the true beneficiaries are still in power.

And a whistleblower who showed that money from the sale of islands ended up in the bank accounts of a private company was accused of wrongdoing and served time in jail. He was nominated for Transparency International's Anti-corruption Award 2016 and finally released but was not pardoned.

The three branches of government in the Maldives do not act as checks and balances. Both the judiciary and the parliament are seen as being in cahoots with the government. This was demonstrated in a recent Al Jazeera documentary, *Stealing Paradise*.

It's not surprising then that a multi-billion dollar deal to sell or lease Faafu atoll raises serious questions about the integrity and anti-corruption safeguards in place. The lack of transparency associated with the deal, combined with

weak oversight institutions may, once again, enable grand corruption at the expense of Maldivian citizens.

The Maldivian public is calling for the government of Maldives to be open and transparent in its plans for Faafu atoll, and for international partners, including Saudi Arabia, to ensure the rights and wishes of its citizens are respected. The response: harass anyone who opposes the government's plans and intimidate civil society who demand accountability. We saw this when two journalists were thrown off Faafu atoll, Nilandhoo.

It seems that, at least for now, the cancellation of the visit by the Saudi King, plans to sell off the Atoll may have been stalled for the moment. But the President has been visually upset about the campaigns against his plans. He spoke at several political rallies blaming the people for not being patient enough to understand the benefits that they would have reaped from the deal. In so many words, he implied that the people shall reap what they had willingly sowed. It is however unclear, to this day, as to what has happened to the deal and if it might once again resurface. For the people of Faafu atoll, they just want to know if they will get a say in deciding their own future and whether they still have a future to look forward to. The government of the day should not be the ultimate arbitrator of the people's land and its heritage.

## *My Country Has Two Faces*



As the plane descends upon the clichéd azure blue waters, unceremoniously revealing the picturesque halos along the ocean, the eager tourists hurriedly take

***The tourists who are ogling at the natural beauty of the Maldives will get just that. They will land at the airport and be whisked to their destination without any idea or about the real country behind the paradise.***

out their cameras that often double up as their phones to capture the submerged volcanoes that form the archipelago of the tiny island nation of the Maldives. There is frenzied movement as the passengers huddle against the windows to get a better glimpse at the sublime natural beauty they are about to land on. They are awaiting impatiently to finally be whisked to their own little island where they will be treated to an unprecedented level of luxury and hospitality. For the next two weeks or so they will have nothing to worry about because they will



be spending their holiday on paradise on earth.

There are a few people who are unperturbed by the beauty of the destination and remain seated silently, often surprised by the commotion. They either remain fixated on their books, mobile phones or each other. As the plane makes its final approach most tourists are unable to contain their excitement while the locals are simply oblivious to how gorgeous their home looks to outsiders. There is a conspicuous dichotomy inside the plane and that is something that has larger implications than two groups of people feeling differently about a similar destination.

The tourists who are ogling at the natural beauty of the Maldives will get just that.

They will land at the airport and be whisked to their destination without any idea or about the real country behind the paradise. They will be welcomed with the most expensive drinks and stay at the most luxurious bungalows and enjoy their vacation in a Maldives, not the Maldives. They will eat the most expensive meats and vegetables and fish while drinking Evian and Perrier. They will have people waiting at their every beck and call and the experience will live unbelievably up to the expectation of a paradise. And they will leave happy and content and completely convinced that nothing wrong can happen in paradise.

Slam cut to the locals who were on the plane. They will not have an expensive seaplane or a wave-cutting speedboat waiting for them. Those who live in

the capital will take a ferry back to the congested tin can of a capital barely more than a kilometer in length. Nearly a third of the three hundred thousand people live in the capital city Male'. They would see paradise in a very different light. A paradise filled with hopelessness and desperation. Where eight to ten people are crammed into a seven by ten room. A paradise where parents and children have to sleep in the same room until they are old enough to get married. A paradise where inequality is brazenly commonplace. There is a jarring contrast, a juxtaposition if you will, an irony if you like that word better or a paradox if you feel a little more dramatic, in the way people from the outside see Maldives and how locals don't often get to see that beauty having lived all their lives in the very heaven on earth. The very beauty of the country, its string of pearly atolls that mesmerize visitors, has intensified the socio economic inequalities in the Maldives. The centralization of power and basic services in the capital has devoid outlying atolls of the most basic of amenities and to this day disproportionately impacts those living in these islands. The aversion to decentralization and the exponential cost of travel, being a sea locked nation, has made things even worse for those living in other atolls. Often they live in more spacious houses and the environment they live in are less congested and claustrophobic, but the lack of employment opportunities, healthcare, education and other basic necessities compel them to move away from the comfort of their islands into

*There are almost 400,000 people in the country. The tourist arrivals often exceed the population but the immense wealth that should be more than enough to address the needs of the people, are often controlled by the elite few. Nearly 95 percent of the wealth is in the hands of less than 4 percent of the population.*

the congested capital. And to those who choose to stay, the situation isn't any less dire. Should they get sick they are often not able to consult a proper doctor in their island. Sometimes the extremely sick, pregnant or old people have to brave choppy waters to find some semblance of appropriate healthcare. And even then the critically ill have to be either flown or dashed in a boat to Male' which once again adds an added burden of his or her family having to pay a hefty rent to stay in the capital. The cumulative cost of healthcare is akin to the most expensive hospitals in the world but the service leaves much to be desired.

Meanwhile the tourist who is enjoying his or her stay in the paradise side of the country doesn't need to be too concerned for his health because each resort island has their own private clinics and in house doctors. And should there be a medical emergency, they will of course be rushed to the private hospitals in the capital. Once again he will not see any reason to even suspect that paradise might have any propensity to be lost.



The local person who landed at the airport is also unable to be angry about the duality of his own country. Of course he is part of a democracy that has crafted a green book called the Constitution which in itself is progressive and guarantees most fundamental rights and freedoms. Of course he is the inhabitant of a country that the outside world feels could be in no serious trouble. But neither the democracy or the constitutional rights are really theirs in its true sense of the word. Their democracy is controlled by the very people who have created the illusion of paradise for the tourists. They are not allowed to protest nor are they allowed to speak their mind. There is a blurry line between those in power and those that promote religious fundamentalism resulting in an uncanny impunity for those who propagate hatred and intolerance. On the other hand, promoting human rights values, respect, tolerance and justice is a dangerous line of work. Human rights activists have been murdered, abducted, threatened or beaten up.

There are almost 400,000 people in the country. The tourist arrivals often exceed the population but the immense wealth that should be more than enough to address the needs of the people, are often controlled by the elite few. Nearly 95 percent of the wealth is in the hands of less than 4 percent of the population. The happy tourist gets to contribute to the personal coffers of the few people who play God in paradise. During their two weeks they see nothing of the real country. The picturesque façade erected to

conceal the darker side of paradise holds strong.

Meanwhile the local person and their families can only dream about the luxury visitors enjoy in their country. But that's not all. The idyllic image of an all perfect tourist destination precludes the international community from really being able to fathom the seriousness of the human rights, anti corruption, religious fundamentalism, poverty, socio-economic inequality in the country. These issues are often dwarfed by the image of Maldives as a first class tourist destination. After all who would think of these foreboding issues when one thinks of the Four Seasons, the Hilton or the Hyatt? Maldives has an erroneously perfect image that is draped over the sufferings of the people who live underneath.

# *The Reed Farmers of G.Dh. Fiyoari and Climate Change*

Most Maldivians know G.Dh. Fiyoari as the producer of the highest quality reed in the country. As such this reed is popular with traditional “thundu kunaa” weavers of the Maldives. Thundu kunaa is a hand woven mat made of dried reeds (hau) of which the premium quality reed is only found in the wetland area of G.Dh. Fiyoari, known locally as “Olhuga’ndu”. These dried reeds once colored with natural dyes are then woven into unique traditional patterns. This practice of mat weaving and reed farming are primarily carried out by women with skills being passed down from mother to daughter.

While we are all familiar with the dangers of heritage and traditional forms of livelihood being threatened by globalisation and sociopolitical changes, traditional reed farmers of the island also face the combined threats of climate change and unsustainable development.

In recent years, the island has suffered greater number of floods which is damaging the quality of reeds used in traditional weaving products - the only

***“People feel helpless with the current situation. Many believe those in power are corrupt. People need to take back their power”***

source of income for many families. Unfortunately, too little is being done to address the problem, and the locals don’t trust those initiatives in the first place.

Attempts to conserve and protect the ecosystem and the art of traditional mat weaving is being undertaken by the Maldives Authentic Crafts Cooperative Society (MACCS). According to Aisha Niyaz, a consultant for MACCS, one of the initial obstacles was gaining the trust of the local community which had become disillusioned with institutions and distrustful of outsiders due to past failed projects conducted in these communities.

Taglines such as “himaayaii” (protection) were particularly unpopular, leading to MACCS tailoring their language to avoid



these pitfalls. They presented the project to the community as one focused on “sustainable use”. For instance, protecting the wetland as an area of “sustainable use”.

“People feel helpless with the current situation. Many believe those in power are corrupt. People need to take back their power” states Aisha. Aminath Abdulla, the Chairperson of MACCS echoes the sentiment that there is a feeling of powerlessness amongst the community.

“When it rains more than half the island floods. Especially the area where the school and island council office is located” states Saeed Mohamed, a former member of the Fiyolari Island Council. “This year has been particularly bad. The taro fields are constantly flooded which is making it extremely difficult for farmers.” The flooding causes additional problems

for the community including mosquito breeding, property damage and difficulty in commuting.

“Every year parents have to buy school shoes for their kids about 3 times. Because of the flooding.” Saeedh explains “Every time it rains we dig trenches in about 4 places around the island, in attempts to drain the water.”

Following a particularly heavy bout of rain in November 2015, the island council dug a 3 feet wide 3 feet deep channel, from the wetland to the sea. This was undertaken in response to complaints lodged by community members of flooding. Which was followed by complaints lodged by taro farmers that the channel was causing saltwater intrusion into the wetland, destroying their crops.

“We blocked the channel in several

places to prevent saltwater intrusion” says Saeedh Mohamed from the Island Council of Fiyolari. The island council reported that they have acquired supplies such as PVC pipes to build a drainage system with 3 to 4 junctions. However this system is not one that has had an EIA conducted.

A complaint lodged to the Environment Protection Agency (EPA) regarding the proposed project was withdrawn a few days later as the council had decided not to move forward with construction.

There are concerns that these quick-fix solutions, corruption and the importance given to short term economic and political gain are decreasing the climate resilience of the island and its economy.

In contrast to Fiyolari the locals of Gn. Fuvahmulah report positive perceptions of the current projects being undertaken such as the US\$4.2 million Climate Change Adaptation Project (CCAP) to establish “eco-tourism facilities” to manage protected mangroves and coral reefs in southern Fuvahmulah and Addu City. The island is also the beneficiary of a water and sewerage project being funded by the Maldivian government and a loan from Kuwait Fund for Arabic Economic Development. Under the project, 2 sewerage pump stations and 3 desalination plants will be installed in the island.

Locals report that the implementing partners of the water and sewerage project have provided communication avenues to lodge complaints and clarify

information in the form of an accessible representative on site on the island. Stakeholder consultations and meetings with the island councils are representative of good governance practices being undertaken by the project.

The cases of G.Dh. Fiyolari and Gn. Fuvahmullah are contrasting case studies highlighting the importance of increasing public trust in institutions amongst local communities for better implementation of development and climate change adaptation efforts. It is essential that the efficacy of climate adaptation projects are ensured so that vulnerable segments of society such as practitioners of traditional heritage receive maximum benefits.

Due to the efforts of MACCS in conserving the marshland and reviving the art of “thudukunaa viyun” or traditional mat weaving, islanders have come to embrace the cultivation of reeds. “During our latest trip to Fiyolari in October 2016, we saw so many reeds being sun-dried all along the main road.”

“Even if people embrace this, without the marshland, there will be no reeds and there will be no economic opportunity” states Aisha. “Locals say this is an especially rainy year. Even the slightest drop of water will ruin the quality of the drying reeds creating water spots. The unpredictable rainfall is creating problems for these women”







