

21 August 2023

**Transparency Maldives condemns the continued abuse of State resources and attempts to influence voters' right to choose a candidate free from undue influence.**

A free and fair election depends not only on the proceedings of the voting day, but also on the larger electoral environment and on ensuring an electoral level playing field for all candidates. The 2023 Presidential Election Pre-election Assessment published by Transparency Maldives identified the misuse of State resources and the risk of systemic and coordinated influence on voters through State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) as a major concern that has the potential to skew the level playing field in favour of the incumbent. The assessment also highlighted the electoral risks associated with ceremonies to mark the inauguration and completion of government funded projects, and their use as a campaign tool for the incumbent parties. These are concerns that have been observed and reiterated in all previous assessments and election observation efforts by Transparency Maldives.

Since the start of the official campaigning period for the 2023 Presidential Election on 10 August 2023, it is concerning that multiple projects are being announced and inaugurated back-to-back, especially during campaign visits. Official media reports and official social media accounts of government agencies report that:

- Ceremonies related to the inauguration and completion of 32 projects in 16 islands were attended by the incumbent in the first 10 days of the official campaign period (till 19 August 2023). At least 8 of the projects were already completed between 2021- 2022 as per the information available on [isles.gov.mv](http://isles.gov.mv)
- 14 new projects approximately worth over **MVR 1 billion** awarded by the Ministry of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure to two SOEs in the first **eleven days** (10 – 20 August 2023) of the official campaign period. In comparison, during the entire month of August last year, 5 projects worth approximately MVR 261 million were awarded by the Ministry.

Coinciding these ceremonies with the official election campaigning period raises grave concerns regarding the level playing field for presidential candidates. Moreover, carrying out official responsibilities while on campaign trips is an abuse of office and related powers, which blurs the line between the official responsibilities of the incumbent and the candidate's campaign.

Additionally, it is highly concerning that the scope and scale of infrastructure projects and socio-economic policies are being modified close to the election period, without a clear and transparent long-term plan or development strategy. While it is the responsibility of the government to provide essential services such as housing, health, and education, these development projects and policy decisions should not be made or perceived to be made for short-term political gains. Instead, policy decisions should be based on the needs of the population identified through an inclusive consultation process, considering socio-economic and environmental impacts, with a clear timeframe for completion. The lack of transparency and the justifications for changes in critical policy decisions raises further concerns especially in ensuring equitable and sustainable development, in addition to how much undue influence this has on voters' right to freely choose a candidate.

To ensure a level electoral playing field, we call on:

- The incumbent administration, including elected public officials, to stop the abuse of state resources and positions of power for electoral gain;
- The Anti-Corruption Commission to proactively enforce its guidelines on the abuse of state resources; and
- Relevant authorities including Anti-Corruption Commission, the Attorney General's Office and the Parliament to work together to strengthen the legal framework to address loopholes in holding the public officials to account for the abuse of state resources, including stipulating a timeframe for announcement of new projects, and ceremonies for the completion and inauguration of projects during an electoral period.

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