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**STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF MALDIVES
FOR THE 50TH SESSION OF THE
UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW**

www.ECLJ.org
4, quai Koch
67000 Strasbourg, France
Phone: +33 (0)3.88.24.94.40

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Introduction

1. The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ) is an international, non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights around the world. The ECLJ also holds Special Consultative status before the United Nations Economic and Social Council. This report discusses the status of human rights in the Republic of Maldives (Maldives) for the 50th session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

Background

2. Maldives is a country located in the north-central Indian Ocean and has a population of approximately 544,700 people.¹ The country is predominantly Muslim, with approximately 98.7% of the population identifying as Muslim.² Christians only make up approximately 0.29% of the population.³ In its 2025 World Watch List, Open Doors ranked Maldives as the 16th worst country for Christians to live in.⁴ This ranking stems from the fact that it is illegal for non-Muslims to be citizens of Maldives, and therefore, Christians converts are forced to keep their faith a secret, sometimes even from their family members.⁵

3. Maldives' last review was held on November 4, 2020.⁶ As a result of the review, Maldives received 259 recommendations, 187 of which it supported.⁷ It was recommended by Ukraine, and noted by Maldives, that the government “[t]ake further measures to protect freedom of religion or belief, creating an equal democratic space for all communities.”⁸ It was also recommended by Italy, and noted by Maldives, that the government “[r]emove legal provisions that restrict the right to freedom of religion or belief, guarantee the right to manifest one’s religion or belief, and combat discrimination and intolerance against persons belonging to religious minorities.”⁹ In our previous UPR on Maldives, we expressed concern over the laws and practices of the country that discriminate against Christians and restrict religious freedom.

¹ *Maldives*, BRITANNICA, (last updated Mar. 27, 2025), <https://www.britannica.com/place/Maldives>.

² *Maldives: Major World Religions (1900-2050) (World Religion Database, 2020)*, THE ASSOCIATION OF RELIGION DATA ARCHIVES, <https://www.thearda.com/world-religion/national-profiles?u=140c>.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Maldives*, Open Doors, https://www.opendoorsus.org/en-US/persecution/countries/maldives/?gad_source=1&gbraid=0AAAAAQQP2Oq6TaCwqc83kUr93dS7osl9N&gclid=Cj0KQCQiA_NC9BhCkARIsABSsnSTYjeo4bLMQIV5yZWibptb0r58XhjPqP6UEbK_LJC2ScwTa1DBzEzp saAoG0EALw_wcB (last visited Mar. 28, 2025).

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Universal Periodic Review – Maldives*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/mv-index> (last visited Mar. 28, 2025).

⁷ *Maldives – Infographic*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session36/MV/InfographicMaldives.pdf>.

⁸ OHCHR, UPR of Maldives (3rd Cycle – 36th Session) Thematic List of Recommendations, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session36/MV/MatrixRecommendationsMaldives.docx>.

⁹ *Id.*

Legal Framework

4. The Constitution of Maldives offers no protection for freedom of worship. It only protects from discrimination on the basis of “race, national origin, colour, sex, age, mental or physical disability, political or other opinion, property, birth or other status, or native island.”¹⁰ In Maldives, Islam is a foundational aspect of national identity. Article 2 of the Constitution of Maldives states that the country is “based on the principles of Islam.”¹¹ Moreover, Article 10 states that “[t]he religion of the State of the Maldives is Islam. Islam shall be the one of the basis of all the laws of the Maldives.”¹² Additionally, Article 9 (d) of the Constitution states that “a non-Muslim may not become a citizen of the Maldives.”¹³

5. The government heavily regulates religion through its law titled Regulations on Protecting Religious Unity of Maldivian Citizens. Under Article 21 of this law:

It is an obligation on the Government and all the people of Maldives to protect the religious unity of Maldivian citizens as Maldives is a 100 percent Muslim nation and because Islam maintains harmony of Maldivian citizens and because Islam is the basis of the unity of Maldivian citizens.¹⁴

6. In order to maintain its Islamic identity, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs has the authority to deport “all foreigners who propagate any religion other than Islam.”¹⁵ Additionally, it is prohibited for anyone to try and convert people from Islam to another religion. Further, it is illegal build Christian churches.¹⁶ Further, under Article 33 of the Regulations on Protecting Religious Unity of Maldivian Citizens:

It is illegal for non-Muslims who visit Maldives and non-Muslims who live in Maldives to express their religious slogans; publicly display objects that express religious slogans of non-Muslims; gather at places and get into groups to express their religious slogans; sell objects of their worship; conduct any activity with an intention of spreading their religious slogans; participation of a Maldivian in any such activity; and allowing a Maldivian to participate in such an activity.¹⁷

7. Maldives is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).¹⁸ However, Maldives has a reservation to the ICCPR, which states that “[t]he application of the principles set out in Article 18 of the Covenant shall be without prejudice to

¹⁰ CONSTITUTION OF THE MALDIVES 2008 art. 17, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Maldives_2008.

¹¹ *Id.* art. 2

¹² *Id.* art. 10.

¹³ *Id.* art. 9(d).

¹⁴ REGULATIONS ON PROTECTING RELIGIOUS UNITY OF MALDIVIAN CITIZENS art. 21, <https://minivannewsarchive.com/society/new-religious-unity-regulations-english-6877> (unofficial translation) (last visited Mar. 28, 2025).

¹⁵ *Id.* art. 24.

¹⁶ *Id.* art. 30.

¹⁷ *Id.* art. 33.

¹⁸ *Ratification Status for Maldives*, OHCHR, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=106&Lang=EN (last visited Mar. 28, 2025).

the Constitution of the Republic of Maldives.”¹⁹ Article 18 of the ICCPR protects a fundamental right and states that:

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.²⁰

8. This right is also enshrined with similar language in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Under Article 18 of the UDHR:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.²¹

Religious Persecution

9. In Maldives, Islam is an essential aspect of national identity, and its laws and practices are designed to protect this national identity. In fact, to be Maldivian is to be Muslim. Non-Muslims are strictly prohibited from being citizens. The government enforces this identity by expressly prohibiting all non-Muslim religions from being practiced in the country or the distribution of non-Muslim religious literature. In fact, in March 2024, two German women were arrested and detained for ten days because they were distributing Bibles in the native language of Maldives.²²

10. Christian converts in Maldives face extreme scrutiny and must be careful to keep their faith a secret. This is extremely hard as Maldives has one of the highest population densities in the world, meaning that is easier for Christian converts to be discovered.²³ Legally, there is no such thing as a Christian Maldivian citizen, and therefore, Christians who are discovered are usually imprisoned, beaten, or forced out of the country.²⁴

11. Christian women are uniquely targeted because of their faith. If discovered, female converts to Christianity risk being subjected to physical and sexual abuse.²⁵ Additionally, to bring them back

¹⁹ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, UNTC (Dec. 16, 1966),

https://treaties.un.org/pages/viewdetails.aspx?chapter=4&clang=_en&mtdsg_no=iv-4&src=ind#EndDec.

²⁰ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights art. 18, *adopted* Dec. 16, 1966, 999 U.N.T.S. 171,

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>.

²¹ G.A. Res. 217 (III) A, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 18 (Dec. 10, 1948).

²² Naizak Mohamed, *Foreigners Who Distributed Dhivehi Language Bibles Get 10-Day Remand*, SUN SIYAM MEDIA (Mar. 29, 2024), <https://en.sun.mv/88464>.

²³ *Maldives Media Advocacy Dossier*, OPEN DOORS (2025),

https://www.opendoors.org/persecution/reports/Maldives-Media_Advocacy_Dossier-ODI-2025.pdf (last visited Mar. 28, 2025).

²⁴ *Maldives*, GLOBAL CHRISTIAN RELIEF, <https://globalchristianrelief.org/christian-persecution/countries/maldives/> (last visited Mar. 28, 2025).

²⁵ *Maldives Media Advocacy Dossier*, *supra* note 23.

to the Muslim faith, Christian women have been subjected to threats and forced marriages.²⁶ Further, because the government relies on Sharia law, Maldivian women are prohibited from marrying non-Muslims. This means that a Maldivian woman, who is secretly a Christian, is only allowed to marry a Muslim man.²⁷

12. Due to the country's tourism sector, Maldives also has a large expatriate community consisting of people from India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh.²⁸ These communities are heavily monitored by the government. They have slightly more freedom than Maldivian citizens but are still restricted in gathering to worship, which mainly occurs informally in embassies. Further, while they are permitted to own a small amount of religious literature, they must be careful when interacting with Maldivians so that their activity is not interpreted as trying to spread Christianity. If expatriates are caught opposing Islam or openly talking about their faith, they risk losing their job and are deported.²⁹

13. Religious freedom is a foundational and essential human right that has been enshrined in numerous fundamental human rights documents, including the ICCPR and the UDHR. Unfortunately, Maldives has been unwilling to protect this fundamental human right. This can be seen through both its laws and its unwillingness to support recommendations calling for the protection of religious freedom. Denying citizenship to non-Muslims, prohibiting non-Muslims from having places of worship, and banning the propagation of other religions are clear violations of the UDHR and the ICCPR. Again, the UDHR provides that everyone has the right to “change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”³⁰

Recommendations

14. As shown above, Maldives has made no effort to protect and guarantee religious freedom for all its citizens. Clearly, Maldives has no respect for one of the most fundamental of all human rights, the right to freedom of religion. Maldives must take immediate steps to reform its laws and constitution to ensure that everyone can peacefully practice any religion. Citizenship must not be based on one religion and all religions should be permitted to register and operate places of worship. Maldives must immediately work to ensure that no one is arrested, attacked, or deported for practicing his or her faith. Further, we ask that the Maldives remove its reservation to Article 18 of the ICCPR and immediately begin to protect the right to freedom of religion.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ OPEN DOORS, MALDIVES: PERSECUTION DYNAMICS 8 (2024), https://www.opendoors.org/persecution/reports/Maldives-Full_Country_Dossier-ODI-2025.pdf.

²⁹ *Id.* 16.

³⁰ G.A. Res. 217 (III) A, *supra* note 21.