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A Maldives Leader Unjustly Jailed

By: Editorial Board

The Maldives, a chain of islands in the Indian Ocean famous for stunning beaches and upscale resorts, draws hundreds of thousands of tourists each year. Many may be unaware of the government's ruthless repression of the opposition, but it shouldn't go unnoticed.

Mohamed Nasheed, the country's first and only democratically elected leader, is serving a 13-year sentence following his conviction in March on bogus charges that were brought to banish him from politics. Political upheaval in the Maldives gets relatively little attention abroad because the nation is small and isolated (home to roughly 350,000 people). Yet, Mr. Nasheed's fight to regain his freedom and re-enter politics is deservedly being championed by world leaders and prominent activists.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the State Department late last month urged the Maldives government to release Mr. Nasheed and to review the cases of hundreds of demonstrators charged in recent months for supporting the former president. Officials at the United Nations have called the proceeding that led to his conviction "unfair" and "arbitrary" and have criticized the government for not allowing him to mount a proper defense. A team of international lawyers, including the human rights lawyer Amal Clooney, visited Mr. Nasheed this week and called on the government to free him.

Mr. Nasheed was elected in November 2008 and stepped down under pressure in February 2012, before the end of his term. He was charged in July 2012 with allegedly ordering the unlawful arrest of a judge while he was president. The case triggered international condemnation because it was seen as an effort to derail his bid to return to the presidency in the 2013 election. Mr. Nasheed narrowly lost that contest to President Abdulla Yameen, the half brother of the authoritarian leader who ruled between 1978 and 2008.

Early this year, as allies began leaving Mr. Yameen's coalition for Mr. Nasheed's Maldivian Democratic Party, the government resurrected the original allegation and charged Mr. Nasheed under antiterrorism laws. His chances of successfully appealing his conviction may well depend on international pressure.

The country's leaders must recognize that their malicious prosecution of a democratic leader has generated instability and turmoil, which severely tarnishes the image of a country that markets itself as a dream vacation spot.