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A Human-Rights Crisis Wracks Paradise

The Maldives enjoyed a brief period of democracy, until the elected president was deposed in a coup.

By Jared Genser and Julia Kuperminc

Without urgent action, democracy hero and former Maldives President Mohamed Nasheed, could perish in his island prison. Now suffering from a major spinal injury exacerbated by the lack of appropriate medical care, he is in intense pain and parts of one side of his body, including his fingers and face, are numb.

Two independent doctors selected by the government recommended he have microsurgery on his spine, a procedure not available in the Maldives. Yet current President Abdulla Yameen has refused a medical evacuation and now appears content to let Mr. Nasheed die. The world cannot let Mr. Nasheed's story end this way.

After 30 years of dictatorship under former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, the Maldives briefly became a budding democracy. In 2008, Mr. Nasheed was elected president in the first democratic polls held since the country's independence.

During his tenure, Mr. Nasheed strove to re-establish the judiciary as an independent and impartial branch of the government. He pushed for democratic reforms aimed at respecting human rights, due process and rule of law, and he fought to end the previous regime's rampant corruption.

In 2012, those aligned with the former dictatorship staged a coup and deposed Mr. Nasheed. Now, Mr. Gayoom's half-brother Abdulla Yameen is president, Mr. Gayoom's daughter Dunya Maumoon is foreign minister, and Mr. Gayoom himself remains the leader of their political party.

This past February, after a key coalition partner of the government defected to Mr. Nasheed's side, prosecutors brought bogus terrorism charges against the former president. During a 19-day trial, he was denied the right to call any defense witnesses and was repeatedly denied access to counsel. No credible evidence was presented to justify the charge against him. The court sentenced him to 13 years in prison.

Mr. Nasheed's situation reflects the deplorable state of human rights and rule of law in the Maldives. More than 1,700 Maldivians face charges and imprisonment for exercising

their freedom of speech and peaceful assembly. As Mr. Yameen's fear of his own people has increased, he has purged leaders in an array of government institutions.

In the last year alone, the government impeached two successive vice presidents, Mohamed Jameel and Ahmed Adeeb. The latter is now imprisoned and facing charges of treason. Mr. Yameen also sacked two defense ministers (one of whom is now imprisoned), fired two police commissioners and the prosecutor general, and orchestrated the removal of the chief justice of the Supreme Court.

In response to widespread condemnation, the government has rejected the "suggestion that [President Nasheed] is a 'political prisoner,'" and claimed the depiction of the Maldives as a repressive regime "is an unfounded characterization." Mr. Yameen ignores calls from numerous world leaders to release political prisoners, including Mr. Nasheed.

The police have raided and harassed independent TV stations, pepper-sprayed peaceful protestors, and assaulted and arrested journalists. Home Minister Umar Naseer recently decided to ban public protests, saying, "The streets should be safe and peaceful. It is public property, not grounds for political activities and disorder."

Even as Mr. Yameen doubles down on domestic dissent and purges alleged traitors within his own ranks, he ignores the growing threat of extremism in the country. More than 200 island jihadists have traveled from the Maldives to join ISIS. In per capita terms, this is likely more than any other country outside the Middle East.

Human rights in the Maldives deteriorate by the day. Mr. Yameen's repression of his own people and the lack of economic opportunity are fueling extremism. So far, the government has refused to change course.

Meanwhile, Mr. Nasheed's life hangs in the balance. Earlier this year, the United Nations concluded it was "clearly impossible to invoke any legal basis justifying [his] deprivation of liberty."

The world must demand Mr. Nasheed's evacuation on urgent humanitarian grounds. But to have a broader impact on Mr. Yameen's regime, the international community must impose asset freezes and travel bans targeted against gross human-rights abusers. Such actions must be accompanied with exposure of the repression, challenging the regime's repeated lies. Maldivian officials should be challenged on the regime's record as they travel the world. Only intense pressure can force Mr. Yameen to yield.

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