

## [The ongoing attack on democracy in the Maldives](#)

*If western countries are unwilling to place any pressure against a regime of questionable legitimacy, allied with a former dictator and hard-line Islamists, while failing to provide any support for a popularly-elected leader committed to democracy and to nonviolence, what kind of message does that send?*

A political struggle now under way on a tiny island nation in the Indian Ocean has huge implications for the global struggle for democracy and human rights. Western powers which profess to support democratic and accountable governance need to act decisively to prevent this Muslim nation, whose protracted nonviolent freedom struggle was an important precursor for the Arab Spring, to continue its slide back into authoritarianism.

Despite superficial media reports depicting the situation in the Maldives as simply a power struggle between competing political factions, it appears increasingly to involve an illegal seizure of power by authoritarian criminal elements in an effort to reconsolidate control by the former dictator Mamoun Abdul Gayoom and his associates.

The nation's first democratically-elected president Mohamed Nasheed was deposed last February, less than four years after celebrating the triumph of a nonviolent pro-democracy revolution. A popular human rights activist and environmentalist who helped lead the struggle against the former dictatorship, Nasheed was - as feared and predicted - finally arrested on October 8 when fifty heavily-armed police in full riot gear and wearing masks broke down the door of a home where Nasheed and some aides were staying on a political visit to a Maldivian island. Despite offering no resistance, former cabinet officials and other pro-democracy activists were attacked with pepper spray.

As president, Nasheed had become one of the world's most outspoken figures in the struggle against climate change, given the impending impact of rising sea levels on his country's survival. Following his overthrow by allies for the former dictatorship earlier this year, he has sought to revive the nonviolent pro-democracy struggle that forced Gayoom to agree to free elections in October 2008, in which Nasheed emerged victorious.

Nasheed's career-long commitment to nonviolent resistance against corruption and authoritarianism resulted in his being awarded the 2012 James Lawson Award for Achievement in the Practice of Nonviolent Action, named after the prominent US civil rights leader. Now, however, this tragic reversal of an apparent triumph by a mass nonviolent freedom struggle could embolden other former tyrants to attempt to reverse democratic gains elsewhere - unless the international community supports serious measure to restore the necessary conditions for Maldivian democracy.

A journalist by training, Nasheed was repeatedly jailed and tortured for his writings exposing government corruption and other abuses under the Gayoom regime. He eventually found himself leading a campaign of nonviolent protests and civil disobedience which eventually brought an end to a thirty-year dictatorship which had facilitated corruption, drug trafficking and human rights abuses. Unfortunately, significant parts of the old regime's police and judicial system remained in place after Nasheed took office. When he attempted to investigate and pursue reforms of the system, he was detained and - facing threats against his family and prominent supporters - was forced to resign.

His vice-president, Mohamed Waheed, who was apparently part of the plot, assumed the presidency and promptly dismissed Nasheed's ministers, replacing them with conservative Islamists opposed to Nasheed's liberal reforms as well as [nine key figures from the former dictatorship](#), including Gayoom's son and daughter. The United States immediately recognized the new government, refusing to acknowledge the coup, instead referring to the ouster of the democratically-elected president as simply a "[transition of power](#)." Similarly, US State Department spokesman [Victoria Nuland commended](#) as "thorough and conclusive" a [highly-problematic](#) Commission of Inquiry which claimed Nasheed's resignation was not under duress, despite its failure to consider important evidence to the contrary or allow for key witnesses.

But regardless of the circumstances surrounding Nasheed's resignation, it seems clearer every day that the regime that replaced his government has little regard for human rights or the democratic process. Indeed, the real test of a government's legitimacy is its tolerance of freedom of expression and freedom of assembly.

### **Since the coup**

Since the coup, over 2,000 peaceful protesters have been arrested, many suffering severe beatings. [Amnesty International](#) has described the situation in the Maldives as a "[human rights](#) crisis," documenting widespread brutality by security forces and arbitrary arrests. The US State Department, however, has simply [called](#) "for restraint by all sides to prevent possible violence." In a visit to the Maldives last month, assistant secretary of state for South Asia [Robert Blake](#) announced a plan to work with the regime's military and police to "strengthen them" and "build up their capacity."

The repression is not just taking place against those on the streets. In recent months, key leaders in Nasheed's Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) have been arrested on politically-motivated charges and now Nasheed himself appears to be suffering the same fate.

Nasheed and his supporters, apparently confident of victory in any free and fair poll, have called for elections as early as possible – as did the British foreign secretary last month. In parliamentary elections prior to the coup, Nasheed's NDP won the largest number of votes. Even the head of the Commission of Inquiry, a judge from the autocratic country of Singapore, has endorsed the call for elections as soon as feasible.

The regime, however, has reneged on its promises for early elections and has refused to announce a future date for them. There is some speculation that, even if the regime does eventually allow for elections, the filing of charges against the popular deposed president and restricting his movement are designed to prevent him from campaigning or from running altogether. Indeed, if the leader of the democratic opposition is detained, it raises serious questions regarding the regime's commitment to anything resembling a normal democratic process. And Nasheed's legal troubles may only have begun. The regime's Home Affairs Minister has threatened to put him behind bars for the rest of his life.

Even simply restricting Nasheed to the capital island of Male would make it impossible for him to travel through his country or abroad to rally support. The latter is critical, because for a country as dependent on tourism and foreign trade as Maldives, even relatively mild sanctions by Great Britain, United States, Australia or India could be a major constraint on those who have taken power and whose democratic intentions are widely distrusted, including by most Maldivians.

Indeed, it is the lucrative tourism industry which has contributed to the country's crisis. Gayoom and a handful of his family members and cronies are reputed to own well more than half of the island properties where expensive hotel resorts are located, a source of the enormous wealth that Gayoom used to buy the loyalty of corrupt judges and security forces.

Before 2008, Nasheed and pro-democracy activists were able to force free elections and influence Gayoom to honour the result because of the threat of western sanctions. They will have a very difficult time forcing free elections again without similar pressure, which has thus far not been forthcoming.

If western governments are unwilling to implement even modest measures which could significantly advance democracy in the Maldives, what hope is there for those involved in nonviolent struggles for democracy in more complicated circumstances?

Indeed, if western countries are unwilling to place any pressure against a regime of questionable legitimacy, which is allied with a former dictator and hard-line Islamists, and if they fail to provide any support for a popularly-elected leader committed to democracy and to nonviolence, what kind of message does that send to those struggling nonviolently for freedom elsewhere in the world?

Popular nonviolent struggles in poor countries emerging from authoritarianism and fighting corruption must know that the international community has their back.

Fortunately, leading human rights activists, environmentalists, academics, actors, and others are [mobilizing in support for democracy](#) in the Maldives. The question is whether the world will listen.