



Maldives: Obstruction of observers and media latest sign of polling misconduct

For immediate release

Bangkok/Colombo, 22 September 2018

The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) denounces recent developments in the island nation of Maldives, which ensure that the upcoming presidential election of September 23 cannot be considered free and fair.

Among others, intimidation of local civil society organizations, media, and members of the opposition, the lack of transparency from the Elections Commission, and the refusal to allow international journalist and election observers in the country suggest that Maldivian authorities are paving the way for an undemocratic polling process, while suppressing anyone who might speak out on the behalf of Maldivian citizens.

Indeed, the political environment in the country is heavily tipped in favor of the ruling party, as critical media are being subdued into silence, and opposition figures sentenced to jail terms or forced into exile for politically motivated charges. Incumbent President Abdulla Yameen has allegedly been campaigning for his reelection misusing state resources, in violation of existing campaign finance regulations. Checks and balances from the judiciary have been removed, with the arrest in February 2018 of two Supreme Court judges, including the Chief Justice, following a court order to release nine high-profile political prisoners.

In the months since the declaration of a state of emergency last February, Maldivian authorities have extensively used national security and anti-defamation laws to restrict the fundamental freedoms of assembly, association and expression. 19 supporters of the joint opposition have been arrested by the police since August, in a move to discourage campaigning for the opposition.

Meanwhile, the Elections Commission has repeatedly shown it lacked both the independence and transparency required to carry out its duties satisfactorily. Chaired since March 2018 by a former ruling party MP and loyalist of President Yameen, the electoral management body has enforced opaque regulations threatening the sanctity of the ballot, sometimes overstepping the boundaries of the powers it is provided by the Constitution.

Most recently, the Commission has reportedly adopted new vote-counting rules that, if implemented, will prevent the verification of individual ballots and the immediate publication of results in polling stations, thus driving the last nail in the coffin of Maldivian democracy. Other reported instances of misconduct include the nomination of polling staff with ties to the ruling party, and widespread manipulation of the voter list, whose integrity is compromised.

Another example of the opaque manner in which Maldivian authorities are preparing for the ballot is the unreasonable delay in processing the business visas required for international election observers and journalists before entering the country. ANFREL was eager to send its first ever mission to the Maldives to monitor on the ground a Presidential election which few expected to be free or fair.

As international election observers, we applied to obtain official accreditation with the Elections Commission, which we received on September 1st. Yet, three weeks later, our team members still have not been received their visas despite filing the required forms and complying with all applicable regulations. The same holds true for a number of representatives from the foreign media. It appears that Maldivian authorities are granting visas only to observers and monitors they perceive as friendly, while using ANFREL's name and that of other applicants in an attempt to gain international legitimacy.

This obvious attempt to limit international scrutiny of the election through a barrier of red tape replete with financial and administrative requirements, and presumably politically motivated delays, results in an unprecedented situation in our long experience of election observation, one where we are officially recognized but effectively unable to accomplish our duties. In the absence of an ANFREL team in the Maldives, no credible international election observers would be present to give an independent assessment of the September 23 election.

Deeply concerned about the repression of democracy advocates and the absence of transparency in the Maldivian electoral process, we therefore call on the international community to be vigilant and to closely monitor the welfare of civil society and media in the country as they perform their mission in these trying times. Otherwise, in the absence of any scrutiny or pressure, somber events surely loom ahead for the people of Maldives.

For more information, ANFREL can be reached at anfrel@anfrel.org