

Maldives

Country Overview

Population 330,000

Sunni Islam 100 percent

INTRODUCTION

Officially a Sunni Muslim country, the Maldives, known by Maldivians as *Divehi Raajje*, is a group of 19 coral atolls in the Indian Ocean, with about 1,200 flat islands lying on its reefs. Only about 200 of the islands are inhabited. The Maldives is 260 miles (420 kilometers) off the southern tip of India and about 435 miles (700 kilometers) southwest of Sri Lanka. The Chagos Archipelago lies almost 315 miles (500 kilometers) to the south. The total land area of the Maldives is 115 square miles (298 square kilometers).

The Maldivian national language, Divehi, is an Indo-European language with its own script that has heavily borrowed words from Arabic. There is a high literacy in the country, both among men and women. According to tradition, Sunni Islam has been the religion of the Maldivians since the twelfth century CE, when a visiting Islamic scholar converted the last Buddhist king to Islam. The atolls of the Maldives are stretched across the path of the ancient seaborne trading route between Arabia and Southeast Asia and have been continuously populated for millennia. Long considered an isolated and remote place, the Maldives became a major tourist destination beginning in the 1970s.

The Maldives is defined by its leaders as a 100 percent Muslim state. As such, except in the expatriate community, there are no other active religious faiths in the country. Islamic law, or Sharia, forms the foundation of the legal system.

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

Religious freedom is greatly restricted in the Maldives, and every citizen is required by law to be Sunni Muslim. The Maldivian constitution states that the president's foremost duty is to protect and promote Islamic principles and does not permit the public practicing or propagation of any other religious faith. The display of symbols of other religions, as well as the importing of icons, religious statues, and religious literature, is forbidden. Expatriate residents, however, are permitted to practice their religion in their private lives and may own a restricted amount of religious books, such as a Bible, for personal use.

Sunni Islam of the generally conservative Shafi' *Madhab* (school of thought) is formally defined by the government as one of the distinctive characteristics of the country, giving it religious harmony, historical continuity, and a national identity. Islamic radicalism is viewed by Maldivian traditionalists as the spreading of

sectarianism and division (*fitna*), upsetting the balance of the nation. As a result, the government of Maldives has undertaken to curtail the influence of Islamic militants, including Wahhabi hardliners. A Muslim converting to another faith is considered in violation of Islamic law, resulting in severe punishment and the loss of the rights to citizenship.

MAJOR RELIGION

SUNNI ISLAM

DATE OF ORIGIN Twelfth century CE

NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS 330,000

HISTORY

Arab travelers who visited the Maldives before the twelfth century wrote about a flourishing culture in the islands before the last Buddhist king decided to convert to Islam. The precise reasons why this monarch decided to abandon his ancestral Buddhist faith are not known, but tradition tells about a visiting Muslim Sheikh that performed miracles in front of the king. After his conversion the Maldivian king became Sultan Ibn Abdulla, or Muhammad-ul-Ādil. Buddhist monks from important monasteries in other atolls were brought to the capital and were beheaded. Buddhist statues were destroyed, and stupas were defaced by breaking the top spire. This was followed by the building of mosques at the sites of desecrated Buddhist monasteries and the forced conversion of all Buddhist subjects to Islam.

Sunni Islam, along with its traditional institutions, was firmly established in the islands on the eve of the age of exploration. In mid-sixteenth century, not long after Portuguese seafarers had entered the Indian Ocean, a Maldivian king converted to Roman Catholicism. There was firm local opposition, and a struggle ensued to keep the Maldives free from the influence of the Portuguese and their religion. Dutch and French seafarers succeeded the Portuguese in the control of the seaborne

spice route, but they had little influence in the Maldives.

In 1887 the king of the islands placed the Maldives under British protection, retaining internal self-rule. At that time some young Maldivians were sent to further their education in Ceylon. In 1932, during king Shamsuddin's rule, the first constitution was proclaimed, and in 1965 the country became fully independent from the United Kingdom. The centuries-old monarchy ended in 1968 when Prime Minister Ibrahim Nasir proclaimed the Maldives a republic and became its president. He embarked on a modernization drive, secularizing the state, opening the country to tourism, founding a Maldivian shipping line, destroying the royal palace, and building new structures in the capital.

In 1978 the new president Maumoon Abdul Gayyoom scrapped Ibrahim Nasir's secular process and began a policy of Islamization of the Maldives based on the model established by Pakistani President Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq. However, by mid-1980s Muslim Wahhabi hardliners, who desired an even more severe form of Islamification, began to oppose Maumoon, who then assumed near-dictatorial powers. Following popular discontent with Maumoon's long tenure and the approval of a new constitution in 2008, direct presidential elections were held. The winning candidate was M. Nasheed, a young politician with a wide base of support that included pro-secular youth, as well as the Wahhabi hardliners that had opposed Maumoon. In February 2012 the democratically elected government was brought down by a coup d'état engineered by groups linked to the former dictator Maumoon, including members of the security forces, hired street gangs, and major tourism industry investors backed by a corrupt judiciary. President Muhammad Waheed, who became president after the coup d'état, called for national unity after Islamists destroyed ancient Buddhist remains at the National Museum shortly after he took office.

EARLY AND MODERN LEADERS

Early Maldivian history is obscure. A legendary king from the neighboring subcontinent named Koimala is said to have been the founder of the first kingly dynasty in the islands. In the local oral tradition Koimala is often credited additionally with having become the first Muslim ruler after converting to Islam, although a time span of over thousand years separates both events.

A Muslim from Tabriz in Persia, Maulāna Shaikh Yūsūf Shams-ud-Dīn, also known as Tabrīzūgefānu, is hailed in the *Tārīkh*, a local historical chronicle in Arabic, as the holy man that brought about the conversion to Islam of the last Buddhist king in the twelfth century. Moroccan explorer Ibn Batūta, however, mentioned that the saint was Abū'l Barakāt the Berber from Morocco.

Queen Khadija was the ruler of the islands when Ibn Batūta reached the Maldives in the fourteenth century. Al Idrisi, an Arab traveler who had visited the islands before the conversion to Islam, already expressed his bewilderment about the Maldives being ruled by a queen instead of a man in his *Kitab Nuzhat Al Mushtaq Fi Ikhṭirāq Al Afaq*.

According to Maldivian epic works, Muhammad Thakurufaan (d. 1585) helped free the islands from the Portuguese in the mid-sixteenth century, and he has become one of the main figures of Maldivian nationalism. Muhammad Thakurufaan hailed from an island located at the northern end of the archipelago, and his residence has been preserved as a national monument.

In the latter part of the sixteenth century, a Muslim East African crewman who deserted a foreign trading ship for unknown reasons was found praying on a sandbank near Malé. He was brought to the capital, where a cult was built around him and where he became known as Sheikh Najib Habashi.

Muhammad Imaduddin IV was the king who ruled for the longest period of time in the Maldives; his reign lasted for 48 years between 1835 and 1882. Muhammad Shamsuddin III (1879–1935) ruled the Maldives in the first half of the twentieth century. He was the monarch under whose auspices the first Maldivian constitution (1932) was drafted and proclaimed.

Muhammad Amin (1910-54), also known as Amin Didi, became president of the first republic in 1953. He attempted to modernize and secularize the Maldivian state. Amin had an imposing appearance and hailed from a noble family that included French ancestry. Besides reforming the military and the ceremonies of the state protocol, Amin also made a contribution to Maldivian literature.

Abdullah Afif (1916–93) was the leader of the short-lived breakaway state of Suvadives. The secession took place in 1959, encompassing the southernmost atolls of Addu, Huvadū, and Fua Mulaku. The three atolls became again part of the Maldivian Islands in 1963, and Afif was exiled to the Seychelles, where he died three decades later. Despite his role as a separatist leader, Afif is still renowned in the southern atolls for his integrity and moral stature.

Ibrahim Nasir (1926–2008) was the prime minister of the last king of the Maldives and oversaw the signature of the declaration of independence from the British in 1965. Three years later he abolished the ancient monarchy, becoming the first president of the second republic. Nasir sought to expand the modernization and secularization of the Maldivian state initiated by Amin. The first tourist resorts, which would later become the mainstay of the Maldivian economy, began operating under his rule. After being ousted from power, Nasir lived in exile in Singapore, where he died in 2008.

MAJOR THEOLOGICIANS AND AUTHORS

No theologians and authors are known from the Buddhist era. The works and the memory of

Maldivian Buddhist religious figures have been effectively obliterated. After a long silent period, the first noteworthy Muslim authors of the country began to propagate their works four centuries after the conversion to Islam.

Vādū Dannakalēfānu, also known as Nāibu Tuttu and Muhammadu Jamāl-ud-Dīn, was a religious learned man of the late sixteenth century. He spent his last years in near seclusion in Vādū Island, Huvadū Atoll, after having lived most of his life studying in Hadhramaut, Southern Arabia. Nāibu Tuttu is the author of the *Boḍu Tartību*, a book in the Maldivian language about practical aspects of Islam. This scholar rigorously followed the Shafi' school of thought in matters of *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and his book is still in use among traditional Maldivian Muslims in such matters as the proper procedure for burials.

Husain Salahuddīn (1881-1948) worked to strengthen Islam as part of the national identity of the islands. He translated the *Sirat*, the biography of the Prophet Muhammad, into the Maldivian language. Salahuddin also wrote an epic account eulogizing the role of Muhammad Takurufānu, the Maldivian nationalist hero who is credited with having kept the Portuguese at bay in mid-sixteenth century. His son Ibrahim Shihab (1909–88) was also an influential writer and statesman.

Sheikh Muhammad Jamil, also known as Jamil Didi (1915-89), greatly contributed to the religious development of the Maldivian people. He translated Arabic texts and wrote primers on essential devotion emphasizing morality and the broadly accepted traditional social norms. Jamil developed a straightforward writing style, using clear language whenever possible, so that every Maldivian would understand the religious and moral teachings. Some of his descendants are prominent figures in the Maldivian government.

Former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom studied at Al Azhar University in Egypt. As a religious author, he interpreted the Koran and its message for the Maldivians in the journal

Dīnuge Magu (Path of Religion), published weekly in the local language during his tenure. Through this journal he sought to promote an ideology based on the official Maldivian form of Sunni Islam.

Muhammad Ibrahim Luthfi and Hasan Ahmed Maniku are considered significant authors in Maldives. Their writings are mainly in Divehi, and their work was primarily based on the geography and the history of Maldives. Aminatu Faiza, known by her pen name Daisymaa, is one of the country's foremost poets, weaving together the life and the religion of the islands.

HOUSES OF WORSHIP & HOLY PLACES

In the twelfth century the first Muslim king ordered mosques to be built in all inhabited islands in order to replace the Buddhist temples and shrines. Since that time the place of worship for Maldivians is the mosque.

There are mosques in every inhabited island, as well as in the staff quarters of tourist resorts. Islands with a significant congregation have larger Friday mosques. Traditional Maldivian mosques used to be very small structures of coral stone and wood without a minaret built near the local graveyard. The mosque ceilings were elaborately carved and lacquered, and the roof was thatched with coconut leaves.

Despite its relatively small size, the most important mosque in Maldives is the seventeenth-century Old Friday Mosque in the capital Malé. It has an unusually shaped minaret rising above tombstones of ancient kings and queens located nearby. There are more than 700 mosques for men and about 200 mosques for women throughout the country. The latter are a traditional feature in some islands, but in 2009 the Islamic Ministry threatened to close all women's mosques, claiming that the government was trying to cut expenditures. Most mosques have been rebuilt or renovated in recent decades owing to an influx of mainly Saudi funds. The Islamic Center with its Grand

Friday Mosque was built in 1984 with major funding from outside Maldives. The gold-colored dome of this mosque is the first building sighted when approaching the capital.

In the mid-twentieth century there was a small church at the Royal Air Force base in Gan Island, Addu Atoll. It was used by military personnel of the air base and was desecrated after the British left in 1976.

WHAT IS SACRED?

Traditionally in the Maldives mosques had to be kept scrupulously clean by the community, and a lamp had to be kept burning inside at all times. The Koran, as a holy book, has to be treated with care as well. People should never sit at the same level as the Koran, so it needs to be kept elevated on a special stand.

Graveyards have been held in special reverence. Women's graves were marked by elaborately carved rounded coral tombstones and men's by pointed ones. The often isolated tombs of revered persons were small buildings known as *ziyaraiy*. They were kept as clean as the mosque, often with white flags planted within the enclosure.

Fandita is the traditional sorcery practiced by local healers largely in order to cure the ailments of ordinary people. Formerly it was believed that, while other diseases could be cured by means of folk medicine (*Divehi bēs*), fever could only be cured by *fandita*. Local Maldivian magic is syncretistic, incorporating ancient local charms along with Koranic verses.

Maldivian folklore is marked by a widespread belief in evil spirits causing disease and monsters coming from the sea. The Koran is seen as supporting this popular belief through certain verses referring to creatures known as *jinn*.

HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS

Friday is the weekly holiday for Maldivians. Men go to Friday prayers at noon, often

accompanied by the boys of the household except for the very small ones. During Friday prayers all other activities are expected to cease. According to local custom, it was considered inauspicious to do any work, such as fishing, at Friday prayer time.

Religious festivals in the Maldives tend to promote unity among Maldivians, as they involve communal worship, festivities, and entertainment. The two major Islamic festivals are the *Bodu Idu* (*Id al-Adha*), or Feast of Sacrifice, and the *Kuda Idu* (*Id al-Fitr*), the feast marking the end of the Ramadan fast. Maldivians celebrate these festivals in the same way as Sunni Muslims elsewhere do. In some islands traditional music, games, and dances are often part of the holiday celebrations. The Prophet Muhammad's birthday is observed in Maldives, though without the same high spirit of festivity found during the *Bodu Idu* or *Kuda Idu*.

Maulūdu was a traditional Muslim religious festival that involved chanting devotional songs in praise of the Messenger of Allah. In some islands the celebration included the building of a decorated pavilion that was lit with oil lamps at night, as well as a large amount of special food. The chanting was done by a group of well-regarded men arrayed at one end of the pavilion. This festival has been discouraged by religious hardliners since the 1980s.

MODE OF DRESS

Religious men who regularly attended mosque, as well as the *mudīmu* (the caretaker of the mosque), were commonly dressed in white. They favored a white long-sleeved shirt and a mostly white or light-patterned sarong (*mundu*), an ankle-length cloth fastened around the waist. Since President Nasir's time, the government has encouraged male officials to wear Western-style clothes. A white kerchief (*rumā*) or a white skull-cap (*tākiha*) are normally used as covering during worship.

It was never customary for Maldivian women to wear veils or headscarves in daily life, but it was imperative that they wear their hair combed and arranged neatly in a bun. Traditionally they wore a full black waistcloth (*kandiki*) and a long, shoulder-to-ankle dress in bright colors (*libās*) on top of it. Noble ladies wore a patterned waistcloth (*fēli*). Schoolgirls wore Western-style uniforms until the Islamization of the 1980s imposed uniforms with a veil. Although government regulations have sought to curtail the use of female dress that covers the face, Wahhabi men and other hardliners force female members of their families to wear the full black veil.

DIETARY PRACTICES

Most of the traditional Maldivian culinary preparations were based on three items: fish, rice, and coconuts. There used to be little variety in the average daily diet. Rice was imported, but some islands used to grow taro, millet, and breadfruit. Traditional food included the fruits of certain mangroves (*kullavah*, *kandū*), bananas, and the screwpine fruit (*kashikeyo*). Vegetables were scarce and were cultivated in small gardens adjacent to houses. The most common were chilies, drumstick (*muranga*), eggplant, sponge gourd (*torā*), and certain green leaves (*kullafila*, *massāgu*, *digutiyāra*).

The most valued fish was tuna, which was also preserved as Maldivian fish. Sea turtles and their eggs were also eaten. Nearly every household used to rear chicken, which were mostly eaten as chicken curry. Sugar was formerly obtained from the sap of coconut palms (*rā*), but it has become scarce, and Maldivians now consume imported white sugar. It is customary to chew areca nut along with betel leaf and cloves after meals.

Special sweets and drinks are prepared during the holy month of Ramadan to be enjoyed after breaking the fast. Reflecting Islamic dietary restrictions, alcoholic beverages, pork, and pork products are outlawed in the Maldives. Alcohol

and pork are available in tourist areas but are restricted to foreign visitors.

RITUALS

Religious rituals in the Maldives are much like those in other Islamic nations. The ritual prayer, *salat*, is conducted five times daily. Since 1981 a law enforces the closure of shops and offices in the islands for about 10-15 minutes after the prayer call.

During the month of Ramadan, islanders fast during the daytime. Tea shops and restaurants are closed. Working hours are also limited. Selling food during the daytime in the month of Ramadan is a punishable crime in the Maldives. In addition to abstaining from food and drink, most Maldivians listen to the Koran and the recitation of religious texts, such as the *Sirat*, or biography of the Prophet. The fast is broken after sunset with a special meal and begins again at dawn. Special prayers are recited during the night.

Maldivians always carefully buried their dead, and funerary rites were an essential part of island tradition. The ceremony before the burial usually took place at the main family home. The deceased person was ritually washed and wrapped in white shrouds (five for women and three for men), which were given a strong fragrance with camphor.

Local highly regarded men recited funeral prayers, while visitors came to “see the face” of the displayed body for the last time. It was considered a disgrace for a Maldivian not to have the proper funerary rites performed after death.

The location and arrangement of the burial place was a matter that was given great consideration by islanders. The dead were buried with their face facing Mecca. Burial grounds and isolated tombs (*ziyāraiyy*) were the most important landmarks in every island village, and most traditional celebrations involving cooking and extensive meals, as well as important social gatherings, were associated

with commemorative funerary ceremonies. Opposed by Wahhabi hardliners, the use of carved tombstones in the graveyards and the elaborate funerary rituals have been on the wane since the 1980s.

Compared with the traditional burial, birth, and menarche ceremonies, which were celebrated with much fanfare amid cooking and feasting, the customary Maldivian marriage rites were low-key events. In the last decades, however, marriage celebrations and birthday parties have increased in importance, largely replacing some of the older rituals.

rites of passage

A Maldivian baby is usually given an Arabic name on the seventh day after birth. Most islanders have an informal local name, as well as an official Arabic name.

The naming ceremony is accompanied with ritual prayers followed by a celebration with friends and relatives. In some of the islands it is customary to shave part of the baby's hair on the day of naming.

The circumcision of boys between the ages of 7 to 10 is compulsory by tradition in the Maldives. Usually the local doctor (*hakīm*) performs this rite, although in Malé this is normally done in a hospital. The circumcision ceremony takes place in the boy's home, which is decorated and open to the community. Visitors are entertained with traditional drum music, games, and dances. They are also treated to special food while the boy lies in the middle of the room on a bed surrounded by relatives, who massage his feet and generally attempt to keep him comfortable. The boy also receives gifts. The festivity lasts almost a week until the boy is healed.

Libās levvun was the ceremony held on the occasion of the menarche, the time of the first menstruation of girls. This puberty ritual marked the time when they were no longer considered children and were introduced into the society as women ready for marriage. The

girl was given one or more special dresses (*libās*) during a celebration with a meal especially prepared for the event, and friends and neighbors were invited. Although formerly very important in Maldivian society, the *Libās levvun* custom has gradually vanished since the early 1980s.

MEMBERSHIP

The government does not aggressively propagate Islam among expatriate non-Muslim workers in Maldives. The authorities, however, expend a great deal of energy promoting the spirit and culture of Islam, officially outlawing the propagation of any other religion in the country. In practice, however, the government casts a relatively lenient eye on Hinduism and Buddhism, rarely censoring religious scenes in Hindi movies, for instance, while firmly opposing the radio broadcasts of certain Christian programs in Divehi language from other countries.

Ever since the nineteenth century the Maldivian government has steadfastly opposed the translation of the Bible into the Divehi language. The first translations of the Gospels, made almost two centuries ago, were lost. In the last two decades the Bible Society of Maldives based abroad has translated and published parts of the Bible in Divehi, but the Supreme Council for Islam responded by issuing a fatwa banning these publications in the Maldives.

In recent years, and for the first time in the history of the islands, there have been Maldivians who have publicly declared themselves atheists, rejecting Islam altogether. Following their avowal these persons have been harassed and, in some instances, have been victims of violent attacks resulting in serious injuries.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

The government's promotion of tourism has been repeatedly criticized by militant Muslim politicians. Detractors have argued that tourism

could lead to the erosion of the privileged position of Islam in the nation.

Initially tourism and fisheries provided full-employment, but unskilled jobs have been increasingly taken over by migrant workers. While local unemployment has soared, there were about 50,000 Bangladeshis in the Maldives in 2011, making up nearly a sixth of the population of the country. Almost a third of the Bangladeshi migrant workers are without proper documents. Often despised and mistreated by Maldivians, they work for a very low pay and are kept in poor living quarters, often in near-slavery conditions.

The wealth from tourism has brought an increase in drug abuse as well, especially among the unemployed Maldivian youth. Formerly a society based on mellow and peaceful values, recent times have seen the proliferation of violent street gangs in the Maldives. This phenomenon is most conspicuous in the capital, where groups of young men congregate in public areas intimidating passers-by and starting fights. Gang members are mostly unemployed youth who often are drug users and are affiliated to religious militant groups as well. Street gangs use violence during political rallies and cause property damage to businesses and neighborhoods. Manipulated by politicians, gangs played a high-profile role in bringing down former President Nasheed's government in February 2012.

SOCIAL ASPECTS

The rate of divorce has been very high throughout the history of the islands. The Maldives is listed in the Guinness World Records as the country with the highest divorce rate in the world with 10.97 divorces per 1,000 inhabitants per year. Polygyny was frowned upon in traditional society, but it is legally allowed in the country with about 1 in 11 men having more than one wife. Most polygamous families are religious

hardliners, such as Wahhabis, who disregard local social norms.

POLITICAL IMPACT

In the Maldives Islam and politics are closely related. The nation's president must be a Sunni Muslim. Furthermore, the government uses all its power to enforce religious conformity, considering the protection and promotion of Sunni Islam as one of its primary tasks, viewing Islam as the glue that holds the islands together as one harmonious nation.

The role of the Islamic religion in Maldivian society, however, has changed significantly since the beginning of the 1980s, when government-led Islamization was enforced through campaigns such as *Dīnuge Hēlunterikan* (Religious Awareness). That process helped breed local Wahhabi hardline groups who identify with international Islamic terrorist organizations. Wahhabis refuse to acknowledge the right to rule of their own authorities, who they claim give precedence to laws that are un-Islamic. This attitude has flared up in a number of incidents, such as violence on the island of Himandū in October 2007, when enraged Salafis attacked policemen using knives and clubs while throwing stones at them.

In spite of the increasing rifts in society created by religious issues, Maldivians see their religion as an identity marker. Most fear a loss of Islam resulting in a loss of Maldivian identity. Notwithstanding the great number that have embraced virulent and revolutionary Islamic ideologies in the past decades, Maldivians tend to be quietly conservative in their political views, reflecting their desire to preserve what they see as the values of the Maldivian nation.

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

The Maldivian courts apply a mixture of Sharia (Islamic law) and civil law mellowed by traditional island values; thus, the amputation of hands and the death penalty are not enforced. In the fourteenth century Moroccan traveler Ibn Batūta, who had been appointed as supreme

judge by royal order, reported that once when he ordered the hands of people guilty of stealing to be cut off according to religious law, most spectators in the hall fainted. Average Maldivians still privately consider acts of violence, even if committed in the name of Islamic law, barbaric.

The government sanctions floggings and banishment to remote islands, though, legal punishments that have been practiced in the Maldives for centuries. The flogging and subsequent exile is particularly common among women getting pregnant out of wedlock.

Islamic education for children has been imparted in small island madrassahs (Muslim schools) in Maldives for centuries, and since the 1900s Maldivian families have largely favored secular schools for higher education. However, beginning in 1984 large well-funded Islamic schools with foreign teachers were opened in the Maldives, and religious education was extended into the high-school level. Successful students went to Islamic religious universities abroad to further their studies, often with scholarships subsidized by foreign Islamic organizations. It has been mainly through these schools that the Islamization of society was accomplished, above all the enforcement of the wearing of the headscarf among Maldivian girls.

In the 1980s Maldivian parents began sending their sons and daughters to the new Islamic religious schools with the hope that their children would become morally upright people in the future. Instead, some young Maldivians forsook the ancient indigenous traditions and emerged as political activists after completing their studies, sponsoring violent causes and not paying the customary attention to the guidance of their parents or the older people of the island.

CULTURAL IMPACT

Although Sunni Islam generally restricts arts such as music, Maldivian culture includes certain artistic expressions that flourished in the

1970s during President Nasir's secular tenure. Traditional Maldivian music has affinity with the music from North India. Local folkloric dance was performed either by men (*Gaa Odi Lava, Bodu Beru*) or by women (*Bandiyā Jehun*), but it was not customary for men and women to dance together.

In the 1970s young people quickly adopted modern dances in parties and fairs. President Maumoon, however, seeking to change the religious, political, and sociocultural structure of the country, outlawed dancing among Maldivians. In 1980 the few establishments where Maldivians of both sexes used to dance together, such as Icege in the capital, were closed. Staged dances of the traditional kind were permitted, but discotheques were restricted to tourist resorts.

By limiting dance and music among the Maldivian people, militant Islamic groups were successful in largely stifling popular entertainment on the islands in recent decades. Nonetheless, there were some islands in which the youth managed to avoid restrictions and stage light merriment (*Mali neshun, Kodi kendun*), particularly during religious festivals such as *Bodu Idu*.

OTHER RELIGIONS

In recent history there was only one distinct religious minority in the Maldives, the Bohra merchants. These were Ismā'ili Shiite Muslims who used to live in Malé as a separate trading community. They were originally from Bombay and Gujarat and owned the main shops in the capital, having settled there in the 1800s. There are no statistics regarding their numbers, but they built the fine mosque known as *Bandara Miskiy* that still stands. After being accused of unfair trading practices and monopolizing commerce, all Bohras were expelled by Muhammad Amin in the mid-twentieth century.

Ever since the government endorsed the *Al Quds Fund* campaign in the 1980s and portrayed Jews as enemies of Muslims, virulent

anti-Semitic rhetoric has been common in the Maldives, above all among Wahhabis and other religious hardliners. There has also been an increasing use of religious issues in politics, often leading to derogatory statements about Christianity and Judaism, as well as accusations of cooperating with foreign Christian missionaries among politicians. The intimidation of Maldivians calling for a more tolerant interpretation of Islam led in October 2012 to the murder of a prominent member of parliament, a Muslim scholar supporting the traditional Shafi' school of thought.

The largest expatriate community is made up of Bangladeshi laborers, who are mostly Muslim and who generally arrived beginning in the 1990s. Other foreign workers are Buddhist, Christian, and Hindu. They are mostly Filipinos, Sri Lankans, South Indians, and Thais. They usually work in the tourist resorts and in a number of other, mostly menial, occupations.

Xavier Romero-Frias

See Also Vol. 1: *Islam, Sunnism*

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Muhammad Jamil

A distinguished Maldivian writer and politician, Muhammad Jamil (Jameel) Didi (1915–1989) emphasized morality and the preservation of broadly accepted social norms, expressed in Divehi as Heu Nubai (Good versus Bad). His works include *Dīniyat*, *Ta'alim Diyāna*, and *Dhu'ū sul Akhulaaq*, which provided religious lessons and daily moral guidance. In order to convey basic moral teaching, Jamil translated foreign fables, adapting them to the Maldivian context. Jamil also wrote poetry, as well as the lyrics of the Maldivian national anthem.

Jamil was the son of Abdullah Kamal-ud-Dīn, attorney general of the Maldives, and studied at Al-Azhar University in Egypt. He became minister of justice in 1953 and attorney general in 1956. Jamil did not see any role for religious political militancy in Maldivian society, preferring to promote the time-honored values of gentleness, personal devotion, social harmony, and respect for the established authority. After his death in 1989, President Maumoon recognized him with the *Usthaz-ul-Jil* (Generation Teacher) title.

Jamil was in favor of a modern state, but he was also aware that the steadfast allegiance to Islam in traditional Maldives was strengthened by a dense structure of island customs and family relationships. He remained faithful to the conservative Shafi'i school of thought and regarded the promotion of other Islamic sects (mainly Salafism) as dangerous, introducing unnecessary divisions in the country. Therefore, he has been criticized by religious hardliners hostile to local traditions.