

# Finding the Right Islam for the Maldives: Political Transformation and State-Responses to Growing Religious Dissent

La Toya Waha<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*At the first glance, the Maldives appear not to be prone to religious conflict. The archipelago state comprises a religiously and ethnically homogenous society, the different islands have been subject to shared Islamic rule for centuries and even constitutionally religious homogeneity is granted by making every citizen a Muslim and religious diversity prevented by limiting naturalisation to a specific Muslim group. Yet, today allegations of a threat to Islam play a major role in political mobilisation, the Maldives are faced with Islamist violence, and Maldivians have joined the Islamic State and al Qaeda in disproportionately high numbers. The paper seeks to find an answer to the question of how the repression of dissent under the Gayoom regime and the expansion and rise of violent Islamism relate in the Maldivian context. Next to the theoretical model, the paper will provide an introduction to the Maldivian political culture and the reasons for changes therein. It will shed light on the emergence of three major Islamic streams in the Maldivian society, which stood opposed to one another by the late 1990s and early 2000s, and show how Gayoom's state repression of dissent initiated an escalation process and furthered Islamist violent politics. The paper will argue that while state repression of dissent played a significant role in the repertoire selection of Islamic non-state agents, the introduction of fundamentalist Islamic interpretations through migration, educational exchange programmes and transnational actors have laid the ground for violence in the Maldives.*

**Keywords:** Transnationalism; political violence; Maldives; contentious politics; state repression; migration; Islamic fundamentalism.

## Introduction

The Maldives have long been regarded not only as paradise for tourists from all over the world, but also as a paradise for adherents of a moderate and non-violent Islam; a place where fundamentalist interpretations of Islam have not been put into practice and where women enjoy rare freedoms from religiously sanctioned suppression. Moreover, the population's relative ethnic, linguistic and religious homogeneity laid ground to the hope that Maldivians would be spared from intercommunal violence and terrorism, which plagued the diverse neighbouring South Asian states. Several internally initiated political reforms were evaluated as positive steps towards a modern state, for example, the introduction of a constitution and a parliament (*Majlis*), which terminated the hereditary handover of power and turned the Sultanate into a constitutional monarchy in 1932, or the creation of the first Maldivian republic in 1953. Despite a period of increased political tension and turmoil from 1954 to the creation of the second republic in 1968, which comprised a violently ended secessionist movement of the southern atolls and the independence from British protectorate in 1965, the Maldives were not considered a negative exception of the South Asian rule. The Maldives opened to the world by inviting tourists in the 1970s and by joining several multilateral organisations, including

---

<sup>1</sup> La Toya Waha, PhD, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Singapore. E-mail: [latoya.waha@kas.de](mailto:latoya.waha@kas.de)



the United Nations, the Non-Alignment Movement, and – even as a founding member – the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). In the 1980s, the Maldives sought greater visibility in the world and engaged actively in organisations, such as the Organisation for the Islamic Conference (OIC). And despite several foreign attempts to use Maldivian islands as military posts, Maldives managed not to be drawn directly into great power rivalry in the region, first between the US and the USSR and later India and China (Phadnis and Luithui, 1981). With the transition from the authoritarian president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom to Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) head Mohamed Nasheed in 2008, the Maldives have moreover raised the hope for a functioning Muslim democracy, in which dissent and the acceptance of human rights were possible.

Today, the Maldives are drawn to authoritarian regimes; Maldives joined the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and received large funds from Saudi Arabia (Naseed, 2015: 108). The Maldivian society is polarised, which frequently shows in the contention around the implementation of *hudud* punishments.<sup>2</sup> Maldivians travelled to join the Islamic State (IS) in Syria in disproportional numbers, and are frequently found involved in Islamist attacks in the region and engaging in transnational terrorist networks, such as al Qaeda or Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) (Hafeez, 2008: 253). Women wear the burqa and the numbers of female circumcision have increased significantly.<sup>3</sup> Secular bloggers are murdered<sup>4</sup> and religions other than Sunni Islam violently suppressed (ACFHR, 2005). And despite the hope which arose from the surprising electoral success of MDP supported presidential candidate Ibrahim Mohamed Solih in 2018, the influence over key institutions by supporters of former authoritarian rulers appears unbroken. Even worse, the Islamic State (IS) has laid hand on the islands state and conducted its first terrorist attack in the country in April 2020. While writing, anti-government protests challenge the democratic forces currently in power, like, in the protest leading to the resignation of President Nasheed in 2012, with increasingly religious overtones.

This paper seeks to explain the expansion of violent Islamism in the Maldives by analysing how state responses to religious dissent have influenced the transformation of Maldivian politics and non-state actors' repertoire from non-violent to violent means of contention. Thereby, the paper draws on a theoretical model explaining shifts in political behaviour – repertoire – of non-state actors. Based on the analysis of the core hypothesis and its results, the paper shows how and why the repertoire of the fundamentalist religious-political agents has changed. Placing the analysis of the Gayoom presidency into context, the paper will first give a short introduction into the political culture of the Maldives and the changes herein introduced by the long-term powerholder Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. It will then show the emergence of three major Islamic streams in the Maldivian society, which stood opposed to one another by the late 1990s and early 2000s. It will be shown how Gayoom's state repression of dissent initiated an escalation process and the developments towards Islamist violent politics before and during the regime change in 2008 will be outlined. Finally, a conclusion will be drawn.

---

<sup>2</sup> See for example the controversy about the punishment of the raped teenage girl in 2013 (Elliott, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> According to Dawson et al., "In 2011, Dr Iyaz Abdul Latheef, the Vice President of the Fiqh Academy, the primary religious academy in the Maldives, encouraged the practice during a broadcast on national radio" (Dawson et al., 2020: 9).

<sup>4</sup> The rationale for killing the secular blogger Yameen Rasheed in 2017 was that the victim was believed to have "mocked religion" (Maldives Independent, 2017).



## Theory and Method

The paper seeks to understand the impact of state responsiveness on agents' repertoire. What is to be explained, thus, is the change of behaviour of a certain, here religious, political agent towards the application of violence<sup>5</sup>. The theoretical model, which serves as the basis for this analysis, is based on rational choice theory and has been investigated on in the case of violent Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka (see Waha, 2018). It assumes behaviour to be the result of a decision making process. Related to the theory of human motivation, it is assumed that in such a process, the agent elaborates aims based on basic desires, in line with an overall aim, analyses his current conditions, including the constraints for the achievement of the desired end, and selects the behavioural alternative relating the current condition and the desired end, which, based on his cognitive models, he thinks serves his ends best. In the course of decision making, the agent weighs costs and benefits with regard to 1) the value of the aim, also in relation to his overall aim ('the good life'), 2) the incentives provided by the opportunity structure as by the agent's evaluation which is grounded in the agent's 3) cognitive models (worldviews).

Violence as a costly form of behaviour is considered to be chosen in situations, in which an agent seeks to prevail. This is often the case when an agent pursues a high-valued aim or perceives important values to be severely threatened. In situations of contention, where agents seek to and/or need to prevail escalation – that is the step-like increase in the costs of behaviour<sup>6</sup> – is likely. At the same time, the opportunity structure, which includes the opponent, sets incentives for certain behaviours (Waha, 2018: 553).

It is hypothesised that if in the context of contention of identity – here Muslim identity in the Maldives – state elites lack to be responsive, collective identity elites – here elites of the three relevant streams – are likely to enter a process of escalation/escalate. Based on the conceptualisation by Tilly and Tarrow, *contentious politics of identity* is defined as interactions, in which agents make claims bearing on someone else's identity interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of a shared collective identity, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties (see Tilly and Tarrow, 2007: 4). The operationalisation thereof is collective action in the name of an Islamic community which bears on the identity-interests or programmes of another agent, who makes an own value-proposal for the Islamic community in the Maldives, whereby the government is involved as a target, initiator of claims, or third party.

The independent variable (IV) of the given hypothesis is state responsiveness. *State responsiveness* refers to the ability or willingness of the state elites, in this case particularly the Maldivian president, to allow for the accommodation of the claims considered as important by the contending opponent within the state. The operationalisation thereof are actions which indicate accommodation, like making concessions to another stream's demands, etc.; lacking state responsiveness refers to the lack of such behaviour and/or actions which are directed against the claims made by the contending opponent (see Waha, 2018: 546). The dependent variable (DV) is escalation. *Escalation* is defined as the "step-like increase" in (the costs of) means (see Zartman, 2008: 195). It shall be operationalised as the application of increasingly costly means, ranging from 1) means allowed to means tolerated to means

---

<sup>5</sup> Violence is defined as "the intentional use of physical force by an agent or agents [...] threatened or actual, against the self, another person, against a group or community, or an object in order to damage, hurt or injure physically and/or psychologically, or kill" (Waha, 2018: 75), and considered to be a form of human behaviour.

<sup>6</sup> Based on the definition of escalation as "a step-like increase in the nature of conflict" (Zartman, 2008: 195).

prohibited by the state order<sup>7</sup>; ranging from 2) means with no or little risk to means with high risk for the participating agents; and 3) means ranging from non-violence to violence in the political sphere, and within violence 4) ranging from threats to apply violence to attacks against things and finally to attacks against beings, which are ranging from 5) damage to destruction and from harm to killing (Waha, 2018: 546f.).

The *opportunity structure* shall be, based on an extension of Tilly and Tarrow's concept, defined as features of an agent's environment that facilitate or inhibit an agent's actions and changes in those features, offering the agent opportunities and risks (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007: 49). Opportunity structure is operationalised as an agent's statement regarding his evaluation of the environment's opportunities and risks, and claimed or actual changes therein. Thereby a special focus is put on the evaluations of relations to the Maldivian ruling elite and to the members of their community, the evaluation of features of their organisation or networks, of the society as well as of the international community as favourable or unfavourable to the Islamists' aim achievement (Waha 2018: 553). *Means selection* is meant to be the rational decision for a behaviour as a means towards an end. It is operationalised as applied (collective) behaviour by members of the group.

The qualitative method which unifies the rational choice theory-based modelling with the closer analysis of the contextual givens of a case is the method of "analytic narrative" presented by Bates et al. (1998). The analytic narrative follows a micro-level approach towards the analysis of political events and outcomes. The central characteristics of this approach are the focus on agents and the accommodation of "the actors' preferences, their perceptions, their evaluation of alternatives, the information they possess, the expectations they form, the strategies they adopt, and the constraints that limit their actions" into the analysis (Bates et al., 1998: 11). According to Bates et al., the aim of the method is to "piece together the story that accounts for the outcome of interest" (Bates et. al., 1998: 11) and "to cut deeply into the specifics of a time and a place, and to locate and trace the processes that generate the outcome of interest" (Bates et al., 1998: 12). The narrative begins with a general introduction into the local specifics, and then introduces the sequence under investigation. The focus of the present sequence is the 1990s and early 2000s until the power transition in 2008.

The access to data in the Maldives is limited as is the academic treatment (Naseem, 2015: 99). Most research is conducted from outside the Maldives, potentially a consequence of the lack of higher education institutions which treat other subjects than Islam. For the sources, the author draws mainly on newspaper articles in newspapers from the Maldives and neighbouring countries as well as international news agencies. Beyond that, primary sources of political agents, like publications, interviews in the national or international media and social media comments – when already available at the time – are used. During repression, some Maldivian dissidents have published comments in newspapers in neighbouring countries, most notably in Sri Lanka (e.g. *The Island*). These sources are drawn on as well. The information provided by the sources is then triangulated.

## **Islam, Authority and Political Culture in the Maldives**

Since the establishment of the Sultanate on the Maldivian islands, the subsequent expansion of state structures and enforcement of Islam for social and political control over the vastly dispersed Maldivian islands, there was little space for religious and political diversity. With the conversion of

---

<sup>7</sup> Tilly and Tarrow present different sorts of episodes of repertoire based on their reviewed literature. These are 1) legal, illegal but tolerated, illegal but tolerated in some circumstances, repressed and new means of claim making, and 2) conventional, confrontational and violent means of claim making (see Tilly and Tarrow, 2007: 50-51).



the last Buddhist king, powerholders sought to destroy the Buddhist religious structures and social institutions on the islands. Buddhist monks were killed, temples and shrines destroyed, and the population forced to convert (Maloney, 1980). The adoption of Islam did not only serve as a bridge to the Arab traders but has been a central element of the Sultanate's rule and its upholding of social and political order.

The geography of the Maldives poses a special challenge to the establishment of centralised control due to the wide dispersion of atolls and islands, among others given the time it takes to reach from one to the other by boat. In this context, Islam has become a framework for social and political order, next to the islands' and atolls' headmen, who could reinforce the centre's control locally. The tight religious rules and compulsory participation in daily religious rituals enabled the control of individuals even in the remote islands far away from the capital. Furthermore, the shared religion enabled a shared sense of belonging among the population, whose contact to one another was widely limited to the own island community. Islam further helped to keep the sense of belonging and social cohesion among the Muslim Maldivians as it allowed for a cultural barrier to the neighbouring powers, Hindu India and Buddhist Sri Lanka, and as such as the means to prevent foreign control and influence over the islands on religious lines (Maloney, 1980). Stories of Muslims, who were claimed central in defeating the Portuguese' attempt to colonise the Maldivian islands, project Islam as the reason for the strength to prevent Christian invasion. Given that the neighbouring states were colonised, while the Maldives were widely left unimpacted from foreign control over internal affairs, Islam was considered the force enabling the sovereignty of the country.

Despite the distinct religious and linguistic homogeneity, Maldivian politics were factious. Although the Sultanate lasted several hundred years, it was characterised by political intrigues at the court. To a large extent, political participation by selected members of the society was given through the installation of political leaders, like the island's and the atoll's headmen, to a certain extent even the Sultan, and political dissent was mainly expressed through the removal of political figures through popular protest or court intrigue. In the 'modern' Maldives, petitions were political means of interest expression. By and large, however, once a political leader was selected and installed, Maldivians accepted his authority and his decisions (Maloney, 1980). Dissent was expressed through the removal of people from office rather than demanding to change the content of policies and decisions. This practice did not change despite the introduction of a constitution in 1932, the abolishment of the monarchy, or the establishment of the first republic in 1953. Coups are found in the different regimes and remain part of Maldivian politics until today.

Particularly during the presidency of Gayoom (1978-2008) and the contentious situation of the foreign affairs in the Indian ocean at the time, shaped by the great power rivalry between the USSR and the United States, India's growing hegemonic interests, and later Chinese search for influence in the region (Phadnis and Luithi, 1981; Malik, 2001), the need was felt to secure Maldivian sovereignty and interests through balanced international relations on the one hand, and internal hegemony and control of politics and religion alike on the other. Foreign presence and exchange with the local population were sought to be kept at a minimum.

The secessionist movement (1956-1964) following the British presence on Gan thereby served as a poignant example. The most southern atolls had retained their own specific identity and sought to independently benefit from the wealth the British military base in Gan generated. However, the secession movement was defeated by police action from 1959 to 1960 and thereafter withered away. The impact of the British on local affairs was resented (Maloney, 1980: 203-206). Strength was a

central requirement in the political realm. As mentioned earlier, Maldivian politics have been shaped by political intrigues throughout the Sultanate and the constitutional times alike. Coups and overthrows have been frequent, the weakness of a leader was quickly exploited and likely to end his term. The projection of strength became an important way to retain power and office. Also, Gayoom's three decades of authoritarian rule have witnessed several coup attempts. Most notable was the coup, which could only be ended by Indian forces in 1988. A Tamil militant organisation from Sri Lanka, the People Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) served as a 'private' force of a Maldivian businessman living in Sri Lanka. Indian Special Forces had ended the coup which had severely challenged the Maldivian government (Haider, 2017: 45-46).

Since the Sultanate and beyond, Islam has legitimised power, served as a basis and the justification of authority and rule. Sharia was the basis for law and social order. Islam was considered the guarantor of political power, social control, as well as national unity and independence from foreign influences and control, most notably from the European colonial powers (Amir, 2011). Islam, thus, was understood as an instrument for unity and security in and of the Maldives (ACFHR, 2005: 4).

These aspects of the Maldives' political culture, Gayoom has carried to extremes, and has united the secular and religious power onto himself. Throughout his thirty-years lasting presidency, Gayoom has brought under his control the executive, legislative, judiciary, and religious pillars of power in the Maldives.

### **Where does the Dissent come from? The Three Major Streams of Islam in the Maldives**

The first stream builds on the culturally grounded and widely practised Islam in the Maldives. This form of practice was described as dominant in the 1970s by Maloney (1980). Traditionally, sharia took a central role in state and social rules, but there were little Islamic teaching and knowledge of the scripts in the Maldives (Amir, 2011). While local officials were required to learn Arabic and to take basic courses for Quran and sharia, deeper Islamic education was rare on the islands state. Pre-Islamic traditions continued to influence the rather ritualistic practice of Islam, rites as well as the belief system. Myths from pre-Islamic times, like the Rannamaari (a myth about a sea goddess) or the inclination towards non-violence – including the aversion towards violence against animals – remained part of Maldivian life (Maloney, 1980). Certain social structures and practices, too, found continuation in the Muslim Maldivian society. As such, women were neither required to cover themselves completely nor to wear any form of veil, despite frequent attempts by foreign religious scholars to change it. While women in their older age covered their hair, this was less for religious purposes or requirements. Despite frequently practised rituals of female circumcision and the possibility for women to get married – and divorced – without their own presence in the respective ritual, relative to other Muslim countries at the time and today women enjoyed wider liberties and rights in the Maldives; their participation in certain areas of social life – except for religious rituals – was possible and the mixing of sexes for festivities and evening meetings was allowed on some islands. Although there were variations in the strictness of the application of religious rules, the formal, ritualistic practice of Islam was upheld. As such, for example, men's participation in the Friday prayers in the mosques prescribed by the state was mandatory and violations were punished. Sharia law was the basis of social and political life and physical punishment was practised. However, *budud* punishments, like cutting off hands, were not welcomed by the wider society and rejected for the violence (Maloney, 1980). While Islamic rituals took a prominent role in the everyday life of the people, the collective identity was widely shaped by the belongingness to an island and atoll; being a



Muslim, in turn, was taken as a given. Muslim identity was however stressed in delineation to foreigners. Christians were particularly disliked and pride was taken in the Maldivians' resistance towards Portuguese attempts to colonise the islands, seen as a victory of Islam over Christianity (ibid.). This outlined a culturally-grounded Islam, which might be considered as the indigenous "Maldivian Islam".

The second stream resulted from a kind of Islamic revivalism in the Maldives and was heavily influenced by then-president Gayoom. Gayoom lived longer parts of his childhood and young adult life abroad, first for schooling in Sri Lanka (length unplanned) and then for most of the time for Islamic education and studies in Egypt, most notably the Al-Azhar University. When Gayoom returned to the Maldives, the country's wider population and good parts of the political elite lacked deep knowledge and grounded education in Islam – despite political authority and the state's legitimacy had been built on Islam. Gayoom, who had gained a degree in Islamic studies and taught Islam in Nigeria, thus brought with him superior religious credentials. Selected by *Majlis* as the sole candidate, Gayoom became president in 1978. After assuming office, Gayoom promoted religious education and education programmes to other Muslim countries (Naseem, 2015: 114). Like in other countries in the region, the Maldives' economic situation provided little opportunities for self-actualisation and economic success. The Maldives under Gayoom's presidency, however, provided little or no opportunity for higher education, and, despite some English medium schools, instead, a focus was largely placed on religious education. The country's best students were provided with scholarships, often funded by other Muslim majoritarian countries like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, and were sent abroad for madrasa education. A sort of Islamic revivalism in the Maldives accompanied Gayoom's drive for religious education and was furthered by Islamic educated figures, who, like Gayoom, had been educated abroad (Van Es, 2008). Gayoom united the secular and religious powers and authority in the country in the office of the president, which he held for thirty years. He turned himself into the Supreme Authority of Islamic Affairs and as such sought to determine the "right" Maldivian Islam. In delineation to foreign and domestic contenders of his position, he forged a Maldivian national identity mostly based on Islam (Van Es, 2008). As the religious and secular authority, it was on Gayoom to decide what was the right Islam and who was allowed to discuss it. Only a small circle was authorised to discuss Islamic issues, only authorised circles were allowed to preach Islam, and only according to Gayoom's interpretations. Dissenters, irrespective of them speaking up for more moderate or more fundamentalist interpretations, were silenced and severely punished (ACFHR, 2005). The merger of secular and religious authority, the equalling of Islamic and Maldivian identity, and the exclusivity of religious interpretation have resulted in Gayoom's widely believed and dispersed narrative of a homogenous Maldives and the special moderate Maldivian Islam. Gayoom's drawing on the teachings, the rejection of inner-Islamic plurality – let alone religious diversity –, the streamlining of thought, practice and interpretation, which included the denying of pre-Islamic traditions and influences, has turned the "moderate Maldivian Islam" in a mere catchword.

A third stream emerged in the Maldives in the course of the late 1980s and 1990s. On the one hand, the Maldivian students who had studied Islamic studies abroad were returning to the islands state. Educated in madrassas and Islamic universities in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Qatar, Kuwait, Libya or Egypt (Van Es, 2008), the graduates brought back different interpretations of Islam. Rejecting the president as the major religious authority, they not only questioned Gayoom's religious orders but claimed the sole truth for their learned interpretations. While themselves dissenting the country's authority, they rejected any dissent from their interpretation themselves. On the other hand,

foreign international agents inspired by the pan-Islamic movement came to the Maldives. With them came a transnational Islamic identity, which promoted Islamic unity beyond nations and state boundaries. The unity of Muslims is entailed in the Quran by the concept of the *umma* (the community of believers), similarly, pan-Islamism aimed at creating a “formal political unity in the Muslim world” dates back to Islamic thinkers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Hegghammer, 2010: 17). It was, however, revived in the 1960s and 1970s in Saudi Arabia, based on “Saudi King Faisal’s call for coordination and mutual aid between Muslim countries” and furthered the “notion of ‘Muslim solidarity’ (*al-tadamun al-islami*)” (Hegghammer, 2010: 17). “To promote pan-Islamism, King Faisal established a number of institutions at the [...] supranational level which worked to promote cooperation, mutual solidarity and religious awareness in the Muslim world” of which the two most important were the Muslim World League (MWL) and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) (Hegghammer, 2010: 18). The populist manifestation of pan-Islamism was fostered by the activities of such international Islamic organisations and was characterised by “a particularly alarmist discourse about external threats to the umma and the need for grassroots inter-Muslim assistance” (Hegghammer, 2010: 18). In the course of time, the issue was securitised and the threat to Islam and the Muslims – most notably by Christians – and the need to protect them became a prominent feature of their rhetoric and propaganda. Such populist pan-Islamists received funding from Saudi Arabia, engaged in different regions in the world and only cooperated with local governments where convenient (Hegghammer, 2010: 18). The Maldives had joined the OIC already in 1976 (Ministry of Economic Development) but became an active member only during Gayoom’s regime in the 1980s (Amir, 2011). In the 1990s, the first MWL office opened in the capital Male, but remained largely inactive, until a new permanent office was opened in 2013 (Minivan News, 2013). But at the subnational level, religious teachers, preachers and Islamic NGOs with such populist pan-Islamic background have come to and established themselves in the Maldives in the course of the 1990s. They are fundamentalist, i.e. demand a literal reading of the Quran, Salafi, i.e. seek to live like in the times of the prophet Mohammad, and, given they receive funds from Saudi Arabia, promote Wahhabism. During the late 1990s and particularly in the consequence of the tsunami in 2004, which was followed by a flood of Islamic relief organisations with own political agendas, Islamic transnational organisations established themselves and took guidance over entire islands.<sup>8</sup> As a consequence, many new “solely right and true” interpretations of Islam emerged.

### **Lacking State Responsiveness and Escalation**

When Gayoom took power in 1978, his religious credentials were hardly met, and few would contend his views on a religiously educated basis. While his views and interpretations trespassed the Maldives’ religious-cultural traditions and went against the in fact existing religious diversity (including non-believers and cultural practitioners), due to his religious credentials he was able to underpin the legitimacy of his decisions and authority. This, however, changed particularly in the course of the 1990s, when Maldivian students, educated abroad, returned home and foreign graduates came to the Maldives to do Islamic “service”. Gayoom’s – and with him the Maldives’ political system’s – legitimacy was challenged. Even more, due to Gayoom’s merger of religious and secular authority, each challenge to his religious views equalled a challenge to his secular power.

The contention of religion significantly increased throughout the late 1990s. To secure his position, Gayoom, who also controlled security forces and judiciary through established networks of

---

<sup>8</sup> Based on a conversation with a Maldivian representative in March 2020.





supporters (Naseem, 2015: 101), employed substantial force to repress religious as well as political dissent. Through the arrival of new ideals of state and society accompanying the pan-Islamist fundamentalists, simultaneously rising demands for freedom and democracy, and the overall growing rejection of Gayoom's style of governance, political and religious dissent increasingly became inseparable. The building pressure from below was met with state repression rather than responsiveness. According to a report by local journalists, men were detained for publicly following other forms of Islam (ACFHR, 2005). Many claim to have been tortured. The torture, according to an alleged victim included, among others, forcible shaving, while "using chilli sauce as shaving cream" (Van Es, 2008).

Contention crystallised on the female covering and the burqa. As mentioned above, the burqa and full coverage were not required in Maldivian Islamic practice. In the fundamentalist Salafi and Wahhabi circles, however, the covering of the whole female body was claimed to be mandatory. Increasingly, women across several islands, including in the capital Male, began to wear the burqa. This has been – and is – a public contestation of both, the state's religious authority as well as the traditional culturally-grounded Maldivian Islam. In response to this challenge to authority, the government legally prohibited wearing a burqa. The government justified this decision with security reasons. The alleged secular cause to prohibit the implementation of a – according to their view – religious rule, instilled anger in such fundamentalist groups. While men, who publicly rejected Gayoom's form of Islam, were frequently arrested in the course of the 1990s and early 2000s the wearing of the burqa has continued and in some places increased significantly. For men expressing their dissent, yet, punishment was harsh.

To serve the aims elaborated by the fundamentalists' cognitive models new and alternative means of action were sought. One alternative to the engagement within the Maldives was provided by the transnational Islamist networks with which Maldivian youth had come in touch through the madrasa education programmes abroad. These networks gained publicity in 2002 when Maldivian Ibrahim Fauzee was arrested in Karachi for his links to al Qaeda and his subsequent imprisonment in Guantanamo Bay (Hafeez, 2008: 253).

Within the Maldives, tourism moved to the centre of contention between the three streams, next to females' freedoms, dresses and role within the society. The Maldives' lack of natural resources or industries, and dried fish as the only export good at the time, demanded a strategy to generate income for the Maldivian population. With the rising tourism industry in the 1970s, the Maldivian government had begun to allow the construction of resorts (Amir, 2011). President Gayoom, however, significantly elaborated this economic sector, turning the Maldives into a luxury holiday destination, and thus lifting the country from its status as a least developed country. The tourists, who mostly came from Western countries, yet, posed a challenge to Gayoom's ideal of the Islamic society. While tourism would not flourish without the ability to pursue a Western lifestyle, including drinking alcohol and the mixing of sexes, this lifestyle contradicted the pious Islamic society Gayoom sought to build. Gayoom thus created a wall of separation between Maldivians and the tourists; mainly foreigners would work in the resorts, things that were allowed in the resorts – such as alcohol – were prohibited on the inhabited islands, and tourists were prevented from meeting the local population. As a consequence of this separation, the income generated by tourism did not benefit wider parts of the society, and the discrepancy between the liberties in the resorts and the regulations in the inhabited islands was frowned upon. Even more, the migration of foreign workers to the Maldives, mainly from Bangladesh but also from non-Muslim countries like the Philippines, raised the fear of growing foreign influence. While the Maldivian constitution protects Sunni Islam by

allowing only the naturalisation of Sunni Muslims, forbidding the practice of all other religions and even prohibiting the import of other religions' books, symbols or idols, fear of losing Islam was promoted by fundamentalist agents. The fear of losing Islam furthered the escalation as it allowed for the application and acceptance of costlier means.

In 1999, for example, protests against the millennium celebrations escalated into attacks against the regime when protesters claimed these celebrations to be a plot to spread Christianity (Hafeez, 2008: 253). Despite the expectable violent repression of dissent by the state, people nevertheless were ready to openly contest the government's decision.

### **Changing Opportunity Structure and Escalation**

The state's suppression of religious and political dissent had increased in the course of Gayoom's presidency since 1978. In 2003, however, the political conditions within the Maldives changed, when within diverse spectrums of the Maldivian society the rejection of Gayoom's government mounted. Calls for more democratic liberties as well as for a more strictly practised "true" Islam alike became louder. While the political aims of the diverse contenders of Gayoom's rule were quite different and to a large extent even incompatible, the contenders shared the rejection of Gayoom's treatment of dissenters.

While some continued to seek opportunities to fight for their religious-political aims abroad, as the documented travel attempts of Maldivian youth to training camps in Pakistan (Amir, 2011) suggest, others increasingly expressed their support for religiously sanctioned political aims within the country. As such, for example, Osama bin Laden posters praising the al Qaeda leader were hung in Edjafushi Island (Hafeez, 2008: 253). In these circles of support for al Qaeda and *jihad* violence increasingly became considered as legitimate tool of politics, even within the Maldives.

While supporters of the traditional Maldivian culturally-grounded Islam sought political reform and non-violent protest, fundamentalist groups, in turn, sought the uncompromisable transformation of the country into an Islamic state according to their ideals. Although these two streams' political aims and ideals could hardly be further apart, they nevertheless shared the rejection of Gayoom's political and religious aims and views.

In the context of the growing challenge to his authority from the other streams, Gayoom revoked the narrative of a threat to Islam in the Maldives. In the collective 'national' identity, Islam was the central factor unifying the Maldivian population. To fan fears, Gayoom drew on an old folk tale of a sea demon, Rannamaari (Van Es, 2008). The folk tale<sup>9</sup> stems from a pre-Islamic myth and was later supplemented with Islamic elements. The Islamised version claims that reading from the Quran had once defeated a demon, which frequently ascended from the ocean to accept human sacrifice from the infidel population. This story was transformed to fit Gayoom's needs to create both a threat and an enemy. The new Rannamaari story went that the Portuguese attempted to force pious Maldivians to drink alcohol. "Three brothers from the island of Utheemu – Mohamed, Ali and Hasan Thakurufaanu – then intervened heroically, in a tale of cunning and tact, to overthrow the infidel Portuguese, and became heroes of Islam who saved our pious nation from the alcoholic, Christian

---

<sup>9</sup> The story goes as follows: a demon coming from the ocean demanded virgin girls. Once a month the demon came to the island and a virgin girl was sacrificed for him by the "infidel" population. She was brought to the idol temple to stay there for the night and was to be found "dishonoured" and dead at the next morning. A saint from the Maghreb became witness of this ritual and by reciting the Quran at night, defeated the demon. As a consequence, the king and his people embraced Islam, broke the idols and destroyed the temples and sent messages to the other islands to convert to Islam, too (Romero-Frias, 2012: 74-75).



invaders” (The Daily Panic, 2013). The threat to the Maldives and Islam was mainly kept vague, and the threat to traditional moderate Maldivian Islam (by fundamentalists) not mentioned. Only the narrative of a Christian threat was continuously revoked. Yet, such claims of threat changed the political discourse in the Maldives to such an extent that all contenders of power were judged by their religious credentials rather than the quality of their arguments.

Subsequent to the death of a political prisoner in custody in September 2003, anti-government demonstrations were accompanied by civil unrest in the capital Male (ACFHR, 2005: 4-6). The state’s response was the imposition of the state of emergency. But national and international pressure had built up to such a degree that Gayoom was forced into political reform (Naseem, 2015: 100). A new constitution, which allowed for political parties, was prepared and two years later, the formation of political parties was permitted. Major contenders of Gayoom’s rule were the Maldivian Democratic Party and from the rather fundamentalist stream the Adalaath Party<sup>10</sup>. In the course of increasing contention, particularly the MDP was turned into the “threat” to Islam. The political contention was drawn into the question of the security of Islam, which required all political agents to prove their religious credentials and political plans to find a legitimisation by Islam. Political agents who sought a separation of political and religious authority, the implementation of democratic principles and human rights, were sidelined and defamed by Gayoom and the fundamentalist streams, who both neither respected nor accepted dissent.

The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which had a devastating effect on the Maldivian islands, served as a catalyst for the already emerging societal developments. Particularly the influx of a variety of relief organisations and NGOs from Muslim majoritarian countries, often related to the populist pan-Islamism (Amir, 2011), changed the power balance and capacities of fundamentalist streams in the Maldivian society to their favour.

With the changed opportunities to express diverging (Islamic) views – if not completely freely, than at least less suppressed – on the one hand, and the increasing perception of threat to Islam on the other hand, agents representing the fundamentalist streams in the Maldives gained broader support within the society. In 2006, a group of fundamentalists had established full control over an entire island, Himandhoo, in the Alif Alif Atoll. The state prescribed mosque remained unused and religious service was performed in a newly and illegally built mosque headed by fundamentalists. When the government agents sought to close down the illegally constructed mosque, they met with stiff resistance (Hafeez, 2008: 254). In the course of this contention, a state official was murdered on the island – in a country in which for long murders had been extremely rare (The Diplomat, 2020; Maloney, 1980). The willingness to escalate further was encouraged by strong local and transnational support networks which increased the agents’ capacity on the one hand, and the simultaneous decline in state capacity, on the other hand, which furthermore limited the president’s ability to use the state institutions to easily repress dissent according to his wish.

In 2007, the first Islamist attack took place in the capital Male. It was directed against foreign tourists – who had been made the symbol of the “threat to Islam”. The attacks with a homemade device became to be known as the Sultan Park Bomb Incident and injured twelve tourists (Amir, 2011). The attack had been loaded with symbolism and underlined the attackers’ claims as much as they had pointed towards their political aims. The attack was perpetrated on the 17th day of Ramadan,

---

<sup>10</sup> In 2017, the Adalaath Party posted on their twitter account an own interpretation of the Rannamaari story, in which the conversion to Sunni Islam and the castration of a non-Sunni king by a Sunni Muslim ended the former rule during which, disguised as Rannamaari, he had raped more than 150 girls below 13 years of age. See Adhaalath @adhaalath, 20. Dezember 2017. Last accessed 15 July 2020.

Mohammed's first 'victory' in battle, and was directed against tourists considered as infidels and a threat to Islam in the Maldives. Transnational links were found to Jamia Salafiya Islamia (Faisalabad) which stands in connection with Lashkar-e-Taiba, and to Saudi Arabia (Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadees) and the UK (Jamaat-ul-Muslimeen) (Dharmawardhane, 2015: 65; Hafeez, 2008: 254, 255; 261). Links were also found to local Wahhabi prayer meetings, and to the illegally constructed mosque in Himandhoo. Police were sent to the mosque and suddenly confronted by an "organised mosque militia", a group of fully masked men, wearing red-helmets and holding wooden planks (Amir, 2011: 55). The security forces clashed violently with the Islamists so that the Maldivian National Defence Force (NMDF) had to move in (*ibid.*). In the course of the year, the Islamists, who retained their grip on Himandhoo islands despite police action, themselves suppressed any form of dissents. Death threats were sent to inhabitants of the island in case they did not collaborate, children were prevented from going to the local school due to alleged "impure" influences by foreign teachers as they taught English and subjects beyond Islam, and women now were required to fully veil themselves (Hafeez, 2008: 254).

Himandhoo is just one extreme example of fundamentalists' influence on Maldivian islands (Borri, 2017). The escalation of repertoire, however, becomes increasingly visible in other places as well. Even with Gayoom voted out of office, this trend has not been stopped. International influences and transnational organisations have taken ground in the Maldives – and expanded it. In 2009, for example, Jamiat-ul-Salaf and the Islamic Foundation of Maldives (IFM) were formally established (Amir, 2011: 47). In the same year, too, an al Qaeda propaganda video featured a Maldivian, and another Maldivian's link to the Mumbai attack was uncovered (*ibid.*). Just a year later, nine Maldivians were arrested in North Warzirstan, Pakistan. In 2011, shortly before the then-president Nasheed was forced to resign in the course of protests, which gained in religious overtones over time, Gayoom's and the fundamentalists' streams, represented by different groups and organisations, forced the temporal closure of spas and resorts on the basis of allegedly compromising Islam by furthering prostitution (The Guardian, 2011). Since then, fundamentalists have taken ground. Transnational, fundamentalist and often militant organisation established themselves and receive increasing popular support. In 2014, 200 people protested while carrying the IS flag demanding the full implementation of the sharia and the end of secular rule in the Maldives (Dharmawardhane, 2015: 64). One year later hundreds protested for the IS in Male (The Diplomat, 2019). In 2015, a YouTube video titled "A Message to the Maldives Government" appeared. Therein three masked men with rifles threatened "to kill the Maldivian President Abdulla Yameen and Vice President Mohamed Jameel Ahmed and carry out attacks in the country", to target the economy by attacking tourist resorts, if demands were not met within 30 days (Dharmawardhane, 2015: 64). Although they carried IS flag, the affiliation was not confirmed. Just two years later, however, an Islamic State bomb plot was foiled (The Diplomat, 2019). Finally, in April this year (2020), the first confirmed and 'successful' IS attack in the Maldives was perpetrated in Mahibadhoo island (The Diplomat, 2020).

Dissent from fundamentalist versions of Islam or people claimed to engage in "un-Islamic behaviour" are threatened, hurt, and punished by death at the hands of non-state actors. Assassinations of moderate clerics, political figures, journalists and bloggers took place in 2012, in 2013, in 2014, and in 2017. With that, the fundamentalists in the Maldives seek to change their opponents' behaviour and threaten them into compliance. They have escalated to violence and are willing to prevail.



## Conclusion

This paper sought to find an answer to the question of the relation between the repression of religious dissent under the Gayoom regime and the expansion and rise of violent Islamism in the Maldives. The paper hypothesised that in the context of the contention of the Islamic identity in the Maldives, Gayoom failed to be responsive to diverging interpretations and therewith furthered an escalation process.

It was found that Gayoom's merger of religious and secular authority, the exclusive linking of Muslim and Maldivian identity, and the violent repression of religious dissent have set the stage for violent protest against the Maldivian state and regime. Yet, the repression of dissent alone did not lead to the increase of Islamist violence in the Maldives. The expansion of Islamic education programmes in Muslim majoritarian states and the increased influx of populist pan-Islamic organisations in the course of Gayoom's foreign policy as well as following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami promoted a transnational Islamic identity, "purified" from local traditions and directed towards the creation of an Islamic state and society based on the literal interpretation of Islamic teachings. The global securitisation of pan-Islamism had resonated well with Gayoom's claim of "Islam under threat". The violence directed against foreigners as well as "dissenters" within their own community, as the case of Himandhoo island shows, as much as the support of Islamist organisations abroad were not the result of escalated contention with the state, but the ruthless pursuit of religious-political aims built on certain transnational and fundamentalist cognitive models.

With a changing opportunity structure between 2002 and 2008, including political liberalisation and reform, the Islamisation of the political discourse and the increased influx of populist pan-Islamic organisations, Islamists were incentivised and enabled to pursue their political aims by violent means. The "purification" of Islam from its local cultural traditions has furthered the rise of violent Islamism in the Maldives and Maldivians' participation in foreign conflicts as foreign fighters. Gayoom's repression of dissent has furthered the spread of fundamentalist interpretations in several regards. While his suppression of dissent, thus, has provided a significant part of the agents' opportunity structure enabling an escalation process, the use of violence as a political tool is not solely grounded therein.

## References

- Amir, H. (2011). *Islamism and Radicalism in the Maldives*. Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School.
- Asian Centre for Human Rights (ACFHR) (eds.) (2005). *Maldives: The Dark Side of Life*. New Delhi: Asian Centre for Human Rights.
- Bates, R. H., ed. 1998. *Analytic narratives*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Borri, F. (2017). In Himandhoo Where Islam is Not a Religion, it's Politics. (<https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2017/10/12/maldives-in-himandhoo-where-islam-is-not-a-religion-its-politics/3908351>). Last accessed 15 July 2020.
- Dawson, A., Rashid, A., Shuib, R., Wickramage, K., Budiharsana, M., Martua Hidayana, I. and Marranci, G. (2020). "Addressing female genital mutilation in the Asia Pacific: the neglected sustainable development target", *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 44 (1): 8-10.
- Dharmawardhane, I. (2015). *Maldives. Counter Terrorist Trends and Analysis*, 8 (1) (December 2015 –January 2016): 63-69.
- Elliott, F. (2013). "Raped Girl, 15, Sentenced to 100 Lashes for Premarital Sex in Maldives", *The Times*, 28 February 2013.
- Hafeez, M. (2008). *Growing Islamic Militancy in Maldives*. *Strategic Studies*, 28 (1) (Spring 2008): 251-256.
- Haider, Z. (2017). "Locating the Loopholes of South-South Cooperation in South Asia: Can SAARC Deter Hostilities and Promote Cooperation?", *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 40 (3): 35-56.

- Hegghammer, T. (2010). *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kumar, A. (2016). *Multi-party Democracy in the Maldives and the Emerging Security Environment in the Indian Ocean Region*. New Delhi: Pentagon Press.
- Maldives Independent. (2017). "Maldives blogger killed for 'mocking Islam', say police", 10 August 2017. (<https://maldivesindependent.com/crime-2/maldives-blogger-killed-for-mocking-islam-say-police-131974>).
- Malik, J. M. (2001). "South Asia in China's Foreign Relations", *Pacifica Review: Peace, Security & Global Change*, 13 (1): 73-90.
- Maloney, C. (1980). *People of the Maldives Islands*. Bombay et al.: Orient Longman.
- Ministry of Economic Development, Republic of Maldives. See (<http://www.trade.gov.mv/page/oic>). Last accessed 07 May 2020.
- Minivan News. (2013). Saudi Arabia's Muslim World League opens office in Maldives Islamic Ministry. 1 July 2013. <https://minivannewsarchive.com/news-in-brief/saudi-arabian-muslim-world-league-opens-office-in-maldives-60583>. Last accessed 31 July 2020.
- Naseem, A. (2015). The Honeymoon Is Over: Maldives as a Growing Security Threat in the Indian Ocean. *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 26, 99-119.
- Phadnis, U., Luithui, E. (1981). The Maldives Enter World Politics. *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 8 (3): 166-179.
- Romero-Frias, R. (2012). *Folk Tales of the Maldives*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- The Daily Panic. (2013). (<https://thedailypanic.com/2013/11/maldivian-history-a-mockery-of-past-and-present/>). 8 November 2013. Last accessed 15 July 2020.
- The Diplomat. (2019). Violent Extremism in the Maldives: The Saudi Factor. 24 December 2019.
- The Diplomat. (2020). Islamic State Terror in the Maldives as COVID-19 Arrives. 18 April 2020.
- Tilly, C. (2006). *The Politics of Collective Violence*. Cambridge [u.a.]: Cambridge University Press.
- Tilly, C.; Tarrow, S. (2007). *Contentious Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Van Es, M. (2008). Gayoom's Abuse of Faith. *Himalmag*. (<https://www.himalmag.com/gayooms-abuse-of-faith/>). Last accessed 15 July 2020.
- Waha, L. (2018). *Religion and State-Formation in Transitional Societies*. Baden-Baden: Nomos.
- Zartman, W. (2008). *Negotiation and Conflict Management: Essays on Theory and Practice*. Oxon: Routledge.

