

Report Part Title: MALDIVES

Report Title: REAL LIVES, REAL STORIES

Report Subtitle: THE POWER OF INFORMATION IN ASIA PACIFIC

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Assisting the state to adopt a strong Right to Information Act was a first step. The tougher challenge is changing institutional cultures and mindsets of public servants who subscribe to a decades-old and strongly entrenched culture of secrecy.

Aiman Rasheed

Executive Director of Transparency Maldives



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MALDIVES

Holding public officials accountable

Fathimath* is a governance and human rights activist working in the Maldivian capital, Malé. She has been a strong advocate for the effective implementation of the Maldives' Right to Information Act since it was passed in 2014. Fathimath makes frequent requests under the law to hold public officials accountable. However, in a country with a long history of government secrecy and a reluctance to proactively publicise information, the pushback to Fathimath's work has been strong, and her progress slow.

In July 2015, Fathimath's colleague, Hussein*, requested information from the Auditor General's office on which Maldivian cabinet ministers and presidents had declared their assets between 2009 and 2015.

However, despite numerous personal visits to the Auditor General's office, Hussein's attempts to access this information – which should have been public – were not successful. The office kept insisting on additional documents, even though his application was legally complete, and rejected further requests by citing the confidentiality of internal procedures.

It is common in the Maldives for officials to use time as a means to discourage people from seeking information. Delays in responding to their claims often discourage activists who work on multiple fronts and lack time to spend weeks on a single issue.

But Hussein and Fathimath were not willing to give up.

In autumn 2018, Fathimath twice resubmitted the right to information application to the Auditor General's office. This time it was rejected first for breaking the office's internal policies and then because officials

claimed that the information was private and third party, and therefore exempted under the Right to Information Act.

Fathimath and Hussein achieved long-awaited success after they sent a complaint to the Information Commissioner's Office, based on sound legal arguments. In January 2019, the Auditor General's Office finally published the list of presidents and cabinet ministers who had submitted their asset declarations since 2008. Concurrent advocacy efforts on asset declarations by Transparency Maldives over the previous ten years resulted in the president's office suddenly making the asset records of presidents and cabinet ministers public. A month later, the ruling party also decided to publicise the assets of all those running in parliamentary elections. This was an incredible leap forward for transparency in Maldivian politics and shows that right to information requests can lead to systemic change.

Activists in the Maldives still have a long way to go. The country urgently needs an organised system for declaring assets, a way of keeping track of officials' overseas assets and a robust legal framework for holding them accountable. But thanks to Fathimath and Hussein, the way has been paved for greater political integrity.

*Names have been changed.