



Permanent Mission of the Republic of Maldives
to the United Nations Office at Geneva

Statement by

**Her Excellency Ms Dunya Maumoon
Minister of Foreign Affairs
of the
Republic of Maldives**

**at the
22nd Session of the Working Group on the
Universal Periodic Review,
United Nations Human Rights Council**

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Bismillah Ab-rah'man Ab-raheem

Mr President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,
Assalamu alaikum wa rahmathullani wa barakatuh, Good afternoon:

1. This year, the Maldives marks fifty years of independence. Fifty years as a sovereign country, as a Member of the United Nations: fifty years as a responsible global citizen, committed to fulfilling its international obligations.
2. Maldivians are proud of the progress we have achieved: we graduated from the United Nations List of Least Developed Countries in 2011, only the third country to do so since 1971. We are a world-renowned luxury tourist destination, and a leader in sustainable fisheries. We are a vocal advocate, and a leader of the small island developing states: a strong voice on the adverse impacts of climate change. We were the smallest country to get elected to this esteemed Council, and we take great pride in the contributions we continue to make here, towards the promotion and protection of human rights.
3. That sense of pride and responsibility has been a defining characteristic of our people. It is that sense that guides Maldivians to craft our own story of progress: a story set on our white sandy beaches and azure blue waters, a story of resilience; one, we can proudly call, the "Maldivian Story".
4. While we continue to invest in our own future, our own brand, we haven't shied away from engagement. A significant part of the Maldivian story is our constructive partnerships with international agencies and foreign governments that are serious in supporting us in making positive changes. We recognise the value of learning from each other. We follow and respect international law and norms. We appreciate the positive contributions that our friends have helped to make. That is why we are here.
5. It has been four years since the Maldives last came to this Working Group, with our first report under the Universal Periodic Review. Much has changed since then. What has not changed under the administration of President Abdullah Yameen Abdul Gayoom, is our unwavering belief in the UPR mechanism: this remarkable process, where the human rights of all countries, regardless of size, might or plight, are assessed and measured on an equal footing, on an equal basis.
6. My delegation and I are pleased to join you today, at the Human Rights Council, to present our follow-up report. In preparing for our review, we have followed a policy of inclusivity. The UPR Standing Committee, led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the support of the Attorney General's Office, and with all relevant stakeholders, including the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives and civil society organisations, was convened in preparation for the second cycle, as we did in our first review. The standing committee was instrumental in the implementation of the recommendations, and the review of our achievements and remaining challenges.



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7. Before I begin, please allow me to introduce my delegation:
 1. Uza Aishath Bisam, Legal Affairs Secretary to the President,
 2. Dr Ali Naseer Mohamed, the Foreign Secretary,
 3. Uz Ismail Wisham, Assistant Attorney General,
 4. Ms Geela Ali, Chargé d' affaires, a.i., Permanent Mission of Maldives, Geneva,
 5. Ms Rishfa Rasheed, Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Maldives, Geneva,
 6. Ms Mariyam Midhfa Naeem, Counsellor, Permanent Mission of Maldives, New York
 7. Ms Shiuneen Rasheed, First Secretary, Permanent Mission of Maldives, Geneva.

Mr President:

8. Our democratisation story began in 1932 with the first written constitution and the introduction of universal adult suffrage. Throughout the decades Maldives achieved significant socio-economic progress: literacy rates and life expectancy improved dramatically, and the economy expanded exponentially. From a little-known, poor, and under-developed country, the Maldives is now a well-known, successful, middle-income country.
9. The story with significant revisions was recast with the introduction of the Reform Agenda in June 2004. The Reform Agenda, proposed by the then President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, that culminated in the adoption of a new Constitution in 2008, set the country on a path of change that was unprecedented in the country's history.
10. The changes introduced through the reform agenda, represented a paradigm shift in Maldivian society: political parties started functioning; oversight institutions, including the Human Rights Commission, the Anti-Corruption Commission, the Auditor General's Office, and an independent Elections Commission, were established; the new constitution provided for a complete separation of powers between the executive, legislative, and the judicial branches of the State.
11. I would like to highlight for example, the freedom of expression guaranteed in the new Constitution. The Maldives has one of the most liberal interpretations of freedom of expression. All systemic restrictions on freedom of expression and media have been abolished. Safety of journalists is guaranteed. Online newspapers are free to operate and continue to do so with much support. The Media Council and the Broadcasting Commissions, both independent bodies, are tasked with protecting the freedom for media in the country. The Government is also moving to establish Public Service Media, to ensure public information and public awareness on all matters of importance. The challenge to the Government now is to balance this broad freedom of expression with the guarantee of individual liberty.
12. The fundamental rights including freedom of expression, freedom of media, freedom from torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and forced labour, that are guaranteed in the Constitution of 2008, cannot be infringed, even in the event of a state of



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emergency. In short, the Constitution provides for a governance system that recognises the primacy of individual liberty over the conventional notion of political order in the society.

13. Parallel to the domestic reform, the Maldives also pursued an activist policy of promoting its international human rights obligations. Since 2005, the Maldives has joined seven out of the nine core human rights conventions, and five optional protocols. We have ratified the Rome Statute of International Criminal Court, and the eight fundamental ILO Conventions. We have issued a standing invitation to all UN Special Procedures since 2005, and to date hosted six visits of the Rapporteurs.

Distinguished Delegates:

14. The Maldives has been a Muslim country for the last 800 years. The social framework, historic and traditional values have evolved over the decades, to be intimately linked to Islamic practises. And thus, Islamic values are part of our national identity and national heritage. And therefore, it follows that Islam forms the basis of our constitution, and all our laws. Calls to introduce values and practises that are contrary to the values of Islam, such as non-traditional forms of families and LGBT, will not be entertained by the people of Maldives. We assure you, we continue to work closely with all relevant stakeholders, including religious leaders, to promote the true Islamic values of tolerance and respect in our society. And while we continue to allow non-Maldivians to practise their own faith in private: for Maldivians, this basic belief in Islam as an integral part of our Maldivian identity, I assure you, will not change.

Mr President:

15. The initial review of the Maldives took place in 2010. Since then, distinguished delegates, the Maldives has overcome some key challenges, and achieved significant progress in realising the recommendations of this Group, as well as improving the human rights situation in the country.
16. President Yameen was elected to office in November 2013, on a platform of “people empowerment” through economic growth and employment creation. The President’s economic agenda is one that not only protects the rights of the individual, but also most importantly, enables the individual to unleash the power of human creativity and, in turn, increase the welfare of the individual and the society. This is what the President’s national human rights policy aims to achieve. The human rights policy is guided by the belief, that although they provide the basic framework, human rights are not just about international instruments or pieces of law. Human rights is also about belief; belief that needs to be carefully cultivated and nurtured; belief that needs space and time to grow organically, and become valued and cherished traditions in the societies concerned.
17. One important strategy that the Government has adopted to cultivate that belief in Maldivian society is civic education at schools, to enable the future generations to continue the Maldivian Story of respect and tolerance. The new curriculum, which offers civic education as a component,



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is an integral part of continuing the successful story of the Education sector. In order to ensure equal access to all children, to the fundamental right of education, the Maldives offers free education up to higher secondary level, free textbooks and stationery, and free local and international exams.

18. Similarly, in health care, we have made great strides in our efforts to provide the highest attainable standard of health. Maldives has introduced universal health insurance across the country. This has enabled access to health care for people of all socio-economic backgrounds. The Maldives' maternal mortality rates of 13 per 100,000 live births, and infant mortality rates of 9 per 1000 live births, are on par with developed countries and well above the global average. Vaccine preventable diseases such as neonatal tetanus, whooping cough, polio, and diphtheria are non-existent. Malaria has been successfully controlled for decades, and we continue to maintain low prevalence of HIV/AIDS. There is sustained investment in improving the quality of access and delivery of health services.
19. Notable progress has also been made in providing adequate, affordable, and safe housing for all in the country: a true challenge for a country with such limited land, and such dispersed population. Successive governments have adopted social housing schemes as the best way to provide affordable housing to all. To date, the Government has built over two thousand six hundred housing units, that has met the housing needs of over seventeen thousand people.
20. It is this continuous emphasis on the realisation of the basic economic and social rights of our people that has improved, and sustained the high levels of human development in the country. It is this continuous commitment that has made the Maldives the only MDG+ country in South Asia, having achieved five and being on track for the rest, ahead of the deadline this year. It is this continuous commitment that puts our human development above global average.

Mr President:

21. A key part of President Yameen's "people-empowerment" policy is investing in the youth. The Government has prioritised skills development and job creation for the youth. Over the last seventeen months, more than seven thousand jobs have been created, and several skills development programmes have been launched. We believe that through these instruments, and through empowering our youth, we would be able address the growing problem of drug abuse and gang-violence. The enactment of the *Drug Act* and the *Gang Violence Act*, provide the legal framework in dealing with the phenomenon. A separate court has been established under the *Drug Act*, to hear drug related cases; there is a conscious shift in policy towards rehabilitation and re-introduction of addicts into society, with Drug Rehabilitation Centres across the country. The Government has criminalised gang violence and organised crime, and moved rapidly to correct the infringement of human rights violations through gang activities.
22. The country is also not immune to the global rise in religious radicalism. The Maldives has always maintained a policy of moderation and openness. We have rejected all forms of extremism



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and introversion. We have rejected radical interpretations of Islam. We have continuously and unequivocally denounced and condemned terrorist activities in the name of Islam. And I am pleased to announce here that the Government has drafted an entirely new *Counter-Terrorism and Prevention Bill*, that will make it a serious criminal offense for Maldivians to take part in any kind of armed activities overseas, except where the military or police officials operate under an authorised formal arrangement. This Bill, that is consistent with United Nations Security Council Resolution twenty-one seventy-eight, will be submitted to the Parliament soon. When enacted, it will provide a robust legal framework for taking stronger measures against those individuals who travel to fight in terrorist warfare on foreign soil.

23. At home, the Government is currently implementing a strategy aimed at increasing awareness about the value of moderation, tolerance, and the peaceful nature of Islam, with the help of international scholars, renowned for their moderate religious teachings. The Government is also targeting other practises associated with radicalism, including the instances of limited under-age marriage, forced marriage, non-vaccination of infants, and deprivation of school enrolment of girls and children.

Mr President:

24. Promoting and protecting the rights of vulnerable groups have been among the most important objectives of the Government's human rights policy. And I am pleased to announce that we have made significant progress in this regard.
25. The *Domestic Violence Prevention Act*, the *Prevention of Sexual Harassment and Abuse Act*, and *Sexual Offences Act* have strengthened the legal framework to protect women, children, and migrants from violence and sexual abuse. The *Gender Equality Bill*, which is currently in its final stages, once passed, will cement our national standards on gender equality, and confirm that our policies and legal framework are consistent with the *Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*.
26. The *Disability Act* boosted the protection and rights afforded to persons with disabilities. Now, persons with disabilities have access to financial assistance, there are regulations on minimum standards and identification of persons with disabilities, and room for affirmative action including access to gainful employment.
27. More recently the *Anti-Trafficking Act* was a milestone in combating trafficking in the country, especially affording protection to the large number of migrant workers in the country from exploitation. The National Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Persons for 2015-2019 has been finalised. And today, we are pleased to announce that the Parliament has on 27 April 2015, approved Maldives accession to the *Optional Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children*. This will undoubtedly boost the protection framework offered to migrant workers in the country.



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28. There has been no question about the role and the participation of women in politics and decision-making in the Maldives. Women in the Maldives have always been among the most emancipated in the region, without the systemic barriers of race, class, and caste that are prevalent in some parts of the world. Maldivian women have had the constitutional right to vote since 1932, which I dare say, is way ahead of some developed countries. Maldivian women have always, without question, had equal pay, and paid maternity leave. Women have the same access to education and employment opportunities, with girls doing even much better than boys in higher education.
29. Despite the apparent parity, challenges remain. This is why the Government is now concentrating on making women economically empowered by introducing targeted micro-loans, single mother benefits, home-based employment opportunities, and day-care facilities. It is our wish and our hope to see women, one half of our population, become more productive citizens of the country, in whatever capacity they choose for themselves, free from coercion or social pressure. It is only when the experiences of us Maldivian women, are fully reflected, that the Maldivian Story can be complete.

Mr President,

30. The achievements that I just highlighted are unprecedented by any measure. Yet, my Government believes that the progress that the Maldives has made in the areas of governance, and social and economic development can be fully realized and sustained over time by creating the necessary enabling institutions.

Distinguished delegates:

31. You would be fully aware of the current political tensions in the Maldives. Tensions arise because the speed of institutional development has been slow; institutional shape and structure envisioned in the Constitution is still not complete; and tensions arise because the gap between the socio-economic growth and the emergence of strong political institutions is still not entirely filled. It is for this reason that President Yameen has formulated a comprehensive strategy for democracy consolidation. The President's strategy aims at transforming the Maldivian society into a political community that is able to forge an overwhelming consensus on the acceptability of the political system; where there is consensus on the shape and definition of public and national interests; and where there is consensus among the political leaders on the need for competent, strong, and adaptable political institutions; and effective bureaucracy, de-politicised civil society organisations, and well-organized political parties, that respect the prevailing laws, procedures, and social norms.
32. A significant component of the democracy consolidation strategy is the justice sector strategic action plan. This plan recognises the judiciary's continuous efforts to improve access to, the effectiveness, and the functioning of the system. The action plan therefore, builds on the



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significant progress we have made over the last few years, and sets new benchmarks for increasing efficiency, effectiveness, and above all, increasing public confidence in the sector.

33. The new *Penal Code* that President Yameen ratified in April last year, and that will come into force in July this year, will play a pivotal role in achieving these targets. This Penal Code is expected to contribute towards strengthening and modernising our criminal justice system. A *Legal Profession Bill*, to implement the United Nations Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers, is being drafted. And several key pieces of legislations such as the *Anti-Torture Act*, the *Prison and Parole Act*, the *Anti-Money Laundering Act* and *Anti Terrorism Financing Act*, *Extradition*, *Mutual Legal Assistance on Criminal Matters and Transfer of Prisoners*, have also been passed, that will enhance the effectiveness in the delivery of services in the justice sector.
34. The Maldives is continuously working with international human rights mechanisms aimed at strengthening the judiciary, and in training and building the capacity of judges in the country. We have never claimed that our institutions are perfect. It is our hope that these measures will encourage the growth of the judiciary, into a strong, robust arm of the State, which enjoys strong public support.

Mr President

35. The achievements that a country such as the Maldives has achieved, within only a span of ten years, is by any measure, remarkable. The fast pace of change also brings with it new challenges, that the Government and the society are not entirely accustomed to deal with.
36. Among the most daunting challenges is the incredibly high economic cost of bringing the systemic changes envisioned in the 2008 Constitution. Although categorised as a middle-income country by the UN, the total government revenue is less than 1.5 billion US dollars a year. That figure is dwarfed by the astonishing “cost of rights” envisioned in the Constitution. Providing basic public services, explicitly listed in the Constitution, such as education, health, safe drinking water, sanitation, communication, electricity, and healthy and ecologically balanced environment, to a population of 340,000 dispersed across 188 islands, that are spread over an area of 90,000 square kilometres in the Indian Ocean, is incredibly expensive. These services, together with urgent defensive measures against the effects of climate change, such as shore protection of the islands, take away more than three quarters of government revenue.
37. Another significant challenge that hinders our progress is the speed of the change. In less than a generation, the Maldives has reinvented the governance system, completely replacing the conventional sources of political authority and legitimacy, and replacing that with new concepts less familiar to the society. These are changes that countries generally benchmarked for human rights and democratic systems, took centuries to build. The swiftness of the change, has not given adequate time for the country, to develop a pool of human resources with sufficient capacity, to transform the changes into norms in the society.



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38. These challenges have been further heightened by the fact that the Maldivian democracy is “growing up” under the international spotlight. Precisely because the Maldives is such a beautiful, and yet delicate, paradise on earth, almost everyone seems to have something to say, about what they think is good for the Maldives. As a result, every-baby-step that the Maldives takes is fiercely debated all over the world, including in the corridors of power in key capitals.
39. We are thankful for that. We appreciate the well-meaning and well-intended commentaries, and valuable advise. It is easy to criticise, but we urge you to not only do that: invest in us, to bring about meaningful change.
40. There is conclusive evidence to show that meaningful democratic change cannot be imposed, but can only be sustained if the change is locally owned, locally driven, and locally shaped. At the same time, it is also important to let democratic institutions have the space and the independence to grow organically: and develop their own traditions and make a better fit for our own society and the demands of our own people. It is only then, that we, Maldivians, can write our own story: a story of building resilience through challenges, a story that will make Maldivians proud.

*Assalamu alaikum
Shukuriyya*

