

NGOs consolidating democracy

By **AIMAN RASHEED**

TRANSPARENCY MALDIVES



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is a young civil society leader in Maldives. During his high school years he started a secret student newspaper critical of the student administration and authorities. This was at a time when dissent was not tolerated, and offenders were dealt with harsh punishments. The Maldives' reform movement was gaining momentum when Aiman and a group of his friends formed a youth organisation to fight for the values they believed in. Aiman and his friends were instrumental in creating the environment for the downfall of the Gayoom regime during the first ever multi-party Presidential Elections in October 2008.

Mohamed Nasheed, Maldives' first new president in 30 years, was sworn in on 11th November 2008. This marked not just a beginning of a new administration, rather it heralded a new view on what constituted governance.

A new constitution came into effect on 7th August 2008, bringing with it an overhaul of the system of governance in Maldives. Popularly known as the reform constitution, it guaranteed a complete separation of powers, establishment of oversight mechanisms in the form of independent institutions and incorporated a comprehensive Bill of Rights. These changes are much needed positive steps in Maldives' struggle to join the ranks of democratic nations.

The drastic overhaul to the governance systems has created shockwaves in the socio-political sphere. Existing and new threats such as rising fundamentalist extremism, an economic crisis, the increasing economic disparity between the rich and the poor, and the deepening political divide among others, threaten to tear the country apart. Needless to say, the civil society in Maldives has a key role to play in mitigating the risks and helping consolidate Maldives' infant democracy. This article will explore the conventional role of NGOs, the rise of advocacy NGOs, challenges faced by the civil society and civil society's role in consolidating democracy in Maldives.

According to official data, well over 700 registered NGOs and clubs exist in Maldives. The previous Gayoom regime used NGOs for its political ends, and the citizens involved in the running of the NGOs saw it as a platform to curry favours from the political elite. By and large, this system cemented the public's perception of NGOs as ineffective and corrupt institutions. For a long time the civil society was restricted to organising sports events and small community projects.

The true potential and scope of a strong and active civil society to achieve good governance was not realised until the reform movement gained momentum after 2003. The then opposition helped set up and supported various advocacy NGOs. While NGOs were for the most part limited to operational or service delivery institutions in the past, the rising advocacy NGOs focused on a host of issues ranging from detainee rights to corruption.

In comparison to previous times, the environment for NGOs to flourish is relatively conducive. By law NGOs are now guaranteed seats on statutory committees and

boards such as the Human Rights Committee, the National Advisory Committee for the Elections and the Parole Board. For the first time, an NGO's statement was a crucial deciding factor in a politically sensitive case relating to the Parliamentary Election in May 2009.

Having said that, it is important to note that much more needs to be done by civil society as well as the state in addressing the imminent issues faced by the country. The government needs to do more to support the work of NGOs and engage with NGOs with alternate views. More often than not NGOs find themselves deliberately left in the dark on issues of concern. The state's regulatory function is weak and needs to be strengthened to help sustain credible NGOs and eliminate pseudo-NGOs. Sections of the government are still averse to working with the civil society even when support is extended. In addition, the archaic NGO Act leaves holes in the legal framework pertaining to establishing and operating NGOs.

The Maldivian Democratic Party's government got elected to office on a platform of participation and inclusiveness. For various reasons, a portion of the public are already disillusioned with the administration. It is imperative that the government set up better mechanisms of communication to reach and inform the public. And one of the easiest ways of getting the people's voice on board is via the civil society. It goes without saying that the crux of credibility and legitimacy of any government lies in people participation. That is the role of civil society; connecting the government and the public. Just as the civil society was instrumental in bringing about the fall of the Gayoom regime, the civil society could hasten the demise of this administration or help it achieve its goals. It would be wise for the government to remember that civil society has its roots in the people of the country.

Transparency Maldives is the national chapter of Transparency International, the non-political global civil society organisation working to build a momentum for the anti-corruption movement. Transparency Maldives received formal recognition from the Ministry of Home Affairs in July 2007, and aims to be a constructive force in the Maldives by encouraging discussion on transparency, accountability, and the fight against corruption. Transparency Maldives seeks to engage with stakeholders from all sectors (government, business, politics, civil society, media, among others) to raise awareness of corruption's detrimental effects on development and society. ■