

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

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### **Maldives' police arrest campaigner seeking religious tolerance and allow his attackers impunity**

The authorities in the Maldives should release prisoner of conscience Ismail 'Khilath' Rasheed immediately and unconditionally. The government must provide him with compensation for his unlawful detention and ensure his safety and security.

Ismail 'Khilath' Rasheed organized and took part in what he called a "silent" demonstration in Malé, the capital, on 10 December, calling for religious tolerance in the Maldives. Some 30 other demonstrators took part.

As the "silent" demonstrators were holding their peaceful protest, about 10 men opposing their gathering attacked them. Ismail 'Khilath' Rasheed was hit with stones thrown by attackers and injured. He sustained a skull fracture and was taken to Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital for treatment.

Police arrested him several days later, on 14 December. Police said this was to "question" him about his involvement in the "silent" gathering, as "calling for anything against the constitution is illegal".

Ismail 'Khilath' Rasheed's arrest came after the opposition Adhaalath Party, which advocates Islamic Shari'a, wrote to the police urging them to take action against him for organizing the "silent" protest.

Under the 2008 Maldives constitution, Islam is the only religion that Maldivian nationals can practise. Ismail 'Khilath' Rasheed has said he is a Muslim of Sufi orientation and entitled to exercise his faith in peace and without discrimination.

Orthodox religious groups believe only one religious doctrine, which they consider to be Sunni Islam, is allowed under the constitution. They say Ismail 'Khilath' Rasheed's call for religious tolerance in the Maldives is a challenge to that doctrine and therefore unconstitutional.

The continued detention of Ismail 'Khilath' Rasheed is in breach of international treaties on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which the Maldives is a state party.

Amnesty International is dismayed that instead of defending Ismail 'Khilath' Rasheed, who has peacefully exercised his right to freedom of the expression, the government of Maldives has detained him. Moreover, the government has taken no action to bring to justice those who attacked the "silent" demonstrators, even though there is credible photographic evidence of the attack.

This development is a clear example of the erosion of freedom of expression in the Maldives. This basic human right is not just under attack from some religious groups; it is also violated by the government of the Maldives.

All people in the Maldives should be able to enjoy their right to freedom of expression without being attacked or detained by the police.

### **Background**

Debate on religious freedom has been gathering pace in the Maldives in recent weeks. Orthodox religious groups opposed to freedom of religion have called a demonstration on 23 December to “protect” Islam.

President Nasheed has called for a counter demonstration on 23 December in defence of what he considers to be the prevalent and less restrictive cultural and Islamic values of the country. He said: “We all have been accustomed and have accepted moderate policies for our daily lives. I see that it is time for all those who support our traditional methods and believe that those methods are not wrong, to come out for their defense.”

Amnesty International calls on all parties to respect each other’s right to freedom of expression. The organization urges the police to ensure that peaceful demonstrators are protected against attacks and that no one taking part in such demonstrations is detained, or subjected to any other human rights violation.