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Maldives: Attackers remain at large as blogger is released

A Maldivian blogger who was attacked and detained after organizing a protest calling for religious tolerance has been released after almost four weeks in detention, while his attackers remain at large.

Ismail Khilath Rasheed was assaulted by about 10 men opposing a peaceful demonstration he had organized in the capital, Malé, on 10 December. He sustained a skull fracture after being hit with stones, but was then arrested by police a few days later.

“While the release of Ismail Khilath Rasheed is a welcome development, the fact that his attackers have not been investigated points to a serious failure of the government to end impunity for human rights abuses in the country,” said Abbas Faiz, Amnesty International’s Maldives researcher.

“Instead of defending his right to advocate religious tolerance, the government locked Ismail Khilath Rasheed up and have done nothing to bring his attackers to justice – thereby sending a message to the public that crushing a peaceful demonstration is acceptable,” he said.

The blogger, who is a Sufi Muslim, was released Friday night after an investigation into his involvement in the protest concluded with no charges against him.

Maldives police say Ismail Khilath Rasheed was detained because his call for religious tolerance is “unconstitutional”.

The 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 protest.

Under the 2008 Maldives constitution, Islam is the only religion that Maldivian nationals can practice.

Radical religious groups say only Sunni Islam is allowed under the constitution. In a political campaign against the President, opposition politicians have sided with these groups.

They say Ismail Khilath Rasheed’s call for religious tolerance in the Maldives is a challenge to that doctrine and therefore unconstitutional.

“It is time for the Maldives government to bring to justice all perpetrators of human rights abuses – past and present – including those who attack religious minorities," said Abbas Faiz"

“The first step in this process should be to carry out an independent, impartial and effective investigation of those who used violence against Islamil Khilath Rasheed and other demonstrators on 10 December.”

Human rights in the Maldives have increasingly been held hostage to a political impasse between President Mohamed Nasheed, who claims to advocate the protection of human rights, and the influence of hardline Islamist parties and opposition politicians who are against freedom of religion.