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Maldives: Arrest of 16 journalists threatens freedom of the press

Amnesty International calls on the Maldives authorities to ensure that independent media can operate without unlawful restrictions on their work and that the right to peaceful protest is respected. The arrest of 16 journalists peacefully protesting outside the President's office in Malé on the 3 April 2016 is a dangerous assault on freedom of expression and the media.

Dozens of journalists and other supporters had gathered outside the office of President Abdulla Yameen in a protest before police broke up the demonstration. Police used pepper spray on some of the demonstrators – at least three had to be hospitalised from their injuries as they had been sprayed at close range. In total, 16 journalists were arrested around 11:00 am local time and some of them were later strip searched. All of those arrested were released later on the same evening.

The journalists were arrested under section 532 (Resisting or obstructing law enforcement officer or custodial officer) and section 533 (obstructing administration of law or other government function) of the new Penal Code. If found guilty of these charges, the punishment is either a fine or house arrest for first time offenders.

Among the journalists arrested were Maldives Independent editor Zaheena Rasheed and Sangu TV Managing Director Ibrahim Waheed. The journalists detained in police custody include five from The Maldives Independent, six from Haveeru, two from Sangu TV, two from Raajje TV, and one from Villa TV.

The journalists were peacefully protesting a range of worrying moves by the government that could threaten freedom of expression and independent media in the Maldives. These included: the recent court-ordered closure of the print edition of the local daily Haveeru; a recently introduced Public Defamation Bill journalists say will seriously limit media's ability to report allegations of corruption against state officials; and the police's admission that Maldives Independent journalist Ahmed Rilwan had been abducted almost two years after his initial disappearance.

The arrest of the journalists comes amidst a wider, worrying trend where the space for the right to freedom of expression and media freedom in Maldives is shrinking, especially for criticism of the government and perceived social or religious norms. As Amnesty International stated in a recent briefing *Maldives: Assault on Civil and Political Rights* (23 April 2015),¹ media organizations and journalists publishing news and opinions critical of the authorities continue to be intimidated, harassed and threatened with death and physical harm. In particular, journalists covering demonstrations are at risk of attack. Several journalists told Amnesty International that they have received death threats by Twitter or SMS. Those suspected to be responsible for attacks are rarely held to account.

Amnesty International calls on the Maldives authorities to:

- Fully ensure that the right to freedom of expression is respected, protected and promoted in the country and that media workers can carry out their legitimate work without fear of reprisals.

¹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa29/1501/2015/en/>

- Effectively respect the right to peaceful protest, even when they themselves are the focus of demonstrations. As a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Maldives is required to uphold the right to freedom of expression, media freedom, freedom of association and peaceful assembly.
- Carry out a prompt, thorough and impartial investigation into whether police used excessive force in breaking up the protesters.