



© AI

Jennifer Latheef: Unbowed after imprisonment

The release of prisoner of conscience Jennifer Latheef from house arrest on 16 August marks her latest victory in her campaign for greater democracy and freedom of speech in the Maldives.

The South Asian islands that make up the Maldives are a popular tourist destination, but, as Amnesty International noted in its report *Maldives: Human rights violations in the context of political reforms* (ASA 29/001/2005, February 2005), "the

space for political dissent has been very limited". Some Maldivians who speak out against the Maldivian President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom have been imprisoned and intimidated. Opposition political activist and journalist Jennifer Latheef is one of these people.

In October 2005, Jennifer Latheef was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment after being convicted of "terrorism". Her crime was to have joined in a protest in September 2003 against the killings of four

prisoners by prison guards. Although some acts of violence occurred during the protest, there has been no strong evidence to suggest that she was amongst those responsible. Amnesty International considered her to be a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned for peacefully expressing her right to defend human rights. Though her trial was marked by irregularities, including an arbitrary dismissal of defence witnesses, Jennifer Latheef remained hopeful: "I knew I was innocent, I knew they would never be able to find anything against me, so I wasn't scared of being sentenced", she says. "I didn't really think they would keep me for too long."

Jennifer Latheef's conviction appeared politically motivated, as she is the daughter of Mohammed Latheef, the main leader of the democratic opposition in the Maldives, who currently lives in exile in Sri Lanka. However, before her sentencing, Mohammed Latheef told the authorities holding Jennifer that any attempts to silence him by harassing his daughter would be futile. Jennifer says, "When I was [first] arrested... my father went with me – he gave me a lot of strength, because he's been arrested, in and out of jail... I knew he was not going to stop."

Prior to her sentencing, Jennifer had repeatedly been detained without charge for periods of one to six weeks. During one of these periods of detention in August 2004, Jennifer was blindfolded and subjected to verbal and physical assaults. She recalls, "The verbal abuse frightened me- the things they were describing they would do to me sexually."

She was also badly beaten by the arresting police officers. "We were blindfolded and handcuffed... [the police] hit me on my lower back with their steel boots twice, and that was enough to give me a permanent injury", she says. No one has been brought to justice for these abuses.

Immediately after sentencing, she was taken away in a speedboat to Maafushi Prison on an island south of the capital, Male. Conditions in Maafushi Prison are notoriously harsh. During her detention, Jennifer reported toilets constantly overflowing, unhygienic food, contaminated water supplies and abuse from prison guards. Poor bedding and a failure to provide treatment exacerbated Jennifer's back problems. Eventually she was admitted to hospital, and on a doctor's recommendation, was put under house arrest so she could take bed rest and receive physiotherapy.

On 16 August 2006, Jennifer Latheef was released, after President Gayoom announced that he would pardon her. Initially, she refused to accept the government offer of release on two grounds: firstly, that her release should have been unconditional and not through a pardon, since this would imply that she had committed a recognizably criminal offence – which she had not; and secondly, she insisted that the other four political prisoners convicted at the same trial should also be released. After consulting with friends and other human rights defenders, Jennifer Latheef agreed to accept the offer of release from house arrest. She has since said that she will continue to campaign for the release of other political prisoners, and for the conviction imposed on her by the court to be quashed.

However, as a political opposition activist and journalist, Jennifer Latheef remains at risk of further harassment by the authorities. At the time when she was first arrested in 2003, she had been one of thousands of people who peacefully took to the streets in Malé in September 2003 to protest against the killing of four men in prison, and against other human rights violations

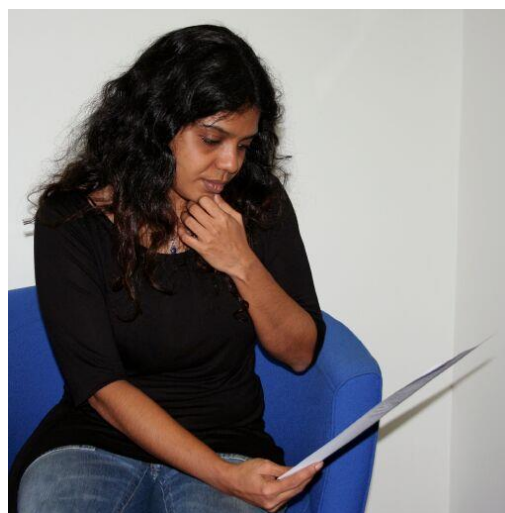
and political repression. A total of 400 protesters were arrested. Jennifer says, "They were voicing a lot of frustration because in the Maldives we haven't had freedom of expression. That was the one time people came out against the brutality... Gayoom has never seen that kind of opposition... the only way [forward] for democratic reform is if people have a way to speak."

Despite the arrests, President Gayoom acknowledged the protestors' legitimate demand for a thorough investigation into the deaths in custody. He also promised to reform the political and judicial system in speeches following the protests. These included the reform of the criminal justice system and the constitution to improve the political and human rights environment in the country.

The government has taken some steps towards implementing these reforms, such as forming a human rights commission, and removing barriers against the registration of political parties. However, it has reacted strongly against those exercising their right freely to engage in peaceful political activity. People like Jennifer Latheef, who oppose the authorities or take part in peaceful political activity in the Maldives, are frequently the targets for arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment. Harassment or intimidation of those who speak out is also common, says Jennifer Latheef: "You can lose your job or sometimes your business, and you are threatened, your family is threatened." Amnesty International has expressed its view that if President Gayoom is genuinely committed to democratic reforms in the Maldives, individuals exercising their right to freedom of assembly and expression must not be harassed or detained for their peaceful political activity.

Jennifer Latheef doubts President Gayoom's commitment to reform,

and points out that he has had the opportunity to strengthen democracy since he came to power in 1978. "I don't think people believe him – he is saying that for the international community, not the people", she says. "The people have had 28 years of listening to the same stuff, so they're not about to believe that he's going to do it now." She identifies people's fear of speaking out as one of the obstacles to reform in the Maldives: "[Gayoom] made sure nobody says anything against him. Very early on in his Presidency he started detaining people for even switching off the TV while he was speaking... People were just too scared to talk about him... people just don't know how to speak... As a human rights defender in the Maldives I have faced a lot of problems, and one of them is the lack of awareness... people are not educated enough to know [about human rights]... I've had to... make it simple so that [the people of the Maldives] understand... this is only going to make it better and bring them together."



Jennifer Latheef reads her UA © AI

Jennifer Latheef has expressed her gratitude to the members of the UA network and other activists, for their part in securing her release and helping her to continue her work to promote reform in the Maldives. In a message sent to Amnesty

International, she says:

"I believe that Amnesty and friends from Maldives and all over the world have put tremendous effort into securing my freedom. I would like to thank each and every person who has believed in my innocence and given their emotions, time and energy to not just my cause, but the cause of each and every Maldivian. It is my fervent wish that the international community will continue to bear witness to the human rights violations and the miscarriages of justice that are orchestrated on a daily basis in Maldives. It is also my belief that the sweeping reforms that I would like to see in my country can only come about if there is strong international pressure for reform."

Since her release, Jennifer has

travelled to Europe and has met with many people interested in the Maldives' human rights situation. She visited Amnesty International's International Secretariat in London in late September 2006.

Jennifer is now planning to do more work to investigate the use of torture and custodial deaths in the Maldives: "All that [Gayoom] has done will come out... people haven't talked about the brutality, but now they are. People haven't documented what's happened, but they are now. From the moment he came to power until now... he's painted a pretty picture but the darker side is coming out now." She urges tourists to play their part in exerting pressure on the authorities in the Maldives. "Most people, when they come to the Maldives, they go to the resorts, which are absolutely beautiful. They never see what is really going on," she says. "The tourism industry has to be targeted. Tourists... have to understand that they have to make a stand."