



# IFJ THE MALDIVES COUNTRY REPORT: **A MATURING MEDIA**

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**FRONTLINE DEMOCRACY: MEDIA AMID POLITICAL CHURN**

# THE MALDIVES

The peaceful transfer of power after the September 2023 presidential election marked a significant milestone in the Maldives' democratic journey. The parliamentary elections held in April 2024 continued the trend of the ruling party, the People's National Congress, winning a supermajority — this time 71 out of 93 seats — effectively arming the new president, Mohamed Muizzu, with both executive and legislative control of the atoll nation.

With a diminished opposition unable to effectively exercise legislative oversight, the media sector braced itself for a new government emboldened with unchecked power. Advocates of press freedom feared now there would be nothing standing in the way if the ruling party wished to curtail freedom of expression or clamp down on unfriendly coverage.

The Maldives' media landscape has logically evolved in tandem with its nascent democracy. The first independent magazines and newspapers were registered along with political parties in 2005. Since then, news media in the archipelago has transitioned more broadly to digital platforms. Only one newspaper, *Mihaaru*, still releases a daily print edition in the Maldives. Over the past two decades, critical and hostile coverage of the government has now become more common in growing media sector.

It remains to be seen whether, despite setbacks and periods of political instability, democratic institutions and civil liberties can gain firmer ground in the Maldives.

## Financial leverage

Media in the Maldives is predominantly made up of Dhivehi language news websites. At the end of 2024, there were 42 active daily news websites, journals, blogs, and magazines registered with the Maldives Media Council (MMC), the country's self-regulated media body. Aside from a handful of outlets from other populous islands, the vast majority of media enterprises are based in the country's capital, Malé, home to more than 40 per cent of the nation's people. Along with a dozen television stations, digital media outlets represent the primary source of news for most Maldivians today.

Despite the best intentions of committed journalists and editors, media in the Maldives remains politicised, and encumbered by a lack of journalistic independence. The underlying structural problems stem from the small size of the population (382,751 resident Maldivians). At present, the media market in the islands is saturated with an overabundance of media outlets, leading to fierce competition for eyeballs.

Unable to fund operations solely through advertisements from the private sector, most news media in the Maldives are heavily reliant on politicians and business magnates, often promoting their patrons' interests without even a pretence of impartiality. For media outlets without wealthy benefactors — whose shifting allegiances are reflected in their editorial policies — the main source of income is advertising by state-owned enterprises (SOEs). But SOE largesse is doled out without any apparent transparency, oversight or merit-based processes such as website visitor figures. In some cases, SOE ads have questionably appeared on new and largely unknown websites.

This financial reliance has created a useful ecosystem for leveraging the Maldivian media sector to meet politically motivated ends. Successive administrations have been accused of strategically dangling offers of sponsorship or of wielding the threat to withhold payments to media enterprises. Editors are regularly instructed to remove offending articles, laud government initiatives, or refrain entirely from covering sensitive subjects. It is not uncommon for identical, glowing write-ups to be published in multiple media outlets, suggesting a coordinated and centralised effort to leverage media. The President's Office is also alleged to have issued detailed instructions to the media on how articles on 'priority areas' should be framed.

In February 2025, Moosa Rasheed, a senior journalist at *Mihaaru*, the leading local and only printed newspaper, resigned in protest over

alleged government interference. In a resignation letter leaked online, the journalist accused *Mihaaru* management of editing and removing articles at the government's behest. He alleged editors changing the slant or entirely deleting news articles critical of the government have become commonplace over the past four years. According to Rasheed, editors confessed to facing pressure and specific directives, including phone calls from the Maldivian President himself.

A newsroom culture of vigorous debate, non-interference from the media house's marketing department, and encouragement of in-depth reporting or investigative journalism has been replaced with "making small news, increasing lifestyle articles and getting ahead in numbers", Rasheed wrote, decrying the emphasis on "quantity over quality".

The nexus of government and media was illustrated in the case of MMTV, a new private broadcaster allegedly operated by communications officials from the President's Office. In July 2024, MMTV's parent company was the only bidder to offer office space to the National Social Protection Agency (NPSA), a government agency. MMTV proposed a five-year contract estimated at USD 2.2 million to sub-lease floors, in the same building that houses its studios, to the NPSA. The rent proposed to be paid by the NPSA was allegedly enough to cover several floors, effectively subsidising the private TV channel's lease. The NPSA later terminated the agreement citing "false" media reports of corruption.

## Unfulfilled promises

The early experience with the new Muizzu-led government was mixed. Muizzu took office with a pledge of such unprecedented transparency that investigations to seek information would be unnecessary. This did not prove to be the case. The Attorney General's office challenged multiple orders from the Information Commissioner to comply with requests under the country's Right to Information (RTI) legislation, refusing to disclose simple details, including on the number of political appointees.

After securing parliamentary supermajority, the Muizzu government announced plans to amend the 2023 Evidence Act to address concerns over provisions that allowed the courts to compel journalists to disclose anonymous sources in cases involving alleged acts of terrorism or offences related to national security. To date, the law remains unchanged, but the provision has not been enforced so far.

A month into the new administration, the Communication Authority of Maldives (CMA) blocked access to three alleged "anti-government" media websites on grounds that they were unregistered. However, the authorities did not have legal sanction to block access to the websites under a specific law that allows for digital censorship. The government later relented in the face of widespread criticism and unblocked the websites.

The new government also took to seeking remedies via the MMC, which regulates print and online media in the country, and investigates alleged ethical violations. By July 2024, the President's Office had submitted 75 complaints against Maldivian websites for "spreading false news and information". The majority of the complaints involved websites operating without formal registration as business entities or licensed media organisations.

After formulating specific procedures for handling complaints related to unregistered outlets, the MMC decided to block news website Dhenme in August 2024 over the "publication of content that violates social norms and standards". An inquiry flagged obscene content that was derogatory towards women, and the website regularly flouted the media code of conduct, the council concluded.

Meanwhile, promises made by the Muizzu government, including state funding, and the development of a media village to provide office space for newsrooms, are yet to be met.



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### Regulatory challenges

In February 2025, Maldives Broadcasting Commission (MBC), an oversight body whose seven members are appointed by the president with parliamentary approval, initiated an inquiry against Raajje TV, an outlet aligned with an opposition party. The issue was the lyrics of a song aired to promote an opposition protest march on January 31, 2025, which, according to the MBC, violated the broadcasting code of conduct on grounds of lack of accuracy, fairness and balance. The regulator informed Raajje TV, which objected to the application, of connecting news reporting standards to a song.

Unlike the MBC, the MMC follows a self-regulatory mechanism. Media outlets elect eight of the council's 15 members. Ahead of the council's most recent election on December 7, 2024, the Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) expressed concern over the questionable conduct of the Ministry of Youth Empowerment, Information and Arts in organising the MMC polls, in which 148 media outlets, including online, print and broadcast were registered to vote.

The concerns included last-minute changes made to the voters' list after some media outlets asked that their voting representatives be substituted. The MJA said such changes to the permanent list, published in the gazette in accordance with procedures and deadlines, contravened the spirit of the election rules and violated the rights of candidates. The association also questioned the ministry's decision to make a new announcement directed at the candidates after the deadline for contesting had passed and a list of candidates had already been published.

Separately, in November 2024, the MJA raised concerns over the integrity of the MMC's annual journalism awards. When a video documentary by online news portal Adhadhu about the president's estranged Sri Lankan stepmother won the investigative journalism award category, Ahmed Musthafa, the council's president, was dismissed from his job as news operations manager at the state-run Public Service Media (PSM).

The abrupt sacking came after several government officials criticised the decision to confer the award to the opposition-aligned Adhadhu. PSM filed a complaint with the MMC over a clip from the documentary aired during the state broadcaster's live coverage of the award ceremony, which was deemed to have breached editorial standards.

Musthafa was reinstated to his position a day later. He then released a statement on the MMC's letterhead, as the media body's president, criticising the documentary. All six judges issued a similar statement the same day. An emergency meeting of the MMC was held a day later, where members decided to withdraw the award. Amid the controversy, the Anti-Corruption Commission raided the MMC's office and seized the score sheets for the awards.

"This association believes that these events may lead a reasonable individual to believe these actions are being taken due to the influence of powerful persons," the MJA said. Nevertheless, the MJA welcomed the MMC's subsequent decision to publish the score sheets.

### The price of critical reporting

Online media outlet Adhadhu became the principal platform for some strong adversarial journalism in the Maldives, prompting the ire of the president's spokesperson, who denounced its articles as baseless or misleading, with the President's Office submitting complaints over alleged attempts at "deliberately spreading false information".

Adhadhu's antagonistic stand led to reporting challenges for the media outlet. In June 2024, the state-owned Housing Development Corporation revoked an invitation for Adhadhu to cover a land reclamation project. The ceremony was open only to "partner media" outlets, the Adhadhu was told.

In March 2025, after denying a report by Adhadhu related to a desk set up at a government-run health insurance company to facilitate requests from ruling party lawmakers, MP Ibrahim Mohamed took to social media accusing the outlet of "criminalising [the] spreading [of] lies".

In June 2024, Parliament Majority Leader, Ibrahim Falah, accused the opposition party of funding television channels to incite hatred and spread "anti-government disinformation". He threatened to summon "TV channels operated by parties" to parliamentary oversight committees. As political parties receive state funding, such television stations should be held accountable by the country's parliament, Falah contended.

An egregious incident occurred on March 14, 2025, when the new president allegedly contacted Adhadhu's chief executive officer, Hussain Fiyaz Moosa, threatening to take the "harshest possible action" against the media outlet. According to Adhadhu, the President was enraged over remarks made by an opposition activist about his teenage son, but the outlet defended it had not covered the allegations until after they were officially condemned. In the wake of the intimidating phone call, Adhadhu filed a police complaint and accused the government of targeting the outlet by pressuring business partners to pull out of advertising.

### Eroding trust

The implications of visible political control over the media has not been lost on the public.

At an official event to mark Press Freedom Day in May 2024, a report titled 'Unveiling Public Trust in the Maldivian Media' was officially launched. Its survey found that 87 per cent of respondents held the media accountable for political divisions in the country, with television and internet news websites perceived to have the highest levels of sensational or biased coverage.

The vast majority of respondents believed that the ownership of television stations and websites skewed or compromised coverage in favour of the owner's business or political interests.

Nearly 70 per cent of respondents saw fake news as "prevalent" in social media and online outlets, and nearly half of respondents thought fake news was prevalent in "sources or persons known only through the internet".

In recent years, some internet personalities have assumed an outsized and consequential role in Maldivian politics. One anonymous account in particular, referred to as Hassan Kurusee, an unfiltered and provocative outlet and self-claimed 'citizen journalism' source, appears to have become the preferred conduit for whistle-blowers seeking to transmit sensitive information or expose government corruption. Many revelations are posted on social media platform X before they are published as reports in the country's mainstream media. In the absence of robust fact-checking mechanisms in the Maldives, the unfettered digital space and online discourse remains rife with misinformation, disinformation and character assassination.

### Female face of harassment

For professional journalists who do not have the luxury of online anonymity, threats and harassment have become a part of the job description for media workers in the Maldives. The majority of the threats are made online.

On May 1, 2024, police announced an investigation into threats of arson against Raajje TV and Channel 13, both of which are affiliated to opposition parties. The threats against Raajje TV and senior video journalist Laisha Ahmed were made in an Instagram post. In August 2024, Ahmed was also sexually harassed and verbally abused with obscene language during a TikTok livestream. In the Channel 13 case, a

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Facebook comment on an article posted by the outlet warned the private broadcaster that it would not be allowed “the opportunity to spread discord”. The President’s Office strongly condemned both incidents and assured thorough investigations.

On January 29, 2025, the MJA raised concerns over the increasing harassment and threats faced by female journalists. An anonymous X user posted a photo of Sangu TV journalist Fathimath Madhadha; a businessman harassed *Rivaya* editor, Aidha Abdul Hakeem, on X over questions she had posed; Shaama Shuaib from Aslu TV accused police officers of forcing her to delete a photo taken during a counter-terror operation; Sangu TV journalist Laisha Ahmed Zaki was harassed on several social media platforms; and Asima Nizar of *Mihaaru* was threatened on social media over one of her articles.

More than a quarter of women journalists — who account for about 30 per cent of staff in mainstream outlets — have faced sexual harassment, according to a 2021 report by the MJA on gender equality in the media. It also found that media outlets also had a very low proportion of women in leadership roles.

In the absence of cybercrime laws, compounded by the inability of social media algorithms to detect hate speech violations in the country’s language, Dhivehi Latin, means that the perpetrators behind threatening and abusive posts from fake accounts go unpunished. Divehi Latin is written in the Latin script and borrows from English phonetics but doesn’t accurately represent the sounds in Dhivehi.

At an Internet Governance Forum in October 2024, journalists spoke of avoiding investigative journalism for fear of the harassment reaching their families. Solutions backed by the participants included advocating for legislation, teaming up with tech companies Meta and X to improve hate speech detection in Dhivehi, and equipping journalists to better navigate online harassment.

“These threats further erode the working environment for journalists, enabling a fearful atmosphere that continues unabated due to the widespread impunity for crimes against journalists,” the MJA observed in May 2024, referring to the decades-long failure to prosecute or secure convictions.

### A decade of impunity

The most damning example of impunity remains the unresolved enforced disappearance of Ahmed Rilwan on August 8, 2014. On the tenth anniversary of his abduction, local and international human rights and press freedom groups called on the new administration to publicly disclose the findings of an inquiry commission set up under the previous government.

In November 2023, a criminal court dismissed terrorism charges against three suspects in the case, who had been arrested the previous year. One of the suspects was later appointed to a senior post at a state-owned company. The reports on the 27 cases investigated by the Presidential Commission on Deaths and Disappearances are yet to be made public, despite the Commission being formally dissolved in June 2024.

“The complete impunity in this case and the shocking disregard and negligence by politicians, investigators and prosecutors continue to send a dangerous, chilling message to journalists in the Maldives,” the MJA said.

Rilwan, a prolific blogger and popular social media user, was targeted for his outspoken criticism of religious fundamentalism and violent extremism. In the decade since his abduction, his fate has served as a cautionary tale for other liberal voices.

“Civil society and journalist sources stated media practiced self-censorship on matters related to Islam due to fears of harassment or being labelled ‘anti-Islamic,’ according to the 2023 US State Department

report on human rights in the Maldives, which highlighted the government’s failure to take action against online death threats.

### Strength through resistance

Bolstered by the long-awaited Industrial Relations Bill ratified in January 2024 — which guarantees the right to form trade unions, and for the first time introduced mechanisms for collective bargaining — the MJA demonstrated the power of the media community by presenting a united front.

In November 2024, the MJA mobilised a campaign against the Maldives Media and Broadcasting Commission Bill introduced by a ruling party lawmaker to merge the MMC and MBC. The proposed seven-member Maldives Media and Broadcasting Commission was set to have four members appointed by the President with only three representatives from the media. The new regulator’s proposed powers included levying fines, withholding media licenses, and demanding formal apologies.

Strongly objecting to the jettisoning of the MMC’s self-regulatory model, the MJA formed a working group, held a press conference to inform the public, and launched a petition signed by more than 100 journalists. The proposed legislation was dubbed the ‘Media Control Bill’ and a social media campaign carried out against it under the slogan ‘*Hatharehge haggugai*’ referring to Article 4 of the Constitution: “All the powers of the State of the Maldives are derived from, and remain with, the citizens.”

The Bill was eventually withdrawn on November 26, 2024, after journalists successfully lobbied the country’s attorney general and door-stepped the president to seek assurances. The MJA called it “a major win” for Maldivian journalism.

### Future battles

The need for solidarity is ever-present in the Maldives media. Amid deliberations on proposed cost-cutting measures in February 2025, several ruling party lawmakers spoke in favour of merging the pair of media regulators, which they declared as “redundant”. The government’s five-year legislative agenda includes bills on freedom of expression and freedom of the press, as well as amendments to the laws governing the MMC and MBC.

In October 2024, the MJA joined 14 other local NGOs to call on the government to consult all stakeholders before proceeding with undisclosed amendments planned for the 2014 Right to Information (RTI) Act. “Findings from various studies indicate low levels of compliance under proactive disclosure of information. Furthermore, non-disclosure and delays from institutions were found to be common, indicating the need to strengthen the implementation of the law,” the civil society collective observed.

In the ten years since the enactment of the RTI law, with a global ranking of 22 in access to information, the number of complaints filed over noncompliance has steadily increased every year. The Information Commissioner’s Office registered 566 cases in 2024, up 61 per cent from the previous year. Many of the complaints concerned government offices “not responding at all to RTI requests”.

The Maldives does not lack strong laws and legal safeguards to guarantee safety, gender equality, and other constitutional rights. What has been sorely lacking is effective implementation, and the political will to help steer the maturing Maldives media on the path to stronger professionalism and true independence.

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Afghan Independent Journalists' Association  
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Federation of Nepali Journalists  
Federation of Media Employees' Trade Unions,  
Sri Lanka

Free Media Movement, Sri Lanka  
Indian Journalists' Union  
Journalists Association of Bhutan  
Maldives Journalists' Association  
National Union of Journalists, India  
Nepal Press Union  
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The online report also includes country reports for Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, as well as a full list of jailed and detained journalists in South Asia and the IFJ list of media rights violations by Journalists' Safety Indicators (JSIs), May 2024 to April 2025.

**Online report: [samsn.ifj.org/SAPFR24-25](https://samsn.ifj.org/SAPFR24-25)**

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Front cover: A predominantly Muslim nation, the Maldives has seen its media evolve in tandem with democracy since 2005. A report released on World Press Freedom Day 2024, found 87 per cent of respondents held the media accountable for political divisions in the archipelago nation. Spectators in Hulhumale gather for a drone show to celebrate Eid al-Fitr, marking the end of Ramadan on March 30, 2025.  
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