

## Maldivian president was pathbreaker for freedom of expression

Deposed president Mohamed Nasheed will always be remembered as the man who brought free speech to the Maldives, writes Maryam Omid.



The Maldives was plunged into fresh chaos today after Mohamed Nasheed, the country's first democratically elected president, claimed he was [forced](#) to resign "at gunpoint" by mutinying police and army officers. A statement from his party yesterday claimed he had been presented with an ultimatum: step down or prepare for a bloodbath. His brother, Ibrahim Nasim, said the decision was a no-brainer.

Yesterday's turn of events were a far cry from Nasheed's stunning 2008 electoral victory in the Maldives, a string of 1,200 coral islands sprinkled across the Indian Ocean. A former journalist, and staunch defender of free speech, Nasheed triumphed over Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, whose brand of soft dictatorship had prevailed for three decades. Under Gayoom's rule, the 44-year-old had been [jailed](#) 27 times for a total of six years for demanding democracy and for his political writings.

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The crisis came to a head yesterday when protesters, joined by factions of the police and military, demanded Nasheed's departure. The unrest was triggered by the arrest of a senior criminal court judge, Mohamed Abdulla, on January 16. Nasheed's failure to secure a court order, necessary to hold Abdulla for a period longer than 24 hours, led to widespread criticism and cries of unconstitutionality. (You can read more about the events that led to Nasheed's exit in my article [here](#).)

Yet, despite his fall from grace, Nasheed's decision to step down rather than use force to quell the unrest has been welcomed by many of his allies. Messages of support flooded Facebook. One read: "You taught us what freedom of expression meant." Another, targeted at the protesters, said: "If it wasn't for him u wouldn't even be thinking anti govt thoughts let alone have the right to protest and voice your opinions."

Among Nasheed's achievements is a free press (although frequently backed by individuals with vested interests) and the decriminalisation of defamation in 2009 – a clear victory for freedom of expression in the country. That year, he declared the Maldives a haven for dissident writers from countries such as Burma and regularly called for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese politician who spent most of the last 20 years in some form of detention.

Yet the path to entrenching freedom of expression both culturally and institutionally in the Maldives has not always been smooth. From the outset, Nasheed's call for more free speech has been at odds with the Adhaalath Party, a religious conservative group and member of his coalition. Under the Maldivian constitution, expression is free as long as it does not undermine Islam. The woolly wording in the constitution leaves the interpretation of this law wide open.

As a result, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, headed by members of Adhaalath, has issued instructions to ban websites on a number of occasions. Websites are typically targeted either because they contain pornographic material or content deemed to undermine Islam. Last year, the website of a controversial blogger, Ismail Hilath Rasheed, was shut down because it was used to express his Sufi Muslim identity – a breach of the constitution, which stipulates that all Maldivians are Sunni Muslims and that conversion to another religion is illegal.

The Adhaalath Party's use of religion to silence was not, however, restricted to websites. In 2009, the party condemned Nasheed for saying the penal code should be revised to exclude the death penalty and amputation - two punishments under Sharia law.

Despite these obstacles, there is no doubt that Nasheed's commitment to free speech as a cornerstone of democratic government will be part of his legacy. While questions remain over the future of the fledgling democracy, the right to speak freely, and its corollary, the right to protest, will almost certainly last.

*At the time of going to press, Nasheed, always the activist, was protesting on the streets of the*

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*capital Male, along with his supporters. Follow [Minivan News](#) for updates.*

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