

Press system in the Maldives

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By

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of

From the known history of the country except for the 17 years of Portuguese colonial rule the people of the Maldives have lived in an independent and a free environment. The geographical isolation of the island communities to each other and the homogeneity of the people made the inter relationship between the people of one island to another, and between peoples of one island very special. Because of the extreme smallness of the population almost all of the inhabitants in any one island knew each other personally. Furthermore, the smallness of the population, made the islands generally have a few dozen families only. This close knit relationship, coupled with a similar economic system made the people in the islands dependent on each other not only for a shared life style but also to be informed of. Thus it was the person to person conversations that became the most important source of communication and information.

The system of journalism in Maldives will always be the same. The style of journalism we have is structured for the advancement of the people and for its development. This style of journalism neither opposes the government nor sides with the government against the people. Therefore journalism in Maldives has only had a positive effect in the country's development.

Our country is a 100% Muslim country. We have a democratic government. The Multi Party system does not exist here. Neither are there open demonstrations against the government by those opposed to it. Hence, journalism in Maldives exist in a peaceful environment.

Article 13 of the present constitution says, "Every person has the freedom of speech and expression of thought, orally and in writing, as long as the specific provisions of Islamic Shariath and law are not contravened". Therefore this article in effect states in clear terms the present status of the freedom of speech, expression and the freedom of the press in the country. The people have also been given such freedoms, right from the very first constitution of 1932.

Today anyone has the right to register newspapers or magazines in accordance with the law No. 47/78 which outlines the procedure for such registration at the Department of Information and Broadcasting. Again under Article 5 of law No. 3/68 (official Business, Chapter 3) the owner of such a newspaper also has the right to publish anything that he desires for publication, so long as the law of the land permits him to publish such articles in the news papers or magazines.

Under the existing laws individuals are only required to adhere three areas which are unconstitutional as outlined under law No. 4/68, Article 8 when writing or expressing their point of view. Accordingly they should not write about anything that contravenes the principles of Islam or anything that would bring any damage to the stability and integrity of the society, and to refrain from writing or talking about anything that would damage or defame the dignity of any individual of the society. Hence, if a negative effect surfaces in the society as a result of a published article, then depending on the gravity of the article the author is punishable by law. The editors of newspapers or magazines have to bear responsibility only in situations where cases arising from articles are written under the name of the newspapers. In case of news item published, the person reporting the news has to bear the responsibility, for any false information.

Criticism in articles by some of our journalist reveal that freedom of journalism is

restricted. However Maldives cannot be counted as a country which does not have freedom of press at all. The clause 38 of the Maldivian Penal code and other regulation states that an article written with reality in view, with proof of its validity will not be regarded as an article aimed to influence the people against the government.

No matter how free it is to operate a press within the Republic, there are also constraints. The vast expanse of the sea separating the island communities have become the most difficult barrier for an effective means of transport and communication. Thus, it is almost impossible to have the timely distribution of newspapers in the islands and also to publish a paper at a reasonable cost plus maintaining an efficient press service in the country. On the other hand, the people also preferred their simple life and favoured to hear from each other rather than buy an outdated newspaper, to know of what is happening in the islands. Moreover, because of the nature of the simple island life the people don't have a developed reading habit.

Despite the unfavorable situation in the atolls, in Male' the capital, some form of organised press was in existence since 1943.

Therefore it is only 60 years since journalism was introduced in Maldives. Maldives being a group of islands, there is no nation wide newspaper yet. This is because the transportation facilities in Maldives has not yet advanced. Therefore the two daily newspapers published in Male' "Haveeru" and "Aafathis" which are hand written and offset printed are only brought out to the 56,100 people living in Male'. There is no arrangement made yet to send any of these papers to the other islands daily.

Other than these an English newspaper "Spectrum" is published fortnightly by the Haveeru news services and a number of magazines in the local language too are published in Male'.

In Maldives too journalists still faces the difficulties of getting news and information from some of the government offices. This occurs despite the designation of a senior person to act as press officer in every office at present. This is because of the existing unawareness amongst us, and the inability to realise fully what journalism is, and its necessity.

I believe that Journalism in Maldives too face many problems. For instance, the difficulties caused by the smallness of the community and the number of people which makes every one well known. This makes the journalists well revealed to everyone.

A major change in the "media situation" was seen after the Presidents' speech to the nation on 11th November 1989. He said that "from time to time we need to revive and bring about new moves to reform what we do", otherwise he remarked, that we would be "trapped inside a shell of our own creation".

In that speech he cautioned that new changes should also be appropriate to our times and compatible to our nation, and that we would change our way of thinking in order to get out of that shell. This was quite understandable given our unique characteristics as a small nation. The country is hundred per cent homogeneous in ethnic composition, speak one language and adhere to one religion. Being small and scattered it is also vulnerable to many external forces.

Similar to some other nations our journalists too have to appear at the Department of Information and Broadcasting for various issues. And we too have to face problems such as being fined.

The year 1990 which is the 25th anniversary of the country's independence saw a host of new newspapers and magazines emerging in Male'. Most of the new weekly

magazines were run by youth, and hence was regarded as an encouraging sign, as the new magazines were seen by many as the youth's answer to President Gayoom's policy of bringing in reforms, making the youth play a major role in the decision making process of the country, and be a force for its future development.

Thus, the country saw the emergence of young writers from all walks of life, in a number unprecedented in the history of the country, making the private media in a very short while a well represented source of public opinion. The new situation was further strengthened by the strong support and prompt action given by the government for the young journalists' open expression of views and their constructive criticisms made in the press. Moreover, to facilitate the media to have easier access to information on government activities and policies, the Department of Information and Broadcasting began holding regular weekly meetings among the heads of government offices and the journalists. Furthermore, the Department also conducted training courses for the local journalists to develop their writing skills and make them more aware to the needs and contemporary issues of society.

A lot of writers began to take part in bold criticism, and put forward constructive views to which the government brought immediate action. The President in a recent interview to a foreign news agency, described such criticisms as a "desire to correct the society's sins of commissions and omissions." However, in the same interview, the President also cautioned, saying that the "power of the pen was not a God given warrant" to criticize without facts or to attack the defenceless and the innocent.

The type of journalists previously referred to believe freedom in journalism is criticism of another's personality, even without substantial proof and label the person as a traitor. However this is not the kind of freedom our society or community believes in, because as Muslims too we cannot criticize others without any proof. In my view, you too would not like to have this type of journalism. I believe that journalism is based on a country's political, social and religious awareness.

But it is also a reminder of the social responsibilities of the writers and publishers and on the other, a check on the abuse of the power of the pen against the innocent and the defenceless. Moreover, when the country is undergoing rapid socio-economic developments and its youth taking a more frontal role in this process, that effort should also be made to protect the national integrity and preserve the unique "Maldives Image" bestowed on us by the forefathers of this peace loving nation.

Among our journalists there is yet no Press Association for the promotion of Journalism in the country. I believe in the importance of having such an association in the future. I offer to all of you the idea of a SAARC Press Association. Such an association can strengthen the ties between the journalists of this region.

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