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religious beliefs is pervasive and all-encompassing, what he portrays to the non-Muslim international community is (especially to the USA and Western Europe) quite the opposite. Gayoom portrays himself as a religiously tolerant person who opposes religious fundamentalism. As proof he would regularly jail people wearing long beards and short trousers (telltale signs of Wahhabis) and those who follow the prayer rituals in a manner that is not identical to his interpretation of the Shafi'i Madhab. He sees non-conformity more as a challenge to his strict authoritarian rule than as a form of religious deviancy. He also parades them to the international community as proof of the extension of fundamentalism in the country and as proof of his valiant effort to suppress religious extremism.

Gayoom continues to use Islamic fundamentalism as a bogey and as a ruse to avoid implementing the reform agenda he proposed under duress. The same ruse is used to deprive the Maldivians of their fundamental rights. Of all Gayoom's increasingly bizarre reasons for avoiding political reform, the bogus claim that pro-reformists are preventing him from doing so is the most ridiculous. The reason for the Maldivian Democratic Party's existence is precisely to introduce liberal democracy, political pluralism and good governance to the country. The argument that the people struggling for liberal democracy, greater political participation, rule of law, separation of powers, independence of the judiciary and stronger civil society would derail a reform agenda that promises precisely that is a puerile, desperate argument.

The Gayoom regime, sensing that calling the MDP anti-reformist would convince no one, quickly changed their tune and now blames "fundamentalists" as blocking his reform agenda. This argument, too, is typically baseless. Sheik Fareed (who was on 26.9.04 sentenced to two years for causing "religious disharmony") did attend some pro-

reform meetings, including the gathering on the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of August. The allegation, however, that the Wahhabis took over the pro-democracy movement is completely baseless. The "Wahhabis" would not have constituted even 0.5% of the crowd of over 10,000. Even the handful who was present espoused legal and orderly change. The people who tried to create disorder (and ultimately brutally suppressed the gathering) were the National Security Service officials and a private militia organized by Gayoom's brother, Minister Yameen. Neither the followers of Sheik Fareed nor the pro-democracy activists created any "disorder"- in spite of grave provocation on the part of Minister Yameen's militia.

Not more than half a dozen of those arrested and tortured (about 200 by the Government's count, perhaps double that in fact) can be classed as "fundamentalists" while not one among them is known to be violent. Crying "fundamentalism" is Gayoom's excuse for avoiding reform and - more urgently - ensuring that the members of the parliament - along with almost the entire opposition reform movement, remain in jail till he conducts (and rigs) the parliamentary elections scheduled within the next two months. Gayoom knows that 30 out of 42 members elected for the Special Majlis last May are either MDP members or those who strongly adhere to the Party's agenda for liberal democracy and socio-political and economic reform. Gayoom is fully aware that the MDP would win with ease any election that may come up now - provided, of course, the election is free and fair.

Gayoom cannot say - and as such has refrained from specifically mentioning anyone by name - that of any of the members of Majlis and Special Majlis he has in detention are Islamic fundamentalists or espouse any ideology of violence. He knows people such as Gasim Ibrahim (the biggest investor and employer in the country after the state itself) and his two ex-ministers and

professionals and academics such as Male member Ibrahim Ismail and Dr. Husain Rasheed are well established and respected people in Maldivian society who abhor violence and extremism. Even if some people did espouse a fundamentalist point of view, there is absolutely no logical reason why pro-reformist members of the Special Majlis have to take responsibility or are held accountable. The members held in detention are working precisely to avoid a situation where extremism would take root in place of the participatory liberal democracy they advocate.

The irony is that Gayoom is the catalyst that may very well bring about the Islamic fundamentalism that he uses to both gain Western sympathy and to cover his human rights abuse and illiberal autocracy. Gayoom, with his Madhrasas, his Islamic rhetoric, his coterie of Mullahs and his exhortation for religious purity, changed the religious culture of Maldivian society from that of tolerance to one that is increasingly susceptible to a more dogmatic and fundamental interpretation of Islam. The lack of political pluralism, clampdown on freedom of expression, the sense of hopelessness and uncertainty among the youth combined with dysfunctional political institutions may well create a strong resonance, especially among the youth, for the fundamentalist call.

The members of the Majlis and Special Majlis and pro-reform activists presently under detention (and systematically subject to physical and psychological torture and inhuman and degrading treatment) are people who clearly understood the abyss the country could fall into under the short-sighted, increasingly distant and hollow rule of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. If one is to be incarcerated for the spread of Islamic fundamentalism then the just and logical course of action would be to incarcerate the person most responsible for such an act - in this instance, President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom himself. □

## Letters

### The First Family shops while Maldives under emergency

We hear about Emperor Nero playing his fiddle while Rome burnt. Gayyoom fiddles with the country's money and shops while his country is under emergency and his human rights institution screams that his NSS is raping, brutalizing and generally torturing people who seek reform.

Gayyoom also repeatedly met with his psychiatrist. That is a good sign. My hope is that he will get back some of his

sanity and appreciates the fact he and his family should desist from raping the country's wealth. It would also be nice if he can stop torturing and literally raping the Maldives. □

### Seena Zahir: One heartbeat away from the presidency

If Gayyoom were to die, Seena Zahir would be the caretaker President of the country. I do not know enough about Zahir to determine if that would be a good thing. What I hear about Zahir makes me believe that he is an opportunist of the highest order. He was supposed to be a communist in his youth. However, after Gayyoom bought him with a resort and a cabinet post he

is just another opportunist. My problem is I just cannot understand how any decent human being can consent to serve under such a brutal dictator who so blatantly violates even the basic rights of his people. Gayyoom is supposed to be sick. If Zahir follows him without substantial change in the system, I fear the country will have yet another dictator who will remain till he dies. Our country deserves better. □

### Gayoom's game plan

Gayoom is planing to have brother Abdullah Hameed as speaker of Special Majlis so he can manipulate the next constitution for 17 years and his family can rule for ever more. Mark my words□







