

Transcript of the speech given by Ismail 'Khilath' Rasheed at the Maldives' side event during the 21st session of the United Nations Human Rights Council - September 11, 2012, Palais des Nations in Geneva, Switzerland

Good afternoon. My name is Ismail Khilath Rasheed and I am a journalist and blogger from the Maldives.

Until 2003, for the past 800 years, the Maldives had been a moderate and liberal Islamic country, thanks to Sufi influence from India which is a more mystical form of Islam. The arts and entertainment were not only tolerated but actively encouraged and promoted - most notably *boduberu* songs and dances that send participants into a *trance* in the Sufi spiritual tradition.

However, in the last years of Gayoom, due to poverty and oppression, and also as a result of the forced imposition on the Maldivian people of Gayoom's own version of Islam, extremism took a hold, and though it is still a minority, it is a very vocal and formidable one that both Nasheed's and Waheed's governments have been unable to tackle with.

But a stark difference has been that while Nasheed's government officially *acknowledged* there was an extremist problem in Maldives, Waheed is refusing to acknowledge the problem. While Nasheed sought to keep extremism in check by bringing them into his government, in the form of the Adhaalath party, Waheed came into power on the back of extremism, and therefore is giving free reign to extremists.

What is worrying is that while Nasheed allowed extremists to spread their propaganda through private channels, Waheed's government is directly sanctioning the promotion of the extremist agenda through official religious channels.

The Adhaalath Party, under whom extremists operate, and under whose umbrella the Islamic Affairs Ministry has been under both Nasheed and Waheed, is now using Friday prayer sermons, also known as *khuthubas*, to spew bigotry, misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, racism, sexism and other sorts of discrimination, and to issue *fatwas* or religious rulings proclaiming the arts and humanities, such as photography, art, music, singing, dancing and acting as *haram* or sinful.

The scary thing is that ordinary Maldivians still trust the word of *Sheikhs* or Islamic scholars, and when it comes through sacred channels such as *khuthubas*, people tend to believe and follow them. In fact, a handful of artists, photographers, actors and singers have already given up their profession which is a cause for concern in terms of human development, progress and enlightenment.

While such propaganda has so far remained as propaganda, the long-term aim is to introduce legislation that would actually make these propaganda into law; for example, one long-term aim of the Adhaalath is to prevent Maldivian women and girls from going out of their homes without the headscarf and without a male *mahram* - as in Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In fact, it was Adhaalath's Islamic Affairs Minister Bari, under Nasheed, who gave a public statement that the Adhaalath sought to ban the import of musical instruments into the Maldives and sought to change the mindset of Maldivians, and I quote, "by educating them first in order to mentally prepare them for the eventual ban."

It is deeply regrettable that both Nasheed and Waheed have done little or nothing to curb extremism as every political party in Maldives seems afraid of extremists - for surely when Nasheed did finally openly take a stand against extremism, by staging his own counter-

protest on December 23, 2011, it came a little too late, and Waheed's "December 23 Coalition to Protect Islam" was able to oust Nasheed from power in February 2012.

And what is really depressing now is that since Waheed's government is backed by Islamic extremists, who in turn have been backed by rogue police and military officers, extremists are now acting with impunity. For instance, it was right near a CCTV camera that the extremists carried out their third murder attempt on me in June 2012. And it was carried out by the same group that attacked me previously, in December 2011 and May 2012, in broad daylight and in front of police officers.

Members of this same extremist gang were operating behind police lines during the protest held against Waheed opening the Parliament. Complete with media passes belonging to radical Islamic newspapers, magazines and websites, they took photographs of individual protesters and later posted them on social networks with their names, addresses and phone numbers, calling on the public to murder them, describing them as "irreligious, secular MDP activists who want to eradicate Islam from the Maldives." And this same group of extremists were seen operating behind police lines during a protest by women near the President's office, taking photographs of the women in compromising positions when the police turned water cannons on them.

In fact, dozens of Maldivian families, who have been subjected to a witch-hunt by Waheed's forces, have migrated to neighboring Sri Lanka, and are unable to return to the Maldives, their only hope being placed on the outcome of the next Presidential elections, scheduled for July 2013.

I began blogging in 2000 but when in 2009 I reported about Maldivian extremists keeping child concubines, I started getting death threats. And since they started acting without rationale and reason, I realized that there was no need anymore for me to keep silent, and therefore, I started writing about taboo topics in Maldives, most importantly, the highly sensitive topics of freedom of religion and sexual orientation.

Maldives may be a small country but it is not insignificant. It lies at a strategic crossroads and the cultural and political invasion of Maldives by Saudi-funded Wahhabi extremism will definitely have regional and global repercussions as already some armed Maldivians with Al Qaeda links have been [arrested](#) in Waziristan, Pakistan.

The only hope we have in saving the Maldives is by the international community keeping a close watch. I, therefore, welcome UN Human Rights Commissioner Ms. Navi Pillay's decision to assign a Human Rights Advisor to the Maldives as rising Islamic extremism is causing serious setbacks to human rights, freedom of expression and democracy in the Maldives. And therefore, it is crucial that the international community closely monitor and observe the Presidential elections of 2013.