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PRESS RELEASE

Maldives: Defamation Decriminalised

The Maldives parliament has passed an amendment to the Penal Code abolishing five articles providing for criminal defamation. ARTICLE 19 welcomes these developments and calls on the authorities to ensure that they are brought into force as soon as possible.

The Bill was passed overwhelmingly by the People's Majlis on 23 November, in a clear victory for freedom of expression. This was despite the fact that the parliamentary committee reviewing the Bill, proposed by the government, had recommended that it be rejected and the crime of defamation retained. The Bill was part of the government's wider platform to enhance respect for freedom of expression. It was also prompted by the announcement last year of the newly appointed independent Prosecutor General that he would start pursuing criminal defamation cases, reversing a prior practice of not bringing such cases. A few criminal defamation cases have been brought over the last year.

The decriminalisation of defamation was also one of the recommendations in a joint report by ARTICLE 19 and UNESCO, *Assessment of Media Development in the Maldives*, which applies UNESCO's Media Development Indicators to the Maldives. The Assessment was launched in the Maldives on 28 October 2009.

ARTICLE 19 is very pleased to welcome the Maldives to the growing community of democracies around the world that have decriminalised defamation and we call on the government and parliament to continue to introduce needed reforms in the area of freedom of expression, including in the areas of broadcasting and the right to information.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- The Assessment of Media Development in the Maldives is available at: <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/press/maldives-assessment-of-media-development.pdf>
- For more information please contact: Toby Mendel, Senior Legal Advisor, a19law@hfx.eastlink.ca, +1 902 431-3688
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.