

# Fundamentalism Biggest Threat To Maldives Security: Government Advisor

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"The ability of the government to address the growing problem of fundamentalism and its potential to become violent will determine the security future of the Maldives."

So warns a report on the September 29 explosion in Male', written by the Government's own counter-terrorism advisor and obtained by *Minivan News*

Dr Rohan Gunaratna, an Al-Qaeda expert at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University has trained the Maldives' police first two counter-terrorism officers on tactics used by Islamist groups.

But the Sri Lankan born Gunaratna argues religious education, rather than "hard security," is the key to preventing further radicalisation in the Maldives.

## Threat

Gunaratna's report, compiled in the aftermath of last Saturday's bomb blast which left twelve tourists injured, shows the level of concern about extremism within the Government, even before the attack.

He claims the Government had four hundred radicals in detention in 2006. "And by radicals I mean people preaching violence," Gunaratna says in an interview on his report.

Gunaratna describes "attempts by fundamentalists to enter Pakistan for ideological and perhaps other training," and says a Maldivian arrested in Pakistan has disclosed links to Al Qaeda.

## Education

Gunaratna's report echoes a Government briefing compiled by then Attorney General Dr Hassan Saeed and cabinet colleagues in March 2007.

The cabinet report called for an overhaul of the Maldives' Supreme Islamic Council, school curricula and the media, to allow the dissemination of moderate religious teachings.

Despite his background in counter-terrorism and security, Gunaratna's report also advocates a programme of "counter ideology," to reinforce the position of moderate Islam in the Maldives.

"There is still time to implement a strategy that places community engagement and rehabilitation, the so-called soft approach, at the heart of the counter-radical efforts," he suggests.

"The challenge for Maldives could be... to build Madrasas to groom and educate future scholars who could build a legacy of preserving [moderate] Maldives Islam."

## Divided Political Fabric

Gunaratna argues political parties in the polarised Maldives must come together to combat extremism, if "the image of an Asian paradise" is not to "be lost forever."

But hopes of a shoulder to shoulder response to the Malé explosion have all but disappeared.

Dr Saeed, who quit the government in August, launched a scathing attack on the President for, "failing to clamp down on extremism," within hours of the bomb detonating.

The main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party accused the President of "using the police to lock up his political opponents instead of delivering law and order."

Gayoom himself had already blamed the MDP for "jeopardizing the stability and peace of the country," and blamed his political opponents for the attack.

## Flirting With Extremists

Gunaratna's report touches on accusations levelled at both the Government and opposition.

He says it is imperative for the judicial system to be seen as, "credible and respected," rather than a political tool of the government.

"The population at large [must be able to] see that [extremists] being punished have committed actual crimes, rather than simply anger a political leader."

But he accuses the MDP of "flirting with extremists," warning, "the political opposition don't have a plan to deal with the Islamists who are supporting them, if they come to power."

### **Radicalisation**

Gunaratna report, written only this week warns, "reliance on the hard security approach may lead to further radicalisation, and perhaps more violence."

But the Government has so far reacted to the explosion forcefully.

A radical mosque in the capital Male' has been raided. And hundreds of police and soldiers are now laying siege to an illegal mosque on Himandhoo, the western island regarded as a haven for extremists in the Maldives since 2005.

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