

United Nations Human Rights Council, 61st Session
23 February to 31 March 2026
Item 6: Universal Periodic Review – Maldives
Speaker: Humanists UK representative: Laura Newlyn¹

We thank the Maldives for its engagement with the UPR process.

However, we are disappointed that no less than nineteen recommendations with a view to abolishing the death penalty have not been accepted.² Nor have recommendations to remove restrictions on citizenship for non-Muslims.³ We remain concerned that the Maldives will not enact legislation against discrimination on grounds of religion or belief,⁴ nor withdraw its reservation to article 18 of the ICCPR.⁵

We note that under the Penal Code criticising Islam is punishable by up to a year in prison. Conversion away from Islam is prohibited and may result in a loss of citizenship. However, judges may impose harsher punishments for religious crimes – and according to sharia jurisprudence such acts may be viewed as ‘apostasy’ and risk carrying the death penalty.⁶

A reservation against article 18 does not justify these violations of the rights of the non-religious and of individuals who do not adhere to the state religion, including converts away from Islam.

First, the Maldives remains bound by ICCPR Article 6, which limits the death penalty to the ‘most serious crimes’. The Human Rights Committee’s General Comment 36 states that under no circumstances can the death penalty be applied as a sanction against conduct which if criminalised at all is itself a violation of the Covenant. This includes apostasy.⁷

Second, the Committee’s General Comment 34 on article 19 states that blasphemy laws are incompatible with the Covenant, further highlighting that ‘it would be impermissible for any such laws to discriminate in favour of or against one religion or belief system, or its adherents over another, or the religious over the non-religious.’⁸

¹ Humanists UK is the operating name of the British Humanist Association.

² See UNHRC, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Maldives*, UN Doc A/HRC/61/9, 2 January 2026; and UNHRC, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Maldives, Addendum*, UN Doc A/HRC/61/9/Add.1, recommendations 135.6, 135.7, 135.16, 135.17, 135.18, 135.19, 135.20, 135.53, 135.54, 135.55, 135.56, 135.57, 135.59, 135, 60, 135.61, 135.62, 135.63, 135.64, and 135.65.

³ Ibid recommendations 135.45 and 135.46.

⁴ Ibid recommendations 135.39, 135.40, and 135.41,

⁵ Ibid recommendations 135.9, 135.10, and 135.11.

⁶ Humanists International, *Freedom of Thought Report: Maldives*, 8 October 2020, <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/asia-southern-asia/maldives/>

⁷ Human Rights Committee, *General Comment No. 36* UN Doc CCPR/C/GC/36, 3 September 2019 para 36, <https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/GC/36>.

⁸ Human Rights Committee, *General Comment No 34*, UN Doc CCPR/C/GC/34, 12 September 2011, para 48 <https://docs.un.org/en/CCPR/C/GC/34>

Third, ICCPR Article 26 requires all persons to have equal protection before the law without discrimination, and to have effective protection against discrimination including on grounds of religion.

We therefore urge the Maldives to guarantee the rights of all – including the non-religious and converts away from Islam – in line with the international human rights standards, such as those laid out in the ICCPR which it has ratified.