

Expat Christian Teacher Forced to Flee Maldives

Authorities in the Maldives last week had to transport a Christian teacher from India off one of the Islamic nation's islands after Muslim parents of her students threatened to expel her for "preaching Christianity."

On Wednesday night a group of angry Muslim parents stormed the government school on the island of Foakaindhoo, in Shaviyani Atoll, accusing Geethamma George of drawing a cross in her class, a source at Foakaindhoo School told Compass.

"There were only 10 teachers to defend Geethamma George when a huge crowd gathered outside the school," the source said by telephone. "Numerous local residents of the island also joined the parents' protest."

The school administration promptly sought the help of officials from the education ministry.

"Fearing that the teacher would be physically attacked, the officials took her out of the island right away," the source said. "She will never be able to come back to the island, and nor is she willing to do so. She will be given a job in another island."

A few days earlier, George, a social studies teacher, had drawn a compass to teach directions to Class VI students. But the students, who knew little English, mistook the drawing to be a cross and thought she was trying to preach Christianity, the source said. The students complained to their parents, who in turn issued a warning to the school.

Administrators at the school set up a committee to investigate the allegation and called for a meeting with parents on Thursday to present their findings. The committee found that

George had drawn a compass as part of a geography lesson.

“However, the parents arrived the previous night to settle the matter outside the school,” said the source. According to local newspaper Haveeru, authorities transferred George to the nearby island of Funadhoo “after the parents threatened to tie and drag her off of the island.”

The teacher, who worked at the school for three years, is originally from the south Indian coastal state of Kerala. Many Christians from Kerala and neighboring Tamil Nadu state in India are working as teachers and doctors in the Maldives.

Preaching or practicing a non-Muslim faith is forbidden under Maldivian law, which does not recognize any faith other than Islam. The more than 300,000 citizens of the Maldives are all Sunni Muslims.

A string of 1,190 islands in the Indian Ocean off Sri Lanka in South Asia, the Maldives is the only country after Saudi Arabia that claims to have a 100 percent Muslim population. As per its constitution, only a Muslim can be a citizen of the country. Importing any literature that contradicts Islam is against the law.

Many of the more than 70,000 expatriate workers in the Maldives are Christian, but they are allowed to practice their faith only inside their respective homes. They cannot even get together for prayer or worship in each other's houses – doing so has resulted in the arrest and deportation of expatriates in the past.

The Maldives was ruled by an authoritarian, conservative Muslim president, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, for 30 years. The nation became a multi-party democracy in 2008 with Mohamed Nasheed, from the largely liberal Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), as the new president.

Gayoom's right-wing party, the Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party

(DRP), however, managed to win a simple majority in the People's Majlis' as the parliament is known in the Maldives' in the 2009 parliamentary election. The Maldives follows the presidential system.

The DRP-led opposition often criticizes Nasheed's government, accusing it of being liberal in cultural and religious matters, which DRP leaders claim will have a bearing on the country's sovereignty and identity.

A key ally of the MDP, the Adhaalath Party, also holds conservative views on religion and culture.

Many in Maldivian society, along with religious and political leaders, believe religious freedom is not healthy for the nation's survival, although the Maldives does not perceive any threat from nearby countries.