

Maldives Arrests Indian Teacher for Owning Bible

Police in the island nation of Maldives held a teacher from India for about 15 days before deporting him on Oct. 14 for having a Bible in his house, a source said.

Shijo Kokkattu, a 30-year-old Catholic and teacher at the Raafainu School in Raa Atoll, had been arrested in late September after police found a Bible and a rosary in his house during a raid, a foreign source in the capital city of Male told Compass by phone.

Charging that Kokkattu was preaching his Christian faith in the Muslim nation, which recently tightened restrictions on preaching and practice of non-Islamic faiths, police took him to another island for interrogation and kept him in custody for more than two weeks, said the source, who requested anonymity.

Police raided his home after Kokkattu's colleagues found Christian materials on a school computer he had used and reported it to authorities. While downloading material from his pen drive, Kokkattu had mistakenly downloaded some Catholic songs in the Malayalam language (used in a south Indian state) and a picture of the Virgin Mary.

"The videos were in Indian, so I don't know what they were saying, but the images were Christian," school principal Mohamed Shiraj told Minivan News, an independent news portal based in the Maldives.

Kokkattu, a parishioner from Tellicherry Archdiocese in the south Indian state of Kerala, had been teaching at the school for two years.

"He was a very good teacher, we've not had any complaints of

him in the past,” the principal reportedly said.

Last year, Maldivian authorities rescued another Christian teacher from India when Muslim parents of her students threatened to throw her into the sea for “preaching Christianity” after she drew a compass in class, which they alleged was a cross. (See , “Muslims Force Expat Christian Teacher to Flee Maldives,” Oct. 5, 2010.)

The Maldives, a string of 1,190 islands boasting numerous white beaches in the Indian Ocean, is regarded as a tourist paradise visited by tens of thousands of Westerners each year. But it’s also a country that claims, like Saudi Arabia, that all of its more than 300,000 citizens are Sunni Muslims.

The country’s 2008 Constitution states that a “non-Muslim may not become a citizen of the Maldives.” Expatriates following other religions can practice their faith only individually and within their respective homes.

New Restrictions

Last month, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs published new regulations under the Protection of Religious Unity Act of 1994 in the government gazette, signaling a renewed commitment to control unlicensed preaching of Islam and propagation of non-Islamic religions in the country.

The Act outlaws promotion of anything that represents a religion other than Islam or any opinion that disagrees with Islamic scholars. It also prohibits use of any website, blog, newspaper or magazine that contradicts Islam. Any violation under the Act is punishable by an imprisonment of between two and five years, banishment or house arrest. Foreigners who are found proselytizing are to be deported, it says.

The new set of regulations maintains a longtime ban on propagation, display and expression of any religion other than Islam. It also prohibits translation of books with such content into the local language, Dhivehi.

The regulations state that only preachers licensed by the government are allowed to speak in public, and they must not create hatred towards people of any other religion—the latter stipulation has been criticized by members of Islamic organizations such as the Islamic Foundation of Maldives, who say that because the Quran speaks against Judaism and Christianity, they too should have the right to do so.

The regulations require foreign scholars to abstain from criticizing Maldives' social norms, domestic policies or laws. And media must not disseminate any information that "humiliates Allah or his prophets or the holy Quran or the Sunnah of the Prophet [Muhammad] or the Islamic faith."

The nation's tight control over religion is seen as a legacy of former authoritarian President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who ruled for 30 years until 2008, keeping religion and its institutions under his grip. He was particularly known for insulating the country against Wahhabi influence from Saudi Arabia and for checking alleged missionary activities by Christians.

President Mohamed Nasheed seeks to deviate from Gayoom's policies but has not been able to introduce any major reforms or ensure religious freedom. Any advocacy for individual rights is seen as a Western conspiracy to attack Islam in the country. Maldivian conservatives do not allow citizens to become atheists, and leaving Islam can attract violence and harassment by authorities.

Nasheed's moderate Maldivian Democratic Party does not have a majority in the parliament. In 2009, the main opposition party, the Maldivian People's Party led by Gayoom, won a majority in the parliamentary election.

Decades of carefully exercised political control over religious narrative in the Maldives has left in its wake a culture of intolerance among the general public unsympathetic

to wider views on non-Islamic religions and hostile to Islamic academics and Muslim religious scholars who espouse a more humane form of Islam.

A Minivan author wrote last month that many Maldivian lawmakers and senior government officials privately admit “their hands are tied when it comes to the issue of freedom of religion.” The author asserted that advocating universal human rights “is the easiest way of committing political suicide in the Maldives.”