

UK grants asylum to Maldives' ex-president Mohamed Nasheed

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Colombo: The former president of the Maldives said Monday that he's been granted political asylum in Britain where he had traveled for medical treatment on leave from serving a prison sentence in his country.

Mohamed Nasheed

Mohamed Nasheed, who was the Indian Ocean archipelago's first democratically elected leader, was sentenced to 13 years in prison last year for ordering the arrest of a senior judge while in office.

He traveled to Britain in January on medical leave apparently to undergo back surgery.

Nasheed was elected to office in 2008 in the country's first free election ending decades of autocratic rule by Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. However, Nasheed's order in 2012 to arrest the judge, whom he accused of bias and corruption, led to weeks of public protests and his subsequent resignation.

He failed in a second attempt at the presidency, losing to sitting President Yameen Abdul Gayoom, the half brother of the long-time autocrat, in the 2013 presidential election.

Nasheed's office in a statement quoted him as saying that "President Yameen has jailed every opposition leader and cracked down on anyone who dares to oppose or criticize him. In the past year, freedom of the press, expression and assembly have all been lost."

"Given the slide towards authoritarianism in the Maldives, myself and other opposition politicians feel we have no choice but to work in exile â€" for now."

Nasheed previously had been forced into exile for many years when Maumoon Abdul Gayoom was in power and he was jailed repeatedly for his pro-democracy activism. Before political parties were recognized in his country, Nasheed helped form the Maldivian Democratic Party while living in exile in Sri Lanka.

Britain's Home Office said in a statement that it does not comment on individual asylum cases.

The Maldives foreign ministry said in a statement that it is concerned about reports of Nasheed being granted political asylum even though it has yet to be officially confirmed.

The ministry's statement said Nasheed was given a medical leave on an exceptional basis and the latest development demonstrates that his motive in seeking the leave was to avoid serving his prison term.

"Further, the Government of the Maldives is disappointed, if confirmed, that the U.K. Government is allowing itself to be part of this charade, and further, is enabling an individual to circumvent his obligations under the law," the foreign ministry said. Nasheed's trial under Maldives' terrorism law last year drew wide local and international criticism for an apparent lack of due process.

The United Nations working group on arbitrary detention has also declared Nasheed's jailing illegal and called for his immediate release.

Maldives, which is best known for its luxury island resorts, has in recent years lost much of the democratic gains

reflected in Nasheed's 2008 election.

- AP