Amid political standoff, Maldives President Yameen Abdul Gayoom declares state of emergency fo

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Maldives President Yameen Abdul Gayoom

Male: The Maldives government declared a 15-day state of emergency today as the political crisis deepened in the Indian Ocean nation amid an increasingly bitter standoff between the president and the Supreme Court.Â

A surprise Supreme Court ruling last week ordering the release of imprisoned opposition leaders has led to growing turmoil, with the president lashing out at the court, opposition protests spilling into the streets of the capital, Male, and soldiers in riot gear deployed to the parliament building to stop lawmakers from meeting.Â The extent of the emergency order was not immediately clear.

â€œDuring this time though certain rights will be restricted, general movements, services and businesses will not be affected,â€• President Yameen Abdul Gayoom said in a statement issued after the state of emergency was announced on state television.

Exiled former President Mohammed Nasheed, Yameenâ€™s main political rival, is among the people ordered released by the court.

Yameen, in a letter to the court released by his office earlier today, said the order had encroached on the powers of the state and was an â€œinfringement of national security and public interest.â€• He urged the court to â€œreview the concernsâ€• of the government.

Officials say the court has not properly responded to a series of letters citing problems with implementing the order, including that the cases against the political prisoners are at different legal stages.

A Supreme Court statement on Sunday said â€œthere are no obstacles in implementing the ruling ... and that this has been informed to the Prosecutor Generalâ€™s office.â€• The Supreme Court ruled that the politiciansâ€™ guilty verdicts had been politically influenced. The ruling has led to protests by opposition supporters urging the government to obey the order.

Clashes have erupted between police and the opposition supporters. Soldiers have occupied the parliament building to stop lawmakers from entering.

The United Nations and several foreign governments, including the United States, have urged the Maldives to respect the court order.

Nasheed has been living in exile in Britain since 2016 after being given asylum when he traveled there on medical leave from prison.

In addition to ordering the release of the political prisoners, the court also reinstated 12 lawmakers who had been ousted for switching allegiance to the opposition.Â When those lawmakers return, Yameenâ€™s Progressive Party of the Maldives will lose its majority in the 85-member parliament, which could result in the legislative body functioning as a

rival power to the president.Â Known for its luxury tourist resorts, the Maldives became a multiparty democracy 10 years ago after decades of autocratic rule by the current presidentâ€™s half brother, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom.

But the nation lost much of its democratic gains after Yameen, who has maintained a tight grip on power, was elected in 2013. He had been set to run for re-election this year virtually unopposed, with all of his opponents either jailed or exiled.

On Friday, Nasheed said he would mount a fresh challenge for the presidency this year. Nasheed was sentenced to 13 years in prison after he was convicted under the Maldivesâ€™ anti-terror laws. The trial was widely condemned by international rights groups.

- AP