

The Rising Tide of Islamic Radicalism in the Maldives

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Islam in the Maldives has undergone something of a remarkable transformation, one that concerns a shift from moderation to radicalism. Evidence of this transformation isn't hard to come by: venture out any street in Male' (the capital city) and one is confronted by a sea of burkas – a sight unexpected a decade ago when burkas were rare. Worryingly, the newly elected Government, with Abdulla Yameen as president, just passed Sharia law. Granted, Islamic viewpoints have always infiltrated the semi-secular Maldivian legal system. But while aspects of Sharia law only popped up here and there, e.g. a ban on locals drinking alcohol, and having premarital sex – both of which were never policed anyway except as a way of settling political grudges – we are now heading towards a fully fledged, mostly literal, implementation of the law. Even more worryingly, 2007 saw the first ever terrorist attack: a bombing in Sultan Park in Male', which led to 12 foreigners being injured.¹ Further still, some Maldivian youths are now travelling overseas to fight for al-Qaida and ISIS.²

This is hardly the stuff of nightmares in comparison to recent, and extremely violent, insurgencies elsewhere, which have all been carried out in the name of Islam. And whilst one may acknowledge the sea change, one may question whether it is remarkable given the global trend towards radical Islam, and conservative religious values more generally. I, however, think the transformation in the Maldives is remarkable, and for two reasons in particular. First, the rate at which the process has occurred. Protagoras proclaimed man to be the measure of all things.³ I'll go one better, and declare myself to be this measure. To that extent, the aforementioned changes took place on a timeline from when I left the Maldives at the beginning of the new millennium to the present day: a mere 14 years. The significance of this, perhaps, is better appreciated when coupled with the second reason, i.e. the sheer scale of the transformation.

Part of the aim here is to explain this second reason. In particular, I want to delve into the Maldivian psyche, as well as its take on Islam – the one I grew up with – as a way of emphasizing just how far down the rabbit hole we've fallen. The other part is to consider some possible explanations for the change, with the hope that this will shed some light on how to reverse it. The broader goal is to view the radicalization in the Maldives as a case-study for the plurality of idiosyncratic reasons a country may head towards religious extremism. I hope, therefore, that this

will also make a modest contribution to the literature on nation-specific ways of combating fundamentalism.

The Old Islam

The Islam that I grew up with, and practiced, was vastly different to the Islam I encountered elsewhere, and almost unrecognizable from the one portrayed by Western media in the wake of 9/11. The five pillars of Islam were hemmed into the fabric of every child's religious education, but beyond that, any Islam taught concentrated on the life of the Prophet and the Muslim conquests. Islam in schools, then, was history, not theology.

There was even leeway with the famous five. While everyone acknowledged that praying five times a day, fasting during Ramadan, and going to Hajj once in one's life, were all part of being a good Muslim, these were also thought to be conditions defeasible by practical considerations. (Believing in God's oneness, and Muhammad being his last prophet, however, weren't negotiable). Only the really religious, i.e. the old and the rare pious baby boomer, and the rarer pious adolescent, ever woke up for the early morning prayer. Men and women who went to work almost never prayed during work hours, and nor was it expected. Having a convenient migraine was a perfectly good reason to not fast during Ramadan. And of course, any financial constraints were justifiable grounds for not making that trip to Mecca and Medina.

These attitudes towards Islam are still prevalent, but whilst they were once the majority, they are fast coming up against more radical, imported, takes on the faith. To compare, when I was growing up, terms like 'jihad,' 'fatwa', and 'halal' weren't terms that easily rolled off Maldivian tongues. I for one never heard them except in foreign news reports. Moreover, old-world stigmas like women not accompanying men in the workforce, or inculcating the virtues of men growing beards, were far from common.

In fact, my first acquaintance with a Muslim radical came in the form of a mild mannered middle-school Islam teacher. I don't recall anything atypical about him except that he had a longish beard – think less terrorist, more Williamsburg hipster – and like some of the latter, wore pants that looked a size too short. This penchant for ankle-baring was supposed to ensure a clean trouser-leg for the frequent prayer. The beard, however more significant, was in line with a newer form of Islam – i.e. new to the Maldives – that took everything the prophet Muhammad did as a *sunnah*: a virtue that gained one bonus points in piousness. These sunnah, though not strictly required like

the five pillars, were thought of as ways of expressing devotion, as well as accruing better credit-ratings to ensure more lavish dwellings in heaven. It is this fetishization of the accidental features of the prophet's life, which explains the Arabic aesthetic adopted by some of the holier Maldivian men.

Maybe I am making too much of a deal about something as trivial as tailoring. But it illustrates a not-so trivial point. From as early as the 1920's, Maldivian men wore western clothes, namely pants and shirts – with the exception being the traditional sarong, which was by then already deemed unstylish. And while 'sunnah', as a concept of Islam, was familiar, Maldivians didn't take too kindly to realizations of it, which were out of step with Islamist practices already in play. For instance, the first government response to the new radicals was to round them up and make them shave. Needless to say, there were days when middle-school Islam was taught by a sub.

An Implicit Moral Relativism

This heavy-handed response to radicalism was out of step with the more tolerant, even open, attitude Maldivians adopted towards westerners. But this is hardly surprising considering our collected history. The earliest known mention of the Maldives comes from the ancient Buddhist Jatakas, dating 300-250 B.C. This is followed by Roman documents *circa* 90 A.D, and then Chinese, from around 600 A.D.⁴ These documents tell the tale of a small, yet established, ancient nation-state. What's more, they also tell of its role as a significant trade route between East Asia and China on one side, and Africa, Saudi Arabia, and then greater Europe on the other.

The geography of the Maldives – a thousand plus islands forming a long atoll-shaped vertical line just south of India and to the west of Sri Lanka – renders it a convenient stopover for those embarking on more serious trade. This destination, at times, proved intrinsically worthwhile too, least not for its cowry shells, which were once used as the main source of currency, e.g. in the slave trade. The pristine white sandy beaches, where the aforementioned were found, also proved to be the country's undoing with respect to agriculture. Nothing really grew except coconut, banana and papaya trees. Subsequently, fish aside, Maldivians have always been reliant on other countries for food. This lack of resources, however, proved effective elsewhere – the Brits came but never bothered to colonize; why plunder when there's nothing to plunder?

I mention all of this as a way of emphasizing that Maldivians have, as far back as we know, routinely traded with far-flung travellers from the East and the West, as well as neighbours in

India and Sri Lanka. So when ‘the white man’ came at the turn of the century, which led to the establishment of the first tourist island, *Kurumba Village*, in 1972, and in turn the tourist boom, this didn’t constitute anything like what anthropologists call ‘first contact’, as it did elsewhere. Westerners, especially Brits, were treated as curiosities, as opposed to subjects of fear or hostility.

More crucially, the necessity of trade meant that Maldivians, like other historical trading communities, have long developed an openness to foreign merchants, a part of it which was a tolerance of their particular cultural idiosyncrasies. This attitude still prevailed in my youth, but appears to be under threat in the face of radicalism. Another reason for the tolerance, I venture, is tourism – a source on which the local economy is heavily reliant. Tourism, surely, wouldn’t have taken off in such a humdrum manner without the tolerance already in play due to foreign trade. Nonetheless, tourism must have also enhanced it.

Of course, one may wonder whether this tolerance was just a disguised Machiavellian way of ‘exploiting the infidels’. Here I can only appeal to anecdotal evidence. The Maldivians that have the most contact with tourists are resort staff: waiters, tour guides, diving instructors, windsurf instructors, catamaran instructors ... (you get the picture). Of those of whom I’ve met – men and women predominantly from the working classes and always on the younger side – most seemed to be intelligent, warm folk who had picked up conversational fluency in French, Italian, Japanese etc., and appeared to show genuine affection towards their guests.

Maldivians, on appearances, then, were genuinely open and tolerant towards westerners. So why were radical Islamists, at least initially, persecuted? One answer is that countries that have long histories of interaction with foreigners develop a culture-preserving mechanism, which is inwardly conservative whilst outwardly liberal. Such a mechanism would ensure a system of openness and tolerance towards outsiders, especially if the outsiders in question are crucial for the local economy. Nevertheless, it would simultaneously prove intolerant of any local attempts at adopting foreign customs, which it deems a threat to its culture and religion.

This is symptomatic of a moral relativism grounded in a cultural one. Cultural relativism, as espoused by anthropologist Franz Boas in the late 19th Century, is just the view that different cultures have different moral codes.⁵ This rather uncontroversial thesis, however, often gets used to argue for a much more controversial one: moral relativism, which is the doctrine that any given moral truth is only true relative to a particular theoretical framework, be it historical, cultural etc.

An argument for moral relativism premised on cultural relativism is fallacious. Consider: different cultures differ as to whether the earth is round. Therefore truths concerning the earth's shape are relative. Truths are one thing; people's beliefs are another. The latter doesn't entail the former.⁶

Moral relativism, though logically suspect, has a desirable effect. It promotes tolerance, for we can't criticize the practices of other cultures, which we deem immoral, if our own moral codes only hold salt within our own specific cultural paradigms. Maldivian morality, I propose, is unique because it doesn't promote tolerance *simpliciter* – which we can gather from its initial response to radicalism – but does so within a relativist framework; one that is inwardly critical but outwardly coolheaded.

Further evidence for this comes from contrasting judgments we make concerning tourist behaviour, and Maldivian actions, which mimic them. Tourist resorts are hotbeds for bikinis and booze. Whilst the former are known for raising the pulse rates of any pubescent Maldivian boys lucky enough to catch a glimpse, neither is regarded as anything out of the ordinary. The fact is, in my youth, Maldivians just were very gung-ho towards tourist behaviour, including that which was far from Islamic. But let a Maldivian woman bath in a bikini, even a modest 30's one-piece, and she will be the subject of derision. The same goes for any locals daring enough to order a *Sex On the Beach*, or any of the other over-priced tropical cocktails on offer at luxury resorts.

These breaches, let me stress, were never any real causes for concern. You couldn't, for instance, get arrested for boozing unless you performed a drunken waltz on one of the main streets of Male'. And I certainly don't know of anyone arrested, let alone taken in for questioning, for indecent exposure in the form of a swimsuit. These were largely private affairs, to be sorted out, if at all, by one's family. Perhaps they brought shame to the family for being un-Islamic, but more importantly, they were also a class of a more serious crime: they were un-Maldivian.

Explaining Radicalism

So what are the actual changes taking place towards radicalism, and what accounts for them? If the Maldivian moral psyche is inherently relativist, it allows for the possibility that we grow inwardly more extreme with our religious interpretations, whilst keeping our outward moderation intact. On all accounts, it appears that there still remains an asymmetry in the way we hold the moral conduct of our own up to much more scrutiny than that of others. Nevertheless, the terrorist

attack, which targeted tourists, the viral YouTube video of an officiant secretly deriding a western bride and groom in Dhivehi as swine etc., would indicate that some of the relativism is also slipping.

The slip can be explained by the radicalism itself. The explanation can be indirect: there's only so much you can tolerate when your moral compass errs on the side of the extreme. But it can also be direct: part of what it is to be a radical is to disavow any credence to one being wrong, and hold strongly to the belief that not only should you abide by these (alleged) objective moral principles, but everyone else ought to as well. Since a dwindling relativism can be accounted for by the puritanical objectivism symptomatic of radicalism, the more interesting question is what accounts for the new radicalism itself?

I propose a two-pronged answer, both of which concern an ignorance of Islam. My thesis is this: an ignorance of Islam, *qua* its more radical interpretations, explains the moderation, which we have enjoyed for so long. Moreover, an ignorance of Islam, *qua* the more scholarly liberal readings, explains why we are quickly forsaking such moderation for fundamentalism. As is evident, these two types of ignorance differ, and so let me explain each in turn, whilst explaining how they bear on our question.

Ignorance & Moderation

The Maldives boasts a literacy level of 99%⁷, with children being taught Arabic and English, as well as Dhivehi (the local dialect). But there is an oddity in the way these languages get taught, which will surely strike non-Maldivian readers as astounding. That is, only English and Dhivehi were taught in any way that ensured we knew what their words meant.

Why the heck would anyone teach you how to read and write without telling you the meanings of the words? Perhaps this is partly because one didn't have to. While kids learnt how to read and write Dhivehi at home and in pre-school, the meanings of the words would have been familiar already just by growing up in an environment where Maldivian was the only spoken dialect. English words, on the other hand, would have been less familiar, but the adaptation of an English medium in the 1960's – with subjects like math, geography, physics etc. being taught in English – ensured that no one left the school system without basic conversational English. Regrettably no such systems were in place to guarantee any sort of meaningful knowledge of Arabic.

But why? The question needs emphasis. Why would a nation that proudly proclaims to be 100% Muslim, and whose subjects believe Arabic to be the language spoken in heaven, not ensure that its children understand Arabic? The answer, I claim, has to do with the, frankly utterly dumb, way Maldivians have historically understood the Quran, and by extension, Islam. The first words of the Quran – relayed to Muhammad via the angel Gabriel – are as follows: “Read [O Muhammad!] in the name of your lord who created” (96.1).⁸ Maldivians have understood this verse in the most literal sense, i.e. to read, ... more precisely *to recite*, and to recite the Quran in particular.

So. All our kids are taught to how to read Arabic, and to dutifully recite the Quran in Arabic. Why the “Read” command wasn’t interpreted as reading the Quran in your own dialect, or as reading the Quran in Arabic *with an emphasis on what it actually says* I don’t know. It defies logic, and it hurts my head just thinking about it. Some of course do read the translation, be it in English or Dhivehi, or some also know pidgin Arabic, and *ergo* read the Quran in a way that is roughly comprehensible to them. For the most part, though, Maldivians just recite the Quran with no understanding of its content. The same goes for the content of the five daily prayers, which we also recite in Arabic.

What this all entails is that we have been largely operating under a religious manifesto that has been exceedingly thin: adhere to the five pillars of Islam and not much more. This, I confess, is an oversimplification. There have been influences from overseas Islam scholars, mainly from the Arab world, here and there, and we also seemed to have adopted some culture-specific religious practices, like paying an imam-like figure to recite the Quran in our living-rooms Friday morning. Nevertheless, such influences weren’t commonplace, whilst the practices were largely inane. This is significant because it describes an Islamic tradition, which left plenty of room for religious moderation and tolerance.

The New Islam

All of this began to change when we began to interact with our neighbours in a way that was more meaningful than commerce. That is, we began to look for them to educate our brightest – and it should be noted, well-connected. I left the Maldives the year it officially introduced a degree program: A Bachelor of Arts in Dhivehi Language. (‘Umm ... no thanks!’ was the resounding answer from my generation). An absence of any university education notwithstanding, the higher-education system was also generally viewed as being poor. So by the

time it was my turn for high school, the benchmark had already been set. At least as far back as the 40's, there were government initiatives to educate Maldivians abroad. I followed suit, representing a long-line of adolescent Maldivians who weren't part of the chosen few, but who could afford to leave.

Where did we send our young? Anywhere. And everywhere. Nowadays, the destinations transpire, roughly, along in-come lines. The rich send their kids to England, while the poor, to India and Sri Lanka. Those whose parents fall in the middle end up going to Malaysia, Australia, or New Zealand. (I went to the latter). Of course, these are clichés. I know of Maldivians studying in North America, greater Europe, even Cuba and Somalia. But to understand the root of radicalism, we need to understand the initial government-sponsored trips, especially those to Islamic countries, e.g. the gulf Arab states, or those on the other side, like Egypt.

The most influential Maldivian ruler, and the president during my years in the Maldives, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, was himself a product of a government-funded program in Egypt. As far as I know, no official documents have been made available concerning Gayoom's education, but his Wikipedia page (ever a reliable source!) reads as follows:

“Gayoom attended al-Azhar University. He spent six months learning Arabic. He joined the faculty and graduated with honors in 1966, at the top of his class. He was congratulated by Gamal Abdel Nasser. He also obtained another degree in the same field at the American University in Cairo”.

Now, as a university professor, I know of no universities that confer degrees in six months. And it remains unclear why Egypt's then president, Nasser, would see it his duty to personally congratulate a foreigner for gaining top in his class. Regardless, whilst Gayoom's formal education was in Arabic, his time in Egypt gave him enough know-how to teach Islam at the Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria, and then at Aminiyya School (the prominent girl's high school in Male'). This is all relevant because the current state of Islam in the Maldives cannot be explained without explaining the influence of Gayoom's turn in office from 1978 to 2008.

Let me proceed with two caveats. First, it is not my aim here to take political sides with regards to the much-polarized political situation in the Maldives. (The newly elected president, Abdulla Yameen, is Gayoom's brother, and the two have being accused of staging the police-led protests, which resulted in the 2012 resignation of Mohamed Nasheed – the first democratically elected president of the Maldives. Nasheed alleges that he was forced at gunpoint). Second, nor is it my

intention to point the finger at Gayoom, specifically, as the source of fundamentalism. Gayoom wasn't a radical; his Islam was informed by the Egyptian take on the faith, which was relatively moderate. But it should also be stressed that Gayoom, whilst not being an Islamic Scholar (he studied Arabic, not Islam), was an Islamist reformer. In his capacity as an autocratic leader, he implemented several measures that were unprecedentedly pro-Islam. For example, in 1994, Gayoom passed the Protection of the Religious Unity Act, which prohibited the practice of any religion other than Islam. Two years later, he established the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, whose role included 'governing the religious views of the general public'.⁹

Maybe I was too young, but I certainly don't recall there being much fuss over the new regulations. Most of the more serious measures implemented on advice of the Council, like a ban on importing non-Islamic religious paraphernalia, only affected foreigners, and was thereby greeted with apathy. The lesser measures, which did affect locals, appeared gerrymandered, e.g. a ban on New Year's Eve discos, whilst allowing for rock concerts. Such measures were greeted with mere annoyance and ridicule.

The new changes were implemented pretty smoothly. Nonetheless, they were striking in two respects: one, they went against the grain of the pre-established moral relativist outlook. For the first time, there were official sanctions, which prohibited the religious freedom of not just Maldivians, but significantly, anyone who lived in the Maldives as well. How much the local public actually internalized this new attitude is hard to say. Granted, non-religious activities, like drinking, were still allowed for both resident expats and tourists. But here we were, or rather, our government, dictating how foreigners should live on our sandy shores. Paradise was beginning to be intolerant, though not yet intolerable.

The second respect with which the changes were striking concerns the new push towards Islamic education of the Maldivian public, especially its youth. I recall attending several public lectures on Islam by visiting Arabic scholars, clerics, etc., all sanctioned by the Council. (I don't recall being forced to go, but these were probably viewed as extra-curricular activity by my state-run school). Such lecture series, which were often televised, expanded the existing sparser Islamic palate, and saw the seeds for a new kind of Islam – an austere one, which reflected the attitudes of the more radical segments of the Persian Gulf.

During this time, radicalism was still in its infancy. Some Maldivians were turning, but the attitude of the majority appeared to be one of nonchalance. For example, I remember a friend or two who stopped listening to rock music, and likewise, the occasional distant relative, e.g. some

third-cousin once removed, who started wearing a burka. But meanwhile, most of us were still listening to Nirvana, and cycling around the streets of Male', trying to catch a glimpse of our sweethearts, who in turn were busy pining for Leo DiCaprio.

Radicalism really took off in the second and third-waves of Maldivian students studying abroad. The Islamic world had by that time shifted. It would be a mistake to declare this world as always being radical for that rests on equivocating between devotion and fundamentalism. Some, I'm sure, have always carried elements of fundamentalism, but the shift concerns one where intolerant, tyrannical versions of Islam began to hold sway. A lot of youths that attended universities in these nations came back unscathed, and with well-earned degrees to boot. But there were some, especially those that attended Islamist schools or 'madrassas' in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, who came back with a less than sunny disposition towards westerners, or Maldivians for that matter who steered off the dusty path trodden by Muhammad.

Worryingly, the Gayoom years (rather, decades) saw more and more state-funded education initiatives in such nations, and elsewhere, well-meaning parents were happily, and routinely, shipping their teens off to subsidized or even free madrassas. Radicalism, subsequently, matured and became a worthy opponent to the relativist, moderate Islam of yesteryear.

Ignorance & Immoderation

Why did radicalism in Islam spread so quickly, and with such ease? The answer, again, has to do with ignorance. Maldivians have historically been ignorant of Islamic theology, which made it easy for us, especially those of us who already leaned towards the pious side of the spectrum, to swallow any theological pill, insofar as it was Islamist. I was taught in school that we were Sunni Muslims, but sectarian divides within Islam really had held no real significance, for these divides were never actually explained. What it did do, however, was make it easy for Sunni clerics to indoctrinate Maldivians with their own particular brand of Sunni-ism. This in itself needn't have been a bad thing, for the indoctrination could have come from one of the more liberal branches of Sunni Islam. As it so happens, this isn't how things transpired.

The type of Sunni-ism propagated in the cheaper or free madrasas in Saudi Arabia, i.e. the ones that accepted most second and third generation Maldivian students, was Salafism: a strict, literal and puritanical version of Islam. Perhaps all sectarian divides, including inter-religious ones, need to be understood within their political sub-contexts. But this is definitely the case for getting to

grips with Salafism, not least because Salafists follow the teachings of 17th Century scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, who also co-founded the first Arab state.

Al Wahhab's ideology, in essence, is revivalist: it rejects all contemporary Islamic scholarship, and aims at a more traditional Islam, by interpreting the Quran literally, and disavowing any religious activities it deems modern.¹⁰ But this in turn has also bred a form of Saudi nationalism, which cherry-picks certain Arabic customs and turns them into sunnah, by alleging them to be the actual practices of Muhammad. No wonder, then, that Salafism came into prominence in the second half of the 19th Century as a reaction to the rising influence of the West.¹¹

Even to this day, al Wahhab's influence cannot be understated. In founding The Emirate of Diriyah, with him as its Imam, and Muhammad bin Saud as its crown prince, the two brokered a power sharing deal that continues to this day amongst their decedents, who still remain in control.¹² This explains why Saudi Arabia continues to pour its oil wealth into funding Salafist education initiatives, even though such programs have led to the creation of ISIS, which could one day threaten Saudi authority.¹³

What has this got to do with Islam in the Maldives? Well, the simple answer is nothing! A contentious, backward looking, brand of Islam that promulgates cultural and religious intolerance as a shrewd way of maintaining Saudi rule should really have nothing to do with the moderate and relativist seeming Islam of the old Maldives. The only reason for entertaining Salafism, since we don't have a stake in Saudi politics or oil, must rest on its being a legitimate form of Sunni Islam. But it is precisely here that Salafism proves ideologically controversial.

The Islamic Caliphate, which was established right after Muhammad's death, split into two versions of Islam, *viz.* Sunni and Shi'a, with the latter favouring the teaching of the 4th Caliph, Ali, over those of the 1st, Abu Bakr. Both systems gave way to rich, powerful – and it should be stressed, liberal and multinational – empires, e.g. the Sunni Ottoman, and the Shi'a Persian, Empires. Moreover, they also gave way to different sub-branches of Islam, individuated based on their take on Islamic jurisprudence.¹⁴ Salafism, in this way, proves controversial *qua* a form of Sunnism on grounds that it rejects the four schools of thought to which Sunni's typically subscribe with regards to Islamic law.¹⁵ Since they reject the Shi'a schools as well, one may question whether Salafism adheres to any traditional form of Islamic jurisprudence whatsoever. But such baiting questions aside, these differences have led many Sunni's to distance themselves from Salafism, or what they call Wahhabism.

Wahhabism and Islamic fundamentalism are two notions that get conflated in the Maldives. Whilst there are Islamic fundamentalists who aren't Wahhabis, the conflation is understandable given that the fundamentalists in the Maldives have always been those subscribing to Wahhabism. Nonetheless, what is more serious, and recent, is the conflation between Wahhabism and being a devout Muslim. If we, as Maldivians, awake at the turn of the century with the realization that Islam is a much more dense, complicated, religion than what we originally thought, we owe it to ourselves to delve right into the heart of the matter. We simply can't be complacent any longer, and take Wahhabism to be the one true Islam – not without further inquiry anyway.

A Way Forward

The explanation of the rise of Islamic radicalism can be summed up as follows. The first generation of Maldivian students who studied in Islamic countries came back with a moderate, though austere and more demanding version of Islam. Some of these students became highly influential; one became the autocratic leader, while others his cabinet ministers. During this regime, Islamist reforms were set in place, including new stricter laws, Islamist propaganda, and a further push towards foreign Islamist *qua* Salafist education. This, in turn, led to the more radical and intolerant Islam, informed by Salafism, which is found in some subsections of Maldivian society today.

I hypothesized that the imported fundamentalist, Salafist Islam has been spreading with relative ease due to a lack of Islamist scholarship, and an ignorance of the multitude of ways of realizing the Sunni faith. If this is correct, the path back to moderation must involve a more well-rounded Islamist education, and open dialogue about an Islam that would work for us.

“Could you persuade us if we don't listen?” poses a bullying Polemarchus to Socrates in Plato's Republic.¹⁶ Convincing Maldivians to reason about Islam will be difficult for at least three reasons. First, the education system in the Maldives centers on rote-learning, and critical thinking, if not always scorned, is never emphasized. Thus starting to think critically about anything, let alone something as significant as one's religion, will prove both difficult and foreign.

Second, examining Islam, in particular, will prove hard given the concept of 'Muruthadhuvun' – the closest translation I can think of is something that falls somewhere in between blasphemy and apostasy. Any probing questions, as to the nature of God, the afterlife, etc., that aren't in

scripture, as well as any justifications sought for religious assumptions and the like, are greeted with declarations of ‘Muruthadhuvun’. The idea, roughly, is that the inquirer, in asking these questions, has inevitably yielded his or her faith. So the lesson is, don’t ask these questions, for that would make you a non-Muslim *de facto*. I’m not sure where this notion comes from, i.e. whether it is embedded in Wahhabism, but it appears to be a self-defence mechanism designed to ward off embarrassing questions.

Third, and certainly as a result of the second, recent intellectual discourses on Islam have resulted in violence, even death. For instance, in 2012, Islamic scholar, and an advocate for a more moderate Islam, Afrasheem Ali, was murdered on his way home after discussing his views on a television show. He was stabbed four times on the back of his head.¹⁷ This certainly makes any call for moderation a dangerous, even deadly affair, and gives any well-meaning liberal much to think about before espousing his or her views in any kind of public forum.

Still, we must press on. Maldivians must learn to stop accusing those who raise hard questions with blasphemy-cum-apostasy, and they must be willing to listen, learn, and even criticize. Without such measures, more of our well-intending, naïve youth will be recruited to fight for al-Qaida, ISIS, and future Islamist terror-organizations. At home, more bombings, violence, and murders will happen, which in turn will have a devastating effect on tourism, and *ergo* the local economy. Finally, the Maldivian spirit, which has for so long been open and tolerant, might forever be lost. There is, therefore, simply too much at stake for us to be carried along with the current tide.

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