

Press release

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For immediate release.

The Criminal Court's conviction on 19 January 2022 of two, the acquittal of four, accused in Maldivian blogger and human rights defender, Yameen Rasheed's murder trial.

Yameen Rasheed, 29, a prominent Maldivian blogger and human rights defender, was brutally murdered on 23 April 2017. The Criminal Court trial began in September 2017. On 19 January 2022, the Criminal Court convicted Ismail Haisham Rasheed and Ahmed Zihan Ismail of murder; and acquitted Hussain Ziyad, Hassan Shifaz, Mohamed Dhifraan and Ismail Rasheed citing insufficient evidence.

The convicts were sentenced to life imprisonment. The court sought Yameen's parents' wishes on the part of *qisas* requirements during the verdict proceedings. Yameen Rasheed's mother chose to refuse the death penalty against the two defendants and opted for *diya* - the Islamic law concept of compensation for killing.

"The life of my son is invaluable. Yameen advocated fiercely against the death penalty and I do not wish to ask for it in his name. I have always respected and admired Yameen's kindness and his belief that the right to life is fundamentally inherent to every human being." – Mariyam Shafeeqa, mother of Yameen Rasheed.

Yameen Rasheed's family has requested the Prosecutor General that the cases of those acquitted be appealed within the timeframe. We remind authorities that the Prosecutor General failed to appeal the cases of those accused of the enforced disappearance of journalist Ahmed Rilwan, after they were acquitted in 2018.

In consideration of the trial, we believe the authorities' impartiality and professionalism were compromised during the criminal investigation and prosecution. Therefore, we call on the Deaths and Disappearances Commission to thoroughly and expeditiously investigate Yameen's extrajudicial killing and forward the case to prosecutors.

The family's concerns over the murder trial are as follows:

1. All six defendants were charged with first-degree murder. This is the main reason why those who were essentially accessories to the murder were acquitted. The court also raised this issue as to why other defendants—who did not physically attack Yameen but assisted in it—were not charged with aiding and abetting instead. The prosecutor general ignored the family's concerns on these prosecutorial flaws. Yameen Rasheed's family requested the Prosecutor General to lead the case in court due to its serious nature, however the request was refused.

2. The court noted that crucial pieces of forensic evidence were not submitted and that the 'chain of custody' document, provided by the police, had errors. Maldives Police Service and Prosecutor General's Office have a supervisory role over forwarding these evidentiary documents to the court. It is alarming that their actions have obstructed justice.
3. Severe and unreasonable delaying tactics were used by the defence lawyers to obstruct the course of justice. The court and prosecution were not able to efficiently object to delay tactics from the defence lawyers. Maldives Correctional Service also failed to produce defendants in court several times.
4. None were arrested, investigated, or charged for financing or ordering the killing. Local clerics who may have inspired these attacks and created a climate of hatred were not a part of the investigation. The Court was unable to summon political activist Zahid Rameez for his role in threatening Yameen in 2011 and 2012 on social media.
5. Closed preliminary hearings from September 2017 to October 2018 went ahead behind closed doors upon the previous Prosecutor General's request.
6. Four key witnesses reported threats and refused to testify. None of the allegations of witness intimidation was thoroughly investigated or prosecuted.
7. The Court was unable to summon political activist Zahid Rameez for his role in threatening Yameen in 2011 and 2012 on social media.
8. The lead judge presiding over the case changed three times over the course of the trial, contributing to the delays.

"Six random youth could not have organised a murder and have four of them get away with it. I want to know why the police have after almost five years, not been able to identify the people behind my brother's murder. Why were they not charged adequately? Why did the Prosecutor General's Office take the easy way out?". Aishath Rasheed, Yameen Rasheed's sister.

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