



International Foundation
for Electoral Systems

Elections in the Maldives

2021 Local Council Elections

Frequently Asked Questions

Asia-Pacific

International Foundation for Electoral Systems

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Frequently Asked Questions

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Please note that these FAQs were originally published on April 1. They were updated on April 7 to provide more detail on the types of islands in the Maldives.

When is Election Day?

The Maldives' Local Council elections, initially scheduled to take place on April 4, 2020, were delayed to April 10, 2021, as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The last Local Council elections were held in May 2017.

In May 2020, the government of the Maldives passed the Local Council Elections Special Provision Act, which states that elections could not be conducted in the Maldives unless authorities lift the Public Health Emergency status and guarantee that there is no risk in conducting the elections. In January 2021, the government authorized the first amendment to the Special Provision Act, calling for the Elections Commission of the Maldives and other relevant authorities to move forward with the election.

Why are these elections important?

In the 2021 Local Council elections, Maldivian citizens will vote for members and presidents of island-, city- and atoll-level councils, collectively referred to as "Local Councils." Island Councils are grouped into administrative units, called atolls, which are governed by Atoll Councils.¹ Cities are defined as islands that have a population of at least 10,000 registered residents; have achieved a certain level of economic growth; and can independently provide education, banking and transportation services for their population and other peripheral islands. In addition to governing the affairs of the city itself, City Councils oversee the affairs of nearby uninhabited or resort islands that fall under their jurisdiction.

In total, 982 representatives will be elected to govern 200 Local Councils, divided as follows:

- 46 seats on four City Councils;
- 918 seats on 178 Island Councils; and
- 18 seats on 18 Atoll Councils (in addition to the 178 island councilors who also serve on the Atoll Councils).

The 2021 elections will be the Maldives' fourth Local Council elections since Local Councils were first introduced in 2010. Recognizing that the Maldives' population is scattered across nearly 1,200 islands, which include approximately 200 inhabited islands, 400 resort islands and 600 uninhabited islands, Local Councils can play a key role in enabling citizen engagement in government and ensuring that citizens in more remote or less populated areas continue to have access to the services they need. Perhaps most significant for this election, current President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih has pledged to increase the budget for and autonomy of Local Councils² and implement provisions of the Decentralization Act that,

¹ The terms "island" and "atoll" here refer to administrative areas in Maldives legislation, not to geographic features.

² Mohamed Junayd, "Local Council Elections Scheduled for April 2020." *Maldives Independent*, August 28, 2019. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/local-council-elections-scheduled-for-april-2020-147620>

while passed in 2010, have yet to be fully operationalized.³ One such provision, as outlined in the Eighth Amendment of the Decentralization Act, authorized by President Solih in December 2019, enables Local Councils to access up to 40 percent of revenue collected by the government of the Maldives, significantly increasing the resources available to local government bodies.^{4,5} Other notable developments enabled through the Eighth Amendment include expansion of natural boundaries under the jurisdiction of Local Councils, introduction of a quota of 33 percent of women in Local Councils and expansion of the terms for Local Council and Women’s Development Committees (WDC) from three to five years.

In addition to introducing a quota, the Eighth Amendment also changed the election process for members of the WDCs, who serve in an advisory capacity to the Island and Atoll Councils. For the first time, WDC representatives will be elected through the Local Council elections, with both men and women casting ballots for WDC candidates. WDC elections were previously conducted through a separate election administered by the Local Government Authority in coordination with Island Councils, rather than the Elections Commission of Maldives, with only female voters eligible to vote for WDC representatives from their respective islands.

In light of recent decentralization reforms and demonstrated commitment from the central government to advance the decentralization goals, the new local councilors and WDC members will have a critical mandate to enact the provisions laid out in the Decentralization Act.

What is the government and electoral system?

The Maldives is a democratic republic based on the principles of Islam. It has had a multiparty system since 2005. Current President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih was elected in September 2018. The unicameral People’s Majlis is the legislative body of the Maldives.

Local Councils were first introduced in 2010 with the Decentralization Act.⁶ Local Council members are elected through a first-past-the-post system. According to Article 232 of the Maldives Constitution, Local Councils provide for democratic and accountable governance, foster economic development and well-being and establish a safe and healthy environment, along with other duties specified by law. As outlined in the Decentralization Act, the various council functions include:

- Overseeing economic development for local communities;
- Formulating and implementing relevant policies for development and administration;
- Managing local budgets and public resources; and
- Ensuring community services, such as maintaining roads and infrastructure; providing for waste disposal; and administering health, education and other public and social services.

³ Shaany, Aishath. “President Solih ratifies amendment to Decentralization Act.” Raajje, December 15, 2019. <https://raajje.mv/67780>

⁴ “Decentralization Act – 8th Amendment.” Ministry of Finance, Republic of Maldives. 2019.

⁵ “President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih Ratified Amendments to the Decentralization Act.” Avas Maldives. December 15, 2019. <https://avas.mv/en/74879>

⁶ Maldives Ministry of Home Affairs. [Act](#) on Decentralization of the Administrative Divisions of the Maldives. 2010.

In addition to these responsibilities, Atoll Councils, the largest local government units, are responsible for monitoring and evaluating development programs on islands; making economic decisions related to buying, leasing or investing in land and resources for the atoll; and serving as the primary connection between the Island and City Councils and central levels of government.

The electoral legal framework for the Maldives consists of [the Constitution](#), [Elections Commission Act](#), [Elections General Act](#), Decentralization Act, [Local Council Elections Act](#), Political Parties Regulations and [Local Council Elections Regulations](#).

What is the election management body? What are its powers?

The Elections Commission of the Maldives (ECM) was established under the 2008 Constitution to “conduct and supervise all state elections and public referendums as well as to monitor the regulatory framework pertaining to the functioning of political parties.”⁷ The ECM has five members who are appointed by the president and approved by the People’s Majlis.

As outlined in Article 170 of the Constitution, the ECM’s responsibilities include: 1) conducting, managing, supervising and facilitating all elections and public referendums; 2) preparing the electoral rolls; 3) declaring results for elections and public referendums; 4) compiling and revising the register of voters in each constituency; 5) fixing, demarcating and reviewing constituency boundaries; 6) registering political parties; and 7) conducting voter education outreach. The voter register is compiled with information from the Department of National Registration.

Who is eligible to run as a candidate?

Candidates running in the election must be Maldivian citizens and may not be dual citizens. Candidates may be naturalized citizens provided they have been citizens of and living in the Maldives for at least five years. Candidates must be at least 18 years of age, be Sunni Muslims and be of “sound mind.”⁸ Additionally, candidates may not be full-time students.

Candidates are disqualified from running if they have been convicted of a criminal offense or sentenced to a term of one year or longer, unless pardoned at least three years prior to registration as a candidate. Candidates also cannot have been convicted of certain offenses that violate Islamic law, including corruption, fraud, bribery, drug-related offenses or crimes against children. Candidates may not have outstanding debts. Civil servants may run as candidates but must resign their positions as civil servants if elected as council members.

Candidates can be sponsored by political parties or may run independently. Political parties must be registered with the government of the Maldives.

⁷ Elections Commission of Maldives, “About Us.” <https://www.elections.gov.mv/en/ec/ecm/About-Us.html>

⁸ Commonwealth Observer Group, “Maldives Parliamentary Elections.” April 6, 2019. https://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/MaldivesFinalReport_13-06-19.pdf

Article 3 of Local Council Elections Special Provision Bill (2020), states that, despite the yearlong delay in holding the Local Council elections due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Elections Commission of the Maldives (ECM) will not receive new candidacy applications and will regard the list of candidates registered as of March 6, 2020, as the final list of candidates.⁹ A total of 2,236 candidates are running in the Local Council elections, and 1,580 are running in the Women’s Development Committee elections. The government and the ECM maintain that re-opening candidacy applications is not feasible, as it would further delay the electoral timeline. This stance has drawn criticism from the public, and a member of the Jumhooree Party subsequently filed a case citing the decision’s potential infringement on an individual’s right to run in the election, particularly for those who turned 18 after the March 2020 deadline and therefore are newly eligible to serve as candidates.¹⁰

What are the campaign expenditure and donation limits?

A candidate may spend up to MVR 2,000 (USD 130) per constituent who is eligible to vote in the constituency where the candidate is running. Individual contributions made to each candidate cannot exceed 0.5 percent of the total amount specified for each candidate’s campaign expenditure limits. Legal entities’ contributions cannot exceed 2 percent of the campaign’s expenditures.

For example, in a constituency comprised of 5,000 eligible voters, the candidate may spend up to MVR, 2,000 per voter, for a total campaign expenditure limit of MVR 10 million (USD 640,000). Therefore, individual contributions to that candidate cannot exceed 0.5 percent of MVR 10 million, or MVR 10,050,000 (USD 642,500). Contributions from legal entities cannot exceed 2 percent of the campaign expenditure limit, with a contribution limit of MVR 10,200,000 (USD 652,000).

What is the level of women’s representation?

Women are “severely underrepresented” in all levels of politics in the Maldives,¹¹ holding only four of the 87 seats in the Maldivian National Parliament.¹² In 2019, the Decentralization Act was amended to reserve one-third of Local Council seats for women, the first quota of its kind in the Maldives.¹³ In the 2021 Local Council elections, 370 Island Council seats and 14 City Council seats will be reserved for women.¹⁴ If all 384 seats are indeed filled by women, women’s local-level representation will exceed 33 percent.

In addition to Local Council seats for women, each island has one Women’s Development Committee (WDC). As outlined in the 2010 Decentralization Act, WDCs serve as advisory bodies to the Island and Atoll Councils. WDCs are responsible for upholding the rights of women and increasing their political participation, as well as other efforts to improve conditions for women. For the first time, WDC

⁹ People’s Majlis. “Local Council Elections Special Provision Bill 2020.” 2020. <https://majlis.gov.mv/en/19-parliament/parliament-work/472>.

¹⁰ Sun Online. “High Court to Begin Hearings in limitation of candidacy in LCE.” 2021. <https://en.sun.mv/64837>

¹¹ Human Rights Watch. “Maldives Events of 2019.” 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/maldives>

¹² “Maldives: Majlis (People’s Majlis).” Inter-Parliamentary Union. <https://www.ipu.org/parliament/MV>

¹³ Shaany, Aishath. “President Solih ratifies amendment to Decentralization Act,” Raajje. December 15, 2019. <https://raajje.mv/67780>

¹⁴ Zunana Zalif. “Local Council Elections 2020: Over 900 councilors to be elected,” Raajje. December 12, 2019, updated March 2020. <https://raajje.mv/67605>

representatives will be elected through the Local Council Election, with both men and women casting ballots for WDC candidates.

What is the election management body doing to safeguard the elections and voters during the COVID-19 pandemic?

In accordance with the amendment to the Special Act on Local Council Elections, on February 4, 2021, the director general of public health announced a guideline under which the Local Council elections are to take place. The Health Protection Agency (HPA) guidelines outline regulations to which the Elections Commission of the Maldives (ECM), voters and other stakeholders must adhere in order to ensure the safety of the public, poll workers and other elections-related personnel while conducting an election during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Key provisions and considerations include the following:

Electoral campaign adjustments: Candidates, members of campaign teams and their supporters are expected to adhere to the HPA guidelines on travel-related quarantine requirements while traveling between islands for campaign purposes. Except on islands placed under monitoring as a result of comparatively higher numbers of confirmed COVID-19 cases, door-to-door visits are allowed for the purposes of campaigning. Door-to-door campaigning is conditioned on full adherence to all safety protocols stipulated in the HPA public health guidelines, including practicing physical distancing, wearing masks and regularly sanitizing hands. Candidates are required to follow HPA's COVID-19-related guidelines when conducting public gatherings, including limiting the number of participants to a maximum of 30 people. The guidelines further encourage candidates to conduct their campaign activities virtually as much as possible.

COVID-19-related voter education: The HPA guidelines stipulate that voters must be made aware of the COVID-19-related guidelines to be followed during the voting process, with information clearly displayed in the polling centers. In addition to displaying materials at polling stations, the ECM plans to disseminate information on COVID-19-related changes to the election process through public information campaigns shared through mainstream and social media.

Poll worker recruitment and training: The HPA Guidelines mandate that the ECM train poll workers in smaller groups to mitigate risks. Poll workers and other training staff are required to follow physical and social distancing requirements stipulated in the HPA Guidelines, and poll workers are required to abstain from Election Day duties in the event that they are experiencing COVID-19 symptoms. All poll workers are expected to receive the first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine before Election Day.¹⁵

Ballots and other materials: The HPA guidelines include requirements intended to reduce contamination of election materials and ensure the safety of staff involved in all stages of the election. The ECM plans to package election materials in small groups to reduce the risk of contamination. Workers will be allocated their own stationery and regularly disinfect all materials and their work spaces.

¹⁵ The Maldives began administration of the COVID-19 vaccine at the beginning of February 2021. According to the Health Protection Authority, as of March 1, 2021, the country had vaccinated 117,115 individuals. The government has stated that it expects the inoculation of the entire population to be complete within six months.

Election Day, Polling Station Operations and Vote Counting Process: The HPA guidelines mandate that poll workers, observers and other attendants wear protective equipment such as face masks and face shields. Polling stations will be laid out to ensure physical distancing of all voters, poll workers and other attendants. Handwashing and sanitizing facilities and proper waste disposal arrangements will be provided at all voting stations. Disinfection of polling station spaces will take place at regular intervals before, during and after the elections. The HPA guidelines also require special arrangements to ensure voters who have tested positive for COVID-19 or are in quarantine are able to vote at the polling center with minimal risk to themselves or others. To enable this, polling station personnel are advised to reserve a specific window or timeframe to enable those who are COVID-19-positive or quarantining to vote. Protective equipment is mandated for poll workers and observers during vote counting, and they will be required to practice physical distancing and regularly sanitize their hands.

Who is eligible to vote and how many registered voters are there?

All Maldivian citizens aged 18 years and over have the right to vote. Eligible voters must be on the register of electors (the voter register) prior to Election Day and must present a valid photo ID to cast a ballot. Voters can check their voter registration location online on the Elections Commission of the Maldives (ECM) website, or by sending a text message to the ECM. The ECM is not facilitating out-of-country voting for this election. As of February 9, there were 272,480 registered voters for the Local Council elections. The re-registration process is scheduled to begin on March 10, 2021, and will continue for 10 days.

What is the voting process?

In the Maldives, polling stations are typically located in schools and administrative centers. Voters are assigned to vote at a specific ballot box within the polling station, although most polling stations contain only one ballot box. A polling area, or voting area, is the designated area for conducting the voting process. The polling area constitutes a 100-foot radius around the polling station. It can cover parks, empty land and playgrounds, but not homes and roads. Police must always remain outside this radius unless invited inside by the head of a polling station.

The Elections Commission of the Maldives (ECM) announced numerous changes for the 2021 local elections, including deploying 7,562 elections officials (over 2,000 more than in the 2017 Local Council elections) at 713 polling stations and increasing the number of ballot boxes.¹⁶ While Maldivian law requires ballot boxes at resorts where at least 50 citizens are registered to vote, travel restrictions during the public health emergency means that the ECM is now required to install polling centers at every resort in the Maldives rather than facilitating resort workers' travel to nearby islands as in previous elections. For the 2021 Local Council elections, the government has promised that polling stations will also be installed on industrial islands where at least 25 citizens are registered to vote,

¹⁶ Mohamed Junayd. "Local council elections schedule for April 2020." *Maldives Independent*. August 28, 2019. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/local-council-elections-scheduled-for-april-2020-147620>

allowing those who live much of the year at work sites remote from their permanent residences to vote where they work.¹⁷

What provisions for accessibility are there for voters with disabilities?

The legal framework specifies equal access to public buildings and facilities as well as provisions for voters with disabilities.¹⁸ Voters with disabilities may be assisted by an election official or person of their choice. The person who assists must be registered to vote in the same district and approved by the head official of the polling station. Unless the person is an election official, he or she may assist only one voter and will be required to provide his or her name, address and national identification number.

Where are votes counted and tabulated?

Ballot boxes are sealed once voting ends at 4:00 p.m. Then, all materials used for voting, including unused ballots and counterfoils, will be packed and sealed in a designated security envelope. Ballot boxes will then be opened in the polling stations. Designated officials will count ballots by hand, total the votes and announce results for their ballot box. The unsealing of the ballot box, vote counting and tabulation occur in the presence of candidates, official election agents of candidates, candidate representatives and election observers and monitors, if they are present.¹⁹

Preliminary results are first announced in each polling area and then communicated to the Elections Commission of the Maldives through electronic tablets. After the preliminary count, the results are sent to the main counting center in Malé.

How are election disputes resolved?

The General Elections Act establishes mechanisms for resolving election complaints and disputes.²⁰ According to the law, any eligible voter, contesting candidate, political party, approved election observer or monitor or election official may file a complaint. Complaints can be lodged verbally with the head of the polling station on Election Day. Complaints can also be lodged in writing or by telephone on Election Day at the National Elections Complaints Bureau in Malé, at any Atoll or City Complaints Bureau or at any local Island Focal Point. A complainant can also file a petition with the High Court. If a person conducts a criminal offense in contravention of laws and regulations of elections, only the Elections Commission of the Maldives (ECM) can refer the matter to the High Court through the prosecutor general. The period for lodging electoral complaints begins when the ECM announces an election and ends 14 days after official election results are announced.

¹⁷ "Local Council Election: 545 Ballot Boxes to Be Placed." *Avas Maldives*. February 5, 2021. <https://avas.mv/en/77619>

¹⁸ Commonwealth Observer Group. "Maldives Parliamentary Elections." April 6, 2019. https://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/MaldivesFinalReport_13-06-19.pdf

¹⁹ Commonwealth Observer Group. "Maldives People's Majlis Election." March 22, 2014. <https://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/news-items/documents/Maldives%20People%27s%20Majlis%20Election%202014%20Commonwealth%20Observer%20Group%20Report.pdf>

²⁰ Commonwealth Observer Group. 2019.

Electoral offenses include “illegal and corrupt practices, such as bribery, treating,²¹ undue influence, impersonation, illegal voting, false statements, taking a ballot out of the voting area, spending in excess of the limits specified and intimidation.”²² Anyone convicted of an electoral offense faces a fine and a prison term of one to four years.

Who can be an election observer, and how are observers registered?

The Maldives generally allows domestic and international election observers. While historically, only domestic observers have monitored Local Council elections, the Elections Commission of the Maldives (ECM) plans to send an open invitation for international observers to observe the 2021 Local Council elections. Domestic observers identified by political parties, candidates and nongovernmental organizations registered in the Maldives may apply as election observers. Observers must receive accreditation from the ECM. To serve as an election observer, individuals must submit an application to the ECM and provide a letter of accreditation from the organization that they represent.²³

²¹ “Treating” is a form of vote buying in which voters are offered material rewards in exchange for voting for a candidate or party.

²² Commonwealth Observer Group. “Maldives Parliamentary Elections.” April 6, 2019.
https://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/MaldivesFinalReport_13-06-19.pdf

²³ Elections Commission of Maldives. “Downloads,” <https://www.elections.gov.mv/en/downloads.html>

Resources

- [Elections Commission of Republic of Maldives website](#)
- [Elections Commission Facebook page](#)
- [Elections Commission Twitter profile](#)
- [Local Government Authority Twitter profile](#)
- [List of registered political parties](#)

About IFES in the Maldives

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) has supported the Elections Commission of the Maldives (ECM), civil society organizations and other stakeholders in the Maldives since 2011 to strengthen electoral processes and enhance civic education and citizen participation in democratic governance. IFES' work in the Maldives is supported by the United States Agency for International Development to support the expansion of inclusive civic education initiatives, develop leadership programs with marginalized groups and support the ECM to strengthen its outreach and external engagement.

A paper from IFES' COVID-19 Briefing Series, [Safeguarding Health and Elections](#), details how to safely conduct elections during a pandemic and other public health emergencies.

Disclosure

These FAQs reflect decisions made by the Maldives elections authorities as of April 7, 2021, to the best of our knowledge. This document does not represent any IFES policy or technical recommendations.

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