



THE ISLAND PRESIDENT

CLASSROOM GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

This study guide is intended to flexibly support educators in preparing for and following up a group screening of **The Island President**, a feature documentary about Mohamed Nasheed, former president of the Maldives and a global leader on climate change. Support materials are intended to facilitate group discussion, individual and collaborative creative exercise, subject-based learning and access to resources for further investigation of material. Educators are encouraged to adapt and abridge the content as necessary to meet their unique learning objectives and circumstances.

All SFFS Youth Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy.



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USING THIS GUIDE

Group screening of **The Island President** can be a useful tool for inspiring group discussion and prompting further research on a wide range of topical

issues. This study guide may be used flexibly in a classroom environment to guide these discussions, inspire follow-up activities and to generally supplement the educational value of the viewing experience. Content is selected to challenge high school students to think critically about the film's style and substance, and to facilitate further research into related topics.

ABOUT THE FILM

The Island President is the story of President Mohamed Nasheed of the Maldives, a man confronting a problem greater than any other world leader has ever faced—the literal survival of his country. After bringing democracy to the Maldives following thirty years of despotic rule, Nasheed is faced with an even greater challenge: finding a way to prevent global climate change (and the ongoing rise of the sea level) from destroying his archipelago nation. A rise of three feet in sea level would submerge the 1200 islands of the Maldives enough to make them uninhabitable.

This feature documentary captures Nasheed's first year of office, culminating in his trip to the Copenhagen Climate Summit of 2009, where the film provides a rare glimpse of the political horse-trading that goes on at such a top-level global assembly. Nasheed is unusually candid about revealing his strategies—leveraging the Maldives' underdog position as a tiny country, harnessing the power of media, and overcoming deadlocks through an appeal to unity with other developing nations. When hope fades for a written accord to be signed, Nasheed makes a stirring speech which salvages an agreement. Despite the modest size of his country, Mohamed Nasheed has become one of the leading international voices for urgent action on climate change.

Directed by Jon Shenk (USA 2011)
101 min, Color, English
Recommended for ages 14 and up

Recommended Subject Areas:

Leadership
Media Literacy
Social Studies (Government, Economy, Current Events)
World Cultures (Asian Studies)

Key concepts / buzzwords:

Archipelago	Global Warming / Climate Change
Atmospheric Carbon Content	Change
Biographical Documentary	Grassroots Activism
Copenhagen Climate Summit	International Cooperation
Democracy / Democratization	Maldives
Diplomacy	Mohamed Nasheed
Disaster Prevention	Political Strategy
Emissions Management	
Environmental Leadership	
Global Politics	



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

STORY & CHARACTERS

1. All biographical documentaries are limited in their scope to certain aspects of (and periods in) an individual subject's life. On which aspects of Nasheed's life and career does this film focus? What aspects or periods of his life does it omit?
2. How would you describe the character of Mohamed Nasheed overall?
 - a. What are his political priorities? What are his core values? Who are his closest confidantes?
 - b. What else would you like to know about him, besides the information presented in this film?
3. Which supporting characters did you find most memorable?
4. How would you describe the narrative structure of this biographical film, which follows the first year of Mr. Nasheed's presidency? Where does this story begin? Where does it end? Is the story presented sequentially?
5. What was the most memorable moment in this movie? The funniest? The saddest? The most thought-provoking?

LEADERSHIP

1. How would you describe President Nasheed's leadership style?
2. President Nasheed often speaks candidly with his confidantes (and with the camera) about his political and public strategies. What are some strategies that Mr. Nasheed employs
 - a. ...to peacefully oust the brutal regime of his predecessor
 - b. ...to raise awareness of the Maldives situation globally
 - c. ...to gain headway on an international pact to reduce carbon emission
3. To what extent do you agree or disagree with his decision making as a leader and public figure, based on what you've seen in this film? Do you think a different style of diplomacy or leadership would have been more successful?
 - a. Do you think his decision in Copenhagen to compromise his original platform in the interest of achieving some international headway on climate change was a good one?
 - b. How would you describe the diplomatic challenges Mr. Nasheed and his allies faced with India and China? ▶

WHAT DID YOU KNOW ABOUT THE MALDIVES BEFORE SEEING THIS FILM? WHAT DID YOU KNOW ABOUT PRESIDENT NASHEED, IF ANYTHING?



▶ CONTEXT

1. Non-fiction films often attempt to portray historical or biographical information in an objective, impartial way. Do you think true objectivity is possible in documentary filmmaking? Why or why not?
2. What did you know about the Maldives before seeing this film? What did you know about President Nasheed, if anything? What did you learn about Maldivian culture from watching this film?
3. Did you learn anything new about global climate change from watching this film? If so, what?
4. “I don’t even like the word negotiate. There’s nothing to negotiate with climate.” Discuss this quote.
5. How do you think the filmmaker feels about President Nasheed and his message? What are some choices the filmmaker made that convey this attitude? Why do you think the film focuses so little on President Nasheed’s youth and education, but focuses heavily on his imprisonment and political organizing?
6. Why is Mr. Nasheed considered the first democratically elected president in Maldivian history, when elections had previously been held? In what ways was the previous regime totalitarian in nature?
7. Does Mr. Nasheed remind you of any other world leaders from history? If so, whom? And how so?
8. What other biographical documentaries have you seen or do you know of? What biographical narrative films have you seen? What are some characteristics that biographical films tend to have in common?
9. How would you characterize the level of access that the filmmakers had to President Nasheed and his inner circle?
 - a. To what extent do you think the presence of the camera influenced the characters’ behavior in this film?
 - b. Which moments felt the most “staged”? Which moments felt the most candid?

MESSAGE & THEMES

1. If you had to summarize the message that the filmmaker was trying to convey in one sentence, what would it be?
2. What values does this film perpetuate? To what extent does it agree or disagree with its primary subject?
3. What reasons do you think the filmmakers had for making this documentary?

MEDIA LITERACY

1. How was this film made? Was it shot on film or video?
2. What was a compelling shot that you remember from this documentary? What did you like about it? How was it framed? What elements comprised the frame? How were they organized relative to each other?
3. Was there a scene that you found particularly memorable in this documentary? What did you like or dislike about it? What took place narratively? What types of shots comprised it? Was there anything notable about the way it was edited? What sound elements comprised the sequence?
4. What questions came to your mind as you watched this film? Is there anything you would ask the filmmaker? Is there anything you’d like to ask Mr. Nasheed? If so, what?
5. Who do you think this film was made for? Who is the intended audience? ▶



ARTICLES & REVIEWS

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Shortly after Mohamed Nasheed was elected President in 2008, he began taking some actions that drew international media attention. First he made a public statement saying that, although it was wonderful to have democracy in his country, they needed to find new land, because the Maldives were going to be underwater. He seriously floated the idea of the people of the Maldives relocating to a new homeland in India or Australia or somewhere else. In 2009, he pledged to make the Maldives the first country to go carbon neutral within a decade by moving towards renewable energy sources. “I thought, ‘this guy sounds incredible,’” says director Jon Shenk (*Lost Boys of Sudan*), “he’s not afraid to make dramatic, honest pronouncements to call the world’s attention to his country’s problem.”

Together with his filmmaking partners, Richard Berge and Bonni Cohen, he set out to make a film on Nasheed. The filmmakers began a series of conversations with Nasheed’s international press liaison, Paul Roberts. While many TV crews had previously done stories on Nasheed, what they were proposing was something much more ambitious and intrusive than Roberts had ever previously arranged. Says Shenk: “I felt that the way to make people care would be to humanize the Maldives by portraying Nasheed as personally as possible. That could only work if the camera could go into places you normally can’t go with a political leader—their home, their private office, diplomatic meetings—to see how they act around their trusted colleagues, staff, and other leaders.”

Unfortunately, Roberts told the filmmakers that they’d have to come to the Maldives to find out if Nasheed would even take part in the kind of film they were imagining. “He told us, ‘the President doesn’t work in the abstract,’” says Shenk. “You have to come here and make your

pitch in person.” While it was a costly leap of faith for the filmmakers to journey to the Maldives without a commitment, they had no choice: soon Shenk and Berge were on a 16-hour flight to Dubai, followed by another five-hour flight to the faraway island archipelago in the Indian Ocean. “During the last few hours of the flight, all we saw out the window was water,” says Shenk, “until suddenly we laid eyes on these amazingly beautiful islands.”

When Shenk and Berge sat down to speak with Nasheed the next morning, they discovered he was not one to waste time: “Tell me what you want to do,” he said. As the filmmakers breathlessly attempted to spell out their plan, it was clear that Nasheed wasn’t familiar with the kind of documentary they envisioned, and the high level of access it would require. “He listened to us for five minutes,” says Shenk, “and then he agreed.” Says Nasheed: “I thought, well, seeing as they are here, we might as well let them film what they have come all this way to film. Also, we felt we didn’t have anything to hide, so why not allow us to be filmed.” Hours later, the filmmakers were shooting. Over the coming year they would film Nasheed for 78 days in five continents. “We had no idea what we were getting ourselves into at the start,” says Nasheed. “I thought they just wanted to do a longer interview than normal and would leave after a few days. I didn’t expect them to stay for a year!”

Gaining and maintaining access to Nasheed’s official and unofficial life was a constant battle. “We were pushing for a level of access unheard of for a head of state. Plus, the culture in the Maldives has a sense of removal for the office of the presidency, left over from years of dictatorship. We constantly had to re-explain ourselves,” says Shenk, “not only to Nasheed, but to his family, his staff, to the press corps that surrounded him in the Maldives, and to secret service at international events.” When it came to bilateral meetings with leaders of other countries, the protocol is that media are allowed in the room to shoot photo ops, but are expected to leave as soon after the group shakes hands. ▶



▶ “Fortunately for us, Nasheed doesn’t play by the diplomatic protocols,” says Berge. “As soon as he shakes hands with somebody he gets right down to business. The diplomats and other leaders wouldn’t be ready for that. Even in the cases where we were eventually asked to leave, we were still be able to get a few moments of candid discussion on tape.” There was a tense moment when, in a private meeting in India during the lead-up to Copenhagen, the film crew was asked to leave. “We were really despairing about the prospects of the film,” says Shenk, “but right after the meeting ended, Nasheed invited us back in the room. He told us that he understood that we wanted to film everything possible, but there were certain situations he couldn’t control. When he was meeting with somebody from another country, he could advocate for us to be there, but only so far — ultimately he couldn’t jeopardize his work.

What developed from that point was the unstated understanding that Nasheed would press as hard as possible to keep the camera in the room, but the crew would leave if it became evident the meeting couldn’t continue with them there. “At the time we felt frustrated we were never getting enough,” says Shenk, “and it was finally in the edit room that I realized we had captured a trove of scenes unprecedented from a sitting head of state.”

The extra access that Nasheed offered the filmmakers was never more evident than at the Copenhagen Climate Summit, where they were credentialed as members of the Maldivian delegation rather than as journalists. While their camera and microphone made them look like press, their badges allowed them to go into areas where journalists weren’t allowed to go. Without the credential, the filmmakers wouldn’t even have been able to capture the internal discussions among the Maldivians. “Being in close proximity to the President gave us access to his interactions with the leaders of other countries.”

Another hurdle was dealing with the Maldivian Divehi language while shooting internal meetings among cabinet members and staff. “When they were speaking in Divehi,

we often had no idea what they were talking about,” says Berge. “Instinct took over, and Jon had to follow verbal cues very carefully to cover the scene with his camera. He didn’t know who was going to respond next.”

Acquiring archival footage for the historical sections of *The Island President* was not an easy task, as there was no museum or national registry to search. While a lot of camcorder and cell phone video had been shot of police brutality and other events during the prodemocracy demonstrations, a large part of that material had been confiscated during police sweeps of phones and tapes. The filmmakers were eventually directed to the videographer for the democracy movement, who supplied many valuable images from those events.

Other visual sources included police surveillance tapes that had been created to single out activists for arrests, and material from TV Maldives, the state-run TV network. “Nothing was labeled, and they were on a gazillion different formats,” says Cohen. It was really challenging.” Adds Berge: “The people at TV Maldives, the state-run TV network, seemed very nervous about giving us anything. I think they were apprehensive that the opposition might get back into power and they would be vulnerable for having given us footage of the old dictator.”

Nasheed has a willingness to take risks that is rare in other politicians. “One common response we’ve had from people who have seen the film at early stages,” says Shenk, “is that they wished our President was that unafraid to be honest, and stand up for what he believes in. I think those kinds of leaders are very unusual, because it requires a tremendous amount of charisma in order to keep the people on your side, and a tremendous lack of fear for your political future.” Adds Berge: “Other diplomats and leaders know that Nasheed has been imprisoned and tortured for his principles, and that history gives him an uncommon gravity and street cred, which results in him having a degree of influence far greater than the size of the country would warrant.” ▶



▶ With the U.S., China, India, and other larger countries reluctant to take action on climate change, it might seem hard to believe that a politician from a tiny country, no matter how shrewd or charismatic, can make a difference, but Nasheed is highly motivated to try, and is in a position to speak his mind in a way that other world leaders are unable to. “He doesn’t have to answer to the oil tycoons, the energy tycoons and to the car companies,” says Shenk. “He’s an individual whose entire country is going to be affected by what they do.” Says Cohen: “He is in a position to say what no one else can say. And the things that he is able to move forward as a result of being able to do that really matter.”

“Although Copenhagen was viewed by many as a failure, Nasheed was able to play a critical role there in moving the climate negotiations forward. He helped keep the process from collapsing, and that work has already been built upon in subsequent climate meetings, even if it’s slower than some would want.”

“The thing about climate change that’s different than anything we’ve ever dealt with in the past,” says Shenk, “is that it’s so slow. It’s not like there’s an invading army in our backyard, and we need to rise up against it. It’s this slow, amorphous thing, and even when dramatic examples of extreme weather happen, people tend to focus on them for awhile and then let it pass from their mind, particularly if it happens somewhere far away.”

Perhaps Nasheed’s experience of struggling for twenty years to get democracy and civil rights for his country—and succeeding—has made him unafraid of a tough, seemingly unwinnable fight. “When he was a teenager,” says Shenk, “he realized that his country was ruled by an unfair government, and he essentially decided to get up every day and work towards a better system. It was a case of him simply putting one foot in front of another. If he got knocked down, he got back up and continued the fight. Even though it might seem crazy or impossible to do something about the world’s climate situation, I think in his mind it’s just the work you do every day—getting up and figuring out what the next move is in this grand plan. And he clearly enjoys it.”

MEDIA LITERACY RESOURCES

SCREENING WITH MEANING

The vast majority of interpersonal human interactions taking place at any given moment are taking place via some type of medium. Every image projected on a screen, every word published on a page, every sound produced from a speaker – each comprises a piece of media content, a media message of some sort. The ability to discern between and understand the vast array of media messages by which we are continually surrounded is an essential skill for young people to develop, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Most teenage students already have a keen understanding

of the languages different media use and the techniques they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions.

Analysis of a media message – or any piece of mass media content – can best be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics: (1) the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered, (2) the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination, (3) the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys, (4) the audience to whom it is delivered, and (5) the objectives of its authors and effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics (abbreviated in this section with the keywords Medium, Author, Content, Audience and Purpose) when faced with mass messages will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind them, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education incentivizes students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and free, critical thinkers.

CORE CONCEPTS OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

MEDIUM

All Mass Media Messages Are Constructed.

How is the message delivered? In what format?
What technologies are used to perpetuate the message?
What expectations do you have of the media content, given its medium and format?

AUTHOR

All Mass Media Messages Are Constructed by Someone.

Who delivers the message?
Who originally constructed the message?
What expectations do you have of the media content, given its author(s)?

CONTENT

All Mass Media Messages Are Constructed Using a Language.

What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content?
What visual elements comprise the media content?
What auditory elements comprise the media content?
To what extent did the content meet your expectations, given the format/author?

AUDIENCE

All Mass Media Messages Reach an Audience.

Who receives the message?
For whom is the message intended?
What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message?
What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message?
How might others perceive this message differently? Why?

PURPOSE

All Mass Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason.

Why was the message constructed?
Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How?
To what extent does the message achieve its purpose?
What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?

THE NON-FICTION FILM

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DOCUMENTARY

- 1895 Lumiere Brothers develop the first motion picture film reels, capturing brief, unedited clips of life around them called “actualities” (e.g., *Train Arriving at the Station*)
- 1922 Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* is the first feature-length film to be called a “documentary,” employing the “creative interpretation of reality” to tell a factual story
- 1936 John Grierson releases *Night Mail*, an example of the more poetic, experimental approach to documentary that his movement embodied
- 1963 The cinema vérité movement begins in Europe, shortly followed by “direct cinema” in the U.S. Films of these movements attempt to present factual information objectively and observationally, though many were produced with political or ideological motivations.
- 1999 *The Blair Witch Project* is released, becoming the highest grossing film of all time (relative to its production cost). Marketed and styled as a documentary, the suspense/horror film used the genre to unprecedented effect, fooling millions of filmgoers into believing it was a non-fiction film (obviously enhancing the fear factor). The “mockumentary” has since caught on as a comedic sub-genre.

TYPES OF DOCUMENTARY

All documentaries may be measured along a spectrum of impartiality. Some documentaries attempt to record and present information in as objective and unbiased a manner possible, as if the film were made by a fly on the wall. Other documentaries present real-world information, but do so in a highly obtrusive, manufactured, often biased manner. Arguably no documentary can be 100% unobtrusive to the events it seeks to record (subjects are almost always aware of the presence of a camera, for example), and no documentary can be 100% objective (a single edit represents a subjective filmmaking decision). Media literate students should be able to discern the plausibility and purpose of documentary programs based on their authorship, the nature of their content, the extent to which bias is expressed, etc. Generally, all documentary films and programs occupy one (and sometimes more) of the following categories:

1. **Poetic:** The most abstract type of documentary. The earliest documentaries were essentially poetic; images were organized based on associations and patterns, creating a fragmented, impressionist, lyrical record of actual places, objects and people. Poetic documentaries do not include characters or plots, and were largely made by early filmmakers looking to subvert the coherence and standardization of early narrative films. Some modern music videos can be considered poetic documentaries. Notable examples: *Rain* (Ivens, 1928), *City Symphonies: NY, NY* (Thompson, 1957)

2. **Expository:** Documentaries that speak directly to the viewer (via titles and/or voiceover) in an effort to persuade, convince or educate. Most modern documentary films and

TV programs are primarily expository. Expository docs may be further categorized as follows:

– Persuasive:

- Commercial: Docs that advocate a particular product, service or brand
- Political: Docs that advocate a certain position on political contests/issues
- Theological/Ethical: Docs that advocate a certain position on religious/moral issues
- Topical: Docs that advocate a certain ideological position on social issues



THE NON-FICTION FILM

- ▶ – Educational:
 - Scientific: Docs that attempt to convey factual information on science topics
 - Historical: Docs that attempt to convey factual information on historical topics/periods
 - Biographical: Docs that attempt to convey factual information about individuals
 - Topical: Docs that attempt to convey factual information about social issues

Both persuasive and educational documentaries present information in traditionally efficient ways. Impartial, “omniscient” voice-over narration, on-screen text and insert shots of supporting charts, illustrations, maps, etc. are stylistic techniques common to most expository documentaries. The combination of interview audio and “b-roll” footage of associated visuals is another classic convention of non-fiction filmmaking. It is not uncommon for filmmakers or television producers to take advantage of the credibility that this format lends, and to present fictional (or, at best, debatable) information as factual. Thus, the distinction between a persuasive doc and an educational doc is largely based upon purpose and audience; a film made to argue a point of view or perpetuate a myth may appear no less fictional than an educational doc about photosynthesis.

Expository documentaries are inherently more impactful on the people and environments they attempt to capture than observational docs; but inherently less impactful than participatory docs. The presence of the filmmaker is usually acknowledged and/or obvious (audible interviewer in conversation, voice-over narration, on-screen titles/diagrams/maps/schematics, character interaction with crew, etc.) under the pretense that the filmmaker(s) are only involved peripherally. Some filmmakers include dramatic re-enactments of story content in their

“documentaries”. While this can be as emotionally compelling as a heart-wrenching Hollywood tragedy, it fully removes any pretense of factual impartiality.

3. **Observational:** Docs that attempt to simply and spontaneously observe some part of the world with minimal intervention. Observational films are less abstract than poetic documentaries and less biased or forceful than expository documentaries. Observational docs date back to the 1960s when the advent of mobile lightweight cameras and portable sound recording equipment enabled non-fiction filmmakers to capture events in an organic, unobtrusive way (new celluloid films also needed less light to achieve exposure). This mode of documentary historically avoids stylistic “add-ons” like voice-over commentary, music, titles, re-enactments, etc. These films aimed for immediacy, intimacy and revelation of individual human character in ordinary life situations. Examples: *High School* (Wiseman, 1968); *Gimme Shelter* (Maysles, 1970); *Don't Look Back* (Pennebaker, 1967)

4. **Participatory:** Participatory documentarians rightly believe that it is impossible for the act of filmmaking to not influence or alter the events and characters being filmed. Much like an anthropologist studying a culture by taking part in it, a participatory filmmaker inserts him/herself into the action at hand as a means of inciting and documenting reactions and as a means of making his/her authorship transparent and spontaneous. The encounter between subject and filmmaker inherently becomes a critical component of the film. Autobiographical documentaries are 100% participatory. Examples: *Man with a Movie Camera* (Vertov, 1929), *Sherman's March* (McElwee, 1985), films by Michael Moore.

Adapted from Bill Nichols, Representing Reality (1991) and Introduction to Documentary (2001)



SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

WEB LINKS

The Island President on IMDB

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1990352/>

The Island President Homepage

<http://theislandpresident.com/>

The Island President Press Kit

http://theislandpresident.com/site_elements/pressbook/TIP-Production-Notes.pdf

The Island President Trailer

<http://vimeo.com/38494190>

Mohamed Nasheed Wiki

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohamed_Nasheed

Mohamed Nasheed Twitter

<https://twitter.com/MohamedNasheed>

Democracy Maldives

<http://democracymaldives.com/>
A hub of news, videos, and information on the current Maldivian situation, including activism opportunities.

Mutiny in the Maldives

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akxK-jS9_js
An exposé video piece from Dateline Australia on the controversial 2012 ousting of President Nasheed.

History of the Maldives Wiki

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Maldives

Maldives Tourism Hub

<http://www.visitmaldives.com/en>

ABC's of Climate Change

<http://www.sierraclubgreenhome.com/co2-carbon-dioxide-center/the-abcs-of-climate-change/>
A collection of links and data on global climate change from The Sierra Club.

Climate Change Info from the EPA

<http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/>
Global warming explained by the US Environmental Protection Agency.

Copenhagen Summit Wiki

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2009_United_Nations_Climate_Change_Conference
Information on the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference.

A Global Campaign for Climate Action

<http://www.350.org/>

A Global Campaign for Climate Action

<http://tcktcktck.org>

Mohammed Waheed Homepage

<http://www.drwaheed.com/>
The official site of the current president of the Maldives.



Article: Maldives Ground Zero for Climate Change Impacts

<http://newswatch.nationalgeographic.com/2011/10/15/maldives-ground-zero-for-climate-change-impacts/>

Article: Mohamed Nasheed Talks about The Island President

http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/mohamed-nasheed-talks-about-the-island-president-keeping-fragile-democracy-afloat/2012/04/12/gIQUZvCFT_story.html

The Daily Show Interviews Mohamed Nasheed

<http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/mon-april-2-2012/exclusive---mohamed-nasheed-extended-interview-pt--1>