

ISAS Brief

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The Maldives in 2018:

Facing Uncertain and Unpredictable Times¹

With the rise of Islamist groups, society and politics in the Maldives have witnessed notable changes in recent times. These are reflected in the internal political developments of the country and in foreign policy-related decisions taken by its government. Islamism will continue to spread in the Maldives in 2018 and it will further spread its influence across the country's social and political spheres.

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Over the years, the Maldives has witnessed the rise of Islamist groups, which have found support from the country's political environment. Some external actors have also provided assistance to create the necessary infrastructure to support the cause of the Islamists in the Maldives. For instance, Saudi Arabia recently donated US\$100,000 (S\$139,000) for the establishment of the

¹ The Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) at the National University of Singapore (NUS) has undertaken a prognosis of the eight South Asian countries in 2018. This is both opportune and relevant, given significant developments in the region. Although it requires some crystal ball-gazing, such prognosis is important in providing an understanding of the outlook for each country. This paper is part of a series of nine papers on key development in the eight South Asian countries, namely, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, this year.

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Islamic University of Maldives, along with a generous fund of US\$1.2 million (S\$1.67 million) for the construction of 10 mosques across the archipelago nation.³ While the university and the mosques are not the breeding grounds or recruitment places for the Islamist groups, they used some of these places to propagate their brand of Islam.⁴ Since their rise, these Islamist groups have influenced the domestic politics, social affairs and foreign policy of the Maldives. In all likelihood, the situation will remain the same in 2018.

Domestic Politics

In 2013, Abdulla Yameen was elected as the President of the Maldives. Since then, he has been placating the Muslim constituency groups in various ways. In 2015, the former president of the Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed, who was removed from power in 2012, with support from the Islamists, was arrested on terrorism charges and sentenced to 13 years imprisonment. However, due to global outrage against the Yameen government, Nasheed was allowed to travel to London for 30 days for a spinal cord surgery.⁵ Once in Britain, he requested for asylum as a political refugee which was granted in May 2016.

In November 2015, Yameen declared a state of emergency, arguably to establish his hold over the country and control the activities of the opposition. Seven articles of the constitution, including those guaranteeing the rights of assembly, free expression, freedom from arbitrary detention and freedom of movement, were excluded. The government had originally decided to impose a state of emergency for 30 days. However, it was forced to revoke its decision within a week of its imposition due to international criticism.⁶

³ “The Maldives opposition looks towards India to keep democracy”. <http://www.orfonline.org/research/maldives-opposition-looks-towards-india-keep-up-democracy/>. Accessed on 22 June 2017.

⁴ This is not limited to the radical version of Islam. Rather, all political ideologies or religious teachings across the world engage in similar practices. They use the university campus and all forms of social gatherings to propagate their ideas so as to spread their followers and recruit new members.

⁵ “Maldives ex-leader Mohamed Nasheed arrives in UK”, *BBC News*, 21 January 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35369018>. Accessed on 8 November 2017.

⁶ “Maldives revokes state of emergency amid global outcry and tourism worries”, *The Guardian*, 10 November 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/10/maldives-revokes-state-of-emergency>. Accessed on 12 October 2017.

This high-handedness of the government has had the effect of uniting members of the various opposition parties. Together, they won 664 seats in the Council elections in May 2017. The Maldives United Opposition won more than 300 seats while Yameen's Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) managed to win only 191 seats. Of the PPM's coalition partners, the Maldives Development Alliance won 18 seats while the Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party won a solitary seat. Presently, the opposition consists of the Maldivian Democratic Party, a faction of the PPM, the Jumhooree Party and the pro-Islamist Adhaalath Party (the self-proclaimed branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Maldives). Encouraged by the results, the united opposition served notice on 24 July 2017 to move a no-confidence resolution to impeach the Speaker of the Maldivian Parliament (Majlis) – Abdulla Maseeh Mohamed. The following day, security personnel were called in to barricade the parliament complex.⁷ The government succeeded in winning that battle. While several political groups and individuals have joined the opposition it does not seem to have any grand plans for the country. The groups and individuals are in opposition, primarily, because of personal and professional reasons. For example, former authoritarian leader Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, whose faction in the PPM is now part of the opposition coalition, turned against Yameen after he was politically attacked by the government. In January 2017, he was denied permission by the government to hold a peaceful meeting with PPM members in Male. Then, in March 2017, his son, Faris Maumoon, was arrested by the government. The Jumhooree Party's leader, Qasim Ibrahim, a businessman, allegedly changed his political tone because of personal reasons which included the status of his business interests in the country's air transport sector.

The Maldives will hold its presidential elections in 2018. It would be interesting to observe the united coalition of the opposition political parties. Will they have a consensus on the candidate for the presidency or will there be disarray as they seek to fulfil their respective interests? This is noteworthy because a prominent member of the united coalition and leader of the MDP,

⁷ "What is happening in the Maldives: All you need to know", Jyoti Malhotra, *Indian Express*, 26 July 2017. <http://indianexpress.com/article/what-is/what-is-happening-in-the-maldives-all-you-need-to-know/>. Accessed on 12 October 2017.

Nasheed, has already declared his intentions to return from exile to contest the presidential election.⁸

Foreign Policy

The rise of the Islamist groups in the Maldives has had an impact on the country's foreign policy. The Salafists⁹ version of Islam, brought from Saudi Arabia, has been institutionalised in the Maldives. This version of Islam is being spread by the Islamic ministry and the universities in the Maldives.¹⁰ To placate the Salafists, the Maldives has chosen to follow in the footsteps of Saudi Arabia in foreign policy-related matters. For instance, on 5 June 2017, the Maldives broke off diplomatic relations with Qatar which were established in 1984. By doing so, it joined the ranks of Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in cutting ties with the country. Earlier, in 2016, again following in the footsteps of Saudi Arabia, the Maldives severed its diplomatic relationship with Iran.

The Maldives also had confrontations with the Commonwealth nations on the issue of human rights. In 2015, the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) decided to take punitive actions against the Yameen government for gross violation of human and democratic rights of its citizens. After India intervened, the CMAG softened its stance.¹¹ However, Yameen's government continued with its political tactics to undermine the democratic institutions and use various means to curb the activities of political opponents and human rights activists. This made the CMAG issue a notice against the country in which it gave the government six months to address concerns such as the detention and prosecution of opposition party leaders, meddling

⁸ "Exiled Maldives Leader to stand for 2018 Elections", *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-maldives-politics/exiled-maldives-leader-to-stand-for-2018-presidency-idUSKBN15O13D>. Accessed on 10 January 2018.

⁹ The Salafist movement is an ultra-conservative reform within the Sunni Islam. The Salafists are found in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

¹⁰ "Maldives, Tourist Haven, Casts Wary Eyes on Growing Radicalism", Kai Schultz, *The New York Times*, 18 June 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/18/world/asia/maldives-islamic-radicalism.html>. Accessed on 15 January 2018.

¹¹ Muni, S D. (2017). 'Modi's 'Neighbourhood First' Initiative' In Singh, Sinderpal (edited) *Modi's World: (Re)Constructing Indian Foreign Policy*, Singapore: World Scientific, p 117-138.

with the judiciary and undermining the country's democratic institutions.¹² As the confrontation escalated, in October 2016, the government announced the withdrawal of the Maldives from membership of the Commonwealth. It alleged the Commonwealth grouping of interfering in the country's internal matters.

In recent years, the Maldives has experienced volatility in its relationship with India. In 2017, it signed a free trade agreement with China which upset India. A similar pact is under discussion with India. The Yameen government then suspended three local councillors for meeting with the Indian Ambassador to the Maldives, Akhilesh Mishra. In December 2017, an editorial in the Yameen newspaper, *Vaguthu*, (in the Divehi language) described India as an enemy and called on Male to find a new best friend in China. The editorial also termed the Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi, as a Hindu extremist and anti-Muslim.¹³ However, the editorial was removed from the website after it drew widespread public attention. To address India's concerns, Yameen's government stated that, "[T]he administration would never entertain negative sentiments towards India", highlighting that Indian assistance formed an "invaluable contribution to the Maldives".¹⁴ To mend the relationships between India and the Maldives, the Maldivian foreign minister Mohamed Asim went to New Delhi on 10 January 2018 for a three-day visit. He held talks with Modi, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and other officials from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs.

Conclusion

The aforementioned developments provide an important prognosis of the Maldives in 2018. Its foreign and domestic policies are likely to be similar to that in 2017 – they will be uncertain and unpredictable.

¹² "Maldives quits Commonwealth over alleged rights abuses", *The Guardian* 13 October 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/13/maldives-quits-commonwealth-over-alleged-rights-abuses>. Accessed on 15 January 2017.

¹³ "Maldives reaches out to India, discusses high-level bilateral meet in bid to undo perceived snub", Sachin Prashar *Times News Network*, 26 December 2017. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/maldives-reaches-out-to-india-seeks-to-undo-perceived-slight/articleshow/62244881.cms>. Accessed on 8 January 2018.

¹⁴ Ibid.

First, as the Islamists continue to grow from strength to strength in the country, the political survival of any leader depends upon his or her relationship with them. In the 2018 presidential elections, the Islamists are expected to play a crucial role in the selection of the candidates and the eventual election of the President. Their influence is such that, even liberal-minded candidates have to show their support for conservative Islamic values if they aspire to win the elections.

Second, correspondingly, the rise of Islamists is slowly transforming the country's social structure into a more archaic form. There are examples where, under the influence of the preaching of the Islamists, a number of the Maldivian youths have joined the terror groups in different parts of Asia. At home too, there is a rise in attacks against liberal voices in the country. In 2017, an outspoken liberal Maldivian blogger Yameen Rasheed was hacked to death by the Islamists.

Third, on the foreign policy front, under the pressure or influence of the domestic constituents, the Maldives may further tilt towards Saudi Arabia or other Islamic countries. In South Asia, the country is likely to explore ways to balance its relationships with India and China.

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