

ISAS Brief

No. 552 – 8 February 2018

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Mayhem in the Maldives:

A Pugnacious President Confronts a Court-driven Crisis

The Maldives, with its abundance of scenic beauty endowed by nature, is unfortunately submerged by political turmoil. The current burgeoning crisis, which appears to be worsening by the day, could, unless properly addressed, turn into a proxy war between India and China with all its unfortunate ramifications. This paper points to a window of possibility as to how it could be avoided.

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Nature has endowed the Maldives with bountiful beauty. The turquoise sea, and the colourful corals convey a breathless picturesqueness. It is one of the world's smallest nations. The total area is around 298 square kilometres, and a population of around 400,000 is spread across 26 atolls and 1,192 islets, though not all of which are inhabited. One would expect the Maldivians to lead a peaceful life of languor, leisure and luxury like the lotus eaters of the Aegean in Greek legends. Spiritual choices for the citizens are severely limited and the only legitimate faith to be followed is Islam. The hope was that the homogeneity would further stabilise what should have been a pervasive calm.

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Alas, the reality is very different. Over the past few years, the Maldives has been experiencing tumultuous politics that have assumed proportions which could threaten peace – not just in that country which many had equated to ‘paradise’ but also in the region. Even the singularity of faith has not created the anticipated unity. Extremist interpretations of the same religion are now pitted against the more conventional beliefs creating a culture of acute conflict. Politics have gone awfully awry and are now poised to threaten the stability and peace of the Indian Ocean where this country is located. The capitals of the world are beginning to get concerned about the fallout from the unfolding events in Male, the location of the tiny nation’s headquarters.

A bit about its history might help to aid the understanding of the current happenings. Having obtained independence from the British in 1965, the Maldives was ruled with an iron hand for three long decades by President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. Any opposition was not tolerated. Several coup attempts were put down with Indian support. However, Gayoom yielded to mounting international and domestic pressures, and in 2008, a slice of democracy came to the Maldives in the form of elections. Power was transferred to Mahammed Nasheed following two rounds of elections. Many believed spring had come to Maldivian politics. Through advances in areas such as tourism, fisheries and garment manufacturing, he succeeded in graduating the Maldives out of the list of Least Developed Countries – a prestigious accomplishment. Initially, dealing deftly between China and India, Nasheed eventually swerved towards India. He acceded to India’s request to deploy 26 coastal radars and declared that the “Indian Ocean is India Ocean”, a claim that was not even made in India. Detractors began to see him as *plus royaliste que le roi*, more royal than the King.

However, Nasheed also did not show himself to be steeped in democratic values. He soon became embroiled in a dispute with the Civil Service Commission for its supposed failure to handle the friction between political nominees and civil service appointees. His taste for the tipples was held against him in a predominantly Islamic ethos. Chief Justice Abdullah Mohammed was disobliging when Nasheed went after Gayoom, his predecessor, so the President ordered his arrest (a scenario that eerily repeated after a few years). Eventually, in February 2012, the police mutinied and Nasheed was forced to resign. In due course, Nasheed was defeated in 2013 by Abdullah Yameen, a half-brother of Gayoom. His tiff with

the Chief Justice came home to roost. Arrested and jailed, Nasheed was eventually allowed to travel to the United Kingdom in 2016 where he was granted political asylum.

True to the sad tradition, Yameen also demonstrated quickly that he was not to be confused with Florence Nightingale. He transformed himself into an authoritarian ruler within a matter of time. He too became intolerant of domestic opposition. In a move that was Bismarckian in action but not necessarily in intellectual content, he veered towards China, which had established its embassy in Male in 2011. He treated the ‘special relationship’ with India with scant respect. He cancelled an Indian company’s contract to develop Ibrahim Nasir International Airport and gave it to the Chinese. He joined the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, offered them mega infra-structure contracts, and signed a Free Trade Agreement with Beijing that was ‘fast-tracked’ through the Parliament. Also, last year, he hosted Pakistan’s Nawaz Sharif and signed a raft of bilateral agreements. In short, he lost no opportunity to poke India in the eye – in moves that bordered on foolhardiness.

Then, in a strange and eerie repetition of history, Yameen fell out with the Supreme Court. This is what has sparked the current crisis. Standing up to Yameen’s authoritarian ways, the Supreme Court ordered the release of a group of incarcerated opposition members of the Parliament. Adding insult to injury, the Court declared Nasheed’s trial in 2015 unconstitutional. Livid with rage, Yameen alleged that the Court was seeking to impeach him. He had Chief Justice Abdullah Saeed arrested, along with another of his colleagues, declared a State of Emergency, initially for 15 days, and sacked the Police Commissioner who pledged to implement the Court’s rulings. Thereafter, Yameen turned to his army which appears supportive. Male was, once again, engulfed in turmoil. In an unprecedented move, the Court appealed to India and other countries to help. Eventually, the Court caved in, and under pressure, on 6 February 2018, one day after the declaration of Emergency, revoked its earlier orders for the release of the held opposition.

The developments have placed India between the devil and the deep blue sea. Earlier, in what was known as ‘Operation Cactus’ in 1988, India had intervened to quell a coup attempt by militants coming from Sri Lanka in response to an appeal by Gayoom. However, the situation now is starkly different. It would be unseemly to act against an elected president of a sovereign country, which with all his faults, Yameen can claim to be. Also, unlike the

previous situation, the Chinese stakes are very high. Beijing is not likely to sit back and allow Yameen to simply sink. While Washington and London have issued pro-Court statements – in a United States’ (US) State Department tweet nothing much more was said than “the world is watching” despite having a pro-active Ambassador there of Indian descent (Atul Keshap). Any decision to get too deeply involved beyond ritualistic declarations would have to be carefully weighed. There is great merit in avoiding the proxy war between India and China in the Indian Ocean since this could draw in other players, in particular China, with the US watching in the wings.

The crisis can provide the United Nations (UN) a role to play. Indeed, it seems to be the only actor which can become involved, perhaps with the acquiescence of all concerned. Earlier, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights had made an appeal to the Maldivian government to respect the Court’s ruling. Then, the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, expressed the world body’s continued readiness to facilitate all-party talks in finding a solution to the Maldivian stalemate. Perhaps he could do more. He could appoint a Special Envoy to defuse the crisis in consonance with his ‘good offices’ responsibility. In this volatile region, where one is witnessing the outbreak of a variety of conflictual situations as great powers are increasingly reluctant to rush in (which in itself could be a positive development), the UN should not fear to tread in endeavours to establish acceptable norms and standards of the rule of law.

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