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## **The Presidential Elections in the Maldives: The Incumbent versus a United Opposition**

*In the presidential elections in Maldives in September 2018, there is a direct contest between the incumbent, Abdulla Yameen, and Ibrahim Mohamed Solih from the Maldivian Democratic Party. Since Yameen became the President of Maldives in 2013, the country has witnessed a series of clampdowns on political dissidents. Even some of his own party's lawmakers, who have dared to take a different position, have not been spared by Yameen's government. In the forthcoming elections, the significant issues are radical Islam versus a liberal order, restitution of democratic and political rights versus status quo, foreign businesses and investments in Maldives, and interference of foreign powers in the internal affairs of the country.*

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The first round of the presidential polls in Maldives will be held on 23 September 2018. If none of the candidates manage to get a clear majority in the first round, then a second round of voting will be held within 21 days of the polls. This will be the second presidential elections in the Maldives since former president, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom (1978-2008), was defeated by Mohamed Nasheed in the run-off to the presidential elections in 2008. In the 2013 presidential elections, which were allegedly marred by electoral malpractices,

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Gayoom's half-brother Abdulla Yameen defeated Nasheed to become the president of the country. Once in power, Yameen gradually established his authority over the country's institutions. Both the opposition parties' leaders and Yameen's own party's lawmakers have borne the brunt of his high-handedness. Presently, many of these political defectors and dissenters are in prison, and many of the supporters of civil liberties and human rights activists face unwarranted hassles from government agencies. In such a political environment, there are concerns that the upcoming presidential election results may either be hijacked or highly influenced by the incumbent.

However, dismissing such fears, the Chairman of the Maldives Elections Commission, Ahmed Shareef, made a statement that, "observers would be allowed to monitor the vote and that electoral representatives from eight countries, the European Union and Organisation of Islamic Cooperation would be invited."<sup>2</sup> He also said that, "unlike previous elections this one is going to be fully trusted by the people. We will not withhold any information other than the information that has to be kept secret legally."<sup>3</sup> Candidates' applications are open from 23 July to 4 August 2018. Based on the applications, the Elections Commission will announce the final list of candidates on 18 August 2018 and official campaigning will be held from that day to 23 September 2018.

## **Yameen and the Opposition**

In recent years, as the government took punitive measures against the opposition parties, they formed a coalition to fight against these clampdowns. The opposition parties have come together to contest the upcoming presidential elections against Yameen.

Earlier, in February 2018, after weighing his prospects, Nasheed announced himself to be the presidential candidate from the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) for the elections. However, in June 2018, the Yameen government made amendments to the country's

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<sup>2</sup> "Maldives presidential poll to be held September 23", *Maldives Independent*, 8 June 2018. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/maldives-presidential-poll-to-be-held-september-23-138716>. Accessed on 20 July 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Elections (General) Act and Presidential Elections Act.<sup>4</sup> The amended acts bar Maldivians who have sought asylum overseas or relinquished dual citizenship from running for the office of the president for 10 years.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, Nasheed relinquished his candidature<sup>6</sup> and Ibrahim Mohamed Solih was nominated as the MDP's presidential candidate. Faisal Naseem was nominated by his party, the Jumhooree Party (JP), as Solih's running mate.

The opposition parties decried the amendment to the country's electoral laws. Constitutionally, more than half of the 85-member Majlis (Legislature) must be present to vote on "any matter requiring compliance by citizens."<sup>7</sup> However, only 34 ruling party lawmakers were in attendance when the Elections Amendment bill was presented in the legislative house. They voted unanimously in favour of it. The government justified the process by referring to the Supreme Court's ruling that the laws could be passed in a "state of necessity" when lawmakers deliberately refuse to attend.<sup>8</sup> Notably, the meeting of the Majlis has not been convened since it was suspended in July 2017. The members from the opposition bench raised doubts about the Speaker, Abdulla Maseeh Mohamed, and demanded the reinstatement of 12 former lawmakers who were stripped of their seats<sup>9</sup> for extending their support to impeach the Speaker.

Despite a show of unity, there are differences among the opposition parties on certain issues. The MDP election manifesto says that, if it wins the elections, it will form an "interim coalition government first and then follow it up with a fresh Presidential elections after 18 months in which all leaders, presently banned, will be allowed to contest."<sup>10</sup> Revealing the points in the manifesto through a video address to his party workers, the MDP's lawmaker Imthiyaz Fahmy said that, the "MDP believes that the new government should hold office for 18 months. In these 18 months, the government would establish independent institutions and

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<sup>4</sup> "Ruling party eyes presidential poll win with electoral law changes" *Maldives Independent* 25 June 2018. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/ruling-party-eyes-presidential-poll-win-with-electoral-law-changes-138944>. Accessed on 31 July 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> "Nasheed gives up MDP Ticket", *Maldives Independent* 29 June 2018. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/nasheed-gives-up-mdp-ticket-139032>. Accessed on 16 July 2018.

<sup>7</sup> "Maldivians with asylum overseas barred from running for president", *Maldives Independent*, 4 July 2018. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/maldivians-with-asylum-overseas-barred-from-running-for-president-139166>. Accessed on 12 July 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> "MDP manifesto promises coalition regime for 18 months, followed by party-based Presidential election", *NewsIn.Asia*, 30 June 2018. <https://newsin.asia/mdp-manifesto-promises-coalition-regime-for-18-months-followed-by-party-based-presidential-election/>. Accessed 20 July 2017

empower political parties.”<sup>11</sup> The manifesto calls for a change in the form of governance from the presidential to the parliamentary system. Conflicting certain pledges of the MDP, the JP’s manifesto states that the current presidential form of governance will be followed. It also refuses to accept the MDP’s proposal of appointing foreign judges to the Maldivian courts.<sup>12</sup>

## **Election Issues**

In the September elections, there are a number of issues which will determine the voting preferences of the Maldivians. Some of the key issues are listed below. <sup>13</sup>

### Radical Islam versus Liberal Secular Order

The rise of Islamists in the Maldives has created a social and political tussle between the proponents of radical Islam and its liberal version in the country. In 2012, Nasheed was ousted from power because of his liberal and secular policies. He was criticised for being anti-Islam and encouraging “western values” in the island nation.

In the last few decades, the Maldives has been gradually radicalised. This social transformation has turned the country into a popular recruiting ground for terrorist organisations, including the Islamic State (IS).<sup>14</sup> In an interview with *The Independent* in September 2014, former President Nasheed revealed that up to 200 Maldivians were engaged in fighting for IS in Iraq and Syria.<sup>15</sup> Earlier in 2014, a pro-IS rally was carried out in the Maldives.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> “Jumhooree Party manifesto conflicts with MDP pledges”, *The Edition*, 5 July 2018. <http://en.mihaaru.com/news/6426>. Accessed on 21 July 2018.

<sup>13</sup> See “Islam, infrastructure and foreign pressure: Maldives president on campaign trail”, *Maldives Independent*. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/islam-infrastructure-and-foreign-pressure-maldives-president-on-campaign-trail-139123>. Accessed 22 July 2018.

<sup>14</sup> “Islamic State: The Maldives - a recruiting paradise for jihadists”, Oliver Wright, *The Independent*, 13 September 2014. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/islamic-state-the-maldives-a-recruiting-paradise-for-jihadists-9731574.html>. Accessed on 10 June 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

The growing social influence of conservative and radical Islam has also affected the institutions of the state. As Nasheed said, “Radical Islam is getting very, very strong in the Maldives...Their strength in the military and in the police is very significant. They have people in strategic positions within both...Of the 200 people who have gone to jihad, the vast majority are ex-military.”<sup>17</sup> He added that, the “society had become much more conservative because of the influx of Saudi money – paying for Wahhabi imams and mosques, and spreading a deeply conservative view of Islam at odds with the islands’ traditions.”<sup>18</sup> This socio-political development is visible even in the foreign policy of the Maldives, for example, on 5 June 2017, following the footsteps of Saudi Arabia, the Maldives broke off diplomatic relations with Qatar.<sup>19</sup>

Making Islamisation an issue in the upcoming presidential elections, Yameen, during a campaign tour to Milandhoo Island on 3 July 2018, claimed that Nasheed sought the former Islamic minister’s opinion to allow the freedom to openly practice other religions in the Maldives. Yameen said, “Have we forgotten this? It is I who have been saying other religions won’t be allowed in Maldives, isn’t that so?”<sup>20</sup> He further said that non-believers should be deprived of “any kind of benefits” in the Maldives. He referred to a policy paper in April 2018<sup>21</sup> that proposed financial penalties and prison terms for apostates, and requested the people that, “This is what we should bring to mind when we approach the [September] 23rd vote”.<sup>22</sup> Attacking the liberals, Yameen stated, “Why should we see if there’s space for religions other than Islam in the Maldives? Do the people of Milandhoo agree? They won’t. Do the people of Milandhoo want a temple of another religion in front of the mosque here?”<sup>23</sup>

In this debate between radical Islam and a liberal, secular order, Yameen and the MDP, under Nasheed, are on different sides. However, the MDP is also being supported by the pro-

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> “Maldives join the 4 nations to cut its ties with Qatar”, *ABC News*. <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/maldives-joins-nations-cutting-ties-qatar-47837881>. Accessed on 10 June 2017.

<sup>20</sup> “Islam, infrastructure and foreign pressure: Maldives president on campaign trail”, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> See “Political backlash to EU calls for religious freedom” *Maldives Independent* 21 April 2018. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/political-backlash-to-eu-calls-for-religious-freedom-137603>. Accessed on 31 July 2018.

<sup>22</sup> “Islam, infrastructure and foreign pressure: Maldives president on campaign trail”, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Islamist, Adhaalath Party.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, it is not clear how the MDP, if it comes into power with the help of its coalition partners, will deal with radical Islam in Maldives.

### Restitution of Democratic and Human Rights in the Maldives

Yameen has been accused by international organisations, foreign powers and the opposition parties of gross violation of human and democratic rights of individuals in the country. To consolidate his powers, in November 2015, Yameen declared a state of emergency in the country. During that emergency, seven articles of the Constitution, including those guaranteeing citizens the rights of assembly, free expression, freedom from arbitrary detention and freedom of movement, were suspended. However, amidst global criticism, the emergency was revoked within a week.<sup>25</sup>

Again, on 5 February 2018, the Yameen government invoked a national emergency under Article 253 of the Constitution. The government used the emergency provisions to annul the judgment of the Supreme Court (SC). In its judgment, the SC stated that, “Upon deliberation of matters petitioned at the Supreme Court under supervisory jurisdiction claiming: criminal proceedings were conducted based on political motivations; and in violation of the Constitution and the international human rights covenants acceded to by the Maldives; and the rulings were given subject to undue influence over judiciary and the prosecutor; and contrary to due process; the court finds these cases require retrials and judgments pursuant to the law.”<sup>26</sup> The SC also ordered to reinstate 12 members of the Majlis who lost their seats in 2017 due to defection, and call its meeting.<sup>27</sup>

Following the imposition of an emergency, the leader of a different faction of the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM), Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, was also arrested. The police also stormed into the SC, and arrested Chief Justice Abdulla Saeed and Justice Ali Hamid who

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<sup>24</sup> “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.

<sup>25</sup> “Maldives revokes state of emergency amid global outcry and tourism worries”, 10 November 2015. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/10/maldives-revokes-state-of-emergency>. Accessed on 12 October 2017.

<sup>26</sup> “The Supreme Court Order Number: 2018/SC-SJ/01”, (Unofficial Translation) //C:/Users/isasar/Downloads/Unofficial%20Translation%20of%20the%20SC%20Court%20Order%202018-SC-SJ-01.pdf. Accessed on 6 February 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

had delivered that judgement. During the emergency, the government suspended important civil and political rights of the people. The emergency was lifted after 45 days on 22 March 2018.

Despite the suspension of the emergency, the opposition alleges the government of being high-handed. On the day the emergency was lifted, Nasheed tweeted, “President Yameen lifts the SoE [State of Emergency] because he now has no need for it. He has overrun the judiciary and legislature, arrested hundreds unlawfully and introduced a “new normal” in the #Maldives-full dictatorship. We will not give up, we will fight and we will overcome.”<sup>28</sup>

In the lead up to the elections, the opposition parties have been raising the issue of repression. However, the government has maintained that such steps were/are needed for “national security”.

### Foreign Businesses and Investments in the Maldives

Some sections in the Maldives have been spreading fear in the country by stating that, in the name of investments, foreign companies have been grabbing their land. Many such allegations have been made against Chinese companies engaged into infrastructure projects in the Maldives. These projects are also seen as dragging the country into a debt trap.<sup>29</sup> One such project is the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge. The total cost of the bridge is RMB1.26 billion (\$253.7 million) with 57.5 per cent of this cost being covered by a grant from the Chinese government. Another 36.1 per cent of the cost is in the form of a preferential loan from the Chinese government and the remaining 6.4 per cent is to be borne by the Maldivian state.<sup>30</sup> Another project is the upgrade and expansion of the Velena International Airport while a third is the Hulhumalé Phase II housing project currently under construction, where 16 buildings will be constructed. A fourth project is the development of a link road between the Hulhule and Hulhumalé, which is in progress.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> “Maldives State of Emergency Lifted”, *Maldives Independent*, 22 March 2018. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/maldives-state-of-emergency-lifted-136742>. Accessed on 21 July 2018.

<sup>29</sup> “China defends ‘completely normal’ Maldives investments”, *Maldives Independent*, 14 July 2018. <https://maldivesindependent.com/business/china-defends-completely-normal-maldives-investments-139354>. Accessed on 16 July 2018.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

At present, China leases 17 of the 1,200 islands that constitute the Maldives.<sup>32</sup> A research by Mumbai-based think tank, Gateway House, finds that tourism, which contributes to one-quarter of gross domestic product to the Maldives, depends heavily on China. “The largest number of tourists to the Maldives now comes from China via regular commercial flights. The international airport where they arrive is being developed by a Chinese company. The sea-plane operator that takes them to island resorts is owned by a Chinese firm, as are many of the resorts.”<sup>33</sup> However, the Chinese Ambassador to the Maldives, Zhang Lizhong, said that the investments in the Maldives resorts are “completely normal”. He rejected the claims of land grabs and debt traps.<sup>34</sup>

Besides the infrastructure sector, foreign companies are also engaged in the fishing industry in the Maldives. The local companies find it difficult to compete with them. To promote the local business group, both the government and the opposition are making pledges to the fishing community. The MDP manifesto, for example, has “promised to “transform the country’s fishing industry and allow foreign boats to only purchase fish directly from local vessels rather than catch it themselves.”<sup>35</sup>

### Interference of Foreign Powers in the Internal Affairs of the Maldives

In recent years, domestic turmoil in the Maldives has resulted in international organisations and foreign powers issuing statements expressing their concerns. Some of the Maldivians have welcomed these statements, while, for others, it is a sign of interference in the domestic issues of the country.

The two active powers in the region – India and China – have had confrontations on matters relating to the internal situation in the Maldives. The political leaders of the Maldives have also taken the side of one or the other country. For example, soon after the February 2018 emergency, in his opinion piece in *The Indian Express*, Nasheed wrote, “It is essential that

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<sup>32</sup> “The Maldives: Investments Undermine Democracy”, Amit Bhandari and Chandani Jindal, *Gateway House*, 7 February 2018. <http://www.gatewayhouse.in/chinese-investments-in-the-maldives/>. Accessed on 16 July 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> “China defends ‘completely normal’ Maldives investments”, op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> “MDP pledges to ban foreign vessels from Maldives fishing”, *Maldives Independent*, 2 July 2018. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/mdp-pledges-to-ban-foreign-vessels-from-maldives-fishing-139103>. Accessed on 21 July 2018.

India leads the international community in forcing President Yameen to comply with last week's [1 February 2018] Supreme Court order. This will pave the way for genuinely inclusive, free and fair elections with full international monitoring."<sup>36</sup> Reacting to Nasheed's statement, Dunya Maumoon, the former foreign minister of the Maldives, said, "I believe that the call by Nasheed for foreign intervention is very irresponsible even via certain countries. Yes, we are having a crisis and there are lot of issues we need to resolve and I have been continuously calling for peaceful dialogue and enough of war, we have seen a lot of destructive actions and our people are very concerned. As a country, we really need to make the decisions ourselves and find a way by ourselves."<sup>37</sup> Also, according to a report in *The Times of India* on 7 February, "The [Indian] Armed forces are on standby for any contingency in the Maldives, from evacuation of Indian tourists to military intervention in the archipelago, but there is no political directive to swing into action as yet,"<sup>38</sup>

China's initial stand was that "what was happening there is an internal affair."<sup>39</sup> Later, changing its position, China warned India to exercise restraints. In *The Global Times*, Ai Jun wrote that, "this is the country's internal affairs and China firmly opposes outside interference. More than that, China should take necessary measures to stop India if New Delhi moves to intervene militarily."<sup>40</sup> The piece further stated that, "The Maldives dependence on India for security since then [1988]<sup>41</sup> has made New Delhi grow arrogant and bring Male into its sphere of influence...Since the Maldivian President Abdulla Yameen assumed office in 2013, the nation has proactively interacted with the US, China, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, gradually heading toward(s) more independent and balanced diplomacy.

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<sup>36</sup> "A Villain in Paradise", *The Indian Express*, 7 February 2018. <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/a-villain-in-paradise-maldives-president-abdulla-yameen-5053962/>. Accessed on 7 February 2018.

<sup>37</sup> "Mohamed Nasheed's call for India's intervention very irresponsible....Emergency a necessity: Dunya Maumoon", Jyoti Malhotra, *The Indian Express*, 8 February 2018. <http://indianexpress.com/article/world/nasheeds-call-for-indias-intervention-very-irresponsible-emergency-a-necessity-dunya-maumoon-5055048/>. Accessed on 8 February 2018.

<sup>38</sup> "Maldives Crisis: Indian Military kept on standby", *The Times of India*, 7 February 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/maldives-crisis-indian-military-kept-on-standby/articleshow/62813515.cms>. Accessed on 7 February 2018.

<sup>39</sup> "China suggests its tourists not visit Maldives until situation stabilizes", *Maldives Times*, 6 February 2018. <https://maldivestimes.com/china-suggests-its-tourists-not-visit-maldives-until-situation-stabilizes/>. Accessed on 6 February 2018.

<sup>40</sup> "Unauthorized military intervention in Male must be stopped", Ai Jun *The Global Times*, 12 February 2018. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1089435.shtml>. Accessed on 17 February 2018.

<sup>41</sup> In 1988, "around 80 sea-borne armed forces landed in Male and attempted to gain control over various key government installations, supported by some 80 others who had infiltrated the country disguised as tourists". To overcome the situation, then president of Maldives Gayoom appealed to India for help. India dispatched paratroopers to help him. Within 24 hours, the Indian paratroopers cleared the capital and restored law and order in Male. See Mitra, Subrata K, Siegfried O Wolf & Jivanta Schottli (2006), *A Political and Economic Dictionary of South Asia*. London & New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group. p 218.

This apparently irritated India. Perhaps New Delhi has been seeking an opportunity to showcase its military again in its “backyard”...If India one-sidedly sends troops to the Maldives, China will take action to stop New Delhi. India should not underestimate China’s opposition to unilateral military intervention.”<sup>42</sup>

Yameen is seen as being close to China. Under his presidency, the Maldives has experienced volatility in its relationship with India. In 2017, his government signed a free trade agreement with China which upset India. However, a similar pact is now under discussion with India. In 2017, the government suspended three local councillors for meeting with the Indian Ambassador to the Maldives, Akhilesh Mishra. Then, in December 2017, an editorial in the pro-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.<sup>43</sup>

## Conclusion

Yameen has established his hold over the political and security institutions of the country. He will ensure that they help him win the presidential elections. However, in case the institutions do not interfere and free and fair elections are held, there may be a close contest between Yameen and Solih. The people’s vote in a free and fair election will be determined by the social acceptance of the respective leaders and the values they represent. If the Council elections result of 2017 could be an indicator of the people’s preference, the united opposition stands a chance. It won more than 300 seats in the Council elections while Yameen’s PPM won only 191 seats.<sup>44</sup>

The results of the upcoming presidential elections will shape the country’s internal politics and society, and its foreign policy. Yameen represents the Islamic voice, a strong state and a foreign policy which will take the country closer to China and Saudi Arabia. On the other

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<sup>42</sup> “Unauthorized military intervention in Male must be stopped”, op cit.

<sup>43</sup> “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-reachesout-to-india-seeks-to-undo-perceived-slight/articleshow/62244881.cms>. Accessed on 8 January 2018.

<sup>44</sup> “What is happening in the Maldives: All you need to know”, *Indian Express*, Jyoti Malhotra, 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.

hand, the opposition, mainly the MDP, represents a liberal voice and secularism. On the foreign policy front, it favours maintaining a balance between the different actors in the region. The elections in September 2018 will determine which of the two paths the Maldives will take.

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