

Challenges for the New Government in the Maldives

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Summary

In his inaugural speech on 17 November 2018, Ibrahim Solih, the new President of the Maldives, promised to take steps to re-establish the rule of law and democratic values in the country. On the foreign policy front, he vowed to bring the Maldives out of international isolationism and change the policy of favouring one country over the others, as was the case under the previous government. It would be interesting to see how Solih will turn around the fortunes of a country faced with serious challenges on the domestic and external fronts.

Introduction

On 17 November 2018, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih was sworn in as the seventh President of the Maldives. More than 300 foreign dignitaries from 46 countries attended the event. Among them were India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and former Sri Lankan President Chandrika Bandaranaike [Kumaratunga](#). China was represented by its Culture and Tourism Minister, [Luo Shugang](#).

Moving Away from the Past

In his inaugural speech, Solih reiterated the key electoral pledges of his coalition partners. These included implementing judicial reforms, restoring fundamental rights, recovering stolen assets and seeking the truth behind unresolved murders and abductions. He also highlighted the precarious financial situation of the country due to theft, corruption and negligence of the previous government under Abdulla Yameen (2013-2018). The government has published a 15-page document which outlines its agenda for the first [100 days](#). It has also appointed a committee to look at the cases against the political prisoners in the country.

The new cabinet has representation from the four coalition partners – the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) [40 per cent], the Jumhooree Party (JP) [20 per cent], the Progressive Party of Maldives faction, led by former president of the Maldives Maumoon Abdul Gayoom (20 per cent), and the Adhaalath Party (15 per cent).

A significant number of Maldivians have been critical of the appointments of Aishath Nahula, the wife of JP leader Gasim Ibrahim, as Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation, and JP President Ali Waheed as Minister of Tourism. Gasim is a transport magnate in the Maldives and his Gasim Villa Empire operates several resorts and an airline in the [country](#). Besides a conflict of interest, these appointments are anti-thesis to Solih's promise during his speech. Interestingly, since the 23 September 2018 elections, the JP has added 12 Members of Parliament (MP) to its rank. It now has 19 MPs, the [same number](#) as the MDP,

thereby providing it with greater clout and strength within the coalition. The relationship with the JP could be a potential flashpoint for the coalition.

Foreign Policy

Solih stated that, for the government to achieve its goals, he needs “the support and assistance of foreign countries and [international organizations](#).”

Yameen’s government was seen as being close to China and it allegedly put the country into a debt-trap of US\$1.5 billion (S\$2.1 billion) with [China](#). The Chinese were also accused by the locals of “[land grabs](#)”. The Solih government’s 100-day targets include “renegotiating contracts and loans that would damage sovereignty and put the country into [debt](#)”. However, according to Mohammed Nasheed, former President and advisor to the present government, China’s Ambassador to the Maldives, Zhang Lihong, handed the government an invoice of [US\\$3.2 billion](#) (S\$4.4 billion), a week after Solih took over. The Chinese have denied this and maintained that the amount is about [US\\$1.5 billion](#) (S\$2.1 billion).

India has come forward with an offer of a US\$1 billion (S\$1.4 billion) loan to the [Maldives](#). According to some media reports, this loan is in return for providing a military base to India in the Maldives. However, this has been refuted by [Abdulla Shahid](#), the Foreign Minister. Solih will visit India on 17 December 2018 and the loan details are expected to be worked out between the [two countries](#).

Highlighting the change in the Maldives’ foreign policy, Solih said, “My administration’s foreign policy will be formulated on the basis of human rights, democracy and climate diplomacy. We will endeavour to fortify the existing ties the Maldives has had with India and other regional countries. The Maldives will hereupon bolster its shared role to retain enduring peace and harmony of the Indian Ocean. Let me take this opportunity to emphasise that the Maldives is open and willing to establish diplomatic relations, and strengthen existing ties with all countries that wish to form mutually beneficial development [partnerships](#)”.

Solih’s government also has plans to send a proposal to re-join the [Commonwealth of Nations](#). The Maldives left the organisation in 2016 after the Commonwealth members criticised the Yameen government’s anti-democratic policies.

Conclusion

Solih’s coalition government has made a number of promises to the people. Several domestic issues, such as releasing political prisoners, are easy to address. However, others, particularly managing the coalition partners could pose problems for Solih. Similarly, external affairs, like renegotiating the deals with China, would be difficult. Now India has come into the equation. It would be interesting to see how Solih deals with Indian and Chinese interests. The road ahead for Solih is expected to be rough and it would require great resolve from him to ensure that his government is able to deal with the domestic and international challenges.

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