

A Comprehensive Election Victory: What Next for the Maldivian Democratic Party?

Amit Ranjan

Summary

The Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), led by the President of the Maldives, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, swept to victory in the 6 April 2019 parliamentary elections. A majority representation in the Parliament will help the government take some important decisions which may re-shape the country's domestic and foreign policies, and transform its debt-ridden economy. Some of these domestic and economic policies may redefine the MDP's political relationships with its coalition partners, especially, the Jumhooree Party.

Introduction

On 6 April 2019, the Maldives went to the polls to elect new members to constitute the country's 19th Parliament (Majlis). According to provisional results, the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) has won 65 out of the 87 seats contested, with its coalition partner – the Jumhooree Party (JP) – winning five seats, while the opposition – the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) and the People's National Congress (PNC), led by former President Abdulla Yameen, – has collectively won eight seats. The Adhaalath Party, a coalition partner of the MDP, contested nine seats but failed to win even one.¹ Former President Mohamed Nasheed has been elected from the Central Machchangoalhi constituency while the political heavyweights from the opposition, including PPM parliamentary group leader Ahmed Nihan and PNC president Abdul Raheem Abdulla, have lost their seats in re-elections.² In these elections, about 386 candidates contested for 87 parliamentary seats. The voting percentage was about 80 per cent which means that around 212,079 out of 264,442 eligible voters cast their votes.³

According to the Maldives' chapter of the Transparency International (TI), there were "very few cases where people were not able to vote because their names were not on the voter registry or their details did not match."⁴ The non-government organisation noted that, "72% polling stations reported disputes relating to the validity of ballot papers while 0.3% of ballot papers were disputed by candidates or party observers during the counting process."⁵ Despite this, the TI has assessed the elections positively. However, to improve it further, it has recommended "immediate measures to address wider issues, including vote buying, lack

¹ "Yellow wave sweeps MDP to historic 65-seat haul", (Maldives Independent 9 April 2019).
<https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/yellow-wave-sweeps-mdp-to-historic-65-seat-haul-144790>.

² Ibid.

³ "Elections Commission set to announce results", (Maldives Independent, 7 April 2019).
<https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/elections-commission-set-to-announce-results-144781>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid.

of transparency in political finance, abuse of state resources, barriers for women's equal participation in the electoral processes, and bring long overdue reforms to the electoral legal framework.”⁶ During the voting process, total 21 complaints were made to the Election Commission. Of these 21 complaints, 15 concerned re-registration, four were about conduct inside the polling stations, and two were over alleged bribery.⁷

Main Contest

In the parliamentary elections, the main contest was between the MDP and the opposition led by Yameen. In February 2019, Yameen was jailed by the criminal court of the country for receiving US\$1 million (S\$1.4 million) of government money through a private company, SOF Private Limited, to lease tropical islands for hotel development.⁸ Later, in March 2019, on the advice of doctors, he was temporarily transferred to house arrest.⁹ A few days before the parliamentary elections, on 28 March 2019, the High Court overturned the decision of the criminal court and ordered for his release on bail.¹⁰ Also, his bank accounts, which were frozen in December 2018, were unfrozen by the High Court in March 2019.¹¹

In addition to Yameen, the MDP was contesting the elections against one of its coalition partners – the JP. The coalition between the JP and the MDP for the parliamentary polls ended when the latter decided to contest all 87 parliamentary seats. To take an advantage of the cracks within the coalition, the opposition approached the JP leader Ibrahim Gasim (Qasim). The JP thus had an indirect alliance with the PPM and the PNC. In the elections, the PPM and PNC declared their support for 27 out of the 43 candidates from the JP. Crossing over to the other side during the elections, Gasim called for an immediate release of Yameen. He also termed the Presidential Commissions, constituted by Solih, to probe unresolved murders and recover stolen public funds, as “unconstitutional”.¹² Notably in February 2019, Gasim, as Speaker of the Parliament, refused to call a vote on the Presidential Commissions Bill after it was tabled in the agenda for the fourth time.¹³

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “Yellow wave sweeps MDP to historic 65-seat haul”, (Maldives Independent 9 April 2019).

<https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/yellow-wave-sweeps-mdp-to-historic-65-seat-haul-144790>

⁸ “Maldives ex-president Abdulla Yameen arrested for money laundering”, (ABC News 19 February 2019)

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-02-19/maldives-ex-president-arrested-for-money-laundering/10823916>

⁹ “Ex-president Yameen transferred to house arrest”, (Maldives Independent, 14 March 2019)

<https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/ex-president-yameen-transferred-to-house-arrest-144205>. Accessed on 14 March 2019.

¹⁰ “Ex-president Yameen released”, (Maldives Independent 28 March 2019)

<https://maldivesindependent.com/crime-2/ex-president-yameen-released-144656>.

¹¹ “High Court unfreezes ex-president Yameen’s bank accounts” (Maldives Independent 31 March 2019)

<https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/high-court-unfreezes-ex-president-yameens-bank-accounts-144660>.

¹² “Gasim calls for ex-president’s Yameen immediate release”, (Maldives Independent 9 March 2019).

<https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/gasim-calls-for-ex-presidents-yameen-immediate-release-144111>. Accessed on 11 March 2019.

¹³ “MDP cries foul as presidential commissions bill returned to committee”, (Maldives Independent, 27 February 2019), <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/mdp-cries-foul-as-preserved-commissions-bill-returned-to-committee-143978>. Accessed on 11 March 2019.

The Road Ahead

As the coalition partners – the MDP and the JP – contested against each other, commentators, including this author,¹⁴ speculated that, post-elections, there may be changes in their political relationship. Falsifying such speculations, in his post-elections press statement, Solih categorically stated, “Many of our coalition partners in the government were contenders in this election – some were our opponents. I assure the people, as I’ve done time and again, the coalition remains intact. I haven’t forgotten the hard work by our coalition partners to bring the country back from the brink of President Yameen’s disastrous rule. I will continue to work with the leaders of all our coalition partners to ensure we deliver on our pledges to the people.”¹⁵ This shows that the MDP is not in favour of parting ways with its coalition partners, including the JP. However, it is clear that the degree of political bonding between the MDP and the JP is not likely to be as strong as it was in the past.

In essence, the MDP has an absolute majority. It does not require the JP’s support in the Parliament. It is in the JP’s interest though to cling tightly to the MDP-led coalition. This is mainly to protect its leadership, especially Gasim against whom corruption charges have surfaced again. On 14 February 2019, the Anti-Corruption Commission’s report on the Maldives Marketing and Public Relations Corporation-embezzled funds named the Villa Group, owned by Gasim, for making profit through corrupt means. Gasim has, however, denied these claims.¹⁶

In the last parliament, as the government had to depend on the JP’s lawmakers for a majority, and Gasim held the office of the Speaker of the Parliament, taking any action against him would have been politically difficult. The situation is different now. In the 19th Parliament, the MDP is in a position to elect a new Speaker and Deputy Speaker to the house. Hence, it will be easier for the government to pass the Presidential Commissions Bill and make other anti-graft laws. Thereafter, how it deals with Gasim has to be observed.

During the elections campaign, the MDP stressed on the implementation of Agenda 19, which consists 19 concept papers the party has promised to its voters to introduce in the Parliament. The items under this agenda include bills to introduce a minimum wage and unemployment benefits.¹⁷ Other promises made in Agenda 19 include strengthening the asset disclosure regime, pursuing transitional justice and reforming the judiciary. Reiterating the poll promises, in his post-election statement, Solih said, “While we celebrate, we must also not forget the immense challenges that lie ahead of us. The work to strengthen our democratic institutions, to deliver basic services for citizens, to our promise of bringing

¹⁴ See Ranjan, Amit “Parliamentary Elections and Challenges in the Maldives”, ISAS Insight Number 545, (17 March 2019). <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ISAS-Insights-No-545-Parliamentary-Elections-and-Challenges-in-Maldives.pdf>.

¹⁵ “Statement by President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih”, Press Release, The President’s Office, Republic of Maldives. <https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/20930>.

¹⁶ “Gasim declares legitimate transactions with SOF”, (Mihaaru Online 19 February 2019), <https://edition.mv/news/9235>. Accessed on 7 March 2019.

¹⁷ “President pitches MDP’s ‘Agenda 19’ as plan to deliver pledges”, (Maldives Independent 14 March 2019). <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/president-pitches-mdps-agenda-19-as-plan-to-deliver-pledges-144257>

corruption, past and present to book and ending impunity starts now. I look forward to working with all of you to realize our promises to the people.”¹⁸

However, given the economic situation of the country, it would be interesting to see if the Parliament will introduce all the social and economic welfare policy bills. On the issue of reforming the judiciary, as the MDP has an absolute majority, it may start the process but this would also require institutional support.

Positively, a majority in the Parliament will help the government take some tough decisions or carry out reforms to achieve the International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicted growth of around 6.5 per cent in 2019 and six per cent in 2020.¹⁹ In its report, the IMF had appreciated the measures of the government, such as “public investment management, increasing the credibility of annual budgets and integrating the annual budgets with the medium-term fiscal and debt management strategies.”²⁰

One of the primary challenges the Maldivian economy faces is of external debt. At present, the country has a debt of around US\$1.5 billion (\$1.9 billion) with China.²¹ To address this, in 2018, soon after taking oath to his office, one of the priorities Solih included in his 100-day target was to “start renegotiating contracts and loans that would damage sovereignty and put the country into debt”.²² To help the Maldives pay its debt, in December 2018, India granted a loan to it.. The country is yet to engage China in such negotiations. Legally and politically, it is not easy for the Maldives to re-negotiate those deals.

Theoretically, there are political pitfalls of majority in democracy. Often, the government starts behaving in an authoritarian manner. As a nascent democracy, which has witnessed an authoritarian rule in past, the civil society has to remain politically alert to check and balance the government. It was the vibrant Maldivian civil society which, in 2008, orchestrated the decline of authoritarian rule under Gayoom (1978-2008), and against the Yameen government fought for years to ensure the return of democracy in 2018.

Conclusion

A landslide victory to the MDP will strengthen the Solih government but its effect on policy implementation has to be observed. In any case, with such support, the government can now take some major policy-related decisions to take the Maldives out of the spectre of Yameen’s era. However, the damage done by Yameen is so deep that it will take years for the Maldives to come out from it.

¹⁸ “Statement by President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih”, Press Release, The President’s Office, op. cit.

¹⁹ International Monetary Fund, “IMF Staff Completes 2019 Article IV Mission to Maldives” Press Release No. PR19/64, 5 March 2019. <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2019/03/05/PR1964?cid=em-COM-123-38466>. Accessed on 9 March 2019.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ “PM Clears India’s Stand As Maldives Worries About ‘Loot’ In Chinese Boom”, (NDTV 18 November 2018). <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/pm-modi-clears-indias-stand-as-maldives-worries-about-loot-in-chinese-boom-1949143> . Accessed on 7 March 2019.

²² “Translation: Solih administration’s ambitious 100-day agenda” (Maldives Independent, 18 November 2018), <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/translation-solih-administrations-ambitious-100-day-agenda-142746>. Accessed on 7 March 2019.

Some of the promises made by the MDP are not easy to fulfil because of their political and economic repercussions. For example, the government's measures against corruption are all likely to have an impact on the country's politics. A large number of political leaders are considered to be engaged in corrupt means. In February 2019, two ministers from the MDP were axed by the President because of corruption cases against them. There may be more in the MDP. In such a situation, it will be interesting to observe whether the anti-graft measures are selectively used to target the opposition members or apply indiscriminately to punish the individuals engaged in such malpractices.

.....

Dr Amit Ranjan is Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at isasar@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.