

# Mohamed Nasheed Attacked: Rise of Islamic Radicalism in the Maldives

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## Summary

*The recent bomb attack on former President Mohamed Nasheed clearly indicates that radical groups are actively advancing their position in the Maldives. Radical ideology has strengthened itself in the Maldives and has, in the recent past, been assisted by state institutions. To deal with the extreme elements and radicalism in the Maldives, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's government took several steps. However, these have not been effective in dealing with the menace.*

## Introduction

On 6 May 2021, Mohamed Nasheed, former President of the Maldives and current speaker of the country's parliament, sustained injuries in an attack outside his official residence in Male. Soon after condemning the attack, the President of the Maldives, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, held a meeting of the National Security Council members in the night of 6 May 2021.<sup>1</sup> The next day, during a national address, Solih said that the attack was being investigated by the security services and that the Australian Federal Police would assist them. He further said that "the attack wasn't just an attempt on Nasheed's life, but an attack on [the] Maldives' democracy and economy."<sup>2</sup> In the militant attack, three military officers, part of Nasheed's security and two bystanders – a Maldivian and a British male – were also injured.<sup>3</sup> On the "Dark Web", the international terrorist organisation Islamic State (ISIS) claimed responsibility for that attack. However, such a claim has not yet been verified by the Maldivian officials.<sup>4</sup> The 2020 United Nations (UN) Security Council report on ISIS' presence in the Maldives states that "the [UN] monitoring team was informed that ISIL-K works with a network of supporters in the Maldives".<sup>5</sup> In light of the attack on Nasheed's life, this paper analyses the escalation of Islamic radicalism in the Maldives.

## Islamic Radicalism in the Maldives

Radicalism in the Maldives has its link with many students going to countries such as Pakistan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia to study religion in the 1990s. Several of them returned and found jobs in various positions in academic and non-academic institutions in the

<sup>1</sup> Lamy Abdulla, "President Solih condemns attack on Majilis Speaker Nasheed", *The Edition*, 6 May 2021. <https://edition.mv/news/22510>. Accessed on 9 May 2021.

<sup>2</sup> "Australian police to assist Maldives probe attack against Speaker Nasheed", *Sun.Mv.*, 7 May 2021. <https://en.sun.mv/66569>. Accessed on 9 May 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Aishath Hanaan Hussain Rasheed, "Reports suggest Islamic State orchestrated attack on Speaker Nasheed's life", *Rajje*, 7 May 2021. <https://raajje.mv/99509>. Accessed on 9 May 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

country. Some of the returnees came with a militant set of religious values and new leaders to eulogise. Besides, during their study, some students became attracted to the militant activities in other parts of the world and actively participated in them. One of the early signs of Maldivian youth fighting in militancy affected areas was between 1998 and 2003, when a few were found fighting in the Kashmir valley.<sup>6</sup>

One of the first militant attacks the Maldives took place was on 29 September 2007, when a bomb blast occurred in Sultan Park in Male. Three men – Mohamed Sobah, Moosa Inaz and Ahmed Naseer – were arrested and sentenced for carrying out the explosion. Many other suspects fled the country. After the bombing when the Maldivian authorities attempted to search the Dar-ul-Khair mosque on Himandhoo Island, they were confronted by about 90 masked and helmeted members of the mosque. The army took over from the police and establish control.<sup>7</sup>

Over the years, the Maldives has turned into a fertile recruiting ground for militants, including the IS jihadists.<sup>8</sup> In an interview with *The Independent* in 2014, Nasheed revealed that up to 200 Maldivians were engaged in fighting for IS in Iraq and Syria.<sup>9</sup> During that interview, Nasheed claimed that there were close links between the jihadist groups and the country's military and the police force.<sup>10</sup> He added that the Maldivian "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>11</sup>

In 2015, Malaysian police revealed that three young Maldivian men were trained to target the American and the Israeli consulates in the South Indian cities of Chennai (in Tamil Nadu) and Bengaluru (in Karnataka).<sup>12</sup> The American armed forces had also detained a few Maldivian youngsters fighting along the Al Qaeda terrorists on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.<sup>13</sup>

In 2017, Shauna Aminath, a Maldivian human rights activist, said:

"A new strand of Saudi Salafism is strengthening its roots in Maldivian society. An increasing strategic partnership between the [Abdulla] Yameen

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<sup>6</sup> Praveen Swami, "Maldives: militant Islamists on rise", *The Hindu*, 24 November 2007. <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/Maldives-militant-Islamists-on-the-rise/article14881607.ece>. Accessed on 10 June 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Animesh Roul, "The Threat from Rising Extremism in the Maldives", *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*, March 2013, Volume 6 Issue 3. <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-threat-from-rising-extremism-in-the-maldives/>. Accessed on 17 May 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Oliver Wright, "Islamic State: The Maldives – a recruiting paradise for jihadists", *The Independent*, 14 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>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> N Sathiya Moorthy, "The Maldives: Is the attack on Nasheed a sign of escalating radicalism?", Observer Research Foundation, 7 May 2021. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-maldives-is-the-attack-on-nasheed-a-sign-of-escalating-radicalism/>. Accessed on 9 May 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

government and Saudi Arabia has led to more investments in the island's energy, transport and health sector[s]. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia has donated US\$100,000 [S\$134,000] for the establishment of the Islamic University of Maldives, along with a generous US\$1.2 million [S\$1.67 million] fund for the construction of ten mosques all over the islands."<sup>14</sup>

After the extremists established their foothold in the Maldives, they started demanding the introduction of Shariat law in the country. Liberal bloggers have faced constant threats and attacks from the extremists. One of these bloggers, Yameen Rasheed, was stabbed to death by the extremists in April 2017.<sup>15</sup> In 2019, Husnu Suood, chairman of a presidential commission formed to investigate unresolved murders, told a research journalist from the International Committee to Protect Journalists that the extremist group that killed Yameen Rasheed had also attempted to kill blogger Ismail Khilath Rasheed in June 2012 along with two related acts of violence: stabbing to death the Islamic scholar and Member of Parliament from Raa Atoll constituency, Afrasheem Ali, in October 2012, and abduction of *Maldives Independent* journalist Ahmed Rilwan in August 2014.<sup>16</sup> Hussain Humam, who confessed to the killing of Afrasheem Ali, was sentenced to death by the Maldivian court.

In 2019, it came to light that some of the Maldivian groups also worked as a link to funding for the terrorist groups from other countries. Police investigation revealed that an Indonesian terror group, Jamaah Ansharut Daulah, was wired US\$29,569 (S\$40,511) by 12 people with alleged ties to ISIS from the Maldives and four other countries between March 2016 and September 2017.<sup>17</sup> The four other countries are Trinidad and Tobago, Malaysia, Germany and Venezuela. The money was sent via the Western Union's service.<sup>18</sup>

In April 2020, when COVID-19 began to spread its tentacles in the Maldives, five speedboats and two dinghies at the harbour of Mahibadhoo in central Maldives were set ablaze by the militants. Fortunately, no one was on board at that time. The ISIS took responsibility for that attack in its weekly newspaper, *al-Naba*.<sup>19</sup> This was the ISIS' maiden claim of attack in the Maldives. In his article for *The Diplomat*, Azim Zahir observes that the Maldivian supporters of IS and other jihadi groups "have been quick to exploit the pandemic for propaganda purposes. There is a renewed activism to translate and spread ISIS propaganda. These supporters have focused on framing COVID-19 as a mini-soldier of jihad, a divine intervention that has exposed the weakness of the West. Anti-Western messages have

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<sup>14</sup> "Maldives Opposition looks towards India to keep up democracy", 14 June 2017. <http://www.orfonline.org/research/maldives-opposition-looks-towards-india-keep-up-democracy/>. Accessed on 22 June 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Moosa Hasan and Kai Schuz, "Outspoken Maldivian blogger who challenged radical Islamists is killed", *The New York Times*, 23 April 2017. [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/23/world/asia/yameen-rasheed-dead-maldives-blogger-dead.html?\\_r=1](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/23/world/asia/yameen-rasheed-dead-maldives-blogger-dead.html?_r=1). Accessed on 12 June 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Mohamed Hasan, "Judge concerned over delays in Yameen Rasheed murder trial", *Maldives Independent*, 22 July 2019. <https://maldivesindependent.com/crime-2/judge-concerned-over-delays-in-yameen-rasheed-murder-trial-146746>. Accessed on 23 July 2019.

<sup>17</sup> "Indonesian terrorist group's funding traced to Maldives", *Maldives Independent*, 29 July 2019. <https://maldivesindependent.com/crime-2/indonesian-terrorist-groups-funding-traced-to-maldives-146992>. Accessed on 28 July 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Azim Zahir, "Islamic State Terror in the Maldives as COVID-19 Arrives", *The Diplomat*, 18 April 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/islamic-state-terror-in-the-maldives-as-covid-19-arrives/>. Accessed on 9 May 2021.

increased. They have also framed the pandemic as a divine punishment for people's sins and for an 'un-Islamic' tourism industry. They have started to spread messages of religious purification and a return to 'pure' Islam."<sup>20</sup>

Nasheed is the second important official in recent years to face a blast. In 2015, then-President Abdulla Yameen escaped unhurt in an explosion in his official speedboat. Investigations into the explosion led to the arrest of Yameen's chosen Vice-President Ahmed Adeeb's for plotting the blast, in which then-First Lady Fathimath Ibrahim suffered injuries.<sup>21</sup> The seriousness of the conspiracy charges lost steam after then-Defence Minister of Maldives, Colonel Mohamed Nasim, was arrested. Both Adeeb and Nasim spent years in prison. Nasim came out of jail after Solih came into power.<sup>22</sup>

One of the reasons for the militants' recent attack on Nasheed is his liberal beliefs. Notably, in 2012, Nasheed's views caused his dismissal from the president's office. In recent times, Nasheed has been particularly accused by some members of parliament from the opposition parties for engaging in conspiracy against Islam and conducting anti-Islam workshops in the Maldives.<sup>23</sup> In his tweets, Mohamed Iyaz, a renowned Islamic scholar, criticised Nasheed for sending out Christmas greetings to all those who celebrate it. Some of his tweets connote that Nasheed is not a true Muslim.<sup>24</sup>

Even some individuals in the ruling coalition have challenged Nasheed on his "selective" response to Muslims' issues. In response to Nasheed's tweet in February 2020 – in which he expressed happiness about a British barrister, Amal Clooney, working with the Maldives to fight on behalf of the Rohingyas – Ali Hussain, a member of parliament from the ruling coalition, tweeted, "Also the Muslims who are suffering in India deserve our [Maldives] attention. India is closer to us in many ways so there is no reason why we can't raise our concerns."<sup>25</sup> Nasheed's tweet was in the context of the Maldives government's decision to join Gambia in challenging Myanmar on the Rohingya issue in the International Court of Justice.<sup>26</sup>

Simultaneously, Nasheed has faced opposition due to his support for India's initiatives to develop and fund infrastructure projects such as the Greater Male Connectivity Project and increase India-Maldives bonding. Opposition parties of the Maldives have launched an 'India Out' campaign. This campaign also finds support with some extremists. The Progressive Party of Maldives and People's National Congress held a number of protests across the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> N Sathiya Moorthy, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Zunana Zalif, "Anti-Islamic organizations will not be allowed in Maldives: Nasheed", *Rajje*, 4 March 2020. <https://raajje.mv/72495>. Accessed on 10 May 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Mohamed Fathih Abdul Muhsin, "Nasheed will not stop working against extremist: MP Ilyas", *The Times of Addu*, 27 December 2020. <https://timesofaddu.com/2020/12/27/nasheed-will-not-stop-working-against-extremist-mp-ilyas/>. Accessed on 10 May 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Meera Srinivasan, "MP challenges Nasheed on India stand", *The Hindu*, 3 March 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/mp-challenges-nasheed-on-india-stand/article30975161.ece>. Accessed on 18 June 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

island against what they call “selling off the Maldives” to India.<sup>27</sup> The opposition parties also criticise the defence and security related agreements concluded in February 2021 between India and the Maldives. Interestingly, some members of the ruling coalition are also not happy with the government’s growing ties with India.<sup>28</sup>

Solih’s administration is the first to publicly acknowledge and address the threat of extremism in the Maldives.<sup>29</sup> In October 2019, Solih ratified the second amendment to the country’s Anti-Terrorism Act that incorporates early intervention strategies by the Maldivian authorities to prevent terrorism in the country. Further, the second amendment “accentuates political and religious extremism and radicalisation as terrorist acts. These include any forms of support towards promoting extremism and radicalisation and any types of participation in such acts.”<sup>30</sup> Following the ratification, in December 2019, after the police and military launched raids on the house of suspected extremists, the Islamic ministry suspended the preaching licence of three Islamic scholars accused of encouraging terrorism.<sup>31</sup> Solih has expressed his desire to work with foreign technology companies to halt the spread of extremist ideology and propaganda in the Maldives.<sup>32</sup> There is a National Action Plan on preventing and countering violent extremism in the Maldives.<sup>33</sup> To counter terrorism, Solih has expressed his commitment to work with other countries. In 2019, India and the Maldives agreed to establish a Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism to combat violent extremism and de-radicalisation.<sup>34</sup> Japan has extended a grant of US\$70 million (S\$93.47 million) for the Maldives’ counter-terrorism efforts. During his visit to Singapore in July 2019, Solih visited the Internal Security Department’s counter-terrorism centre to learn on dealing with the issue. Maldives has also agreed to coordinate with the European Union to prevent radicalisation and terrorist attacks.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

The attack by the militants on Nasheed’s life clearly shows that the base and power of the extremists are increasing in the Maldives. Radical ideas in the Maldives have been primarily

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<sup>27</sup> Devirupa Mitra, “After Fire at SBI and Anti-India Protests, Maldives Beefs up Security for Indian High Commission”, *The Wire*, 29 August 2020. <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/maldives-india-high-commission-anti-india-protests>. Accessed on 18 September 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Meera Srinivasan, “Maldives Parliament debates defence deal with India”, *The Hindu*, 22 February 2021. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/maldives-parliament-debates-defence-deal-with-india/article33907044.ece>. Accessed on 18 April 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Mariyam Afaaf Adam, “2019 in review: Highlights of the Solih administration’s work”, *rajje*, 31 December 2019. <https://raajje.mv/68691>. Accessed on 17 May 2021.

<sup>30</sup> The President’s Office, “President Ratifies Second Amendment to Anti-Terrorism Act”, 10 October 2019. <https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/22406>. Accessed on 17 May 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Hasan Mohamed, “Preaching licenses suspended as authorities launch counter-terrorism operation”, *Maldives Independent*, 18 December 2019. <https://maldivesindependent.com/society/preaching-licenses-suspended-as-authorities-launch-counter-terrorism-operation-149698>. Accessed on 17 May 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Gulbin Sultana, “Preventing Violent Extremism in Maldives: President Solih Approach”, *Society for the Study of Peace and Conflict*, 26 February 2020. <https://www.sspconline.org/opinion-analysis/preventing-violent-extremism-maldives-president-solih-approach-wed-02262020-1200>. Accessed on 17 May 2021.

<sup>33</sup> For details on the NAP, see “National Counter Terrorism Centre” newsletter, Volume 40 July 2020. [https://nctc.gov.mv/publications/NCTC\\_Newsletter40.pdf](https://nctc.gov.mv/publications/NCTC_Newsletter40.pdf). Accessed on 17 May 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Gulbin Sultana, op cit.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

imported through returning Maldivian students and foreign contributions. These ideas were helped by the state's institutions, mainly during Yameen's term. After Solih came into power, his government pledged to deal strictly with the terror activities. Nevertheless, the government has not been very successful in doing so. The Maldives needs to deal urgently with the rise of militancy and spread of radical ideology. Otherwise, it can expect further attacks with far greater intensity and consequences.

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