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Institute of South Asian Studies  
National University of Singapore  
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
#08-06 (Block B)  
Singapore 119620  
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505  
[www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)  
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



## Rise of the Islamists in the Maldives

*There is more to the Maldives than just its idyllic beaches and tropical sea waters around its many islands. The country has also been witnessing a rise of Islamist groups in recent times. As result, its society and politics have witnessed notable changes which are reflected in some of the recent foreign policy decisions taken by the government. These developments have also resulted in indoctrinated Maldivian youth fighting 'jihad' in different parts of Asia. It is worrying times for the Maldives.*

Amit Ranjan<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

On 5 June 2017, the Maldives broke off diplomatic relations with Qatar.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, it joined the ranks of Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in cutting ties with the country. Announcing it, the statement of the Maldivian government read, “The Government of Maldives has decided to sever diplomatic relations with Qatar effective from today, 5 June 2017. The Maldives took the decision because of its firm opposition to activities that encourage

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<sup>1</sup> 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. He can be contacted at [isasar@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isasar@nus.edu.sg). The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper. The author is thankful to Shauna Aminath and Thoriq Hamid for their valuable comments on this piece. Shauna is a Human Rights activists and has served as an advisor to the former President of the Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed. Thoriq is with Transparency Maldives.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Maldives join the 4 nations to cut its ties with Qatar’ *ABC News* Retrieved from <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/maldives-joins-nations-cutting-ties-qatar-47837881>. Accessed on 10 June 2017.

terrorism and extremism. The Maldives has always pursued a policy of promoting peace and stability in the Middle East. The Maldives reiterates its commitment to work with countries that promote peace, stability, and show solidarity in the fight against terrorism.”<sup>3</sup> The two countries had established diplomatic ties in 1984.

Earlier, in 2016, following in the footsteps of Saudi Arabia, the Maldives also severed its diplomatic relationship with Iran.<sup>4</sup> Also, Maldivian President Abdulla Yameen participated in the Arab-Islamic-American summit held in Saudi Arabia in May 2017.<sup>5</sup> These decisions taken by the Maldives are a clear reflection of its growing closeness to Saudi Arabia which, incidentally, opened an embassy at the Maldivian capital of Male in 2015.

Foreign policy is generally a reflection of social and political developments within the country. The recent decisions and actions taken by the government of the Maldives can be seen as a representation of its domestic affairs. This paper will explain this aspect.

## **A Brief History of the Politics of the Archipelago Nation**

The Maldives is an archipelago of about 1,200 coral islands, out of which only one-sixth is inhabited by the country’s population of about 375,500 people.

Unlike many other countries of South Asia, the Maldives has, more or less, remained a sovereign state since the early Christian era. During the colonial period, the Maldives became a British protectorate in 1796 but this status was only officially recognised under the 1887 agreement between Sultan of the Maldives and the British Governor of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Under the new status, the Maldivian Sultans enjoyed a large degree of sovereignty in their internal and external affairs. On 26 July 1965, the Maldives got rid of its protectorate status. However, the British, through an agreement, retained Gan Island. It was eventually handed over to the government of the Maldives in 1975.

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<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the Maldives, Retrieved from <http://www.foreign.gov.mv/index.php/en/mediacentre/news/3905-statement-by-the-government-of-maldives-3>.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Maldives join the 4 nations to cut its ties with Qatar’, *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Demographically, the Maldives is predominantly a Sunni Muslim country. According to the 1997 constitution, Islam is the state religion, and non-Muslims are barred from taking public office or even becoming citizens of the country. However, in ancient times, the people in the Maldives were possibly Buddhists – this claim is substantiated by the remains of stupas found on various islands. Some other Buddhist signs were also discovered during excavation in the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> According to the historical records, in 1153, the Maldivian King converted to Islam which simultaneously also led to the conversion of his subjects. The records show that the King was converted to Islam either by Yusuf Shamsuddin of Tabriz or by Abul Barakat the ‘Berber’. From this time onwards, there is a written history of the sultanate, compiled in Arabic, originally in 1725, and supplemented by a few records in Divehi (Maldivian).<sup>7</sup> A lengthy description of some islands of the Maldives can also be found in the records of the North African traveller, Ibn Batuta, who resided there from 1343 to 1344 (when he became the Qazi or Chief Justice) and in 1346.<sup>8</sup> Unlike most of the Islamic countries of the world, the Maldives had been ruled by a number of queens. An early instance of this is found in the description of a merchant, Suleman, who, in the pre-Islamic days in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, noted that this country was ruled by a female.<sup>9</sup>

In 1932, due to dissatisfaction among the people against the monarchy, the King of the Maldives, Mohammed Shamsuddin III, was compelled by his nobles to accept rule by constitution. Thus constitutional monarchy was set up in the Maldives.<sup>10</sup> After the Second World War (1939-1945), Mohammad Amin Didi took charge of the country and introduced many reforms. In January 1953, he changed the country’s constitution. The country transitioned from a monarchy to a republic, and Didi became the first president of the country. However, soon in a political coup, Didi was overthrown by his opponents – they attacked him, resulting in his death in December 1953. Afterwards, the monarchy (Sultanate) was restored through a referendum, and it remained in place until 1968 when a second republic was set up.<sup>11</sup> In 1968, Ibrahim Nasir became the President and, under him, a modernisation process began in the Maldives. A significant development which transformed the economy and has had a socio-

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<sup>6</sup> Robinson, Francis (1989), *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and The Maldives*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, New York.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

political impact was turning the Maldives into a tourist destination in the 1970s. In 1972, the Maldives leased its fish processing rights to a Japanese company after Sri Lanka discontinued the purchase of dried fish from the Maldives. This meant a greater reliance on tourism, which soon succeeded in boosting the country's economy, due to the increased international air connectivity to the archipelago.<sup>12</sup>

In 1978, Ibrahim Nasir was replaced by Maumoon Abdul Gayoom as the president of the country. Gayoom remained in power till the presidential elections in 2008, when Mohammed Nasheed succeeded him. On 7 February 2012, Nasheed resigned following protests by the opposition political parties who were joined by a majority of the military and police forces. He was replaced by Mohammed Waheed Hasan who was then succeeded by the present president, Abdulla Yameen, in 2013.

## **Rise of Radicalism in Contemporary Times**

Over the last few years, the archipelago has turned into a fertile recruiting ground for militants, including the Islamic State (IS) jihadists.<sup>13</sup> In an interview with *The Independent*, former president, Nasheed, revealed that up to 200 Maldivians are engaged in fighting for IS in Iraq and Syria.<sup>14</sup> This figure is also supported by a study carried out by the SOUFAN Group in 2015 on the presence of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria.<sup>15</sup> Earlier in 2014, there was also a pro-IS rally featuring banners calling for the introduction of Shariah law in the Maldives.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Wright, Oliver (2014, 13 September) 'Islamic State: The Maldives – a recruiting paradise for jihadists' Retrieved from <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>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> The SOUFAN group provides security and intelligence-related information to governments and multinational corporations. As the number of such study groups has proliferated in many conflict zones one can trust the data, but not without further verifications about their objectivity. In the case of the Maldives, the former President's statement on the number of Maldivian nationals fighting along with the IS supports the data. For details of the report see 'Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria' Retrieved from [http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG\\_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf](http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf). Accessed on 19 June 2017.

<sup>16</sup> Wright, Oliver (2014, 13 September) 'Islamic State: The Maldives - a recruiting paradise for jihadists' Retrieved from <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/islamic-state-the-maldives-a-recruiting-paradise-for-jihadists-9731574.html>. Accessed on 10 June 2017.

In the same interview, Nasheed claimed that there were links between jihadist groups and the country's military as well as the police force. He 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, "What's happening is they are taking people in for training and they will go away [to fight abroad]. They are using the Maldives military to train their people."<sup>18</sup> He also said that, "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>19</sup> Targeting President Yameen, Nasheed said, "He [Yameen] has the Islamists with him and he can't do away with them. He would deny that but I don't see the government taking any measures against the Isis [Islamic State in Iraq and Syria] flag being displayed on the streets and all the indoctrination going on. They have allowed the military [personnel] to grow beards."<sup>20</sup> He further stated that, "Most people don't want to talk about it. They are afraid to talk about it because the minute you mention Isis, you get death threats".<sup>21</sup>

On the relationship between the tourism industry and radicalism, Nasheed mentioned, "They (Islamists) don't want to hit the tourism industry because they are getting such good 'milk' out of it. They are able to launder their money through it. They are able to recruit people. The government wants the money out of tourism. Everybody wants the money out of that. How the tourists behave on their uninhabited islands is nothing to do with us apparently."<sup>22</sup>

Shauna Aminath, a human right activists from the Maldives, points out, "Since 2012, the democratic environment in the Maldives has severely declined. Amidst corruption allegations and increasing Islamist extremism, President Abdulla Yameen is under severe pressure to step down. Along with curbs on press freedom and free speech, the government has left no room for political dissent. Independent institutions have been politicised, defamation is criminalised and judges are corrupt. In recent years, an increasing number of opposition leaders are facing criminal charges for participating in anti-government protests, receiving jail time or are in

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

exile,” she pointed out.<sup>23</sup> The situation is such that, as she further mentions, “Around the island, it is impossible to criticise radical Islam or call out the undemocratic practices of the government.”<sup>24</sup> She further goes on to say, “A new strand of Saudi Salafism is strengthening its roots in Maldivian society. An increasing strategic partnership between the Yameen government and Saudi Arabia has led to more investments in the island’s energy, transport and health sector. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia has donated US\$100,000 [S\$139,000] for the establishment of 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>25</sup>

It is estimated that about six percent of the Maldivians are currently studying in a foreign country. A significant number of these students have been trained in religion. Earlier in 1990s, many went to Pakistan and Saudi Arabia on the state’s expense. Later, the destination changed because of disturbances in Pakistan. As a result, a majority of the Islamic scholars and preachers currently in the Maldives have been educated in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan or Egypt.<sup>26</sup> During the course of their studies overseas, a few of the Maldivian students were attracted to militant activities in other parts of the world. One of the early evidences of Maldivian youth being indoctrinated to fight jihad can be traced to the period between 1998 and 2003 when a few of them were found fighting in the Kashmir valley.<sup>27</sup> They were trained by Pakistan-based militant group, Lashkar-i-Taiba, to fight against India.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, there were others who, after their studies, returned to the Maldives with different religious values and a new hero to eulogise – Osama bin Laden. For example in 2003, posters appeared on the walls of a school on Edhyafushi, a Maldivian island, praising Osama.<sup>29</sup>

On 29 September 2007, a bomb blast occurred in Sultan Park in Male. It was the first-ever Islamist terror strike in the Maldives.<sup>30</sup> Three men were arrested and sentenced for carrying out the blast. A few others, who were among the attackers, fled the country. The investigation of

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<sup>23</sup> Maldives Opposition look towards India to keep democracy’ Retrieved from <http://www.orfonline.org/research/maldives-opposition-looks-towards-india-keep-up-democracy/> Accessed on 22 June 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> As informed by Shauna Aminath and Thoriq Hamid.

<sup>27</sup> Swami, Praveen (24 November 2007), ‘Maldives: militant Islamists on rise’, *The Hindu*. Retrieved from <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/Maldives-militant-Islamists-on-the-rise/article14881607.ece>. Accessed on 10 June 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

the bombing pointed to a link “between the Maldivian national, Ahmed Zaki, and Lashkar i-Taiba madrassas in the Kashmir valley, and Maldivians belonging to a group known as Jamaah-tul-Muslimeen and individuals participating in an anti-American Islamic extremist online forum called Tibyan Publications.”<sup>31</sup>

In more recent times, on 22 April 2017, a liberal blogger, Yameen Rasheed, was stabbed to death near his apartment in Male.<sup>32</sup> He was administrator of a blog called *The Daily Panic* where he had called himself a “disobedient writer” and “occasional satirist”.<sup>33</sup> According to media reports, he had earlier received threats from the Islamists and he had reported these threats to the police. The pattern of his killing was similar to the killing of the bloggers in Bangladesh in 2015. The reasons for Rasheed’s killing and those of the bloggers in Bangladesh were also similar – they opposed the Islamists and were promoting liberal views through their blogs.

The rise of the Islamists has led to an increasing influence of religion which has had an impact on the Maldivian society. On the changing social behaviour of the Maldivians, Aishath Velazinee, writes, “A few islands even reverted to ‘the Prophet’s time’, attempting to emulate the Arabian dress and lifestyles of the time of Prophet Muhammad. Men grew beards and hair, took to wearing loose robes and pyjamas, and crowned their heads with Arab-style cloth. Women were wrapped in black robes. Goats were imported and fishermen gave up their vocation to become ‘shepherds’.”<sup>34</sup> Thoriq Hamid finds this goat story dramatic and an exaggeration of the prevailing ground situation in the country. However, he agrees that, due to rising influence of conservative ideas, many children have not been vaccinated. The rise of Islamists has deeply affected the status of women in the country which had, as mentioned earlier, historically seen queens in power. Citing the 2015 Human Rights report of the Maldives, Thoriq says, “There is also a growing concern that, with increase in religious

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<sup>31</sup> Robinson, J J, *The Maldives: Islamic Republic, Tropical Autocracy*, London: Hurst Publications.

<sup>32</sup> Hasan, Moosa & Kai Schuz (23 April 2017), ‘Outspoken Maldivian blogger who challenged radical Islamists is killed. Retrieved from *The New York Times*, [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).

<sup>33</sup> ‘Maldives Opposition look towards India to keep democracy’ Retrieved from <http://www.orfonline.org/research/maldives-opposition-looks-towards-india-keep-up-democracy/> Accessed on 22 June 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Cited in Swami, Praveen (2007, 24 November) ‘Maldives: militant Islamists on rise’ *The Hindu* Retrieved from <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/Maldives-militant-Islamists-on-the-rise/article14881607.ece> Accessed on 10 June 2017.

conservatism practices, home based education is sometimes preferred by parents leading to restricting girls' access to formal education at school."<sup>35</sup> Under the influence of such archaic values, "Young girls [have been] taken out of school and married off in their early teens in religious ceremonies said to be sanctioned by Islam."<sup>36</sup>

The Islamists in the Maldives are also against anything that they consider to be 'foreign'. In December 1999, the "Islamists launched incendiary attacks on the regime, arguing that the planned millennium celebrations were part of a plot to spread Christianity. At Male, a shop displaying Santa Claus was attacked in 2005."<sup>37</sup> Due to the increase in the impact of the Islamists, the Maldivian political elites have presented themselves as defenders of Islam, protecting it from other religions. This stance has paid handsome dividends to them in the form of votes and public support. To make people Islamic in their attitude, spiritual preachers and religious leaders from various parts of the world have been brought in by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs to deliver sermons on Islam. These preachers have included Zakir Naik of India.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

The rise of Islamists in the Maldives and their links to other similar groups across the world, as well as the involvement of the Maldivian youth in terrorist activities abroad, have had a profound impact on the social and foreign policy landscapes of the archipelago. In order to curb the further rise of Islamism, among others, the Maldives needs a strong and committed government. However, the political players are more intent on using the Islamist card for their gains. The Maldives is indeed going through challenging times. Only time will tell if it will be able to overcome or fall prey to this threat.

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<sup>35</sup> See 'Submission from Human Rights Commission of the Maldives for the combined Fourth and Fifth Periodic Report of the Republic of Maldives to the United Nations Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) Committee January 2015' Retrieved from <http://hrcm.org.mv/publications/otherreports/HRCMCEDAWShadowReport%2012January2015.pdf>. Accessed on 19 June 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Swami, Praveen (2007, 24 November) 'Maldives: militant Islamists on rise' *The Hindu* Retrieved from <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/Maldives-militant-Islamists-on-the-rise/article14881607.ece> Accessed on 10 June 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Robinson, J J, *The Maldives: Islamic Republic, Tropical Autocracy*, London: Hurst Publications.