

# ISAS Working Paper

No. 145 – 16 March 2012

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## **Stabilising the Neighbourhood? : India's Flip Flop Approach to Maldives Crisis**

**S D Muni<sup>1</sup>**

It has gradually dawned on the Indian policy makers that neighbourhood is strategically critical for India's stability, development, security and also its regional and global aspirations. Since the beginning of this century, a clear admission of this reality has been articulated officially; from foreign secretaries to the prime ministers. An independent group of strategic analysts in their latest report says:

Interstate politics in South Asia has direct spill-over effects into domestic and regional politics in India. India's ability to command respect is considerably diminished by the resistance it meets in the region. South Asia also places fetters on India's global ambitions.<sup>2</sup>

There is however a persisting gap between the realization of the significance of neighbourhood and the crafting of a sustainable strategy to deal with the crises in the neighbouring countries that threaten to jeopardize India's vital interests. The latest example

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<sup>2</sup> 'NONALIGNMENT 2.0: A Foreign And Strategic Policy For India in The Twenty First Century', This report is authored by Sunil Khilnani, Rajiv Kumar, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Lt.Gen(retd.) Prakash Menon, Nandan Nilekani, Srinath Raghavan, Shyam Saran, Siddharth Varadarajan. The Report was released in New Delhi on 28 February 2012 in the presence of India's National Security Adviser, his two deputies and his predecessors.

of this gap was evident in case of the Maldives where India fumbled and faltered in its approach towards the sudden exit of the democratically elected Maldivian president Nasheed. Attempts have since been made to apply course correction, but the situation in that archipelagic country seems to have slipped out of the grip of Indian policy makers.

### **Maldives and its Crisis**

Maldives is located some 300 miles off India's southern coast, covering 820km long and 120km wide spread of strategic Indian Ocean. It is a country of 1192 Islands of which just more than fifteen per cent i.e. 199 islands, is inhabited with a total population of 315,000. Population is dominantly Sunni Muslim and non-Muslims are not accepted as citizens of the Maldives. The Maldives' first major political transition took place in 1968 from a Sultanate to a republic. Maumoon Abdul Gayoom became the third president of the republic in 1978 and survived three coup attempts against him in 1980, 1983 and 1988 respectively. During the last one, he was rescued by an active Indian military intervention (under an India Navy's operation called 'Sandhya') undertaken on his specific request. He eventually had to give up power in the face of a struggle for democracy during 2007-08 against his authoritarian ways to govern, after losing in a popular election in 2008. Nasheed of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), declared a 'prisoner of conscience' by the Amnesty International for his ordeal of detention by the Gayoom regime for nine years on 27 different occasions, led the struggle and became the first popular president of the Maldives.

President Nasheed was forced to resign and hand over power to his Vice-President Mohammad Waheed Hassan Manik on 7 February 2012, in the face of a revolt from the security forces comprising of the country's Police Force and the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF). While the succeeding President Waheed has projected it as a constitutional and peaceful transition of power, Nasheed and his supporters have termed it as a coup claiming that President Nasheed was forced to resign at the 'point of gun'. After his resignation, Nasheed told a group of reporters: "Yes I was forced to resign at gunpoint...There were guns all around me and they told me they would not hesitate to use them if I didn't resign".<sup>3</sup> Whether one accepts Nasheed's description of his ouster as a coup or not, there is little doubt that his resignation was not entirely a voluntary affair and that circumstances were created to force his exit.

There has indeed been a simmering power struggle between Nasheed and his MDP on the one hand and his opponents led by Gayoom and his PPM (Progressive Party of Maldives) on the other. The principal political detractors of President Nasheed, the former president

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<sup>3</sup> BBC News Asia, February 08, 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16945764?print=true>. Accessed on March 05, 2012.

Gayoom's PPM, the conservative Islamic formations the Adhaalath Party and Dhivehi Quamee Party (DQP) and Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (DRP), along with other Islamist non-governmental organisations had joined hands in what they called as the 'Coalition of 23<sup>rd</sup> December' to oust Nasheed. They started agitations and protests against his alleged 'un-Islamic acts, corruption, autocratic functioning and mal-governance'. They also blamed him for violation of the Constitution and proximity to Israel. On the night of January 29<sup>th</sup> they met the then Vice-President Waheed to urge upon him to take over the functions of Presidency and called upon the MNDF and the Maldivian Police Force to defy Nasheed and instead, pledge allegiance to Waheed. Vice-President Waheed was reported to have agreed to all the 'terms proposed by the 'December 23 Coalition' which presumably included rehabilitating Gayoom protégés back in power under Waheed's leadership.<sup>4</sup> Prompted and supported by the consolidated opposition to Nasheed, sections of MNDF and Police Force stormed President Nasheed on 7 February 2012 and forced him to resign.

Nasheed had clearly lost the confidence and control of the security forces. He should also take the responsibility for creating conditions that emboldened his political opponents and united them due to his lack of governance abilities and his various acts of commission and omission. Soon after coming to power, Nasheed's somewhat arbitrary style of politics alienated many of his erstwhile parliamentary allies. His moderate approach to Islam was always an anathema to the conservative religious forces. Over the past decade, conservative Islam has been gaining ground in the Maldives with support from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The Islamic conservative forces had started opposition to President Gayoom also initially but with the democratic opposition becoming stronger, Gayoom accommodated these Islamist forces for his political survival. Over the years, the language and idiom of politics in the Maldives has come to assume a strong religious flavour. The most controversial act of President Nasheed, which became a trigger for the public criticism and protests against him, was his arrest of the judge of Criminal Court, Abdulla Mohammad on 16 January 2012. President Nasheed and his MDP were unhappy with judge Abdullah, a committed Gayoom protégé, for his role in delaying the prosecution of corruption cases against many pro-Gayoom businessmen as also in releasing DQM Vice-President Jameel. Jameel had been detained for his relentless personal attacks on Nasheed. Nasheed's allegations against the judiciary was that it was "handpicked by the former president...these powerful judges provided protection for the former president, his family members and political allies many of whom are accused of corruption, embezzlement and human rights crimes".<sup>5</sup> The arrest of the judge turned the entire judiciary against Nasheed. In mobilising opposition to Nasheed, others alienated by him on different occasions earlier also contributed significantly. For instance, a

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<sup>4</sup> Haveeru online, 'Vice president agreed to all terms proposed: December 23 coalition', January 31, 2012, <http://www.haveeru.com.mv/news/40026>. Accessed on March 05, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Lasanda Kurukulasuriya, 'Maldives coup – too close to call?' *The Sunday Times*, (Colombo) February 12, 2012.

Sandhurst- trained Col. Mohammad Nazim, sacked from MNDF in 2009, had mobilised a section of the MNDF and police to revolt against Nasheed. Rising prices and declining economic prospects added to the growing public perception of Nasheed's government as un-responsive and incompetent.

The judiciary, however, was deeply involved in the power struggle between Nasheed and his detractors. Nasheed was keen on reforming the judiciary and purging it of the influence of Gayoom protégés through parliamentary legislation in the new session which was about to begin later in February 2012. Nasheed could not do it earlier for want of a required majority in the Majlis. He acquired this majority only recently. It may be of interest to note here that the opposition struck against Nasheed on 7 February 2012 just before this purge could begin. There were nearly a 100 cases of human rights violations filed against Gayoom, of which 25 were filed only on a day before the ouster of Nasheed, and the Member of Parliament Moosa Manik, who filed these cases, was physically assaulted on the day after the Nasheed's exit. A Presidential Commission appointed to investigate an oil-deal scam by a company of a PPM politician-businessman Abdullah Yameen and Gayoom brothers, was also to give its report a day after Nasheed's ouster. This company was dealing in OIC (Organisation of Islamic Conference) subsidised oil imports through Singapore since time of the Gayoom regime.<sup>6</sup> The ouster of Nasheed thwarted the release of this report which might have passed strong strictures against the pro-Gayoom company.

Some of Nasheed's acts, accordingly, were driven by his desire to get a grip over the levers of power in the Maldives which have traditionally been nursed by his nemesis and predecessor Gayoom. While the idiom of politics in the Maldives, as mentioned earlier, is religious, its financial sustenance and support comes significantly from the tourism sector which constitutes one-third of the island-chain nation's economy. Rich and powerful resort-owners who control the tourism sector have a close nexus with political parties and their leaders, mostly of the bygone regime of Gayoom. In order to weaken the hold of his opponents on this sector, Nasheed had opened up the tourism sector for greater competition. He took initiatives to bring more of the isolated Islands under the resort economy. Nasheed wanted to streamline the tax net to cover the rich resort-owners. He also expanded the tax net to bring the resort-owners under it. Besides curbing the monetary power of the politically-oriented resort-owners, there was also a need to raise national revenues in the face of declining income from the tourism sector owing to the economic slump in the West (United States and Europe) from where most of the rich tourists came in. All this was hurting the entrenched resort-owners. They therefore came forward to fund opposition to and to change

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<sup>6</sup> This is based on the comments made by 'Narxym' from Male on March 5, 2012 in media report on the Maldives. See *DNA (Daily News & Analysis)*, (Mumbai-India), March 05, 2012, [http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report\\_dont-meddle-in-our-affairs-maldives-home-minis](http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report_dont-meddle-in-our-affairs-maldives-home-minis). Accessed on March 07, 2012.

the Nasheed regime. Some prominent resort-owners were in the forefront of the anti-Nasheed protests and rallies before and after the dramatic political change. Commenting on the role of the resort-owners in ousting him, Nasheed mentioned that at least four of them were involved, one being Gasim Ibrahim owner of the Villa Group, in this respect. Nasheed also said:

They liked the old order of corruption. We were rocking the boat, taxing them. When we came into government revenue was \$600million, today it is \$1.2billion. We have introduced a general sales tax, corporate profit tax and income tax and reduced import duties. They did not like that but the government needs money. We have businessmen here who are richer than the government.<sup>7</sup>

On the whole, the ouster of Nasheed underlines the persisting power struggle in the Maldives which did not die out with the end of the Gayoom regime. Much before the democratic regime could consolidate, the old regime struck back and there are no signs that there would be an early end to this internal power struggle.

## **India's Role**

India seems to have misread the real dynamics of this internal power struggle despite its deep strategic and economic stakes in the Maldives. Strategically, the Maldives occupies a critical position in the Indian Ocean Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) through which thousands of merchant and naval ships transit. During the Second World War, British had established an operational base in the southern Gan Island of the Maldives. This base was handed over to the Maldives only in 1976 when the US had established a senior Naval Command in Diego Garcia, some 600 miles further south of Gan. In 1977, the then Soviet Union approached the Maldives for setting up naval facilities to counter the US Diego Garcia base but without any success. In 1988, when India rescued the Gayoom regime, the attempted coup was suspected to have been led by a Sri Lankan Tamil militant group, Peoples' Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE). In 2001, during Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji's visit to the Maldives, a proposal was made for establishing a Chinese submarine base in Marao coral island of the Maldives, located about 40 km south of the capital Male.<sup>8</sup> Though such a submarine base has not been established, China entered into a defence cooperation agreement with the Maldives, signed during the Gayoom regime that lasted until 2009. India's concerns

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<sup>7</sup> *The Telegraph*, (London) February 13, 2012. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/maldives/9077446/...13/2/2012>. For some details on the role of other resort owners in the crisis see 'Money behind the 07 February Coup in Maldives', <http://haruge.com/?p=220>. Accessed on February 13, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Gurpreet Khurana, 'China's String of Pearls and its security implications', *Strategic Analyses*, January 2008 (IDSA, New Delhi).

about the adversarial use of the Maldives' strategic location were further heightened following the November 2008 cross-border terrorist attack in Mumbai from across the sea. There were already reports that Pakistan's notorious terrorist outfit, Lashkar-e-toiba was seeking a foothold in the Maldives by exploiting the Islamic connection.<sup>9</sup>

This has led India to conclude a close defence cooperation agreement with the Maldives. In August 2009, during the visit by Indian Defence Minister A.K. Antony, India agreed to set up 26 radar stations across 26 Atolls of the Maldives. These stations will be linked to Indian Coastal Command. India will also establish an air force station for surveillance flights to monitor the 'movement of pirates, terrorists, smugglers' and such peace-threatening forces. This cooperation will ensure the security of the vast Indian and Maldivian extended economic zones in the Indian Ocean.<sup>10</sup> Security cooperation between the two countries was reinforced and extended along with the overall Cooperation for Development, for which a Framework Agreement was concluded during Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to the Maldives in November, 2011. Addressing Maldives' Parliament (Peoples' Majlis) on 12 November 2012, Singh underlined the stakes that the two countries had in Indian Ocean security:

India's security like that of Maldives is closely linked to what happens in the Indian Ocean. The challenges we face are well known – extremism and religious fundamentalism, piracy, smuggling and drug trafficking to name a few...Our two countries have agreed upon a multi-pronged approach to deal with these problems... Bilaterally we have entered into arrangements on combating terrorism, drug trafficking, disaster management and coastal security and transfer of sentenced persons...

At a regional level, we shall enhance our cooperation to increase maritime domain awareness and surveillance. We should have better exchange of information, more training programmes and work towards a cooperative security framework in the Indian Ocean region.<sup>11</sup>

Economically, India's trade with the Maldives has witnessed a steady increase, from Rupees 307.95 crores in 2005-06 to 395.57 crores in 2009-10. The Maldives procures many of its consumer requirements from India. India's investments in the Maldives have registered an impressive growth from US\$60-65 million until 2008 to nearly a billion US dollars at

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<sup>9</sup> Author's interviews in Male with senior Maldivian officials during 2007.

<sup>10</sup> 'India Maldives agree to step up defence cooperation', *The Indian Express*, (New Delhi), August 21, 2009. Also see, Balaji Chandramohan, 'India, Maldives and the Indian Ocean', *IDS Comments*, October 13, 2009, Siddharth Srivastava, 'India drops anchor in Maldives', *Asia Times*, September 2, 2009, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/south\\_Asia/K102Df02.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/south_Asia/K102Df02.html). Accessed on March 5, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Text of the speech. <http://www.rediff.com/news/report/text-pm-manmohan-singh-s-historic-speech-in-maldi...> Accessed on March 6, 2012.

present.<sup>12</sup> GMR Infrastructure of India, in a consortium with KLIA of Malaysia, is involved in building the Male International Airport on a 25-year BOT (Build-Operate-and-Transfer) basis. Suzlon Energy of India is setting up a 25MW wind energy farm and the Taj Group of India is operating two resorts in the Maldives. The State Bank of India has extended generous loan assistance to Maldivian entrepreneurs, accounting for 42 per cent of all such loans. In view of internal political crisis in the Maldives, the State Bank of India, on 16 February 2012, temporarily suspended all its loan operations. There are about 30,000 Indians working in the Maldives in various fields.<sup>13</sup>

The spread and depth of these stakes did not get reflected in India's response to the latest crisis of political change in the Maldives. The sudden ouster of the popularly elected President Nasheed was initially described by India as an 'internal development'. It viewed the change in guard as a peaceful and constitutional transition of power. Indian officials were quoted as saying that "Waheed was Nasheed's running mate. He has strong administrative and political credentials. This is an internal issue and not a security issue for India".<sup>14</sup> India even claimed that it had facilitated this transition. Political recognition was quickly accorded to the new President. Prime Minister Singh spoke to the new Maldivian President and offered to extend "any support or assistance that the people of Maldives might require". In a letter sent to the new President, Prime Minister underlined the "common destiny and common security interests" shared by the two countries, adding that "India is committed to working with you and the Government of Maldives, to further enhance our close, bilateral cooperation to mutual benefit and for the continued security, progress and prosperity of our two countries".<sup>15</sup> India also encouraged the United States, Sri Lanka and other countries to recognise the new Maldivian President.

However, New Delhi was soon to realise that the recognition of the new regime and exchange of pleasantries with the new President were somewhat hasty steps. Policy makers in India were taken by surprise at the ousted President Nasheed's labelling of the political change as a 'coup' and at the show of support that he still enjoyed. As it turned out, the latest change in the Maldives was neither peaceful nor orderly. There were violent clashes between Nasheed's supporters and police, which threw the law and order situation into utter disarray in the capital, Male, and other atolls like Nasheed's strong-hold of Addu. There was also international support coming to Nasheed, particularly from the United Kingdom, which set up a Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) to investigate the circumstances of this

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<sup>12</sup> 'Indian Investments in Maldives safe, say officials', *Business Line*, New Delhi, February 09, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> These details have been taken from a Note on 'India-Maldives Relations' prepared by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, January 2012. (MEA website).

<sup>14</sup> Archis Mohan, "India guides Maldives shift – 'Obama of the East' steps down after hardline protests trigger coup fears", *The Telegraph* (Calcutta, India), February 08, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Press Releases issued on Maldives situation by the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi on February 08, 2012.

political change. India feared that its political initiative in the context of this Maldivian crisis would be grabbed by others. New Delhi was also worried if India's strategic interests and investments would be affected by the violence as also by the fact that the new administration included known India-baiters like the defence and home ministers. It therefore decided to send a Special Envoy to assess the ground reality afresh. Why then did New Delhi not delay the recognition of the new Maldivian President for a while until a proper assessment of the developments in the Maldives could be authentically made? Secretary (West) M. Ganapathy of India's External Affairs Ministry, who went to the Maldives on 10 February 2012, as Prime Minister's Special Envoy, had extensive discussions with all the party leaders and brought back the impression that Nasheed's ouster was not entirely peaceful; that he was still hugely popular and that the immediate need in the Maldives was to restore peace and stability. Ganapathy was assured by the new regime that all foreign investments including Indian investments, were safe.<sup>16</sup> On the basis of such new assessment, and to wrest political initiative back, India followed the Special Envoy's visit with that by Foreign Secretary Ranjan Mathai, who visited Male on 15 -16 February 2012. After discussions with the ousted President Nasheed, leaders of all major parties and other leaders from the judiciary and parliament (Majlis), a 'Roadmap for a Possible Way Forward' was prepared. As claimed by Mathai, under this 'Roadmap', all the parties concerned agreed that:

...in the interests of national reconciliation and to encourage harmony between our citizens, the Government of National Unity will hold discussions with all relevant parties to conduct elections by an early date. The Government of National Unity will work towards [creating] the conditions that will permit such elections to take place including any Constitutional amendments.<sup>17</sup>

This 'Roadmap', however, remained largely on paper except for the abatement in violence and agitations. Nasheed and his party refused to join the National Unity government of President Waheed. His party's contention was that if Nasheed's resignation had to be taken as a constitutional transition of power then the rest of the executive and administration would need to be retained and there was no need for a new National Unity government. However, as the new President himself was in league with the anti-Nasheed movement, he has changed the entire government, bringing in hard-line detractors of the ousted regime and former Gayoom allies into powerful political positions. The All Party Consultative Committee (APCC) established for dialogue between the rival political forces has not been able to deliberate meaningfully on the questions of early elections and any constitutional amendments to facilitate such elections. While Nasheed's MDP has been unwilling to talk to the government on anything except the holding of early elections and the necessary

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<sup>16</sup> *The Hindu*, February 11, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> 'Foreign Secretary's remarks to media in Maldives', *Speeches/Statements*, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, February 16, 2012.



constitutional amendment to facilitate that, the government seems to be in no mood to discuss the election dates before legitimising the regime through the presidential address to the Majlis. They sought assurances for MDP's cooperation in this and also for floor management in the Majlis for the desired constitutional amendment. MDP was opposed to all this as that would amount to giving legitimacy to what they called an 'illegitimate government'. Rallies by the new regime and the ousted MDP criticising each other and mobilising public support to consolidate their respective political positions continued, with tensions running high.

This prompted another visit by the Indian Foreign Secretary in less than a fortnight. The second visit failed to break the deadlock between the ruling regime and the ousted one. There have also developed differences within the ruling coalition on India's role. India's acceptance of early elections and concern for the protection and security of Nasheed and his close associates were seen as being a partisan intervention. The hard-liners in the ruling coalition were getting resentful of India 'interference' in the Maldives' internal affairs. They objected to Mathai's participation in APCC which was explained by the Indian side as being in response to a specific invitation from President Waheed.<sup>18</sup> Some of them, such as the daughter of former President Gayoom and Minister of State for Foreign Affairs in the new administration Dunya Maumoon, along with Home Minister Mohammad Jameel had, even before Mathai's second visit, started saying that the government did not give any assurances on holding an early presidential election.<sup>19</sup> A day after Mathai's departure from Male, on 1 March 2012, Nasheed's MDP did not allow Waheed to hold the scheduled Majlis session. Subsequently Home Minister Mohammad Jameel stressed that "as long as India does not interfere in the internal affairs of Maldives, all other efforts put by India will be seen as constructive. However, India must not be seen as a friend only of one party or political individual".<sup>20</sup> In another report, Jameel was quoted to have issued a veiled threat to India saying that "it will be a moral obligation on the part of India to see that democracy is sustained at Maldives, and if not, it will be a blow to India as well, as it is the closest ally of our country."<sup>21</sup>

## Appraisal

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<sup>18</sup> Joint Secretary incharge of Maldives in MEA, Mr. Harsh Vardhan Shringla, who had accompanied Mathai to Male held a press conference to say that 'President Waheed requested Mathai to participate in the APCC talks and an official invitation was extended for this by Mujuthaba, coordinator of the talks'. 'India pushes for early elections in Maldives, parties agree', *India Today* March 1, 2012. <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/india-pushes-for-early-election-in-maldives-parties-ag...> accessed on March 06, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> 'Ranjan Mathai in Maldives for the second time', *IBN Live* February 28, 2012, <http://ibnlive.in.com/generalnewsfeed/news/ranjan-mathai-in-maldives-for-the-second-ti...>, *The Indian Express*, February 29, 2012. <http://www.indianexpress.com/story-print/918156/>. Accessed on March 06 and 07, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> 'Don't meddle in our affairs, Maldives home minister tells India', *DNA (Daily News & Analysis)* (Mumbai) March 06, 2012. [http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report\\_dont-meddle-in-our-affairs-maldives-home-minis...](http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report_dont-meddle-in-our-affairs-maldives-home-minis...)

<sup>21</sup> *The Hindustan Times*, March 06, 2012, 'India has obligation to safeguard democracy in Maldives'. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/Story/Page/Print/821523.aspx>.

The foregoing narrative of India's moves underline two aspects. One, that India is trying to make a course correction of its initial hasty move of going all out to legitimise the exit of Nasheed and two, India has, in the process, trapped itself deep in the Maldives' domestic power struggle, as the new regime refuses to relent on its hold on power. A number of factors accounted for India's initial position. To begin with Nasheed himself was responsible to some extent for misleading New Delhi to believe that the transition of power was within constitutional parameters. He was in direct contact with Indian authorities and did not give the impression that he was being forced to resign. When asked if he needed any help from New Delhi, his answer was in the negative.<sup>22</sup> It is possible that in his weaker moment, under the pressure from MNDF and Police Force, which had refused to obey him, he decided to resign. However, when he went to his party, he was asked to retrace his step and challenge the legitimacy of the transition. India was certainly not prepared for his *volte face*. New Delhi did not plead with him not to resign as it had its own reservations on the way he was functioning. New Delhi was not quite comfortable with his abrasive style of politics and governance which alienated his former allies and strengthened his opponents. It was taken in by the constant criticism voiced against him by his opponents. Even during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Male in November 2011, Nasheed's opponents had voiced allegations of undemocratic and unconstitutional functioning by his administration in conversations with various members of the Indian delegation.<sup>23</sup>

The Indian strategic establishment also suspected that the Nasheed administration was hobnobbing with China behind India's back on the possibility of granting projects of naval significance. The Chinese interest in developing some of the Maldivian islands as a 'submarine base' has been noted earlier. The question of 'Nasheed's proximity to China', particularly of his defence minister's, was reportedly brought up by India's intelligence agencies, in a high-level meeting of the Defence Crisis Management Group in New Delhi when it discussed the question of India's intervention in the Maldives to rescue Nasheed from the violence and chaos that marked the aftermath of political transition.<sup>24</sup> The Indian security establishment was also uneasy with the Nasheed administration's proximity to the UK and the presence of British advisers around him. There were suspicions that the UK, either for its own sake or on behalf of the US, for the latter was expanding and consolidating its presence in the Asia-Pacific region, could persuade the Maldives to grant naval presence to it. If that were to happen, it would blunt, if not neutralise, Maldives' emerging defence cooperation

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<sup>22</sup> Interviews with highly placed Indian Officials in New Delhi, February 18-26, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Rakesh K Singh, 'China connection stalled Indian help to Nasheed?' *Daily Pioneer*, (New Delhi), February 13, 2012., <http://www.dailypioneer.com/pioneer-news/todays-newspaper/422766-china-connection>. Accessed on February 13, 2012.

with India. There were also signs of tardy response from the Maldives side in executing sensitive aspects of this cooperation.<sup>25</sup>

Notwithstanding these sensitive strategic considerations, India should have taken a cautious and dispassionate approach towards regime change in the Maldives. What India failed to understand was the intensity of the simmering power struggle in which the stakeholders of the pro-democracy regime were trying to oust Nasheed. The opposition against Nasheed was building up for the past few months. India claims to have advised him to adopt a consensual approach towards his detractors, which was easier said than done realistically in a situation of a sharpening power struggle. There was surely a need for Nasheed to have been careful in not getting isolated and in smoothening the rough edges of his political and governance style mentioned earlier. But towards that end, India either did not exercise its quiet diplomatic weight properly and fully, or could not do so effectively. India should have kept in focus the fact that, on the whole, no previous regime in Male had promoted Indian strategic and economic interests, mentioned earlier, in the Maldives on the scale done under Nasheed's presidency. Nasheed has also publicly denied the charge that he was soft towards China's attempts towards establishing its strategic presence in the Maldives. He has now disclosed that in 2008, when he came to power, China had a defence agreement with the Maldives. This agreement was due for renewal in 2009, but he refused to go ahead with that. "I had this paper on my desk even two weeks back. The MNDF sent me the letter saying I have to sign it". Now that he was out, China "will certainly play an active role now. They will play much-much more active role" in the Maldives, he added.<sup>26</sup> Replying to other Indian misgivings about him, and contrasting himself with the Gayoom regime and his PPM which forced his ouster, Nasheed in an emotional outburst said:

My question to Indian establishment is that if they think that we did not perform, do they think this (*change of regime*) is a better option?...Unlike PPM we are a group of people who strongly believe in India, their role and functions in Indian Ocean and the relationship that we want with India...The thing is India takes us for granted unlike the PPM. I think this is the biggest reason, a more logical reason (*for India's failure in understanding the situation in the Maldives*). They know we will be with them. It is an ideological thing for us...Did we disturb Indian sensitivities? You can't find a bigger Indian lover than me. Even if they say a thing against India, that is like saying it against me...We never articulated anything anti-Indian and my party has also not done that....<sup>27</sup> (*Italics added*)

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<sup>25</sup> Interviews in New Delhi.

<sup>26</sup> 'Ousted Maldives president warns India it would lose influence to China', *The Times of India*, February 14, 2012. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/Ousted-maldives-president-warns-...>

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

## Prospects

In view of the recent visits by India's Foreign Secretary and the earlier visit by India's Special Envoy, New Delhi now seems to be in a better position to grasp the dynamics of the latest regime change in the Maldives, and there are clear signs of a course correction in India's approach. Under this course correction, India has taken a position that Nasheed and his party should not be victimised and that elections should be held early to bring about a stable and legitimate government. The ousted President Nasheed has broadly endorsed this position, expressing his satisfaction with India's approach as explained to him by Mathai during his first visit on 15 February 2012.<sup>28</sup> However, controlling the damage done to India's policy and leverage in the Maldives may not be easy as India has lost considerable initiative and isolated itself somewhat as a result of its initial hasty moves.

In a sharply polarised political situation like that in the Maldives now, there are generally three options for any external power that wants to play a role. First: to go along with those who are in control of state power. This is evident generally in what China has been doing in cases like Nepal and the Maldives. Second: take the contending forces along and help evolve a compromise, and third: stand by such forces that are your reliable allies and that can serve your long-term interests, as Britain has done in extending consistent support to Nasheed. India has been switching gears on all the three options. Its initial move was compatible with the first. Then in the course-correction of its approach, it has been trying the second option of compromise while being inclined to prefer the third option. In the process, New Delhi's goodwill and credibility with Nasheed and his MDP stands eroded and it has come in for strong criticism now from those who ousted Nasheed and are in control of state power in the Maldives. The second option of helping evolve a compromise and consensus between the principal contenders may look like being the best in the long run but India is severely constrained in taking this course due to the prevailing sharp polarisation in the Maldives and because of the flip flop in India's own position. Those who are in power in Male now do not seem to be prepared for any compromise. Only a couple of days before the second visit by Foreign Secretary Mathai, President Waheed addressing a pro-government 'National Symposium' organised by PPM and its allies, in Male on 26 February 2012 said:

This is no longer the age of colonialism. Today no foreign country can influence the Maldives. Today we will maintain our sovereignty with bravery.

Be courageous. We will not back down an inch. Today, the change (in power) in the Maldives is what Allah has willed. This did not happen because of one or two people coming out into the streets. No body had been waiting for this. Nobody even saw this

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<sup>28</sup> 'Much more satisfied with India's stand says Nasheed', *The Hindu*, February 16, 2012.

day. The change came because Allah willed to protect Islam and decent Maldivian norms.”<sup>29</sup>

President Waheed has also appointed his own Commission to inquire into the circumstances of political change in the Maldives since Nasheed has called it a ‘coup’. This Commission is headed by Ismail Shafeeu, who was Minister of Defence and National Security under the Gayoom government. There is little doubt that this Commission will endorse the legitimacy of the transition of power as being constitutional.

India’s initial hasty moves have become a formidable liability for its attempts to evolve a desirable compromise. All that India can now do is to work gradually towards isolating hard-liners in the contending camps, mobilising the moderate forces that seek stability and progress in the Maldives and creating conditions for a fresh presidential election as soon as possible. Meanwhile, India has to make sure that Nasheed and his MDP are not subjected to revenge and oppression at the hands of the State forces. Any marginalisation of the forces of change and the emerging aspirations in the Maldives represented by Nasheed and his MDP may not be in the long-term interests of India. This may require all of its diplomatic resources to be put to their optimum and calibrated use. India will also have to ensure that its initiatives and leadership in the resolution of Maldivian crisis are fully backed by the international community. The US continues to back Indian initiatives and the UK and the Commonwealth group has reiterated their stand in favour of early elections as stipulated by India. The CMAG visited Maldives on 17 February 2012 and called for the holding of early elections. But the possibility of China and Pakistan extending support to the new regime in view of the latter’s tensions with India, cannot be ruled out. This will surely encourage the new regime to harden its stand against early elections and make moves to marginalise Nasheed and his party politically.

The dilemma that Indian policy confronts in dealing with the Maldives situation epitomises a broader challenge for India in its South Asian engagements. South Asia has been going through a process of democratic transition since the first decade of the twenty-first century. In this process, democratic transitions of varying degrees at the level of institutions have taken place almost in every country but the substantive transition to the democratic institutions has not been completed. There is a complex struggle for power going on in almost all of these countries where the emerging forces of change are pitted against those of status quo. While in Pakistan, the army is using judiciary and dividing civilian politics to keep its dominance, in Nepal and in Bangladesh the army is being used as an ally by the opponents of the forces of change. The challenge before India is to decide where its long-term interests lie. It has supported, encouraged and facilitated the forces of change in the process of transition. These

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<sup>29</sup> *Minivan News*, (Maldives), February 26, 2012.

forces of change like the Maoists of Nepal or the Nasheed(s) of the Maldives may not be adaptive and well-versed in handling the levers of political power entrenched by the discarded status quo regimes. India has to make a critical choice in deciding if it has to continue to stand by the forces of change even at the cost of short-lived stability and order or whether it has to forge compromises by helping those of status quo to re-emerge and sabotage genuine hopes and aspirations of the peoples of these countries. Any failure to make the right choice and letting things drift in the neighbourhood will not only hurt its vital national interests but also embolden its rivals and adversaries in the region.

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