

ISA S Brief

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Painful Politics in ‘Paradise’: Changes in the Maldives

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Introduction

The Maldives conjures up an image of paradise, with turquoise seawater lapping against the silver sands of a thousand idyllic islets! Alas, this serene picture does not portray its politics, whose volatility has not ceased to surprise observers. Even prior to formal independence from the British in 1965, a head of government, Mohammed Amin Didi was lynched by the public as he had fallen foul of the people. The three-decade-long rather repressive rule of President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who won six consecutive elections (all uncontested, with no chance of his losing any), saw a number of coup attempts, in 1980, 1983 and 1988. The last one required Indian support to be put down.

The Maldives in the World

Over a period of time, this tiny state, with a population of 300,000 and a total area of only 298 sq km spread over 26 atolls, has attracted some global attention. Three-fold reasons can be discerned: first, as a tourist destination where, attracted by the sights, sounds and scents of nature, foreigners have descended in great numbers; second, as an archipelago vulnerable to the possible effects of climate change, this Indian Ocean state is seen to face the threat of submergence; and third, as a focus of some amount of strategic competition between the two Asian Goliaths China and India, the Maldives is a recipient of their affections. The Maldivian

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governments have also had positive exposure to a number of international events, such as United Nations sessions, SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) meetings and climate-related conferences.

The Coming of Democracy

Eventually, even under Gayoom, democracy, or at least a slice thereof, came to the Maldives as he yielded to pressures and held elections in October 2008, in two rounds. He did handsomely in the first, polling 70,000 votes, with his principal rival, Mohamed Nasheed, leading the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), coming a distant second with 40,000. By then, Nasheed had been a long-term political activist, who was vocal on environmental issues and who enjoyed powerful western (particularly British) contacts, and whom Gayoom had imprisoned with a relentless regularity, leaving little space for any social cosiness. In the run-off polls, Nasheed's strategy of picking the right allies paid off (though many deserted him soon afterwards), and he was elected with a 54 per cent majority support. So Gayoom's Drivehi Rahiyyithunge Party (DRP) took a sound beating.

Nasheed's Rise and Fall

Nasheed came into office with a long 'to-do' list, and to his credit, he did implement some of his plans. He championed the environmental cause, and added a touch of dramatic politics, by holding a cabinet meeting below sea-level to advertise the possible fate of his country. He floated the idea of creating a sovereign wealth fund from resources derived out of tourism to enable relocation of his population to Sri Lanka, India and Australia should the Maldives indeed sink. A combination of tourism, fisheries and garments led the Maldives to graduate out of the list of Least Developed Countries (LDCs), which may have lent prestige but also limited the favoured market-access to the world's poorest nations.

In foreign affairs, he was both seen and heard. He succeeded in cultivating his friends from the United Kingdom – he had a British climate advisor – and from neighbouring Sri Lanka. He seemed to deal with India and China deftly. He hosted Wu Bangguo, a prominent Chinese political leader, obtained Chinese concessional loans to build 1,000 housing units. Under his watch, his country's trade touched US\$64 million in 2010, rising by 56 per cent from 2009. The Chinese, who built the Maldivian Foreign Office building, however, learnt soon enough that the act of building the Foreign Ministry's physical structure does not necessarily translate into the ability to construct the Maldivian foreign policy too. For Nasheed soon travelled to India, acceded to India's request to deploy 26 coastal radars and refurbish the British Gan Island for reconnaissance use, and declared "Indian ocean is *Indian* Ocean", all of which was not music to the Chinese ears.

Similar craftiness on the domestic scene would have served him better. Democratic institutions had not yet taken firm roots in the Maldives when he took office. Soon enough, Nasheed was embroiled in a clash with the Civil Service Commission, complaining about its inability to handle the friction between political nominees and civil service appointees. Meanwhile the global recession impacted negatively on the tourism industry, thus denting the economy and sharpening public disaffection.

Nor did he himself appear to be steeped in democratic values, for he did go after his predecessor Gayoom, and when the Criminal Court Chief Justice Abdullah Mohammad refused to be obliging in this regard, ordered his arrest (Abdullah Mohammad, a former student of Gayoom is not known to be perfect, but corruption is said to be rife even amongst the judiciary, but Nasheed's drive against it reeked of political motivation!). In a 100 per cent Muslim society, with a sadly increasing marginalisation of tolerance, Nasheed's alleged taste for the tippie was held against him. As a result his honeymoon with power had a sorry end. Ordered to tackle the mounting protests, the police first disobeyed and then mutinied; some troops joined hands, and a flurry of activity on 7 February 2012 ended in the denouement of Nasheed's resignation.

Or, as Nasheed later claimed in an interview with *Al-Jazeera*, he was forced to do so at gunpoint. He called it a coup in the space given to him for an op-ed in the *New York Times*. He accused his successor, former Vice-President Mohammed Waheed Hassan Manik, a Stanford educated ex-UN staffer, of complicity. Manik's Secretary said it was not a 'coup', but 'a wish of the people', without explaining how such a wish was ascertained. Manik's own, somewhat unconvincing defence, was the statement 'Do I look like an accomplice?' This does not totally erase the doubt of a wink and nudge in support, for, of late, he had indeed fallen out with Nasheed.

For a while now, academics and experts will debate the definition of a coup d'état. Nasheed was down, but not out. He has been able to organise a series of demonstrations in his favour and mobilise some foreign media support. He has also publicly pinned his faith on the forthcoming elections in 2013 (which some critics say he himself was conspiring to postpone!). The gainer in all this is Gayoom, who reportedly is in Malaysia at present, but no doubt would be planning a grand homecoming at not-too-distant a future!

Prognosis

So, what appeared to be budding pluralism in the Maldives – the efflorescence of 'spring' in yet another Muslim nation – appears to be withering in pain. Yes, the coup was bloodless, but only because what bled was democracy. As is natural, wounded democracy leaves no blood stains! However, there has been continued violence in many atolls since Nasheed's removal.

The phone call from the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Manik, and the remark about ‘transfer of power’ by Ban ki-Moon, the United Nations Secretary General, will be treated as ‘recognition’ for the new regime. In any case, the change now appears to be a reality.

The statement of the United States (US) State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland that Washington considered the new government ‘legitimate’ was much to Nasheed’s chagrin. Was all this a tad hasty, one might reasonably ask. Stunned by the quick endorsement by the US and India of the change, Nasheed may have learnt the hard way some unsavoury aspects of ‘realpolitik’. By force or not, technically Nasheed had resigned and a successor was sworn in, in accordance with the Constitution. Yet, this could create a destabilising international precedence! The new President’s remark that Nasheed was ‘autocratic in many ways’ is a sign of the difficulties to come in their relationship.

But it will also be incumbent upon those who have accorded the change ‘recognition’ to facilitate the elections next year. This will be Nasheed’s focus henceforth. Rumours of arrest warrants against him can be worrisome. Gayoom and Nasheed will perhaps have another opportunity to sling it out again in the polls. It is too early to tell what Wahid Hassan Manik’s role will be in this context. For now, Nasheed has rejected Manik’s idea of an expanded cabinet of ‘national unity’ and the US urgings for ‘compromise’. However, it is only through elections that one will have the real chance of discerning ‘the will of the people’.

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