

# ISAS Brief

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## Maldives: Towards Open Polity

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Democracy is definitely on the move in South Asia. After Bhutan, Nepal and Pakistan, it has turned corner in Maldives, a republic of 1,192 islands in the splendid Indian Ocean. Asia's longest ruling autocrat, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, lost his Presidency in the elections held in October 2008 to his 30-year younger challenger, Mohamed Nasheed 'Anni', who suffered six years of prison for raising the democratic struggle against the Gayoom regime. Mohamed Nasheed 'Anni' had been declared a 'Prisoner of Conscience' by Amnesty International, a human rights organisation.

The spark of democracy was lit in Maldives in 2003 when protests against the death-in-custody of a young man, detained under charges of drug abuse, snowballed into demands for greater political freedom and democracy. This emerged as the first major challenge to President Gayoom since his assumption of power in 1978. In between, there have been a couple of coup attempts, including a serious and determined one in 1988 which was put down with military help from India. Street protests and international pressures forced President Gayoom to introduce political reforms under which political parties were allowed in 2004, and a new Constitution was adopted in 2007, providing for an open election for the Presidency. The 2005 elections of *Majlis* (Maldivian National Parliament) took place on party basis for the first time. Until then, President Gayoom had been elected six times, each time for a five-year term, on a simple 'yes' or 'no' vote without anyone contesting his candidacy.

The October 2008 elections were held under the newly-introduced political reforms. A seven-point criterion was introduced for a prospective presidential candidate. This included having Maldivian parenthood (both mother and father), being at least 35 years of age, not being a foreign national, not being Sunni Muslim, etc. The first round of elections held on 8 October 2008 was contested by six candidates belonging to five parties, with one independent candidate. There are 10 parties registered with the Maldives Election Commission, but some of the smaller ones formed coalitions to put up strong candidates. President Gayoom of Dhivehi Raiyyithunge Party and Mohamed Nasheed 'Anni' of Maldives Democratic Party (MDP) emerged as the principal contenders after the first round of the polls, obtaining 40.63 percent and 25.09 percent of the votes respectively. Since a winning candidate had to cross

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the 50-percent vote limit, they had to have a second round. The votes secured by the remaining candidates in the first round were as follows: Hasan Saeed (Independent) – 16.54 percent; Gasim Ibrahim (Republican Party) – 15.4 percent; Umer Naseer (Islamic Democratic Party) – 1.44 percent; and Ibrahim Ismail (Social Liberal Party) – 0.18 percent. The first round was conducted peacefully but it was marred by a number of irregularities. Some of the voters' lists reached wrong polling booths located in various atolls, causing confusion, and the identity cards of a number of voters could not be distributed to them in time, causing difficulties in their casting of ballots. Finally, all those who were in the queue at polling booths were allowed to vote.

These difficulties were taken care of during the second and decisive round of polling which was held on 28 October 2008. Earlier, the run-off poll date was fixed for 29 October 2008, but due to school examinations, it had to be pre-poned, as the schools were converted into polling booths. Voters who could not find their names in the voters' list for the first round were also accommodated for the second round by the Election Commission. Of the 209,000 eligible voters, more than 86 percent, that is, 179,343 voters cast their ballots in the second round. Polling was also organised for voters staying outside Maldives. President Gayoom was confident that it would be easy for him to take his tally to 50 percent from 40 percent, by exploiting divisions among the political parties. This, however, did not happen, as all the opposition parties decided to unite behind Mohamed Nasheed 'Anni' as the opposition candidate to defeat President Gayoom, giving him a comfortable lead of 54.21 percent. President Gayoom could muster only 45.79 percent, barely three percent more than his first round tally. He gracefully accepted defeat saying, "I accept the results... and I respectfully congratulate Mr Mohamed Nasheed and his party... I am declaring my full support to him... In this change we are approaching, I assure you, we will make this a peaceful process." The new President is expected to take office on 11 November 2008, exactly 30 years after President Gayoom assumed power.

The core issue in the election was democracy – liberalising the political system. Most of the opposition leaders had worked with President Gayoom at one time or another and were eventually alienated as a result of the authoritarian style of functioning and the heavy reliance on nepotism, cronyism and corruption in the administration. Once they fell from favour of the President, they were treated harshly, even jailed and tortured. There was, therefore, a considerable degree of personal anger between Gayoom and his opponents, which made the campaign highly personalised. President Gayoom was portrayed as a dictator and equated with Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe. He, in turn, labelled his opponents as inexperienced and personally motivated. In the last leg of his campaign, President Gayoom also accused Mohamed Nasheed 'Anni' of deviating from Islam and gravitating towards Christianity. President Gayoom claimed credit for improving Maldives' economy and making it a paradise of tourism in Asia. It was indeed under his regime that the per capita income of Maldives grew to nearly US\$1,500, making it the richest South Asian country. President Gayoom also projected himself as the originator of democracy in Maldives, as it was he who started the political and constitutional reforms in the island republic.

President Gayoom's claims were strongly discounted by the opposition. They brought out numerous instances of torture and political repression under the Gayoom regime. In one of the interviews with Al Jazeera television network, President Gayoom was found fumbling in explaining the offences of the opposition leader Mohamed Nasheed 'Anni' that necessitated his long periods of detention. The opposition explained that the fruits of progress made by Maldives have been distributed unequally, benefiting a chosen few families around the

President. There are also accusations of rampant corruption in the Gayoom administration and, despite the high per capita income, 21 percent of the population live below the poverty line, with very poor facilities for health, education and employment for the ordinary people. With regard to corruption, the Independent Attorney-General of Maldives, otherwise appointed by President Gayoom, released a damning report, highlighting instances of misappropriation of millions of dollars. The release of this report days before the run-off poll for the Presidency exposed the credibility of President Gayoom's campaign. In the capital, Atoll of Male, more than 100,000 people are cramped in a small area of 2.5 square kilometres. The opposition candidate Mohamed Nasheed 'Anni' promised to address the problems of poverty, health and housing. He assured the voters that he would develop the tourism and fisheries sectors and harness vast marine resources to create job opportunities. He also laid emphasis on education and proclaimed that after winning the elections, he would convert the Presidential Palace into a university campus. On the whole, he promised a 'New Maldives' of political freedom and economic progress.

The new Maldivian President faces a number of challenges. The problem is not with his lack of experience because there are a number of people in the newly-energised political space of the island republic with experience in the administration. There is also a clear agenda of building transparent, efficient and liberal political institutions to deliver good governance to the people of Maldives.

The difficulties of the new President may arise on two political counts. President Gayoom has lost but he still has a substantial support of nearly 45 percent in the island. President-elect Mohamed Nasheed 'Anni' has assured that he will steer clear of the politics of vendetta and revenge and even the outgoing President Gayoom has promised to cooperate with the new leader. However, there are inherent incompatibilities between the approaches of these two leaders in addressing the problems of Maldives. Mohamed Nasheed 'Anni's' challenge is to blunt these incompatibilities and forge creative cooperation to take advantage of the experience and understanding of the outgoing leadership without endorsing his regime's distortions.

Secondly, the other political parties and groups have lent support to the MDP leader just on the one-point agenda of ousting President Gayoom. There are otherwise ideological, political and personality-oriented differences among the opposition coalition. The tensions arising out of these differences would start impinging on the dynamics of creating a 'New Maldives' sooner than later. The Nepal example is there for anyone to draw lessons from. In particular, there are extremist streaks among the President-elect's support groups. It would be a challenge to keep Maldives on a liberal, moderate and progressive social track while drawing on the support of the diverse political groups.

Lastly, the global economic meltdown will adversely affect the Maldivian economy as well, particularly its tourism sector which contributes 28 percent to its gross domestic product. The new leader and his administration have to ensure development and equitable distribution of the fruits of development to aspiring Maldivians. One hopes that the dedication of the President-elect and his team to their pronounced goals, and their youthful enthusiasm will help them meet these political and developmental challenges and the 'New Maldives' of their dreams will start taking a shape soon.

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