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Presidential Elections in the Maldives: A Victory for the Joint Opposition

The defeat of the incumbent, Abdulla Yaameen, in the Maldivian presidential elections on 23 September 2018 marks an important step towards restoring democratic rule in the country. However, President-elect Ibrahim Mohamed Solih will not find the going smooth. He has to prepare himself to deal with a number of challenges, both from within his party and from the coalition partners. However, he is likely to have better luck in his relations with the country's two large neighbours – India and China.

Amit Ranjan¹

Even before the Elections Commission (EC) of the Maldives officially announced the results of the presidential elections which took place on 23 September 2018, a large number of the supporters of the joint opposition candidate from the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, took to the streets to celebrate their leader's victory. More than Solih's victory, many were rejoicing the defeat of the incumbent, Abdulla Yaameen, under whose regime (2013-2018) a large number of people suffered from repression.

According to the provisional results, Solih – the common candidate of the joint opposition parties, namely, the MDP, the Adhaalath Party (AP), the Jumhooree Party (JP) and the

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Maumoon Reform Movement (MRM), – secured 58.4 per cent (134,331) of the popular vote in the elections while Yaameen won 41.6 per cent (95,852) of the votes. The total voter turnout for the elections was 89 per cent.²

In the lead up to the elections, there were a number of political obstacles placed by Yaameen’s government. These included the amendment of electoral laws in June 2018 to stop former president, Mohamed Nasheed, from contesting the polls and the imprisonment of a number of political opponents, among others. These developments cast doubts over the conduct of free and fair elections under Yaameen.

A total number of 38 delegates from 11 international organisations and 26 media representatives from 14 media houses observed the presidential elections.³ The Maldivian EC also invited the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) to observe the presidential elections. The UN told the EC that it does not usually participate as an observer in a country’s elections. The EU declined to be an observer for the elections.⁴ A March 2018 report of the EU Follow-up Mission (EUFM) to the Maldives had concluded that there was limited implementation of the EU Election Observation Mission’s recommendations of 2014, “with only one fully implemented and three partially implemented from a total of 22 recommendations”.⁵ The EUFM also found that, due to the political crisis, the crackdown on the opposition, the shrinking of political space and the restrictions on fundamental freedom, the political and institutional environments in the Maldives were not conducive to meaningful and concerted electoral reforms. At the same time, given the political crisis, the EU was not certain that meaningful electoral reform could be implemented in the country.⁶

² See <https://edition.mv/>. Accessed on 26 September 2018. & “Live blog: Maldives election body declares Ibu winner”, *Maldives Independent*, 24 September 2018. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/live-blog-voting-extended-to-7pm-141439> Accessed on 24 September 2018.

³ “Press Release: Statement by Elections Commission of Maldives Regarding the International Observers and International Monitors” Elections Commission, Republic of Maldives. 20 September 2018. <https://www.elections.gov.mv/en/media/pressrelease/25.html> Accessed on 26 September 2018.

⁴ “EU and UN ‘not interested’ in observing Maldives election”, *Maldives Independent*, 27 August 2018. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/eu-and-un-not-interested-in-observing-maldives-election-140587> Accessed on 29 August 2018.

⁵ “European Union Electoral Follow-up Mission (EU EFM) to the Republic of Maldives, 6-18 September 2017 and 8-12 January 2018 – Follow-up Mission Report”, March 2018. https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/final_mal_2017_eu_efm_report_final_formatted-new.pdf Accessed on 26 September 2018.

⁶ Ibid

A few days before the elections, the United States (US) also threatened to impose sanctions against the government officials if the elections were not free and fair.⁷ On the eve of the elections, Solih's main campaign office was raided by the police. However, his eventual victory was indicative of the elections being relatively free and fair. Otherwise, his victory would have been almost impossible.

Not a Smooth Road Ahead for Solih

Solih is expected to face a number of challenges in running the government. The joint opposition parties – the MDP, the AP, the JP and the MRM – came together due to their common opposition to Yaameen's high handedness. Apart from this, they have little in common and they disagree on several important issues.

First, according to MDP's election manifesto, if it wins the elections, it will form an "interim coalition government first and then follow it up with a fresh presidential election after 18 months in which all leaders, presently banned, will be allowed to contest."⁸ The MDP's lawmaker, Imthiyaz Fahmy, said, "[The] MDP believes that the new government should hold office for 18 months. In these 18 months, the government would establish independent institutions and empower political parties."⁹ The manifesto called for a change in the form of governance from a presidential to a parliamentary system. On the other hand, the JP's manifesto stated that it will follow the current presidential form of governance. It also refused to accept the MDP's proposal on appointing foreign judges to the Maldivian courts.¹⁰ The common election manifesto of the joint opposition parties which was released on 17 September 2018 mentioned a proposed amendment to the constitution on the governing system of the country. However, it was silent on the process and nature of such changes, if any.

⁷ "The Maldives' opposition presidential candidate Ibrahim Mohamed Solih claims victory", *Indian Express*, 24 September 2018. <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/maldives-opposition-presidential-candidate-solih-claims-victory-5371161/> Accessed on 24 September 2018.

⁸ "MDP manifesto promises coalition regime for 18 months, followed by party-based Presidential election", *NewsIn.Asia*, 30 June 2018. <https://newsin.asia/mdp-manifesto-promises-coalition-regime-for-18-months-followed-by-party-based-presidential-election/> Accessed 23 September 2017.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Jumhooree Party manifesto conflicts with MDP pledges", *The Edition*, 5 July 2018. <https://edition.mv/news/6426> Accessed on 24 September 2018.

Second, Solih was nominated by the MDP and accepted by the other political parties, mainly because of the Elections (General) Act and Presidential Elections Act¹¹ passed by Yaameen's government in June 2018. These amended acts barred Maldivians who had sought asylum overseas or relinquished dual citizenship from running for the office of president for 10 years.¹² As a result, Nasheed had to relinquish his candidature as he had gone to the United Kingdom to seek asylum.¹³ Solih was nominated instead as the MDP's presidential candidate.¹⁴ It would be interesting to observe the political relationship between Nasheed and Solih in the coming days. If the two leaders cannot agree on any political formula, it could potentially lead to internal tensions within the MDP and could affect the unity of the joint opposition.

Third, the opposition parties have different political ideologies and purposes in wanting to topple the Yaameen government. The MDP projects itself as a liberal and secular group, but has been regarded by the other parties as a "western influenced" political party. The AP is an Islamic conservative party. The MRM was formed by a former president of the Maldives, Abdul Gayoom, who turned against his half-brother and president of the country, Yaameen, after he was politically attacked by the government. In March 2017, his son, Faris, was arrested by the government and Gayoom was put behind bars in February 2018. In June 2018, he was sentenced for 19 months in prison. After Solih's victory, five political prisoners and a member of parliament, Ahmed Mahloof, who was under house arrest, were released. Mahloof was released by the Criminal Court which heard his plea. However, Gayoom and several others remain in prison as their cases are yet to come before the Court.¹⁵

¹¹ "Ruling party eyes presidential poll win with electoral law changes", *Maldives Independent*, 25 June 2018. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/ruling-party-eyes-presidential-poll-win-with-electoral-law-changes-138944> Accessed on 24 September 2018.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ In 2015, Nasheed was arrested on terrorism charges by Yaameen's government and was jailed for 13 years. There was global opposition to it. As a result, Nasheed was released and allowed to travel to London for 30 days for a spinal cord surgery. Once in Britain, he requested a political refugee status which he was granted in May 2016. See "Maldives ex-leader Mohamed Nasheed arrives in UK", *BBC News*, 21 January 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35369018> Accessed on 24 September 2018.

¹⁴ "Nasheed gives up MDP Ticket", *Maldives Independent*, 29 June 2018. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/nasheed-gives-up-mdp-ticket-139032> Accessed on 24 September 2018.

¹⁵ "Maldives lawmaker Mahloof freed from house arrest", *Maldives Independent*, 25 September 2018. <https://maldivesindependent.com/crime-2/maldives-lawmaker-mahloof-freed-from-house-arrest-141567> Accessed on 26 September 2018.

Reactions from the World

Many countries have congratulated President-elect Solih on his election victory.

India was the first country to send its best wishes to Solih. In its statement, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs stated, “We welcome the successful completion of the third presidential election process in the Maldives which, according to preliminary information, Mr Ibrahim Mohamed Solih has won. We heartily congratulate Ibrahim Mohamed Solih on his victory and hope that the Election Commission will officially confirm the result at the earliest. This election marks not only the triumph of democratic forces in the Maldives, but also reflects the firm commitment to the values of democracy and the rule of law. In keeping with our ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy,¹⁶ India looks forward to working closely with the Maldives in further deepening our partnership.”¹⁷ Traditionally, the Maldives has been close to India. However, this started to change after Nasheed was forced to quit office in February 2012. During Yaameen’s tenure (2013-2018), the Maldives deepened its relationships with China at the expense of India. This drift towards China was an effort to find support for his regime against Nasheed who had India’s backing. Also, the Maldives needed Chinese capital for its infrastructure development.

The US Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs tweeted, “The United States congratulates the people of #Maldives, who peacefully raised their democratic voices to determine the future of their country...We urge calm and respect for the will of the people as the election process concludes.”¹⁸

On 25 September 2018, in congratulating Solih for his win, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang expressed his country’s willingness to work with the new government.¹⁹ During Yaameen’s tenure, China developed strong ties with the Maldives.

¹⁶ It is a slogan given by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to convey that India’s foreign policy first priority is its neighbours.

¹⁷ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India “Press Release on Presidential Elections in Maldives”. <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/30424/Press+Release+on+Presidential+Elections+in+Maldives> Accessed on 24 September 2018.

¹⁸ State SCA https://twitter.com/State_SCA/status/1044043201571622912

¹⁹ “China cautiously welcomes election of Solih as Maldives’ new president”, *The Times of India*, 25 September 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/rest-of-world/china-cautiously-welcomes-election-of-solih-as-maldives-new-president/articleshow/65952509.cms> Accessed on 26 September 2018.

In September 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping paid a visit to the Maldives. Soon after his visit, China and the Maldives signed a memorandum of understanding on projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. A number of Chinese companies were invited to participate in several infrastructure projects in the Maldives.²⁰ According to the Centre for Global Development's study, Chinese infrastructure-related loans to the Maldives amount to around US\$1.3 billion (S\$1.7 billion). This has led to allegations of the Maldives being in danger of falling into a debt trap. However, the Chinese Ambassador to the Maldives, Zhang Lizhong, labelled the investments "completely normal" and has rejected any such allegations.²¹

Conclusion

In examining the politics of the Maldives, one finds that the personal interests of the competing individuals tend to take precedence over their expressed principles and values, much to the detriment of the country.

In the current domestic scenario, many of the members of the joint opposition have their own personal agendas. In spite of different orientations, the opposition came together simply to topple Yaameen. In such a situation, it would be interesting to see how Solih handles the different opposition groups while running the country. In addition to the joint opposition, Solih will still need to contend with Yaameen, who continues to remain a threat despite losing the elections.

On the international front, Solih's victory is expected to see an improvement in the Maldives' relationship with India which deteriorated during Yaameen's leadership. Solih's election is also unlikely to adversely affect the Maldives' relationship with China or have any negative impact on Chinese investments in the Maldives in spite of the debt-trap related criticism against these investments. The tiny South Asian country needs funds for its infrastructure projects, development and repayment of its loans.

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²⁰ "China defends 'completely normal' Maldives investments", *Maldives Independent*, 14 July 2018. <https://maldivesindependent.com/business/china-defends-completely-normal-maldives-investments-139354>
Accessed on 16 July 2018.

²¹ Ibid.