

THE MALDIVES: POLITICS OF AN ISLAND NATION

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South Asia Scan

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Amit Ranjan

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Executive Summary

In 2018, the Maldives removed President Abdulla Yameen, who ruled the country as an authoritarian since 2013. During his term, the civil and political rights of the citizens were curtailed. Also, several leaders from the opposition parties as well as several political and civil right activists were tortured, beaten or incarcerated. To silence the dissenters, Yameen imposed emergency rule twice, the first in 2015 followed by the second in 2018.

On the foreign policy front, during Yameen's term, the Maldives' traditional friend, India, was largely ignored while China was favoured. This preference had an economic impact on the country. The growing number of Chinese investments, grants and loans to the Maldivian government pushed the country into a serious debt situation. The degree of the problem was so significant that the presidential election in 2018 centred on the country's engagement with China and its related issues. Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) made an electoral promise to re-negotiate the economic deals with China. This paid off electorally, as Solih defeated Yameen at the polls. However, soon after, the Solih government also began courting China. However, unlike the Yameen government, it also reached out to India.

This publication briefly touches on the political history of the Maldives. It then examines recent domestic socio-economic political developments in the country as well as its foreign policy imperatives.

Introduction

Located along the important maritime trade route in the Indian Ocean, the Maldives is a small island country. It seldom finds mention in the international media. However, the country became the focus of the international community in September 2018 when scores of Maldivians poured onto the streets of Malé to celebrate the defeat of President Yameen to his rival, Solih, in the presidential election. Under Yameen's rule, various forms of political injustice were committed against the Maldivians. A number of political and civil rights activists were imprisoned while a few were forced to live in exile. Following Solih's victory, political and civil rights were reinstated. Many political prisoners were released and the exiled leaders returned to the country.

The radicalisation process in the Maldives started even before Yameen's term. However, the society and institutions found strength during his presidency. There was a rise in the number of Maldivians accepting radical Islamic beliefs in place of liberal Islam. Also, many were influenced by the global political environment. A number of Maldivian radicals travelled to other countries to fight for their religion and, at home, some of them were actively engaged in suppressing the voices which they considered 'anti-Islam'.

To please his radical constituency, Yameen made changes to the country's foreign policy. While he improved relations with China, he allowed ties with India to deteriorate. He also improved relationships with Saudi Arabia. The tilt towards China had largely impinged on the country's economy and pushed it into debt. After Solih took over as president, he made changes to the country's foreign policy. However, social and economic issues remain a serious concern for the new government.

In this publication, the author argues that although Solih is taking steps to bring the country out of the spectre of the recent past, it will be a difficult task. A large section of society which has been systematically radicalised over the years will take time to be de-radicalised. It may also happen that the society and institutions remain as they are, and any extra measures to de-radicalise them will backfire in one form or another. This happened in the past. Mohamed Nasheed was ousted as president in 2012 for his liberal views on socio-religious matters. On the foreign policy front, the author contends that the Solih government may mend its relationships with the countries neglected during Yameen's tenure, but it will not ignore China or allow itself to be marginalised in Beijing's books.

A Brief Political History

The Maldives is an archipelago of about 1,200 coral islands, out of which only one-sixth is inhabited by Maldivians. Out of a total population of 530,953 people as of 2019, around 98 per cent are Sunni Muslims. The other ethnic groups in the country are the Sinhalese, Dravidians, Arabs and Africans. In 2008, the Maldives adopted a new constitution after repealing the 1998 Constitution. Article 109 of the 2008 Constitution maintains that the President, who is the Head of the State, should “be a Muslim and a follower of a Sunni school of Islam”.¹ Even the members of the Cabinet, according to Article 130, have to be Muslims and followers of the Sunni school of Islam.² On the issue of citizenship, the Constitution, under Article 9(d), categorically states that “a non-Muslim may not become a citizen of the Maldives”.³

Contrary to the present, in ancient times, the people of the Island were possibly Buddhists. This claim is substantiated by the discovery of the remains of stupas on various islands. Some other Buddhist relics were also discovered during excavations in the 1980s.⁴ According to historical records, in 1153, the then-Maldivian king converted to Islam, which simultaneously led to the conversion of his subjects. The records show that the king was converted to Islam either by Yusuf Shams ud din of Tabriz or by Abul Barakat the ‘Berber’. Tracing developments since that time, there is a written history of the sultanate, compiled originally in 1725 in Arabic and supplemented by a few records in Dhivehi (the Maldivian language).⁵ A lengthy description of some islands of the Maldives can also be found in the records of the North African traveller, Ibn Battuta, who resided there from 1343 to 1344 (when he became the Qazi or Chief Justice) and in 1346.⁶ 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 by a merchant, Suleman, who in pre-Islamic days in the 9th century noted that his country was ruled by a female.⁷

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1. Constitution of the Republic of Maldives, 2008. Functional Translation by Ms Dheena Hussain. <https://storage.googleapis.com/presidency.gov.mv/Documents/ConstitutionOfMaldives.pdf>. Accessed on 12 June 2019.
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Robinson, Francis (1989), *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and The Maldives*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, New York.
 5. Ibid.
 6. Ibid.
 7. Ibid.

In 1558, the Maldives was captured by the Portuguese, who ruled directly over it for 15 years.⁸ In 1573, the Muhammad Thakurufaanu Al Auzam-led Maldivian Army defeated the Portuguese. As the day of victory fell on the first of *Rabee ul Awwal*,⁹ ever since then, the Maldivians have celebrated the anniversary of that event as their National Day. As the timing of the Maldives' National Day is based on the Islamic calendar, which is a lunar calendar, the date keeps changing each year according to the sightings of the moon. In 2019, it was on 29 October. Officially, in the Dhivehi language, it is known as "Qaumee Dhuvas".

Later, in the 17th century, the Maldives came under the Dutch followed by the British, although neither of the two colonial powers could establish their administration in the archipelagic nation. In the 19th century, under threats and pressure from the colonial powers, the then-Sultan of Maldives accepted an alliance with the British and his country became a British protectorate in 1887. Consequently, the British assumed control over the Maldives' foreign affairs and defence while the Sultan retained his hold over the domestic affairs of the country.¹⁰ During the Second World War (1939-1945), a few of the Maldivian islands were used as a base by the British Navy.¹¹ For example, the Gan Island in the southernmost Addu Atoll served as the location of the Gan Airfield, a critical staging post for the British. Finally, on 26 July 1965, the Maldives shed its protectorate status and attained full sovereignty. This day is celebrated as its Independence Day. However, the British, through an agreement, retained Gan Island. It was eventually handed over to the Maldivian government in 1975.

Politically, in 1932, due to the dissatisfaction among the people against the monarchy, the Sultan of the Maldives – Mohammad Shamsuddin III – was compelled by the *befulus* (political elites) to accept rule by the Constitution. He was later deposed and exiled.¹² After the Second World War, 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, with Didi as the first president of the country. However, Didi was soon overthrown by his opponents in a political coup – they attacked him, resulting in his death in December 1953. Afterwards, the

8. Mitra, Subrata K; Wolf, O Siegfried; and Schottli, Jivanta (2006), *A Political and Economic Dictionary of South Asia*. London & New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

9. It is considered to be the third month of the Islamic calendar. This day is celebrated as the birthday of Prophet Muhammad.

10. Mitra, Subrata K; Wolf, O Siegfried; and Schottli, Jivanta (2006), *A Political and Economic Dictionary of South Asia*, op. cit.

11. Robinson, Francis (1989), *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and The Maldives*, op. cit.

12. Ibid.

monarchy was restored and it remained in place until 1968 when a second republic was set up.¹³

In 1968, Ibrahim Nasir became the president. He started the modernisation process in the country. One significant development, which transformed the economy and has had a socio-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 helped in boosting the country's economy, due to the increased international air connectivity to the archipelago.¹⁴

In 1978, Ibrahim Nasir was replaced by Maumoon Abdul Gayoom as president of the country. Gayoom remained president until 2008. During his term, Gayoom faced three coup attempts – in 1980, 1983 and 1988 respectively. The first two were not serious but the one in 1988 challenged his political survival. According to reports, it was organised by the Sri Lankan mercenaries associated with the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam.¹⁵ They were hired by the Maldivian business interest groups under the leadership of Abdullah Luthufi. "Around 80 sea-borne armed forces landed in Malé and attempted to gain control over various key government installations, supported by some 80 others who had infiltrated the country disguised as tourists".¹⁶ To overcome the situation, Gayoom appealed to India's Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who dispatched paratroopers to help him. Within 24 hours, the Indian paratroopers cleared the capital and restored law and order in Malé.¹⁷

In the presidential election of 2008, Nasheed defeated Gayoom and became president. However, due to his liberal political beliefs, he faced several problems. On 7 February 2012, Nasheed was forced to resign after protests carried out by the opposition political parties, who were joined by a significant number of members from the military and police forces. He was replaced by Mohammed Waheed Hassan who was then succeeded by Gayoom's half-brother, Yameen, in 2013. Yameen won the controversial run-off to the presidential election against Nasheed.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Mitra, Subrata K; Wolf, O Siegfried; and Schottli, Jivanta (2006), *A Political and Economic Dictionary of South Asia*, op. cit.

16. Ibid, p 218.

17. Ibid.

One of the major charges made against Nasheed was that he was anti-Islam and was making legislation to provide space to liberal values. Yameen remained in power till 2018. His authoritarian rule caused a series of protests against the government. In 2018, he lost the presidential election to Solih.

Authoritarian Rule under Abdulla Yameen

Yameen ruled the Maldives with a tight fist and took all measures to curb dissenting voices. During his reign, emergency rule was imposed for the first time in November 2015 to deal with political and civil society activists who were raising the issue of the government's undemocratic ways and high-handedness. It was announced that the emergency would be in force for only 30 days without the imposition of a curfew. However, amidst global criticism, the government was forced to revoke it within a week of its imposition.¹⁸

Again, in February 2018, Yameen imposed emergency rule to deal with his political opponents and the Supreme Court (SC) judges who gave the order to release nine opposition leaders, including Nasheed, who was then living in exile in London. In its judgment, the SC stated:

“Upon deliberation of matters petitioned at the Supreme Court under supervisory jurisdiction, claiming: criminal proceedings were conducted based on political motivations; and in violation of the Constitution and the international human rights covenants acceded to by the Maldives; and the rulings were given subject to undue influence over judiciary and the prosecutor; and contrary to due process; the court finds these cases require retrials and judgments pursuant to the law.”¹⁹

The SC order also reinstated 12 members of parliament who had lost their seats because they had defected to the opposition. The SC order also called on the *Majlis* (legislature), which was suspended in 2017, to hold its meeting.²⁰

Reacting to the judgement, the Yameen government sent three letters to the SC on challenges faced in implementing the orders delivered on 1 February 2018:

“...that the Supreme Court Order No. 2018/SC-SJ/01, issued on 1 February 2018, has resulted in an encroachment on the regulatory powers of the state, the disruption of the functions mandated to state institutions under the Constitution, and the infringement of national security and public interest, and if implemented,

18. “Maldives revokes state of emergency amid global outcry and tourism worries”, *The Guardian*, 10 November 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/10/maldives-revokes-state-of-emergency>. Accessed on 12 October 2017.

19. “The Supreme Court Order Number: 2018/SC-SJ/01” (Unofficial Translation) file:///C:/Users/isasar/Downloads/Unofficial%20Translation%20of%20the%20SC%20Court%20Order%202018-SC-SJ-01.pdf. Accessed on 6 February 2018.

20. Ibid.

would potentially lead to an undermining of the supremacy of the Constitution of the Republic of [the] Maldives.”²¹

In response to those letters, the SC observed that there are no obstacles in implementing its ruling.²² Interpreting the 1 February 2018 judgment to justify the government’s position, the Attorney General, Mohamed Anil, made a claim that he had information according to which the SC was creating a way to remove or impeach Yameen.²³ The ruling was welcomed by the opposition parties. Hailing the SC order and criticising the emergency, Nasheed said that the banning of fundamental freedom and the suspension of the SC are “tantamount to a declaration of martial law”. He termed it as “unconstitutional and illegal” and contended that “nobody in the Maldives is required to, nor should, follow this unlawful order”.²⁴

There was worldwide criticism of the declaration of the state of emergency by Yameen. The US’ official stance was it stood “... with the people of Maldives. The Maldivian government and military must respect the rule of law, freedom of expression and democratic institutions. The world is watching”.²⁵ In South Asia, reacting earlier to the SC decision, India maintained that “In the spirit of democracy and rule of law, it is imperative for all organs of the Government of [the] Maldives to respect and abide by the order of the apex court.”²⁶ On the other hand, China maintained that “what was happening there is an internal affair”.²⁷ The emergency was eventually lifted after 45 days in March 2018.

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21. “President shares his concerns with the Supreme Court, in implementing the Court’s orders”, The Presidency: Republic of Maldives. <http://www.presidencymaldives.gov.mv/Index.aspx?lid=11&dcid=18748>. Accessed on 6 February 2018.
 22. Sharuhaan, Mohamed, “Maldives Presidents Says Supreme Court Overstepped its Power”, *Associated Press*, 5 February 2018. <http://www.philstar.com/world/2018/02/06/1785091/maldives-president-says-supreme-court-overstepped-its-power>. Accessed on 6 February 2018.
 23. Junayd, Mohamed, “Maldives government says will resist any attempt to impeach president”, *Reuters*, 4 February 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-maldives-politics/maldives-government-says-will-resist-any-attempt-to-impeach-president-idUSKBN1FO03W>. Accessed on 6 February 2018.
 24. Srinivasan, Meera, “Maldives President declares Emergency, former leader arrested”, *The Hindu*, 5 February 2018. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/maldives-president-declares-state-of-emergency-official/article22660908.ece?homepage=true>. Accessed on 6 February 2018.
 25. “Maldives Emergency LIVE UPDATES: MEA expresses concern over situation, asks Indian nationals to avoid non-essential travel”, *The Indian Express*, 6 February 2018.
 26. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Press Release on India’s Reaction Over evolving situation in Maldives after order of the Supreme Court of Maldives”, 2 February 2018. http://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29409/Press_Release_on_Indias_over_evolution_situation_in_Maldives_after_order_of_the_Supreme_Court_of_Maldives. Accessed on 6 February 2018.
 27. “China suggests its tourists not visit Maldives until situation stabilizes”, *Maldives Times*, 6 February 2018. <https://maldivestimes.com/china-suggests-its-tourists-not-visit-maldives-until-situation-stabilizes/>. Accessed on 6 February 2018.

Radicalisation of Politics, Society and Institutions

Islamic radicals proved to be an important ally supporting Yameen's authoritarian rule. He gained their support by portraying the opposition leaders as anti-Islam. However, the Islamists had their presence even before Yameen came into power, as the radicalisation of the Maldivian society was already in progress by then.

One of the reasons for increasing radicalism in the Maldives is said to be the interactions of Maldivians studying in different parts of the world, especially in Muslim countries, where they presumably came into contact with those who believe in the radical version of Islam. It is estimated that, out of the six per cent of Maldivians studying abroad, a significant number have been trained in religion. Earlier, in the 1990s, many went to Pakistan and Saudi Arabia at the state's expense. Later, the education destinations changed because of disturbances in Pakistan. At present, most of the Islamic scholars and preachers in the Maldives were educated in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan or Egypt.²⁸ During their time overseas, some of them became attracted to militant activities in other parts of the world. One of the early signs of Maldivian youth being indoctrinated to take part in *jihad* (spiritual struggle) can be traced to the period between 1998 and 2003, when some of them were found fighting in the Kashmir valley.²⁹ They were trained by the Pakistan-based militant group, Lashkar-e-Taiba, to participate in *jihad* against India.³⁰ Some of the others, after their study abroad, went back to the Maldives with a militant set of religious values and a new hero to eulogise. For example, in 2003, posters appeared on the walls of a school on the Edhyafushi Island, praising Osama bin Laden.³¹

The effects of such learning have been violent. There was an early sign on 29 September 2007 when a bomb blast occurred in the Sultan Park in Malé. It was the first-ever 'Islamist' terror-strike in the Maldives.³² Three men were arrested and sentenced for carrying out the blast while a few other suspects escaped from the country. The investigation of the bombing pointed to a link between the Maldivian national, Ahmed Zaki, Lashkar-e-Taiba *madrassas*

28. Shauna Aminath and Thoriq Hamid informed the author about this in their respective comments made in the first draft of the author's Insights, *Rise of the Islamists in the Maldives*, ISAS Insights No. 425, op. cit. They communicated their comments via an electronic mail on 18 June 2017.

29. Swami, Praveen, "Maldives: militant Islamists on rise", *The Hindu*, 24 November 2007. <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/Maldives-militant-Islamists-on-the-rise/article14881607.ece>. Accessed on 10 June 2017.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

(educational institutions) in the Kashmir valley, Maldivians belonging to a group known as Jama'ah-tul-Muslimeen and individuals participating in an anti-American Islamic extremist online forum called Tibyan Publications.³³

A pro-Islamic State (IS) rally, featuring banners that called for the introduction of Shariah law in the country, was carried out at Malé in 2014. Then, on 22 April 2017, a young 'liberal' blogger, Yameen Rasheed, was stabbed to death near his apartment in Malé.³⁴ According to media reports, he had earlier received threats from the Islamists, which he reported to the police. Ismail Haisham Rasheed, Ahmed Zihan Ismail, Ismail Rasheed, Mohamed Dhifran, Hassan Shifaz and Hussain Ziyad were arrested by the police and put on trial where they pleaded not guilty. According to police, they believed that Yameen was guilty of insulting Islam.³⁵ Husnu Suood, Chairman of the Presidential Commission, formed to investigate unresolved murders by Yameen's government, confirmed long-held suspicions about religious motives and the involvement of radicalised gangs.³⁶ He told a research journalist from the International Committee to Protect Journalists that the murder attempt on blogger Ismail Khilath Rasheed in June 2012, the assassination of moderate Islamic scholar and member of parliament, Afrasheem Ali, in October 2012 and the abduction of *Maldives Independent* journalist Ahmed Rilwan in August 2014 have been carried out by the same radicalised group.³⁷

On the changing social behaviour of the Maldivians under the influence of Islam, 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."³⁸

Although Thoriq Hamid finds this goat story an exaggeration, he agrees that due to the rising influence of conservative ideas, many children have

33. Robinson, J J, (2015), *The Maldives: Islamic Republic, Tropical Autocracy*, London: Hurst Publications.

34. Hasan, Moosa and Kai Schuz, "Outspoken Maldivian blogger who challenged radical Islamists is killed", *The New York Times*, 23 April 2017. Retrieved from *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/23/world/asia/yameen-rasheed-dead-maldives-blogger-dead.html?_r=1. Accessed on 12 June 2018.

35. Mohamed, Hasan, "Judge concerned over delays in Yameen Rasheed murder trial", *Maldives Independent*, 22 July 2019. <https://maldivesindependent.com/crime-2/judge-concerned-over-delays-in-yameen-rasheed-murder-trial-146746>. Accessed on 23 July 2019.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. Cited in "Maldives: militant Islamists on rise", *The Hindu*, op. cit.

not been vaccinated. The rise of the Islamists has deeply affected the status of the women in the country. Citing the 2015 Human Rights report of the Maldives, Thoriq said, “There is also a growing concern that, with the increase in religious conservatism practices, home based education is sometimes preferred by parents leading to restricting girls’ access to formal education at school.”³⁹ At another level, under the influence of pre-modern values, several young girls had been taken out of school and married off in their early teens.⁴⁰ The Islamists are against anything they consider “foreign”. In December 1999, they launched incendiary attacks against the government for permitting the celebration of Christmas and New Year. They argued that it is a ploy to spread Christianity in the Island state. In 2005, a shop in Malé, displaying a Santa Claus mannequin, was attacked.⁴¹ Due to the rising impact of the Islamists, the Maldivian political elites have presented themselves as defenders of puritanical Islam, protecting it from the influences of other religions. It has paid them political dividends in the form of votes and public support. To make people Islamic in their attitudes, spiritual preachers and religious leaders from various parts of the world have been commissioned by the Maldivian Ministry of Islamic Affairs to deliver sermons on Islam. These preachers have included Zakir Naik of India.⁴²

During Yameen’s tenure, the archipelago became a fertile recruiting ground for the militants, including the IS.⁴³ In an interview with *The Independent* in 2014, Nasheed revealed that up to 200 Maldivians are engaged in fighting for the IS in Iraq and Syria.⁴⁴ This number is also supported by a study on the presence of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria carried out by the Soufan Group in 2015.⁴⁵

39. 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.

40. Cited in “Maldives: militant Islamists on rise”, *The Hindu*, op. cit.

41. Ibid.

42. Robinson, J J, (2016), *The Maldives: Islamic Republic, Tropical Autocracy*, London: Hurst Publications.

43. Wright, Oliver, “Islamic State: The Maldives – a recruiting paradise for jihadists”, *The Independent*, 13 September 2014. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/islamic-state-the-maldives-a-recruiting-paradise-for-jihadists-9731574.html>. Accessed on 10 June 2017.

44. Ibid.

45. 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 use their 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 alongside 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. Accessed on 19 June 2017.

In the interview, Nasheed also claimed that there were links between the 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.”⁴⁶ He added that the Maldivian “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.”⁴⁷

On the relationship between the tourism industry and radicalism, Nasheed explained:

“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 has nothing to do with us apparently.”⁴⁸

Adding to his points, Shauna Aminath, a human rights activist, said in 2017:

“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 exile.”⁴⁹

46. Wright, Oliver, “Islamic State: The Maldives – a recruiting paradise for jihadists”, *The Independent*, op. cit

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. “Maldives Opposition looks towards India to keep democracy”. <http://www.orfonline.org/research/maldives-opposition-looks-towards-india-keep-up-democracy/>. Accessed on 22 June 2017.

The situation, if one were to go by her account, is such that, “Around the island[s], it is impossible to criticise radical Islam or call out the undemocratic practices of the government.”⁵⁰ She added:

“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[s]. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia has donated US\$100,000 [S\$139,000] for the establishment of the 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.”⁵¹

Recently, it has come to light that some of the Maldivian groups also work as a link to fund the terrorist groups from other countries. It has come to the attention of the Maldivian authorities that an Indonesian terror group, Jamaah Ansharut Daulah, had wired US\$29,569 [S\$40,511] to 12 people with alleged ties to the IS from the Maldives and four other countries between March 2016 and September 2017.⁵² The four other countries are Trinidad and Tobago, Malaysia, Germany and Venezuela. The money was sent through the Western Union money transfer service.⁵³

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

52. “Indonesian terrorist group’s funding traced to Maldives”, *Maldives Independent*, 29 July 2019. <https://maldivesindependent.com/crime-2/indonesian-terrorist-groups-funding-traced-to-maldives-146992>.

53. Ibid.

Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's Victory and Changes

Opposition parties, which were facing real heat under the Yameen government, came together to fight against him. They achieved success when Solih, the common candidate of the joint opposition parties – namely, the MDP, the Adhaalath Party (AP), the Jumhooree Party (JP) and the Maumoon Reform Movement – defeated Yameen in the 2018 presidential election. One has to take note that the main reason for the opposition's unity was a common enemy – Yameen. For example, Gayoom joined the opposition only when his political interests were harmed by Yameen. Likewise, JP leader and business tycoon, Gasim Ibrahim, who was close to Yameen, left him after his business interests were attacked by the government. Ideologically, the AP supports the Islamists and has the objective of implementing Shariah law in the country.

In his inaugural speech, Solih reiterated the key electoral pledges of his coalition partners. These included implementing judicial reforms, restoring fundamental rights, recovering stolen assets and seeking the truth behind unresolved murders and abductions. He also highlighted the precarious financial situation of the country due to theft, corruption and the negligence of the previous government under Yameen.⁵⁴ The government published a 15-page document which outlined its agenda for the first 100 days. It also appointed a committee to look at the cases against the political prisoners in the country.

In February 2019, Yameen was jailed by the criminal court of the country for receiving US\$1 million (S\$1.4 million) of government money through a private company, SOF Private Limited, to lease tropical islands for hotel development.⁵⁵ Later, in March 2019, on the advice of doctors, he was temporarily transferred to house arrest.⁵⁶ A few days before the parliamentary elections, on 28 March 2019, the High Court overturned the decision of the criminal court and ordered for his release on bail.⁵⁷ Also, his bank accounts,

54. President's Office, Republic of Maldives, "Unofficial Translation of the Inaugural Address by His Excellency Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, President of the Republic of Maldives". <https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/20274>.

55. "Maldives ex-president Abdulla Yameen arrested for money laundering", *ABC News*, 19 February 2019. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-02-19/maldives-ex-president-arrested-for-money-laundering/10823916>.

56. "Ex-president Yameen transferred to house arrest", *Maldives Independent*, 14 March 2019. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/ex-president-yameen-transferred-to-house-arrest-144205>. Accessed on 14 March 2019.

57. "Ex-president Yameen released", *Maldives Independent*, 28 March 2019. <https://maldivesindependent.com/crime-2/ex-president-yameen-released-144656>.

which were frozen in December 2018, were unfrozen by the High Court.⁵⁸ In August 2019, Yameen's estranged former Vice President, Ahmed Adeeb, whom he jailed in 2015 on charges of corruption and a criminal conspiracy to assassinate him, testified as the state witness against the former president.

As the ruling coalition has ideological and interest-based differences, some of these cracks have surfaced mainly between the MDP and the JP during the 2019 parliamentary elections. On 6 April 2019, the Maldives went to the polls to elect new members to constitute the country's 19th Parliament. In these elections, the MDP won 65 out of 87 seats, the JP won five seats and the opposition parties – the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) and the People's National Congress (PNC) – led by Yameen, together won eight seats.⁵⁹ Unlike the presidential election, in the parliamentary elections, the JP had an indirect alliance with the PPM and the PNC. In the elections, the PPM and the PNC declared their support for 27 out of the 43 candidates from the JP. Crossing over to the other side during the elections, Gasim called for the immediate release of Yameen and also termed the presidential commissions, constituted by Solih to probe unresolved murders and recover stolen public funds, as "unconstitutional".⁶⁰ Notably, in February 2019, Gasim, as the Speaker of Parliament, refused to call a vote on the Presidential Commissions Bill after it was tabled as an agenda item for the fourth time.⁶¹ After the landslide victory in the parliamentary elections in May 2019, Nasheed was elected by lawmakers as the Speaker of Parliament. The change in the government has also influenced the country's foreign policy. From the day he won the elections, Solih has taken several measures to re-build the Maldives' relationship with the countries neglected by Yameen. He is also trying to correct the other foreign policy-related blunders committed by the previous government.

58. "High Court unfreezes ex-president Yameen's bank accounts", *Maldives Independent*, 31 March 2019. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/high-court-unfreezes-ex-president-yameens-bank-accounts-144660>.

59. "Yellow wave sweeps MDP to historic 65-seat haul", *Maldives Independent*, 9 April 2019. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/yellow-wave-sweeps-mdp-to-historic-65-seat-haul-144790>.

60. "Gasim calls for ex-president's Yameen immediate release", *Maldives Independent*, 9 March 2019. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/gasim-calls-for-ex-presidents-yameen-immediate-release-144111>. Accessed on 11 March 2019.

61. "MDP cries foul as presidential commissions bill returned to committee", *Maldives Independent*, 27 February 2019. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/mdp-cries-foul-as-presidential-commissions-bill-returned-to-committee-143978>. Accessed on 11 March 2019.

Shifts in Foreign Policy

The change in the government also has influence on the country's foreign policy. From the day he won the elections, Solih has taken several measures to re-build the Maldives' relationship with the countries neglected by Yameen. He is also trying to correct the other foreign policy-related blunders committed by the previous government.

Due to its location in the Indian Ocean, India and China are the two major external players who are engaged against each other in the Maldives. The island country straddles critical sea lines of communication which provide critical energy supplies from the Middle East to East and Southeast Asia. From an Indian perspective, the atolls are situated just a few hundred kilometres away from both its western coast and the Lakshadweep Archipelago. New Delhi settled its maritime boundary delimitation with Malé in the late 1970s. On the other hand, Beijing's involvement and efforts in ports such as those in Seychelles and Djibouti clearly highlight its interests in the waters between Africa and India.

Historically, India's relationship with the Maldives prospered before China's entry into the region. Maritime security cooperation between India and the Maldives dates back to the early 1990s. Exercise Dosti (Friendship), a joint coast guard operation, began in 1991. However, during Yameen's tenure, China replaced India as the country's preferred partner. The Maldives' bilateral relations with India took a downturn in early February 2018 on account of the emergency rule in the country.⁶² The Maldives also did not accept India's invitation to participate in the MILAN multilateral naval exercise held in the Andaman Sea. Despite the perceived slump in the relationship during the emergency, the two sides, nonetheless, held a joint naval surveillance exercise in May 2018 where the Indian Navy dispatched its INS Sumedha patrol vessel to patrol the Maldives' Exclusive Economic Zone under its mission-based deployment plan for the Indian Ocean.⁶³

Earlier, in September 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the Maldives. During the visit, the Maldives indicated its support for China's Maritime Silk Road initiative and pledged to "enhance cooperation in the fields of maritime economy, maritime security, ocean research, environment protection and

62. Peri, Dinakar, "Maldives declines invitation for India's MILAN exercises", *The Hindu*, 27 February 2018. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/maldives-declines-invitation-for-milan-exercises/article22866665.ece>. Accessed on 10 June 2019.

63. "Indian ship deployed to undertake surveillance of Maldives exclusive economic zone", *The Indian Express*, 11 May 2018. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/indian-ship-deployed-to-undertake-joint-surveillance-of-maldives-exclusive-economic-zone-5173232/>. Accessed on 10 June 2019.

disaster prevention”.⁶⁴ In 2016, China leased the Feydhoo Finolhu Island near Malé from the Yameen government for four years at a price of US\$50 million (S\$69.25 million) to develop tourism facilities. Later, in 2017, Beijing and Malé signed a free trade agreement that would allow zero tariffs on over 90 per cent of goods in bilateral trade. This, in turn, would improve the country’s aquatic exports, which had been affected by the European Union’s removal of the Maldives from the Generalised System of Preferences countries list in 2013.⁶⁵

On security issues under the Yameen government, the China-Maldives maritime security relationship expanded perceptibly. Three warships of the People’s Liberation Army-Navy made a “friendly visit”⁶⁶ to the port of Malé in August 2017, and were involved in joint activities and training with the Maldives National Defence Force. In December 2017, when Yameen visited China, an agreement was signed to set up a ‘Joint Ocean Observation Station’ at the Makunudhoo Island.

On domestic matters, the Chinese media’s stand was supportive of Yameen’s policies. Soon after the February 2018 emergency, in his opinion piece published in *The Indian Express*, Nasheed wrote, “It is essential that India leads the international community in forcing President Yameen to comply with last week’s [1 February 2018] Supreme Court order. This will pave the way for genuinely inclusive, free and fair elections with full international monitoring.”⁶⁷

Also, at that time, according to a report in *The Times of India* on 7 February 2018, “The [Indian] Armed forces are on standby for any contingency in the Maldives, from evacuation of Indian tourists to military intervention in the archipelago, but there is no political directive to swing into action as yet.”⁶⁸

On the other hand, China’s official stand was that “what was happening there is an internal affair”.⁶⁹ In *The Global Times*, Ai Jun wrote, “This is the country’s internal affair and China firmly opposes outside interference. More than that,

64. Kondapalli S (2018), “The Maritime Silk Road and China–Maldives Relations”. In: Blanchard JM. (eds), *China’s Maritime Silk Road Initiative and South Asia*. Palgrave Studies in Asia-Pacific Political Economy. Palgrave, Singapore.

65. Marwaan Macan-Markar, “China-Maldives trade pact catches India off guard”, *Nikkei Asian Review*, 8 December 2017. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/China-Maldives-trade-pact-catches-India-off-guard> Accessed on 12 June 2019.

66. Shaahunaz, Fathmath, “Three warships of Chinese navy on friendly visit to Maldives”, *The Edition*, 27 August 2019. <https://edition.mv/news/4072>. Accessed on 13 June 2019.

67. “A Villain in Paradise”, *The Indian Express*, 7 February 2018. <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/a-villain-in-paradise-maldives-president-abdulla-yameen-5053962/>. Accessed on 7 February 2018.

68. “Maldives Crisis: Indian Military kept on standby”, *The Times of India*, 7 February 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/maldives-crisis-indian-military-kept-on-standby/articleshow/62813515.cms>. Accessed on 7 February 2018.

69. “China suggests its tourists not visit Maldives until situation stabilizes”, *Maldives Times*, 6 February 2018. <https://maldivestimes.com/china-suggests-its-tourists-not-visit-maldives-until-situation-stabilizes/>. Accessed on 6 February 2018.

China should take necessary measures to stop India if New Delhi moves to intervene militarily.”⁷⁰ The piece added:

“The Maldives’ dependence on India for security since then (1988)⁷¹ has made New Delhi grow arrogant and bring Malé into its sphere of influence. Since Maldivian President Abdulla Yameen assumed office in 2013, the nation has proactively interacted with the US, China, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, gradually heading toward(s) more independent and balanced diplomacy. This apparently irritated India. Perhaps New Delhi has been seeking an opportunity to showcase its military again in its ‘backyard’ ... If India one-sidedly sends troops to the Maldives, China will take action to stop New Delhi. India should not underestimate China’s opposition to unilateral military intervention.”⁷²

Yameen also developed a close friendship with Saudi Arabia as the Maldives began following in the footsteps of Saudi Arabia in many foreign policy matters. For instance, in 2016, the Maldives severed its diplomatic relationship with Iran. And on 5 June 2017, the Maldives broke off diplomatic relations with Qatar, which were established in 1984.

Meanwhile, its traditionally close relations with India deteriorated. In 2017, the Yameen government suspended three local councillors for meeting with the then-Indian Ambassador to the Maldives, Akhilesh Mishra. In December 2017, an editorial in the pro-Yameen Divehi language newspaper, *Vaguthu*, described India as an enemy and called on Malé to find a new friend in China. The editorial also termed the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, as a Hindu extremist and anti-Muslim.⁷³ However, the editorial was removed from the website after it drew widespread public attention. To address India’s concerns, Yameen’s government stated, “[T]he administration would never entertain negative sentiments towards India”, highlighting that Indian assistance formed an “invaluable contribution to the Maldives”.⁷⁴

70. Jun, Ai, “Unauthorized military intervention in Malé must be stopped”, *The Global Times*, 12 February 2018. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1089435.shtml>. Accessed on 17 February 2018.

71. The 1988 incident has been discussed in the first section of the introduction. 72.

72. “Unauthorized military intervention in Malé must be stopped”, op cit.

73. Parashar, Sachin, “Maldives reaches out to India, discusses high-level bilateral meet in bid to undo perceived snub”, *The Times News Network*, 26 December 2017. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/maldives-reaches-out-to-india-seeks-to-undo-perceived-slight/articleshow/62244881.cms>. Accessed on 8 January 2018.

74. Ibid.

Yameen also had a confrontation with the Commonwealth grouping when, in 2015, the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group decided to take punitive actions against the Yameen government for the gross violation of the human and democratic rights of its citizens.⁷⁵ Alleging the Commonwealth of interfering in the country's internal affairs, the Yameen government announced in October 2016 the withdrawal of the Maldives' membership from the Commonwealth.

After assuming office, Solih stated in his inaugural speech that for the government to achieve its goals, he needs "the support and assistance of foreign countries and international organizations."⁷⁶ Highlighting the change in the Maldives' foreign policy, Solih said:

"My administration's foreign policy will be formulated on the basis of human rights, democracy and climate diplomacy. We will endeavour to fortify the existing ties the Maldives has had with India and other regional countries. The Maldives will hereupon bolster its shared role to retain enduring peace and harmony of the Indian Ocean. Let me take this opportunity to emphasise that the Maldives is open and willing to establish diplomatic relations and strengthen existing ties with all countries that wish to form mutually beneficial development partnerships."⁷⁷

In November 2018, Modi made a visit to the Maldives to attend Solih's swearing-in ceremony. Earlier that month, in a show of diplomatic support, India backed the Maldives' membership of the Indian Ocean Rim Association.⁷⁸ The Indian Navy also refitted and handed over the ship MCGS Huravee to the Maldivian Coast Guard in November 2018.⁷⁹ The vessel was originally gifted by the Indian Navy to the Maldivian National Defence Force in 2006.

After assuming office, Solih's first visit was to India from 16 to 18 December 2018. He was accompanied by a high-level delegation comprising the ministers

75. Muni, S D (2017), "Modi's 'Neighbourhood First' Initiative", In Singh, Sinderpal (edited) *Modi's World: (Re)Constructing Indian Foreign Policy*, Singapore: World Scientific, p 117-138. 76. President's Office, Republic of Maldives, "Unofficial Translation of the Inaugural Address by His Excellency Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, President of the Republic of Maldives". <https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/20274>. Accessed on 20 December 2018.

76. President's Office, Republic of Maldives, "Unofficial Translation of the Inaugural Address by His Excellency Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, President of the Republic of Maldives".

77. Ibid.

78. Bagchi, Indrani, "PM Modi set to visit Maldives for Solih's swearing in, reset ties", *The Times of India*, 7 November 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pm-modi-likely-to-attend-oath-taking-ceremony-of-new-maldives-president/articleshow/66527018.cms>. Accessed on 10 June 2019.

79. Press Information Bureau, Government of India, "Indian Navy completes refit of Maldivian Coast Guard Ship Huravee", 15 November 2018, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=184770>. Accessed on 10 June 2019.

for finance, infrastructure, economic development and foreign affairs. In New Delhi, Solih met with Modi, Indian President Ram Nath Kovind, Vice-President Venkaiah Naidu and Minister for External Affairs Sushma Swaraj.

Signifying the importance of the Maldives to India and boosting his “Neighbourhood First” policy, Modi began his second term as prime minister after winning the general elections in May 2019 with a visit to the Maldives followed by Sri Lanka. He was in the Maldives on 8 and 9 June 2019, where he addressed the Maldivian Parliament. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs’ press release said that the visit “will provide an important occasion to review the recent developments in bilateral relations and exchange views on issues of mutual interest with the objective of further strengthening the special relationship between the two countries.”⁸⁰ It also added that Modi’s visit to the Maldives and Sri Lanka demonstrates the priority India attaches to its “Neighbourhood First” policy and the SAGAR (Security And Growth for All in the Region) doctrine.⁸¹

During Modi’s visit, Solih reaffirmed his government’s “India First” policy and pledged its full support towards deepening the multifaceted, mutually beneficial partnership between India and the Maldives, which has traditionally been characterised by trust, transparency, mutual understanding and sensitivity.⁸² Modi recalled his government’s policy of “Neighbourhood First” while assuring India’s full support to the Maldives in realising its aspirations for broad-based socio-economic development and the strengthening of democratic and independent institutions.⁸³ India and the Maldives also signed memoranda of understanding (MoU)⁸⁴ on:

1. Cooperation in the field of hydrography;
2. Cooperation in the field of health;
3. Establishment of passenger and cargo services by sea;
4. Cooperation in customs capacity building between the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs of India and the Maldives Customs Service;

80. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Visit of Prime Minister to Maldives and Sri Lanka (June 08-09, 2019)”, https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/31408/Visit_of_Prime_Minister_to_Maldives_and_Sri_Lanka_June_0809_2019. Accessed on 5 June 2019.

81. Ibid.

82. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “India-Maldives Joint Statement during the State Visit of Prime Minister to Maldives”, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/31418/IndiaMaldives_Joint_Statement_during_the_State_Visit_of_Prime_Minister_to_Maldives. Accessed on 12 June 2019.

83. Ibid.

84. Ibid.

5. Cooperation between the National Centre for Good Governance, Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances and the Maldives Civil Service Commission on training and capacity building programme for the Maldivian Civil Servants; and
6. Technical Agreement on sharing white shipping information between the Indian Navy and the Maldives National Defence Force.

For the Maldives, foreign policy relations have been a source of economic assistance. During Yameen's term, the Maldives' closeness with China brought foreign investments into the country. Allegedly, such investments have pushed the Maldives into debt. Thus, the Solih government is now looking towards India instead of China for economic assistance and infrastructure development in the country.

Debt Distressed Economy

The close association to China during Yameen's tenure has supposedly pushed the country into a debt trap. Several allegations were made against the Chinese companies on land grabbing in the name of carrying out infrastructure projects in the Maldives. These projects are also seen to have the capacity of dragging the country into a debt trap.⁸⁵ One such project is the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge. The total cost of the bridge is RMB1.26 billion (\$253.7 million) with 57.5 per cent of this cost being covered by a grant from the Chinese government. Another 36.1 per cent of the cost is in the form of a preferential loan from the Chinese government and the remaining 6.4 per cent is to be borne by the Maldivian state.⁸⁶ All such loans are to be paid with interest to China by the Maldives. Another project is the upgrading and expansion of the Velena International Airport, while the third is the Hulhumalé Phase II housing project currently under construction, where 16 buildings will be constructed. A fourth project is the development of a link road between the Hulhule and Hulhumalé.⁸⁷ It has been purported that the cost of these projects were inflated by the Chinese companies to make profits.

It has been reported that China is leasing 17 of the 1,200 islands that constitute the Maldives.⁸⁸ Research by the Mumbai-based think tank Gateway House finds that tourism, which contributes to one-quarter of gross domestic product to the Maldives, depends heavily on China. "The largest number of tourists to the Maldives now comes from China via regular commercial flights. The international airport where they arrive is being developed by a Chinese company. The sea-plane operator that takes them to island resorts is owned by a Chinese firm, as are many of the resorts."⁸⁹ However, the Chinese Ambassador to the Maldives, Zhang Lizhong, said that the investments in the Maldives resorts are "completely normal". He rejected the claims of land grabs and debt traps.⁹⁰

In 2018, Solih won the elections by criticising the Chinese projects in the Maldives. After Solih's victory, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman

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

86. Ibid.

87. Ibid.

88. Bhandari, Amit and Chandani Jindal, "The Maldives: Investments Undermine Democracy", *Gateway House*, 7 February 2018. <http://www.gatewayhouse.in/chinese-investments-in-the-maldives/>. Accessed on 16 July 2018.

89. Ibid.

90. "China defends 'completely normal' Maldives investments", op. cit.

criticised Nasheed's repeated accusations of land grabbing and dragging the Maldives into debt traps.⁹¹ A week after Solih took over, Nasheed claimed that Lizhong handed the government an invoice of US\$3.2 billion (S\$4.35 billion).⁹² This was denied by China, which, however, maintained that the amount of debt is nearer to US\$1.5 billion (S\$ 2.01 billion).⁹³ In July 2019, Lizhong cited figures from the Chinese central bank, explaining that out of the total debt of US\$3.2 billion (S\$4.35 billion), the debt owed to China was only US\$1.5 billion (S\$2.01 billion) and that the remainder amount – which was the bulk of the cost – was grant aid from China.⁹⁴ According to the Maldivian Central Bank, the Chinese debt includes “guaranteed debt” of US\$900 million (S\$1.22 billion). The Yameen administration provided sovereign guarantees for US\$1.36 billion (about S\$1.85 billion) worth of loans taken by 23 state-owned enterprises and one private company.⁹⁵

In July 2019, Nasheed was, once again, at loggerheads with the Chinese Ambassador over claims that the vast majority of the Maldives is under Chinese debt.⁹⁶ He also criticised the price tag of the US\$200 million (S\$272 million) Sinamalé bridge, alleging inflated costs and suggesting that it could instead have been built for US\$77 million (S\$104.8 million).⁹⁷

To help out, Modi, during Solih's visit to India in December 2018, announced a US\$1.4 billion (S\$1.9 billion) loan to the Maldives to pay off its debt to China. This was seen by many commentators and media persons as a payoff to establish its military base in the Maldives – a point that was refuted by the Maldives Foreign Minister, Abdulla Shahid.⁹⁸ In his press statement announcing the financial aid to the Maldives during Solih's visit, Modi said that, for the social and economic development of the Maldives, India is providing the

91. “Foreign minister extols China-Maldives partnership”, *Maldives Independent*, 22 July 2019. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/foreign-minister-extols-china-maldives-partnership-146729>.

92. “China Hands Over \$3.2 Billion Bill to Maldives for Building Spree; Solih Govt Clueless About Total Debt”, *News 18*, 23 November 2018. <https://www.news18.com/news/world/china-hands-over-3-2-billion-bill-to-maldives-for-construction-spree-solih-govt-clueless-about-total-debt-1948711.html>. Accessed on 15 January 2019.

93. Ibid.

94. “Foreign minister extols China-Maldives partnership”, *Maldives Independent*, 22 July 2019. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/foreign-minister-extols-china-maldives-partnership-146729>. Accessed on 22 July 2019.

95. Ibid.

96. Ibid.

97. Ibid.

98. “Maldives dismisses reports of Indian military base in Malé in return for \$1 billion aid”, *The Times Now News. Com*, 30 November 2018. <https://www.timesnownews.com/international/article/maldives-india-relationship-abdulla-shahid-china-ties-dismisses-reports-of-indian-military-base-in-male-in-return-for-1-billion-dollar-aid-president/323408>. Accessed on 15 December 2018.

assistance of US\$1.4 billion (S\$1.9 billion) in the form of budgetary support, currency swap agreements and concessional lines of credit.⁹⁹

At that time, India and the Maldives signed an agreement on the facilitation of visa arrangements, MoUs on cultural cooperation and to establish mutual cooperation to improve the ecosystem for agribusiness, and a Joint Declaration of Intent on Cooperation in the field of information and communications technology and electronics. Also, Solih met with members of the Indian business community and invited them to invest in the Maldives. Responding to India's maritime concerns, the two sides agreed to strengthen maritime security cooperation in the Indian Ocean region through coordinated patrol and aerial surveillance.¹⁰⁰

The two countries also agreed to work together to create institutional linkages and cooperate in areas such as health issues, particularly cancer treatment, mutual legal assistance on criminal matters, investment promotion, human resource development and tourism.¹⁰¹ It was also agreed that India would provide 1,000 additional slots over the next five years for training and capacity building in fields such as the judiciary, policing and law enforcement, audit and financial management, local governance, community development, information technology, e-governance, sports, media, youth and women empowerment, leadership, innovation and entrepreneurship and arts and culture.¹⁰²

In March 2019, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj paid a visit to the Maldives. At that time, India and the Maldives signed a US\$800 million (S\$1.1 billion) Line of Credit Agreement. It was to assist the Maldives to achieve sustainable social and economic development.

In June 2019, Modi and Solih stressed the need to work towards:

“... [the] expeditious implementation of people-centric and socio-economic projects including in areas of water and sanitation for many islands, Addu city urban development and support for SME

99. “India’s Modi gives US\$1.4 billion aid to Maldives amid worry over its China debt”, Channel News Asia, 17 December 2018. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/india-s-modi-gives-us-1-4-billion-aid-to-maldives-amid-worry-11039378>. Accessed on 20 December 2018.

100. “PM Modi announces \$1.4 billion aid to bail out Maldives from economic crisis”, *The Indian Express*, 17 December 2018. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/narendra-modi-maldives-president-ibrahim-solih-meeting-5497336/>. Accessed on 19 December 2018.

101. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Joint Statement on the occasion of State Visit of the President of the Republic of Maldives to India (December 17, 2018)”, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/30765/Joint+Statement+on+the+occasion+of+State+Visit+of+the+President+of+the+Republic+of+Maldives+to+India+December+17+2018>. Accessed on 19 December 2018.

102. Ibid.

Finance Corporation under the US\$800 million Dollar [S\$1.1 billion] Line of Credit Agreement. They also decided to work on other projects in the pipeline, including in sectors such as port development, health, agriculture, fisheries, tourism and energy.”¹⁰³

These infrastructure projects include a new commercial harbour in Thilafushi near Malé.¹⁰⁴ They also welcomed the signing of the MoU on Indian Grant Assistance of US\$5.5 million (S\$7.5 million) for the implementation of high impact community development projects through local bodies in March 2019. Solih also thanked the government of India for the cash grant of US\$6.9 million (S\$9.4 million) “...for (the) implementation of socio-economic development projects. Both leaders expressed their happiness that the grant was being used to support community infrastructure, healthy lifestyles, access to education, health, law and order and environmental protection.”¹⁰⁵ The two sides also signed a MoU on passenger and cargo services. A proposal for a ferry service between the cities of Kochi (in the Indian state of Kerala) and Malé was also agreed upon.¹⁰⁶

On the country’s economy, during its visit to the Maldives from 20 February to 5 March 2019, a team from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicted a growth of around 6.5 per cent in 2019 and six per cent in 2020.¹⁰⁷ One of the concerns noted by the IMF team is the Maldives’ high and increasing level of public and publicly guaranteed debt, which has fiscal sustainability risks.¹⁰⁸ It added that financing pressures remain from domestic debt, the bulk of which is issued in short-term securities, whereas for external debt, amortisations from large infrastructure projects start picking up next year.¹⁰⁹ The team appreciated some of the measures taken by the Solih government to strengthen “public investment management, increasing the credibility of annual budgets and integrating the annual budgets with the medium-term fiscal and debt management strategies.”¹¹⁰

103. Ibid.

104. N Sathiya Moorthy, “Swaraj’s Maldives visit lends economic direction to political ties”, Observer Research Foundation, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/swarajs-maldives-visit-lends-economic-direction-to-political-ties-49355/>. Accessed on 13 June 2019.

105. Ibid.

106. “In a first, ferry service to connect India and Maldives”, The Times of India, 9 June 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/in-a-first-ferry-service-to-connect-india-and-maldives/articleshow/69706780.cms>. Accessed on 11 June 2019.

107. International Monetary Fund, “IMF Staff Completes 2019 Article IV Mission to Maldives”, Press Release No. PR19/64, 5 March 2019. <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2019/03/05/PR1964?cid=em-COM-123-38466>. Accessed on 9 March 2019.

108. Ibid.

109. Ibid.

110. Ibid.

The Maldives is a member of the Small Island Developing States, a group of nations whose members usually have jurisdiction over a massive amount of marine resources disproportionate to their size. While the total land area of the Maldives is less than 300 square kilometres, its exclusive economic zone, as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, is over 850,000 square kilometres.¹¹¹

Tourism is the spine of the Maldivian economy. It contributes around 28 per cent to the country's gross domestic product and earns about 60 per cent of the country's foreign exchanges. A record 1.4 million tourists visited the Maldives in 2018, and Solih's government is trying to increase this number to 1.5 million. According to statistics released by the Tourism Ministry of the Maldives in July 2019, China retained first place as the top market for inbound tourists into the Maldives. By the end of June 2019, the number of Chinese tourists increased by 10 per cent to 140,265, compared to the previous year. Over the same period, 82,140 Indian tourists visited the Maldives, making India the second largest market for Maldivian tourism.¹¹²

Fishing is the second largest industry in the country and it is mainly dominated by foreign companies. To give more space to local companies, the MDP promised during elections to transform the country's fishing industry and allow foreign boats to only purchase fish directly from local vessels instead of catching it themselves.¹¹³ Keeping its election promise, in August 2019, the government proposed the new fisheries law which the Maldivian parliament voted in favour of. It will now go to the committee stage where significant changes may be made. This bill is divided into 12 chapters and 80 sections to replace the Fisheries Act of 1987. It proposes measures to control illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing practices and ban purse seine, gill net, troll net, spear fishing and the use of explosives and toxic chemicals. It also introduced fines of up to US\$129,700 (\$\$176,373) for engaging in illegal fishing activities for locals, which would be 20 times higher for crew members of a foreign vessel.¹¹⁴

111. Mundy, Simon and Hille, Kathrin, "The Maldives counts the cost of its debts to China", *Financial Times*, 11 February 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/c8da1c8a-2a19-11e9-88a4-c32129756dd8>. Accessed on 11 June 2019.

112. "India becomes second largest market for Maldives tourism", *Maldives Independent*, 24 July 2019. <https://maldivesindependent.com/business/india-becomes-second-largest-market-for-maldives-tourism-146737>. Accessed on 26 July 2019.

113. "MDP pledges to ban foreign vessels from Maldives fishing", *Maldives Independent*, 2 July 2018. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/mdp-pledges-to-ban-foreign-vessels-from-maldives-fishing-139103>. Accessed on 21 July 2018.

114. Moosa, Hassan, "Parliament moves ahead with new fisheries law", *Maldives Independent*, 21 August 2019. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/parliament-moves-ahead-with-new-fisheries-law-147426>. Accessed on 23 August 2019.

In recent years, there has been a boom in the Maldivian construction sector. According to the Maldives Monetary Authority's quarterly economic review of October 2018, due to the upsurge in the construction-related imports in the first half of 2018, the sector showed an annual growth of 51 per cent.¹¹⁵

Primarily for economic reasons, on the invitation of Singapore's President Halimah Yacob, Solih made a state visit to Singapore on 1 July 2019. He also met with Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong during the visit. The two leaders discussed ways to enhance bilateral and economic cooperation. Singapore and the Maldives established diplomatic ties in 1975. In 1984, Singapore Airlines was one of the first airlines to start direct flights to and from Malé. The regular flight service has helped Singaporean companies such as Banyan Tree and Hotel Properties establish themselves in the Maldives.¹¹⁶

To boost further connectivity between Singapore and the Maldives, on 1 July 2019, the two countries signed an Open Skies Agreement which will enhance air connectivity between them and facilitate greater commercial tourism and people-to-people linkages. After signing the air pact with the Maldives, Singapore's Senior Minister of State for Transport, Dr Lam Pin Min, said that the agreement "underscores the strong bilateral ties between Singapore and [the] Maldives, and will enable greater movement of people and goods between the two countries to benefit both our economies".¹¹⁷ Also, to help sustainable development in the Maldives, Singapore has agreed to provide "a two year technical cooperation package, through the Singapore Cooperation Programme, for senior Maldivian officials in the areas of sustainable development and governance."¹¹⁸

Given the economic strength of China, the Solih government, despite political altercations, is ready to engage. In an interview with the Chinese state-run media, Xinhua, Shahid called the bilateral relationship "an example of how one of the smallest members of the international community can have a mutually productive and progressive relationship with one of its biggest and most powerful members."¹¹⁹ He expressed hope that China will

115. Rehan, Mohamed, "Construction Industry Shows Promising Growth on 2018 First Half", *MBR*, 30 October 2018. <https://mbr.mv/2688/>. Accessed on 9 March 2019.

116. "Singapore and Maldives sign agreements to boost air connectivity, strengthen bilateral cooperation", *The Strait Times*, 1 July 2019. <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapore-and-maldives-sign-agreements-to-boost-air-connectivity-strengthen-bilateral>. Accessed on 2 July 2019.

117. Ibid.

118. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Singapore, "State Visit by His Excellency Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, President of the Republic of Maldives, 1 July 2019", <https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2019/07/01072019-Maldives-SV>. Accessed on 2 July 2019.

119. Ibid.

remain “an important economic and bilateral development partner for the Maldives, in its journey to become one of the most vibrant middle-income developing countries.”¹²⁰ Shahid said that the Maldivian people were “deeply appreciative” of key developmental projects financed by China.¹²¹ In his interview, Shahid expressed support for China’s territorial integrity and the ‘One-China’ policy as well as the Belt and Road Initiative on infrastructure investment. He said that “the recent high-level participation by our economic minister at the Thematic Forum on Unimpeded Trade of the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation signifies the importance the government accords to the Belt and Road Initiative”.¹²² He also observed that China is the largest source market for the Maldives’ tourism and assured his government’s efforts to ensure the safety and lawful interests and rights of Chinese tourists coming to the Maldives.¹²³

Following Shahid’s interview, a project was launched on 29 July 2019 to renovate the Maldivian foreign ministry’s building with grant aid from China. The exchange of letters for this project was signed in December 2018.¹²⁴ The cost of the renovation project was not disclosed. Also, in July 2019, the Maldives Health Ministry and China’s National Health Commission signed an agreement to establish a collaborative ophthalmology centre at the hospital in Hulhumalé. It is aimed at improving the ophthalmologic department at Hulhumalé. In this hospital, ophthalmologists from China and the Maldives will provide their services. Further, it was agreed that regular capacity-building programmes will be carried out for Maldivian doctors and nurses at the Hulhumalé Hospital and Zhongshan Ophthalmic Centre in China. Earlier, in 2015 and 2017, more than 1,000 people were screened and 186 cataract surgeries were carried out in the Maldives. Afterwards, medical equipment worth MVR9.2 million (S\$824, 000) was donated to the Maldives by China.¹²⁵

120. Ibid.

121. Ibid.

122. Ibid.

123. Ibid.

124. “China funds renovation of Maldives foreign ministry”, *Maldives Independent*, 30 July 2019. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/china-funds-renovation-of-maldives-foreign-ministry-147081>. Accessed on 1 August 2019.

125. Ibid.

Conclusion

Under Nasheed's term as president, the country tried to introduce liberal values, which had been propagandised as a threat to the Islamic tenets. Consequently, he was thrown out of power and, later, Yameen was elected into power. During Yameen's tenure, the country went through a series of political changes where democracy was crushed and Islamic radicalism was encouraged. After coming into power, Solih has spoken about the measures to de-radicalise the country. It would be interesting to see how the society and the politics of the country react to such measures.

As in the case of economic challenges, Islamic radicalisation is a major concern for the country. Although Nasheed and Solih expressed concerns about the Islamic radicalisation in the Maldives, the government is yet to take any strong measures against the radicals. The religiously conservative and Islamist party, AP, is part of Solih's coalition government. After the Sri Lankan government started the crackdown on the Islamic radicals in its country, its Army Commander, Lieutenant General Mahesh Senanayake, remarked on the Maldivians travelling to Syria through Colombo. It has been estimated by the Sri Lankan authorities that, over the past five years, about 69 Maldivians, excluding women and children, have joined the militant groups in Syria and Iraq.¹²⁶ This charge was refuted by the Maldivian government. However, one cannot with absolute certainty deny this fact, as Nasheed himself made reference to it during an interview. Unfortunately, none of the suspects charged with terrorism have been convicted till date. The latest case is of Ali Shafeeq, who was charged under the 2015 Anti-Terrorism Act for "leaving the country to join a civil war in a foreign country".¹²⁷ He was accused of travelling to Turkey in October 2016 and making an attempt to cross into the Syrian border with the intention of fighting along with a terrorist group. In July 2019, the Maldivian criminal court dismissed the terrorism charges against him. Earlier, Shafeeq was arrested in connection with the 2007 Sultan Park bombing but was cleared of the charges. Again, in 2009, he was arrested by Pakistani security forces near the Afghanistan border when he was trying to cross into Afghanistan, along with nine other armed Maldivians, to fight for the Taliban.¹²⁸

126. "Maldives denounces Sri Lankan army chief's 'irresponsible' claims", *Maldives Independent*, 20 May 2019. <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/maldives-denounces-sri-lankan-army-chiefs-irresponsible-claims-145417>. Accessed on 25 July 2019.

127. "Maldives court frees alleged jihadi fighter", *Maldives Independent*, 26 July 2019. <https://maldivesindependent.com/crime-2/maldives-court-frees-alleged-jihadi-fighter-146818>. Accessed on 26 July 2019.

128. Ibid.

On the foreign policy front, both India and China have been deeply engaged in the Maldives. Before Yameen, the country's leadership had maintained a close relationship with India. This was changed by Yameen, who helped China establish a strong presence in the Maldives to check India. This he did deliberately, but without understanding the nature of Chinese investment, as his actions put the country into a debt trap. Despite Solih coming into power on the back of criticising the Chinese debt, his government is still ready to engage with China on economic issues. Being a small island state, it is inevitable that the Maldives needs to pamper its two large Asian neighbours. It has social, economic and security challenges and it will need the help of both India and China. Only time will tell what price the Maldives will pay for this intimacy with the two competing giants.

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