

The Presidential Elections in the Maldives

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Summary

On 9 September 2023, the Maldives will go to the polls to elect its new president. At the moment, the incumbent, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, has an edge over the other candidates. However, several internal and external factors could determine the voters' preference in the election.

On 9 September 2023, about [282,395 eligible voters](#) in the Maldives will vote to elect the country's new president among the following candidates:

1. The incumbent president, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, from the Maldives Democratic Party (MDP);
2. Mohamed Muizzu from the People's National Congress (PNC);
3. Mohamed Nazim from the Maldives National Party;
4. Qasim Ibrahim from the Jumhooree Party;
5. Ilyas Labeeb of The Democrats;
6. Ahmed Faris Maumoon, an independent candidate;
7. Umar Naseer, an independent candidate; and
8. Hassan Zameel, an independent candidate.

According to an opinion poll conducted in June 2023 by the Baani Centre for International Policy, a think tank based in Malé, 52 per cent of respondents were undecided on whom they would vote for. Fifteen per cent said they would vote for Solih, 10 per cent for former president, Abdulla Yameen, and six per cent for former president and Speaker of Parliament, [Mohamed Nasheed](#). These percentages changed in the July 2023 opinion poll conducted by the same think tank – while 47 per cent of Maldivians remain undecided, Solih received support from 19 per cent, 18 per cent supported Yameen, four per cent preferred Nasheed, and the other candidates received [two per cent](#) support. Notably, Yameen and Nasheed are not contesting in this year's presidential election, but with a fair number of supporters, they remain important players behind the scenes.

On 1 August 2023, Yameen filed his candidacy papers for the presidential election. However, the Election Commission of the Maldives rejected his candidacy on two main grounds. First, according to Article 109 (f) of the Maldivian constitution, the president elected shall “not have been convicted of a criminal offence and sentenced to a term of more than twelve months, unless a period of three years has elapsed since his release, or pardon for the offence for which he was [sentenced](#)”; and, second, Yameen has failed to settle a fine of US\$5 million (S\$6.78 million) he was ordered to pay by the Criminal Court as part of the sentence for money laundering and bribery, pronounced on [22 December 2022](#). Yameen appealed to the Supreme Court which upheld the Election Commission's [decision](#).

In another significant pre-election development, in May 2023, Nasheed, one of the founding members of the MDP, along with his supporters, resigned from [the party](#) and later set up a new party called [The Democrats](#). Since the last presidential election in 2018, when Nasheed was barred by law from contesting and he extended his support to Solih (a childhood friend with family links), there were [rumblings](#) of an internal power clash between them. In the last five years, on many occasions, Solih and Nasheed had spats over political issues. Their dispute reached the zenith when, in January 2023, Nasheed decided to challenge Solih in the presidential primary election of the MDP. During his campaign, Nasheed accused the Solih government of engaging in corruption, practising undemocratic methods to silence dissent and delaying the completion of some infrastructure projects. He also accused the MDP leadership of expelling more than 39,000 party members who would not have voted for [Solih](#). These attacks and accusations impact Solih, as he won the presidential primary comfortably, receiving around 61.1 per cent of the [total votes](#). After the results, Nasheed accused the party leadership of [“twisting”](#) the votes in Solih’s favour.

Since the presidential primary, there have been speculations about Nasheed’s future role in the country’s politics. Estranged Nasheed even praised his one-time bitter political rival, Yameen, for his dedicated service to the country. Nasheed held talks with Yameen’s Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) to field a common candidate against Solih. This could not materialise as the PPM extended its support to Muizzu. However, the PPM and [The Democrats](#) are working together and formal talks have been held between leaders from the PPM-PNC coalition and The Democrats on forming [a political alliance](#). If there is a second round, the PPM-PNC’s alignment with The Democrats will be a crucial factor in deciding the winner.

Qasim and Faris Maumoon are the other two significant contenders in this year’s presidential election. Qasim, one of the wealthiest businessmen in the Maldives, has a good number of supporters who can influence the result if no candidate receives 51 per cent of the vote in the first round and a second round is held to elect a winner. Son of a former president, Maumoon Gayoom, Faris Maumoon, is contesting the election despite being a part of the ruling coalition. Gayoom’s four sons are affiliated with different parties, including the PPM. Faris Maumoon’s candidature ensures that the family remains a part of any political calculations after [the election](#).

The Maldivian election will also be keenly watched by some outsiders, particularly India, China and the United States (US). After being elected to power in 2018, Solih reversed Yameen’s policies and adopted an ‘India-First’ policy. The PPM-PNC held rallies against this policy. During the campaign, the leader of the PPM-PNC coalition and president of the PNC, Abdulraheem Abdulla, said that they were not going to stop the ‘India Out’ [campaign](#). At the launch of the election manifesto, referring to the close ties between New Delhi and Malé, Muizzu said that if elected into power, his government will not favour a single country. Further pointing at India-Maldives defence and security relations, he said that foreign military presence in the Maldives [will not be permitted](#). Like India, the US has developed close ties with Maldives during Solih’s tenure. The Maldives is now an important partner of the US in the Indo-Pacific region. The two countries also signed [a defence pact in 2020](#). Unlike India and the US, China saw a decline in its ties with the island country during Solih’s

term. Beijing has faced accusations by the Solih administration for the inflated cost of projects, pushing the island country into [debt](#).

Although Solih has an edge over the other candidates, several internal issues such as accusations of corruption, infrastructure development challenges, factionalism, political alignment and re-alignment could play a crucial role in the presidential election. Similarly, the Maldives' relations with India could also have an impact on the election, with questions being raised over New Delhi's significant role in the island state's development.

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