



India and the Maldives: The Perils of Hyper-nationalism

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Summary

New Delhi and Male will need much prudence in dealing with a difficult moment in bilateral relations. The ability of the two governments to reset the relationship is being complicated by the hyper-nationalists on both sides that have turned a delicate situation into a crisis.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Lakshadweep in early January this year – only the second such a visit by an Indian prime minister to the Indian islands – would kick up a tsunami of controversy engulfing the relations between India and the Maldives. While the two governments have reasons to manage the fallout from the avoidable episode, hyper-nationalists on both sides are making it harder.

Well before Modi visited the islands and highlighted their tourism potential, the relationship between New Delhi and Male had begun to get edgy. The new president of the Maldives, Mohamed Muizzu, was elected in September 2023 on the back of a [prolonged campaign](#) to oust Indian military presence from the island republic. All-round cooperation between India and the Maldives had grown rapidly under the previous government, led by Ibrahim Solih (2018-23).

Since he took charge in November 2023, Muizzu wasted no time in demanding that Indian security personnel leave the Maldives immediately. Muizzu also undertook the [first official visit to Turkey](#), breaking from the tradition of visiting India first. The Muizzu government also [declined to attend](#) a regular session of the Colombo Security Conclave in Mauritius in December 2023. However, it sent new Vice President Hussain Latheef to the second [Indian Ocean Region Forum](#), convened by China in December 2023. The new president did not renew an agreement with the Indian Navy for [hydrographic surveys](#) of the Maldives's exclusive economic zone. Muizzu then embarked on a visit to China in January this year.

It was against this background that Modi's visit to Lakshadweep took place. During the last 10 years, the Modi government has sought to [end the prolonged neglect](#) of India's two island chains – the Andaman and Nicobar group in the Bay of Bengal and the Lakshadweep islands to the southwest of peninsular India. If the two island chains were treated as remote outposts after independence, Modi sought to enhance their connectivity and accelerate their economic modernisation. During his visit to Lakshadweep, Modi reviewed the islands' development plans and drew the attention of the Indian public to its pristine beauty and potential for tourism. However, it triggered a bout of [rash hyper-nationalism on both sides](#). The visuals tweeted by Modi on the social media platform "X" drew much vituperation from three deputy ministers of the Muizzu government.

Although Modi did not mention the Maldives, the Maldivian ministers presumed it was about promoting the Lakshadweep as an alternative to the Maldives. They trashed the quality of

Indian beaches and made insulting remarks about the Indian prime minister. As two former presidents – Solih and Mohamed Nasheed – strongly condemned the ministers’ remarks, Muizzu, moved quickly to [suspend the three deputy ministers](#) and distanced his government from their remarks. However, the social media reaction in India exploded. The hyper-nationalists of India, now a [new force in Indian discourse](#), launched a campaign to “Boycott Maldives” and celebrate the virtues of Lakshadweep as a superior tourist destination. This was not rooted in realism. Lakshadweep has a long way to go before it develops the infrastructure and connectivity to match the well-established tourist industry in the Maldives. And India is not the only source of international tourism in the Maldives.

The toxic campaign worsened matters for the Indian government’s engagement with the Maldives. New Delhi, on its part, understood the difficult turn in bilateral relations since the Muizzu’s election. It sought to address the new dynamics in the Maldives and limit the fallout from Muizzu’s new agenda. Its reaction to the unacceptable remarks against Modi by Muizzu’s ministers was tough but correct in communicating its outrage through diplomatic channels.

Meanwhile, Muizzu’s visit to China signalled his clear determination to deepen ties with Beijing. China reinforced Muizzu’s effort to distance the Maldives from India. The [expansive joint statement](#) issued after Muizzu’s talks with President Xi Jinping in Beijing underlined the bilateral agreement to elevate their ties to a “comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership”. China took the opportunity to extend its solid support to the Maldives’ sovereignty. Muizzu, on his part, backed Beijing’s “One-China” policy and endorsed several signature initiatives of Xi – the Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, the Global Civilisational Initiative and the Global Security Initiative. Assessing Muizzu’s visit, *Global Times* pointed out that [“India’s aggressive stance”](#) is pushing its neighbours to “preserve their national dignity and sovereignty via cooperation with other major powers like China”.

On his return from Beijing, [Muizzu declared](#) that the Maldives is “not part of anyone’s backyard”. He also declared plans to reduce dependence on India for food and health security. Soon after his China visit, his government set a [15 March 2024 deadline](#) for the withdrawal of Indian security personnel from the country.

New Delhi and Male will look beyond the episode to reset their relations. Yet, the two sides must recognise the imperatives of geography and territorial sovereignty. The Maldives must realise that pushing a large neighbour beyond a point will have negative consequences. For India’s raucous foreign policy discourse, Muizzu’s policies are a reminder that small countries have political agency of their own.

Official India has been quite stoic about the developments in the Maldives. After all, this is not the first time that a change in the government in Male has led to [a big shift](#) in the nation’s foreign policy. The government, led by Abdullah Yameen (2013-18), did make a dramatic tilt towards China, but his successor Solih adopted an “India First” policy. India appears prepared to keep its head down and bide its time in coping with the political transition in the Maldives.

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