



2018 Presidential Election in Maldives: Outcome and Implications

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The result of the presidential elections in Maldives, held on 23 September 2018, were significant in terms of ending the rule of incumbent President Mr. Yameen, responsible for alleged large scale corruption, human rights violations and centralisation of power. This election is the third presidential election that was held after the country adopted a new constitution in 2008, paving way for the first multiparty elections in the same year.

Result

The Maldives Democratic Party (MDPo) candidate, Mr. Ibrahim Solih won the Presidential election. He received 134,705 votes, i.e 58.4 percent of total votes counted (233,308). The incumbent President and the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) candidate Mr. Abdulla Yameen received 96,052 votes (41.6 percent). Voter turnout stood at 89 percent. Election campaign of candidates focused on issues of development in islands/Atolls, increasing radicalisation, foreign policy and corruption. The Election Commission announced the results officially on 30 September 2018. Mr. Solih is expected to form the government by 17 November 2018.

The election outcome is in line with the verdict people of Maldives had given to the MDP in local council elections in May 2017, in which the MDP with the support of Jumhoori Party (JP) and the Adalath Party (AP) could defeat the PPM with comfortable majority. According to the Government of Maldives, the election took place in the presence of 945 representatives of candidates, 2610 local observers and international observers from 11 agencies, and 3329 local monitors.¹

Reasons for the defeat of Mr. Yameen

A number of factors contributed to the defeat of Mr. Yameen in this election. These include, systematic use of state institutions to centralise power; terrorism and other charges levelled against opposition leaders; suppression of freedom of expression; failure to tackle growing radicalisation; large scale corruption; allowing foreign investments in the country in non-

transparent manner and indifference shown to international actors appeal for political negotiations.

Since 2014, government led by Mr. Abdulla Yameen systematically utilised the state institutions to act against political opponents. The Anti Terror Law of October 2015 was used against opposition leaders including the ex-president, Mr.Nasheed, leaders of Jumhooree Party (JP) and Adhaalath Party (AP).

Under these circumstances, the opposition parties formed the Maldives United Opposition (MUO) in June 2016, to defeat the government of Mr.Yameen. The opposition coalition's endeavour to impeach the President through constitutional means was not successful. Maldives also opted out of the Commonwealth in October 2016 when it asked the Government of Maldives to resolve political differences through dialogue. The UN facilitated talks also did not bring any tangible results due to the intransigent positions taken by the government and the opposition about the release of political prisoners. Attacks on journalists and media houses continued, using the Defamation Law of 2016. Blogger Yameen Rasheed was brutally killed in April 2017 for his critical writing on government policies and his views against Islamic radicalisation. Raajje TV was fined MVR 2 million by the government, after it aired content against the government.

Centralisation of rule led to the alienation of opposition and by 2018, most of the opposition leaders were in exile or in prison. To end the crisis, the Supreme Court (SC) of Maldives gave a ruling on 1st February 2018 that directed the Government of Maldives to release political prisoners, including Mr.Nasheed. The UN, US, EU, Sri Lanka and India asked the Government of Maldives to release political prisoners based on the SC ruling to conduct free and fair elections. Rather than acting upon the ruling that presented an opportunity to break the political status quo, the government declared a State of Emergency on 5th February 2018 and extended it to 22nd March 2018. During the State of Emergency, it also arrested the PPM leader and former ruler of Maldives Mr.Gayoom, along with the SC Judges who passed the ruling.

Meanwhile, the documentary "Stealing Paradise", by Al Jazeera exposed the alleged involvement of the President in money laundering and bribes related to leasing of luxury resorts. President's alleged association with a local company involved in illegal oil trade with a North Korean vessel was surfaced before the elections."² According to a report in Aljazeera, he also received a sum of \$ 1.5 million from various donors in non transparent manner for election use.³ Mr Yameen's indifference to international concern led to the threat of sanctions by EU and the US. The EU, agreed on a framework resolution, to impose sanctions, such as asset freeze and travel restrictions on targeted individuals involved in human rights violations in the country. The US also warned of possible sanctions if government fails to ensure free and fair elections. The Government of Maldives dubbed the statement by the US as "an act of intimidation, imposing undue influence on the democratic process of sovereign states".⁴

The above are some of the reasons responsible for the defeat of Yameen in elections. In this context, it is important to look at some of the challenges the coalition might face in the future and prospects for future India-Maldives engagement.

Outcome and Challenges

President of Maldives Mr. Yameen, in an official statement initially, 'accepted the provisional results of the election and congratulated the President-elect Mr. Solih'.⁵ The former President of

Maldives, Mr. Nasheed tweeted that “democracy is a historical inevitability”.⁶ India, the US and EU welcomed the election results and expressed hope that smooth transition of power, will take place in November. China stated that it respects the choice made by the people and expressed optimism that China Maldives cooperation will continue for mutual benefit.⁷

This election happened amidst opposition allegations of a biased Election Commission. However, the results clearly indicate that, the EC took a fair stand after the results. The outcome is positive as it will help in strengthening democratic processes and institutions, rule of law, protection of human rights in Maldives and bring back the opposition leaders who are in exile. Soon after the election result, the former ruler of Maldives Mr. Gayoom was released on bail. Former vice president Mr. Jameel Ahmed, JP leader Mr. Ghasim Ibrahim also returned to Maldives from exile. Former president Mr. Nasheed is planning to return to Maldives on 1 November 2018.

The unity shown by the opposition acted as a positive factor in the election. Nonetheless, there are challenges the opposition coalition will have to deal with in future. The first challenge is related to reaching consensus on matters pertaining to constitutional amendments and introduction of a new constitution by 2020. The MDP in its manifesto supported a transition from a presidential system to parliamentary system, whereas the JP is not in agreement with the idea. A coalition agreement signed by the four leaders belonging to MDP, JP, AP and PPM (Gayoom fraction) ‘must be approved through parliament within thirty days of the coalition government securing a parliamentary majority’.⁸

The second challenge is to reach consensus on dealing with increasing radicalisation in Maldives. The AP, which is a coalition partner, is a conservative religious party and in the past elections it had appealed to hard-line elements in society and emphasized on following strict practice of Islam. The MDP is considered to be a liberal party and its leader Mr. Nasheed on number of occasions spoke against increasing radicalisation and on Saudi Arabia’s role in spreading conservative Islam. According to reports Maldives provides the ‘higher per capita number of foreign fighters, around 200 persons, to armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq’.⁹

The third challenge is to maintain the unity of the coalition itself till the next parliamentary elections. Mr. Yameen came to power in 2013 with the help of JP, which switched sides after the first round of elections in 2013, to defeat MDP candidate Mr. Nasheed. This now seems to be a remote possibility given the current political situation. The opposition will have to get majority of seats in Parliament to bring political stability. However, in 2009, the PPM won majority of seats in Parliament, which resulted in a continuing conflict of interest in the functioning of executive and legislature and subsequent resignation of Mr. Nasheed as President in 2012.

India-Maldives Engagement

As far as India-Maldives engagement is concerned, the Prime Minister of India called on the president-elect Mr. Ibrahim Solih and congratulated him. India stated that “the election marks the triumph of democratic forces in the Maldives.”¹⁰

In response to the political crisis in Maldives, the PM of India had cancelled his visit to Maldives in 2015 and since February 2018, India issued six press statements on Maldives. It asked the Government of Maldives to ‘lift emergency and release all the political prisoners’ based on the February 1st ruling of the SC.¹¹ India’s position on political developments led to a strain in bilateral

relations. Maldives refusal to renew the contract of two military helicopters gifted by India and its absence from military Exercise Milan in 2018, are examples in this regard.

Apart from its domestic political crisis, Mr. Yameen's government's increasing reliance on China that funded various development projects in the island nation, and increasing debt have also been a concern for India. China and Saudi Arabia have refrained from taking political positions and consolidated their economic and security interests in Maldives. Maldives extended its support to the Belt and Road Initiative of China and concluded a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2017. The FTA will allow Chinese companies to invest in the tourism sector. China is funding large infrastructure projects in Maldives, which include the recently inaugurated China-Maldives Friendship Bridge (USD 200 million), and the expansion of International Airport (estimated cost USD 803 million). Reports also suggest that the Government of Maldives has leased around sixteen islands to China for tourism development purposes.¹² After China, Saudi Arabia is the second largest lender to various projects including airport development and housing development. During the emergency period in Maldives, Saudi Arabia granted USD 160 million aid. Large infrastructure projects are leading to debt and in 2017 alone, according to Maldives Monetary Authority data, Maldives external outstanding debt stood at USD \$ 1,188.2 million.¹³ According to Mr. Nasheed 'seventy percent of Maldives debt is owed to China'.¹⁴

A major shift in Maldives external relations is not going to take place under the new government. The coalition government might review some of the projects and laws that allowed foreign investment in the country, but may not completely scrap the ongoing projects. The new government may also initiate steps to reconcile with Qatar and Iran as a balancing exercise.¹⁵

India-Maldives economic engagement is limited relatively to Maldives' engagement with China, EU and UAE. The Maldives economy is heavily reliant on tourism and fish exports. Tourism contribution to GDP from 2012 to 2016 is more than 22 percent. If one looks at the data provided by Maldives Tourism Ministry out of total tourist arrivals of 2016 (1,286,135), China (324,326) is the largest contributor to tourist arrivals followed by Germany (106,381), UK (101,843), Italy (71,202) and India (66,955).¹⁶

In 2017, Maldives total imports stood at USD 2360.4 millions and UAE (USD 434.4 million) is the largest import partner of Maldives followed by Singapore (USD 318.3 million), India (USD 287.6 million), China (USD 280.6 million).¹⁷

The total exports of Maldives stood at USD 199.4 million in 2017. Thailand is the largest export partner (USD 97.0 million), followed by Germany (USD 14.3 million), US (USD 13.9 million), France (USD 13.9 million).¹⁸

The change of government in Maldives may provide an opportunity for India to engage with the island nation in a constructive manner. For India, political stability in the island nation is of vital importance given its strategic location in the Indian Ocean. Apart from exporting essential items, capacity building and training and development assistance to Maldives particularly to handle natural disasters, India's concerns mainly lies in the security of Indian Ocean. A India, Sri Lanka and Maldives Maritime Trilateral Cooperation Agreement is in place and India provides security assistance (surveillance) to Maldives EEZs. India's Neighbourhood First Policy cannot be realised without the cooperation of neighbouring Maldives. Therefore, it remains to be seen how the new government in Maldives is going to balance its relations with India while maintaining its ties with extra regional powers.

Conclusion

After the EC announced the results officially, Mr. Yameen has questioned the transparency of the election process and planning to delay transfer of power in November 2018. He filed a case in Supreme Court challenging the election results announced by the EC alleging fraud, vote rigging, malpractice and corruption. However, he may not succeed in his endeavour, given the large margin Mr. Solih got and the decreasing support base to Yameen within the PPM.

The presidential election in Maldives has provided a ray of hope to opposition parties, civil society groups and to international actors, in ending the political crisis in Maldives. The result indicates that the EC conducted elections in a transparent manner. For the people of Maldives it is a welcome change in terms of securing civil and political rights. However, the stability of the country will depend on the unity of opposition forces. In this context, how India and Maldives reshape their engagement will play a role in determining regional cooperation and security.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

Endnotes

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