



Internal Developments in Maldives: Is the ruling PPM losing the ground?

*Dr Samatha Mallempati**

The recent lockdown of Parliament on 24th July by Maldives, government and barring of law makers from entering the premises after the Maldives United Opposition (MUO) submitted no-confidence motion against the Speaker indicate that the ruling party the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) backed by Yameen is trying to hold on to power by employing various means. The local council election results in Maldives which were held in May 2017 also gave an indication to the ruling PPM that the policies pursued by his government may not be acceptable for long term. Results reported by the Election Commission (EC) showed that the MUO had own majority of Council seats that is more than 300 seats.¹ The PPM won 191 seats and its coalition partner the Maldives Democratic Alliance won 18 seats. The MDP managed to win 21 out of 23 seats from the Malé, Addu and Fuvahmulah City Councils

The PPM had conceded defeat and its leader Ahmed Nihan reportedly said “PPM will identify reasons for the loss and take corrective measures”.² The statement of PPM is in contrast to the positions the party had taken and took on various issues such as on political dialogue, human rights record, attack on civil society, on amendments to the Constitution and freedom of dissent. The loss in local Council elections for PPM after the party launched campaign for next Presidential elections in 2018 is a major setback. Next Presidential elections of 2018 are the third democratic elections, which are going to be held after the country embraced democracy in 2008. In this context few internal developments indicate that the political stability of Maldives is uncertain. This is mainly because, the government and the opposition members were not successful in solving differences through dialogue; continuation of political arrests; killing of liberal voices and uncertainty over continuation of government due to opposition attempts at impeachment of the Speaker and possibly the President.

Unsuccessful attempts at political dialogue

Since 2016, both the government and the opposition parties are unable to find a solution to the political differences through dialogue. The Commonwealth as well as the UN also asked the political parties to resolve differences through dialogue. It was reflected in the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) meetings that were held in February, April and September 2016. The CMAG asked the government in its recommendations to start a time bound political dialogue; release all political prisoners; allow return of political leaders outside the country and ensure freedom of space for civil society and prevent misuse of Anti-Terrorism Law.

Instead of addressing the recommendations to improve the internal situation, Maldives opted out of Commonwealth, on 13th October citing interference in its sovereignty. Apart from the Commonwealth, the UN also tried to facilitate political party talks to end the political impasse. The UN representative Mr. Tamrat Samuel was in Maldives in April and July 2016 to facilitate the talks, which did not materialise. On 30th March 2017, the government representative and Chairman of the all party talks Dr. Mohamed Shainee, “called upon the political parties to re-engage in talks”.³ The political dialogue did not take off as the parties insisted on fulfilling their respective demands, first before starting the negotiations. The Maldives United Opposition (MUO) had set a pre-condition that political prisoners have to be released, including withdrawal of terrorism charges, imposed on former President Nasheed. The ‘government of Maldives is not in favour of any pre condition before the talks and accused the opposition of not raising any constructive issue of governance or policy that can be discussed through dialogue’.⁴

The proposed political dialogue may not materialise in the future due to few political developments. One is the support the MDP has got from other political parties and formation of MUO in London after Mr. Nasheed was granted refugee status in Britain. The MUO consists of MDP, Jumhoori Party (JP), Adaalath party (AP), PPM fraction under the leadership of Mr. Gayoom and independent MPs. As a coalition it is in a better position to influence government policy, law makers as well as the public. Secondly, the MUO has been trying to mobilise public opinion and informing public on various issues on regular basis through media interaction and public mobilisation. For example it had taken a stand that it is opposed to any foreign party buying land in Maldives. The ‘political coalition linked the proposed sale of Faafu Atoll to Saudi Arabia to increasing radicalisation and stated that it would also compromise the Security of the Indian Ocean. According to MUO, Maldives is second to Tunisia as the highest per-capita recruitment grounds for the ISIS’.⁵ Some reports suggest that due to the massive protests planned by MUO during Saudi King’s proposed visit in March 2017 to Maldives, he cancelled his visit, much to the disappointment of Government of Maldives. However, the Government claimed that, the visit was postponed “due to high prevalence of the flu in the Maldives”.⁶

Since April 2017, MUO is planning to impeach the Speaker Mr. Abdulla Masheeh. The MUO submitted a no-confidence motion against the Speaker in March and April 2017. The Government accused the opposition move as an “attempt at bringing political unrest and disorder”.⁷ In the first instance, the opposition could not impeach the Speaker because the government increased the bar on votes needed for impeachment and in second instance the President ordered the ‘eviction of some opposition MPs from Parliament for unruly behaviour,

thus reducing the number of opposition members'.⁸ The opposition submitted the impeachment motion on grounds that "the speaker has been deliberately ignoring requests from opposition law makers to summon government officials for questioning on matters of public importance and national development".⁹ Another no-confidence motion was submitted by the opposition on 3rd July 2017 to impeach the Speaker with required forty five signatures, enough to win the vote in eighty five members Parliament. However, the government postponed the vote which was originally planned for 24th July to 31st July.

Continuous Political attacks and misuse of state structures

Despite a call given by the government to re-engage in political party talks, attacks on political opponents continued through various means. Some of the developments in this regard are as follows.

-Confiscation of passports of MUO shadow ministers and supporters

-Mr. Gayoom in January 2017 denied permission to hold a meeting with the PPM members. He wrote a letter to Human Rights Commission of Maldives (HRCM) over the denial to hold a peaceful meeting and also filed his case at the National Integrity Commission.

- The Government refused to accept a call by the UN to release political prisoners. The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention had asked the government of Maldives to release the MOU advisor and former Defence Minister Mr. Mohamed Nazim in January 2017'.¹⁰ The former Minister was arrested on charges of illegal weapons possession. In response to the UN ruling, the government said 'it cannot undermine the country's due processes to release former minister'.¹¹ President Yameen also said, 'his government cannot encourage foreign organisations interfere with the sovereignty and independence of Maldives'.¹²

The MDP maintained that "Colonel Nazim was framed and persecuted for his political stand and for challenging the authority of President Yameen".¹³

-The Jumhooree Party leader Mr. Qasim Ibrahim was arrested twice in April 2017 on charges of bribery, corruption and influencing the official conduct of a public official. The court released Mr. Ibrahim on 10th May 2017 on seven conditions which 'include cooperation with the police investigation; seeking police permission before leaving the country; not committing any act to influence witnesses or eliminate evidence; refraining from holding meetings with people who sow discord and strife in society; speaking in a manner that sows discord or incites unrest and allowing others to use his home or property to deliver such speeches'.¹⁴ The JP leader played a key role in 2014 elections by extending his party's support to the current President Abdulla Yameen and for subsequent government formation. Since his decision to join the opposition MUO, Mr. Qasim is facing attacks on his business ventures. For instance, the government had taken over the Kaadehdhoo airport operated by Jumhooree Party leader Gasim Ibrahim's Villa Group and imposed a fine of US\$ 90.4 million'.¹⁵ Not just the JP leader, parliamentarians who had sided with Mr. Gayoom's faction was also targeted by the government. For example, Health Ministry cancelled a contract awarded to a company owned by MP Saudhullah Hilmy to build a health centre in a northern island.¹⁶

- Freedom of expression is one of the main features of democratic governance. But in Maldives the government of Yameen has not taken any positive step in this direction and has used the government machinery to target the press and journalists opposing government policies and having a critical view on political developments in the Maldives. For instance, brutal killing of a blogger in Maldives Mr. Yameen Rasheed in April 2017, whose writings were critical of the government policies, corrupt politicians and increasing Islamic radicalisation in the country has once again raised the question on Maldives human rights record. After much international criticism and domestic public outrage the government authorities arrested five suspects. Impartiality of Rasheed murder investigation was questioned on 'grounds that the police are yet to solve the case of abduction of Maldives Independent journalist Ahmed Rilwan and the near-fatal attack on blogger Hilath Rasheed'.¹⁷

-The election commission on the advice of the government withheld constitutionally stipulated funding for political parties for long and only released them in May 2017.

-Before the no-confidence motion vote against the Speaker proposed on 24 July 2017, opposition MP and the son of former President Mr. Gayoom, Mr. Faris Maumoon was arrested on 17th July on charges of "unduly influencing lawmakers and acting illegally to secure 42 signatures for the no-confidence motion against".¹⁸ His arrest was widely condemned by international actors such as US and EU. Mr. Atul Keshap, the US ambassador to Maldives said "arrests and intimidation of elected legislators impedes the normal function of Parliament and democracy".¹⁹ The EU said it is deeply concerned by ongoing intimidation of opposition lawmakers.

Policies and laws passed

Apart from the developments mentioned above the government of Yameen has also introduced various laws and took decisions without much public consultation. For example, 'the President ratified the bill in 2016 to impose Airport Development Charge (ADC) on locals US \$ 12 and on foreigners US \$ 25. This is in contrast to the position taken by Mr. Yameen when Indian company GMR tried to impose the same tax on passengers during the government of Mr. Nasheed. And his party systematically campaigned to oust the GMR from the country which was involved in development of Maldives International Airport'.²⁰

Many reports suggest that level of corruption has increased in the country undermining democratic foundations. Apart from Al Jazeera expose of US \$ 1.5 billion money laundering plot, the Singapore International Arbitration Centre has ruled in December 2016 that the Maldives government's termination of its contract with Nexbis of Malaysia, to establish a border control system in the archipelago, was a regulations breach and ordered the government to pay USD 15 million to Nexbis as compensation".²¹ The state owned Maldives Ports Limited is under investigation by the anti-graft watchdog over alleged wrongdoing in the procurement of a small boat in need of repairs for MVR5 million (US\$325,000)".²²

Tourism law was amended in July 2016 to give free hand to the Ministry in allocating lagoons and islands for tourism development by bypassing the bidding process. In December, the Ministry announced that, the "Feydhoo Finolhu, the nearest uninhabited island to Malé and the international airport, has been leased to a Chinese company for 50 years at an acquisition cost of

about US\$4 million”.²³ According to MDP leader Mr. Nasheed, the government had allotted 16 islands to the Chinese “that straddle key navigation sea-lanes. Maldives occupies an 800-km geographical expanse from north to south and covers all navigable parts of the Indian Ocean”.²⁴ The government in January 2017 announced the list of islands it was willing to sell without a bidding process such as Kunnimali in Noonu atoll – 8.8 hectares for USD 3.4 million; Gaalee in Thaa atoll – 6.8 hectares for USD 1.9 million and Baulhagalla in Gaafu Dhaal atoll – 6.8 hectares for USD 850,000.²⁵

The government also removed various Ministers and people having administrative posts who differed with government’s policy. Dismissal by the President of Mr. Ahmed Shakir from the post of Senior Policy Executive at the Ministry of Economic Development in July²⁶ and dismissal of Mr. Ahmed Habeeb from the post of Minister of State at the Ministry of Housing and Infrastructure are examples. The Deputy Minister of Youth and Sports was also removed from the post recently.

Response of the international community

International community, particularly the US, the EU and the UN has been critical of Maldives democratic progress. For instance, the UK’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s (FCO) Annual Human Rights Report for 2016 mentions that “Maldives is one of 30 ‘Human Rights Priority Countries’ (HRPCs), countries with which the UK looks for positive engagement that contributes to addressing human rights concerns”. The report particularly referred to the Defamation and Freedom of Speech Act which seeks to clamp down on freedom of expression, and the Freedom of Assembly Act which restricts the right of assembly.²⁷

Dietmar Krissler, head of the European External Action Service for the Maldives region, after the EU- Maldives policy dialogue in May 2017 said that, eliminating” contenders in the 2018 race appeared to be “a deliberate policy of certain elements of the government”.²⁸ The EU Parliament did consider sanctions on Maldives in February 2016. However, the said decision was never implemented.

Future scenario

Given the above developments few scenarios may emerge in coming days in Maldives before the next Presidential elections in 2018.

One is, increasing authoritarian tendency of the government and attacks on critical views and freedom of speech may slowly undermine the government and shift people’s support to MUO. In present circumstances the MUO is in a better position to garner public support. Increasing rallies by the MUO and number of people gathered indicate the same despite the government crackdown on rallies.

Secondly, Mr. Nasheed has been travelling to Colombo from the UK to meet opposition leaders. The support the MDP has got from JP, AP as well as former President Gayoom’s fraction of PPM is significant as it may help to oust the present government through constitutional means before the 2018 elections or ensure the defeat of the current President Mr. Abdulla Yameen in

2018 elections. The coalition support might ensure the removal of terrorism charges against former President Naheed if the MUO wins the next Presidential elections.

The move by the opposition to impeach the Speaker through no-confidence motion was an attempt to topple the government. The government on the other hand is acting swiftly and using the judiciary and other institutions to sabotage coalition moves. For example, after the MUO submitted no-confidence motion against the speaker with 45 signature in July, the Supreme Court ruled that, “MPs who were elected on political party tickets will lose their seat if they have either left their party, been expelled, or switched parties”.²⁹

Due to the ruling, ‘the election commission disqualified four PPM MPs of their seats following their expulsion from PPM as they have shifted their loyalties to MUO’.³⁰ This move by the EC had ensured that, the Speaker cannot be impeached as the signatures required for impeachment falls below 42, a minimum required to initiate no-confidence motion in Parliament. The government has postponed the vote to 31st July. The delay tactics had worked for Yameen in the last Presidential elections. The PPM delayed 2013 Presidential elections after the first round in which Mr. Nasheed got a clear majority over Yameen but not enough to take over power. Mr. Yamen convinced JP to switch sides. This has ensured the formation of Yameen’s government in 2014.

Thirdly, there seems to be an understanding among opposition parties, civil society and interests groups in Maldives for a change in governance. The tactics adopted such as impeachment of Speaker may or may not materialise. However, opposition voices in one umbrella can be a significant threat for the PPM led by Mr. Yameen. If the coalition can manage to speak in one voice till the next Presidential elections then there is a scope for a change of government. The recent local council election results indicate the same, in which the MUO won with good majority.

Fourthly, given the authority Mr. Abdulla Yameen commands over various organs of government, he will try to use all possible means to win the elections. The ruling of SC on switching political parties is a case in point. The ruling may help the President to win no-confidence motions but it may not help in Presidential elections as he has to get popular vote. Another issue is about terrorism charges imposed on most of the opposition leaders. Charges are imposed on potential Presidential candidates to avoid opposition to Mr. Yammen’s candidature in the next elections. In this scenario, as most of the opposition leaders will not be able to contest the election, whether the election which is going to be held next year will represent a fair and transparent election is the question? The government has to take some positive measures on an urgent basis such as, allowing freedom of expression, release of political prisoners and lifting of terrorism charges, or else the political turmoil will continue.

**Dr Samatha Mallempati, Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.*

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

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