



New Government in Maldives: Curtailment of Chinese influence?

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India was among the first countries to welcome the unexpected victory of opposition candidate Ibrahim Mohamed Solih over pro China incumbent President Abdulla Yameen. Amidst doubt over free and fair election under the guidance of Abdulla Yameen, the election was being closely observed by India and other key international players. As China and India are competing for influence in Maldives and the Indian Ocean region, an ouster of pro China President in Maldives is an opportunity for India to intensify its engagement with the new administration. The question is whether the change of guard assures the curtailment of Chinese influence in Maldives and Indian Ocean region. The statement from Md. Nasheed, former Maldivian President and ally of President Ibu Solih, to review all the agreements with China signed during Yameen's presidency is encouraging for India and other international players which were apprehensive to growing Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean region.¹ However, many in India and Maldives believe that Ibu Solih government, instead of being pro India or anti China, will prefer a balance of power approach between the two countries.

Maldives strategic location, just few kilometres away from International Sea Line of Communication (SLOC) – a key route for oil exports and trade between Gulf region and South East & East Asia- is one of the key factors attracting China to enhance its economic and political clout in India's traditionally region of influence. In the colonial era, it was the location of Maldives which drew attention of European maritime powers such as the Portuguese, Dutch and British. Maldives was under Portuguese command from 1558 to 1573. They administered Maldives from Goa. In 1573, a Maldivian leader Muhammad Thakurufaan led a successful guerrilla war to drive the Portuguese out of Maldivian islands.² During the second half of 17th century, the Dutch emerged as dominant power in Ceylon, and established command over Maldivian affairs without meddling directly in local or internal matters.³ Later, Maldives became British protectorate in 1887, and it continued till Maldives complete independence from Britain on July 26, 1965. However, Britain continued its control over air base in the island of Gan until 1976. After withdrawal of the British, Maldives intangibly perceived as the region of India's influence.⁴ Later, China entered into the framework, and gradually started to contest Indian influence in Maldives.

Although China- Maldives diplomatic relations was established in 1972, Beijing strategic interest in Maldives began to grow only in first decade of the 21st century. After the visit of Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji to Male in 2001, Beijing's strategic considerations started to reflect in its relationships with Maldives. Later, in successive years, some media reports concerning China's plan to lease a few islands in Maldives and the potential to turn these into future naval bases created apprehensions in India. However, China- Maldives strategic and economic cooperation gained a major thrust during and after the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Male in 2014. In the following years, Maldives witnessed huge Chinese investments in infrastructure projects and remarkable increase in Chinese tourist arrivals.

The Chinese influence enhanced manifold during Yameen's presidency (2013-18). Maldives entering into a Free Trade Agreement with China in December 2017, and signing of Memorandum of Understanding with China which bring Maldives as a part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), further strengthened the relations between the two countries.⁵ The FTA with China provided a greater prospect for Maldivian fish export and Chinese investment in Maldives tourism sector.⁶ During the Yameen regime, the Chinese footprint in Maldives further expanded with its investment of \$830 million to upgrade the Male airport and the construction of the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, Maldives consent over establishment of a Chinese ocean observatory in one of its islands, and docking of three Chinese naval ships in Male in August 2017.⁷

An ouster of pro China Maldivian President Abdulla Yameen is certainly a setback for China and relief for India. However, it may not guarantee advantage for India in the long term. As Maldives has its own compulsions, a change of guard does not assure a pro India or an anti China government. Considering the Maldives' Chinese debts and its investments in various projects, it will be difficult for Maldives to overlook Chinese interests. It is therefore perceived by some experts and scholars that the new government in Maldives will pursue a balanced approach with equal consideration for India and China. Moreover, when the second largest economy of the world is determined to exert its influence in Maldives and provide lucrative economic assistance, it will always not be easy for any President of the country to ignore Chinese strategic interests in the region.

India's policy of "patience"⁸ and engagement has paid off in Maldives; where as a reactionary approach and a policy of isolation might have augmented anti India sentiment and higher electoral support in favour of Yameen. The new government in Maldives is an opportunity for India to re-establish its close relationship with Maldives and maintain a power equilibrium in the region. Besides security cooperation, New Delhi should strengthen and expand economic engagements with Indian Ocean island countries. A trilateral security arrangement between India, Sri Lanka and Maldives which was initiated by India in 2011, must be expanded vertically as well as horizontally. While dealing with Maldives and other island countries of the Indian Ocean region, Indian policy makers must stick with the concept Security and Growth for All in the region –SAGAR - the vision for engagement in the Indian Ocean region enunciated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in March 2015. This collective approach will help in diminishing anti India sentiment in Maldives and other Indian Ocean island states. After the decision of Maldives Supreme Court to uphold the President Yameen's defeat in the election, there is a possibility for smooth sailing of swearing-in ceremony of President elect Ibrahim Mohamed Solih.⁹ If the transition process is smooth, PM Modi could consider the invitation of the Maldivian President elect to attend his swearing-in ceremony on 17 Novemeber 2018.¹⁰ PM Modi's visit to Male will

help India and Maldives to rebuild mutual trust, simultaneously it will add an important dimension to India's Indian Ocean policy.

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

Endnotes:

¹ Nasheed vows to review all Sino-Maldives pacts following Yameen's ouster, 25 September 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/nasheed-vows-to-review-all-sino-maldives-pacts-following-yameens-ouster/printarticle/65954481.cms>, Accessed on 11 September 2018.

² Maldives History, <http://countrystudies.us/maldives/1.htm>, Accessed on 11 September 2018.

³ Ibid.

⁴ C Raja Mohan, Samudra Manthan: Sino India Rivalry in the Indo- Pacific, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington D.C, 2012, p.143.

⁵ Sudha Ramachandran, The China-Maldives Connection, 25 January 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/the-china-maldives-connection/>, Accessed on 01 September 2018.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Subhajit Roy, Simply Put: What Abdulla Yameen's exit signals, 01 October 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/simply-put-what-abdulla-yameens-exit-signals/>, Accessed on 01 September 2018.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Advantage India in struggle with China over Maldives, 28 September 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/24b0bb54-c22d-11e8-95b1-d36dfef1b89a>, Accessed on 22 October, 2018.

⁹ Maldives Supreme Court upholds presidential poll results, 21 October, <https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/16mgBDNW4dv8TsjCLINYOI/The-keys-of-Toledo.html>, Accessed on 22 October, 2018.

¹⁰ PM Modi invited to Maldives, may go if transition process is smooth, 27 September, 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/pm-modi-invited-to-maldives-may-go-if-transition-process-is-smooth-5376277/>, Accessed on 22 October, 2018.