



Results of Parliamentary Elections in Maldives: Is there New Hope for Consolidation of Democracy?

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People of Maldives once again voted for democratic consolidation but challenges remain



The recently concluded parliamentary elections in Maldives on April 6, 2019 have proved that people of Maldives once again voted for democratic consolidation in the country. The provisional results indicate that the Maldives Democratic Party (MDP) backed by the President of Maldives Ibrahim Mohammed Solih won by two thirds majority. Out of 87 parliament seats, the MDP won 65. The former president Mohamed Nasheed is the most prominent leader who won this election. If we look at the seats won by each party, provisional results show that the Jumhoori Party JP won five, the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) and People's National Congress Alliance together won eight seats. Maldives Development Alliance (MDA) won two seats and seven independent candidates were also declared elected. The religious conservative party, the Adhaalath Party (AP) as well as Maldives Reform Movement led by the former ruler of Maldives Abdulla Gayoom¹ could not secure a single seat.

The MDP victory is significant in several ways. The party's leadership stood against all challenges in the last five years under the government of Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom to emerge victorious. The party's consistent campaign for the protection of human rights, against corruption and political victimisation and for transparent judiciary and balanced foreign policy helped in consolidating public opinion for the party's liberal ideology.



The victory of MDP candidate Solih in Presidential elections held in 2018, with the support of opposition parties has been consolidated by the results of parliamentary elections. The post - Presidential election developments in Maldives caused uncertainty about the political stability in Maldives, as opposition coalition comprising MDP, JP, AP and Abdulla Gayoom led PPM decided to go separate ways to contest in parliamentary elections. In fact, the MDP first took the decision to go alone, which was not appreciated by its alliance partner the JP. The JP then decided to form an alliance with the Yameen led PPM, against whom it allied with MDP in the last presidential elections. But the election results prove that the above developments did not lessen the people's thirst for democracy.

Challenges

The main challenge for the MDP led government will be in implementing its pledges made over the years and in strengthening the democratic governance in Maldives. Collection of personal tax, minimum wage, health, housing and education facilities to people are some of the priorities of MDP along with the larger issue of constitutional amendments, broad based judicial reforms with the objective of tackling corruption. To reform the judiciary, setting up of a Judicial Administration and bar council or association and changes in the composition of Judicial Service Commission are some of other promises made by the MDP.ⁱⁱ

It is clear from the statements of the MDP leader Nasheed that, Islam as a state religion would be protected and the party would not “work to bring a religion to the Maldivians other than Islam”.ⁱⁱⁱ In the past, Nasheed had doubted the Saudi role in spreading “very narrow version of Islam” in Maldives.^{iv} Therefore, the new government might have to work on reforms in education and teachings to suit the new democratic values and ethos, it would want the society to pursue. According to the National Counter Terrorism Centre, USA, more than 200 Maldivians had travelled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State (IS).^v

The biggest challenge for the present government is to tackle the corruption that came to the forefront during the tenure of Yameen. The Maldives government's move against corruption resulted in the detention of ex-president Yameen and freezing of his assets by the court. However, just before the elections the high court released him and unfroze his account. Yameen might prove to be an obstacle in the Solih's anti corruption efforts as may his alliance partner the JP led by Quasim Ibrahim, as the name of the JP leader has also appeared in a report by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC). MDP will try to bring in an anti-defection law, given the past destabilising frequent experiences of loyalty shifts of parliamentarians to various parties in power as well as in opposition. This will be an important but challenging task for MDP.

In post parliamentary election, the political parties in Maldives seem to have arrived at a common understanding about China's role in Maldives and its foreign investments made in the last few years. In a positive move the outgoing parliament of Maldives repealed the Foreign Freehold of Land from constitution that was introduced in 2015. The PPM members, who were responsible for introduction of foreign freehold of land Bill 2015, also voted in favour of repeal of the amendment. At the same time, the MDP leader Mr. Nasheed, contrary to the anti China stand he took before the elections, declared that the new "government wants to have friendly relations with all countries, including China".^{vi} It remains to be seen how Maldives will renegotiate its loans taken from China.

India and Sri Lanka have congratulated Solih for the victory. International observers such as the European Union EU, Commonwealth Observer Group appreciated the smooth conduct of elections by the Election Commission. For India democratic consolidation in Maldives is a good indicator for smooth conduct of bilateral relations. However, consolidation of political stability and the changed political scenario will have to be carefully watched by India from the point of view of its interests in its maritime neighbourhood. Maldives will be looking for capital to improve its economy through development of its various Atolls and India's recent assistance amounting to US\$ 4.1 billion and US\$ 800 million in the last few months will contribute in implementing Maldives government's development agenda.^{vii} Continue to struggle to balance its interests with India and that of other regional and extra regional powers.

Overall these positive political developments will have to be observed with caution, because a lot will depend upon the consensus within MDP regarding the constitutional amendments and reforms the party is planning to bring in domestically and in its external relations.

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

End Notes

ⁱ Maldives Independent, “Yellow wave sweeps MDP to historic 65-seat haul”, 8 April 2019, <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/yellow-wave-sweeps-mdp-to-historic-65-seat-haul-144790>. Accessed on April 10, 2019.

ⁱⁱ Maldives Independent, Priorities, Parliamentary System and Judicial Reform: Nasheed on State Media, 10 April 2019, <https://maldivesindependent.com/politics/priorities-parliamentary-system-and-judicial-reform-nasheed-on-state-media-144822>. Accessed on April 11, 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Suhasini Haider, “Alliance is for bringing Maldives back on track to democracy: Mohammed Nasheed”, *The Hindu*, 17 March 2017, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/will-bring-maldives-back-on-track-to-democracy-mohammad-nasheed/article17671360.ece>. Accessed on April 11, 2019.

^v Maldives Independent, “Maldives Man ‘Beheaded in Syria’ had History of Extremism”, 25 July 2018, <https://maldivesindependent.com/crime-2/maldives-man-beheaded-in-syria-had-history-of-extremism-139537>. Accessed on April 12, 2019.

^{vi} Basu Nayanima, “India-first policy stays but will be friends with China too: Maldives ex-President Nasheed”, 15 April 2015, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/india-first-policy-stays-but-will-be-friends-with-china-too-maldives-ex-president-nasheed/220816/>

^{vii} Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Joint Statement on the occasion of State Visit of the President of the Republic of Maldives to India (December 17, 2018), 17 December 2018, https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/30765/Joint_Statement_on_the_occasion_of_State_Visit_of_the_President_of_the_Republic_of_Maldives_to_India_December_17_2018. Accessed on April 12, 2019.