



View Point

Local Council Elections in Maldives

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The Republic of Maldives had its first local council elections on Saturday 5th February 2011. This was the third major election since the establishment of multi-party democracy in the island state. In all there were 2800 candidates, of which one third were independent candidates. The major political parties participating were the ruling Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), and Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (DRP) the opposition. The elections were held in all the atolls, the island councils and in the capital city of Male. In order to facilitate voting by Maldivian nationals overseas, two ballot boxes were placed in Trivandrum, India and Colombo, Sri Lanka.

During the previous two elections, viz the Presidential election in 2008 and the Parliamentary election in 2009, DRP had a strong support base in small atolls, while in the capital, city islands and larger atolls, the MDP enjoyed the majority. Election Commission is expected to declare the final verdict very shortly. The provisional results indicate that MDP has performed in city councils while DRP has won across all island and atolls. The manifesto of the major political parties in this election focused on development, improving quality of life and initiatives to curb drug abuse.

Former President Gayoom's DRP campaigned on the issues of equality, Islamic values, and deepening democratic practices. The party promised to strengthen bodies like the Election Commission and Anti-Corruption Commission. DRP wants to retain state control over national assets.

MDP, the ruling party emphasised on the work it has done so far. Development and social protection have been highlighted as the primary goals of the ruling party. The party's election manifesto comprised of five core pledges: nationwide transport, affordable cost of living and housing, affordable quality healthcare, and the prevention of narcotics abuse and trafficking. The agenda encourages private sector participation to achieve the above goals.

'Adhalaath', a religious party has an alliance with ruling as well as with opposition in different atolls. Its campaign agenda focused on development and the party vouched to work against drug abuse.

Overall the elections were smooth though electoral violence was reported by the Maldivian Democracy Network. The number of invalid votes is expected to be high due to voter's low knowledge of voting. There were some reports of potential abuse of 'assisted voting system' by party members. The Election Commission has acknowledged dearth of impartial booth officers.

Addu, the southernmost atoll in Maldives stirred controversy ahead of elections. President Nasheed declared Addu 'a city' following the decision by the local government authority. The Dhivehi Quamee party (DQP) expressed reservations and filed a case against this decision in the civil court arguing that the move violated the Decentralisation Act. Civil Court upheld DQP's petition because the government's move was inconsistent with the law. As per rules, any decision pertaining to such matters is to be taken by majority of members of that particular board or council. In the case of Addu, the local government authority had no member on its board. Thus the Civil Court ruled against establishing City Council in Addu atoll. Consequently the Election Commission cancelled elections in Addu. The decision led to public protests.

In response, the President appointed Home Minister Hassan Asheef to identify and announce criteria for declaring Addu a 'city'. Asheef hastily published the criteria in government gazette. The new criteria stated that for a region to be declared 'City'; it should have a minimum population of 25,000 and GDP not less than Rf 1 billion. According to Department of National

Planning, the GDP of Addu was over Rf 3 million in 2010, while its population was close to 30,000. The President thus declared Addu as ‘a city’ for the second time.

Just the day before the elections, the Supreme Court allowed elections in Addu with a view that considering the efforts that had gone into the preparations and cancelling elections would be against the principal of Equality mentioned in the Constitution. This decision affected political parties like DRP who had earlier abandoned campaign in Addu following the decision of Election Commission. As per provisional data, the ruling Maldivian Democratic Party has won all six seats in Addu.

Electoral chaos is common to any democracy and it is not surprising to find that in a nascent democracy like Maldives. The most striking feature unfolding from this election was the Addu election issue. It appears to be a classic case of abuse of power. The Supreme Court decision gave ruling party an upper hand over its opponents in Addu constituency.

Despite such blatant misuse of power, the opposition parties do not seem to be demoralised. They have not given up and are uniting against the government in either filing a case against the Election Commission or by forming alliances. An active and credible opposition is a very crucial factor in democracy and Maldives seems to be scoring on that.

The poor voter turnout indicates the low level of political knowledge resulting from political apathy, which can be attributed to Maldivians being ruled under the Gayoom regime for nearly thirty years. Maldivian citizens would take some time to come to terms with multi-party system as political socialisation is a gradual process. The role of political parties, media and family is important in educating citizens about the political processes. Democracy is no magic wand, nor can it be enforced upon. It has to evolve, preferably from the bottom-up. With local council elections, Maldives has the potential to develop its democracy in the coming years.

Capitalism and liberal democracy are the two sides of the same coin. Along with strong political institutions, development of capitalism is a crucial factor for any democracy to succeed.

In that regard, the role of Maldivian political community- not only to foreign investors but also towards its citizens must be observed.

Maldives can set an example of a successful democracy in the Islamic world. It can serve as a model where religion is synthesised within a Republic. It would be interesting to observe if the traditional institution of religion can co-exist with modern institution of democracy, or secular democracy would be the thumb rule for the aspiring democracies. India should support Maldives in evolving a successful democratic system.

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