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## India and Maldives Towards Consolidation

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Until recently, India's engagement with the Maldives had not been on the same level as with other neighbourhood nations. The same could be said of the Maldives' ties with India. Distance mattered to an extent but that was not all. The exit of the British, followed a little later by the arrival of President Abdul Gayoom on the Maldivian scene meant that there was continuity with change in India-Maldivian relations. The existence of strong institutional mechanisms and greater understanding of bilateral relations at the political level in India, in particular, led to the strengthening of the relationship.

This relationship remained intact even as Maldives shifted gears to become a multi-party democracy in 2008. The existence of a successful and functioning democracy in India, and the yearning for the same in the Maldives has only identified more areas for mutual cooperation between the two countries. Mohammed Nasheed 'Anni', leader of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), as the first democratically-elected President, has only improved bilateral relations. There is vast potential and scope for building on the already existing ties between the two nations. This includes diverse areas such as democratisation initiatives and institutionalisation, education and healthcare, economy and investments, and shared concerns of strategic security.

### I BUILDING DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

The first and foremost expectation from 'New Maldives', is for India to help in the creation and sustenance of democratic institutions in the atoll-nation. There is much warmth and respect in Male, the nation's capital, for the way India has transformed into a 'leader in global democracy'. Having been brought up in an excessive dose of an inherently autocratic administrative structure for centuries together, the Maldives needed time for this inevitable transition. So, when the Maldives

was finally ready and chose democracy on its own volition without being challenged to compromise its sovereignty in any way, India was there for helping to build democratic institutions.

Insulated by geography and centuries-old traditions that it either adopted or modified since taking to Sunni-Islam as the State religion in the twelfth century, in what earlier used to be a Buddhism-dominated state, the Maldivian people trace their origins to early settlers from Kerala in 300 BC, followed by their Indian brethren from the Gujarati coast. Though the Maldives gave itself a new Constitution in 2008, which is at the centre of the democratisation process since, the qualification that Sunni-Muslims alone could become its citizens remains unchanged. This was despite the fact that the Maldives is among the most 'moderate' of all Islamic nations – which possibly owes again to tradition, and not to any new adoption in modern times.

In this background, the Maldives is yet to come fully out of Islamic socio-legal practices. However, it needs to be highlighted that the Maldivians, voting in a multi-party election for the first time in the presidential poll of 2008, rejected 'fundamentalist Islamic parties'. The nation had never practised Islamic laws and customs as rigorously as in most other Islamic nations. Yet, given the greater democratisation of the country and the focussed approach of the Nasheed dispensation in this regard, the country cannot allow cobwebs to gather around the early efforts in this regard. As a nation entering the democratisation process later than many others, particularly the larger Indian neighbour with diversified issues to address and experiences to learn from, the Maldives is uniquely placed to absorb what could be termed India's 'fifth-generation experience and expertise' without it having to re-invent the wheel at every turn.

The Nasheed leadership's missionary zeal on decentralisation of politico-administrative power across the atolls, for instance, could thus be tested

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against the touch-stone of Indian experience of 'panchayat raj'. The Maldivian judicial scheme is quasi-*Shariat*, and this too may need a careful but considerate review without offending religious and individual sensibilities. What may have worked, or not worked for India, may work – or, may not work – in the Maldives. Yet, India could serve in the secularisation and democratisation of the legal and judicial processes. It also applies to the adoption of administrative schemes at all levels, where a schematic and systematic adoption of the 'Indian model' of internal checks-and-balances could go a long way in streamlining what used to be a personalised administrative and accounting system in the Maldives.

In a short span, the Maldives is evolving into a multi-party democracy, with all its strengths and ills. After centuries of living under a single leader, the party that has now come to be christened as the Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (DRP) has had its internal election for electing a successor to Gayoom. This has strengthened the roots of democratic functioning of the political system, what with the MDP having adopted primaries of the western model to nominate its presidential candidate in the first democratic elections in the country, in October-November 2008. There are also other registered parties in the country, which are following the American model of directly-elected Executive President who is not directly accountable to Parliament – where the Opposition DRP-led alliance is in a majority.

While the DRP became the single largest party in the House after the parliamentary polls of May 2009 – again under the new Constitution, as with the presidential polls earlier; the MDP has been able to claim that position in the past months, owing to a series of defections. However, the party has not as yet managed an absolute majority of its own, which position is being held by the DRP in alliance with the pre-polls breakaway People's Alliance (PA). It is again in this context,

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the Indian experience with 'coalition governments' and anti-defection law may come in handy for an infant democracy like the Maldives – both in terms of conceptualisation and implementation.

## II EDUCATION AND ECONOMY

The Maldives is at present shedding the last vestiges of isolation from the rest of the world. This owes to a variety of reasons, starting with the promotion of resort-tourism by the Gayoom regime and its continuance by the Nasheed Government with greater vigour. However, there is no denying the greater exposure that Maldivians have been getting from visits to neighbouring countries like Sri Lanka and India, Islamic nations like Malaysia and western countries like Australia, the UK and the US. While Maldivians who could afford it have been going to any of these nations for higher education and healthcare, the Gayoom dispensation also introduced a scheme of State support for the 'needy' – often reduced to those identified with the leadership.

There may be limited scope in Maldives for starting higher education institutions, given the spread-out nature of the islands. However, nations like India that have vast and varied experience in privatisation of higher education without offending religious and local sensibilities may help the island-nation in exploring the possibilities of internationalisation of education – and also healthcare – in ways that the locals also benefit directly and the Government in Male also finds a viable way to diversify its forex-earning capacities, away from resort tourism. As the experience of the past two years proved, 'resort tourism' was as sensitive as any other sector to global changes in economic climate in nations from which the tourists flock to the Maldives. As a nation depended excessively on tourism for supporting its economy and forex earnings in particular, the Maldives is in urgent need to look elsewhere for long-term economic sustenance, growth and development.

At present, the Maldives under President Nasheed has also embarked on an ambitious privatisation plan, which aims at creating greater avenues for diversifying tourism-potential, like 'conference tourism' and 'golf tourism'. If successful, they have a limited shelf-life. A time would also soon arrive in the long life of the atolls-nation, when policy-makers in the country would have to look at more sustainable and diversified options for industrial investment, which would spur growth and prosperity. The need for strengthening the services sectors earnings might be an option but it would be realistic in implementation, only with the

goodwill of countries like India.

Today, the Maldives has the highest per capita income among the South Asian nations. However, it does not translate in real terms because the laws, as they exist; favour the foreign investor in terms of expatriation of his earnings, which again are mostly from resort-tourism. India has had a long history and experience with laws and investments of the kind – and also has the ‘new generation’ domestic investors with deep pockets who have turned to the West for parking their large investments. Even without this, the Government of India has been among the major donors for propping up the Maldivian economy from time to time, with the full realisation that smaller nations in the immediate neighbourhood cannot become sustainable economies for mutual and shared benefits without getting some assistance from the bigger neighbours, like India.

### III STRATEGIC AND SECURITY CONCERNS

It should be said to the credit of the two nations that they handled the democratic, political transition in the Maldives, efficiently and effectively, with no major hurdles in the forward movement in bilateral relations. Here again, there was continuity with change, as the new President readily acknowledged the role that a strong and supportive neighbour like India could play in addressing the security and politico-economic concerns of the country.

It is readily acknowledged in both the capitals that as an Indian Ocean archipelago of 1192 islands spread across 960kms North-South and over 90,000 sq km – most of them islet-size, uninhabited or very sparsely populated – the Maldives has always found securing its territory and maritime interests a daunting task. Things changed post-Cold War, when the Indian Ocean sea-lanes came to be acknowledged in terms of ‘global energy security’. The emergence of Somali pirates has become an essential factor in security concerns of ‘frontline’ maritime nations like the Maldives.

The immediate security concerns for contemporary Maldives were highlighted in 1978, when mercenaries belonging to the near-defunct Sri Lankan Tamil militant group, PLOTE, intervened in support of some in the country intent on upstaging President Gayoom. India was quick to respond to the Maldivian SOS for help, and Indian troops helped to bring the situation under control. Cutting across party-lines, Maldivians have not forgotten the Indian help in their nation’s hour of need, even as other traditional allies of the

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country were hesitant in intervening.

More recently, a series of incidents flowing out of the ‘ethnic war’ in Sri Lanka showed how the Maldivian Coast Guard (MCG) arrested an Indian fishing vessel, hijacked by the LTTE – and had also passed the blame for the same on to the Sri Lankan Navy (SLN). The MCG arrest in particular silenced critics of the Sri Lankan Navy (SLN) in the south Indian State of Tamil Nadu for a while, but more importantly, it also showed how the LTTE was using the hijacked vessel and its kidnapped engineer to transfer weapons in mid-sea, closer to the Maldivian coast. There had also been other instances where the LTTE, now defeated and defunct, had used the international waters for such transfers. With nearly 1000 uninhabited islets that the sparsely spread security apparatus of the country cannot secure from unwanted intruders, the Maldives is ultra-sensitive to issues that could crop up in the process.

While these could be dismissed as stand-alone incidents that would not have affected the Maldives in the least, as a sovereign nation intent on securing its territorial integrity, the Maldives cannot close its eyes to events and developments in its immediate vicinity. If nothing else, the Maldivian economy is dependent almost exclusively on international tourism, and the country could not close its eyes to post-9/11 spread of ‘jehadi’ terrorism across the world, particularly in South Asia as a whole. There is also the added reality in which Maldives continues to be a ‘moderate Islamic State’ – where other religions are however banned – and has emerged as the first truly democratic country in the Muslim world.

It is in this context that the ‘Sultan Park’ blast of 2007 in the national capital of Male needs to be viewed. In all, 12 foreign tourists were injured in the incident, and the Gayoom dispensation blamed it

on pro-democratic activists based in foreign countries for the same. However, the reported detention of some Bangladeshi nationals for the incident had caused much concern. Bangladeshis, Indians and Sri Lankans form the core of expatriate workers in the Maldives, and the former are mostly into unskilled jobs.

The increasing number of Bangladeshi labourers in the Maldives also caused eyebrows to rise in the strategic community in India, considering that the Pakistani ISI too has been known to use the Bangladeshi soil for anti-India terrorism activities for long. It was known for long that Maldivian students had been enticed into attending *madrassas* in Pakistan since the late seventies – or from around the time the ISI began its ‘zero-option’ unconventional war on India. In recent years, the US-led coalition troops discovered that among the *jehadis* that they arrested along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border were gun-totting militants from the Maldives. The Indian strategic community is thus alive to the possibility of ISI and anti-India *jehadi* groups creating a ‘string of pearls’ of a non-China kind around India, with the Maldives and even Sri Lanka forming the southern string.

Post-war, the Sri Lankan Government has developed strong anti-terror mechanisms in the country, and has come down heavily on some of the Islamic gangs possessing weapons in Colombo city and the Eastern Province, for reasons and concerns of its own. The Maldives however would require external help and assistance to face off the situation and a combination of the country’s size, population and economy could dovetail effectively into creating a mechanism that could serve its own interests and those of friendly and neighbourhood nations like India.

New Delhi fits the bill, given its vast and varied interests and concerns in the Indian Ocean neighbourhood, and also its acknowledged position as a regional super-power, in political, economic and military terms. Better still, for India, southern neighbours like the Maldives and Sri Lanka form the first line of defence, and there is purportedly great appreciation in both capitals about New Delhi’s inevitable concerns for India’s larger security concerns flowing out of their own immediate security, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Nothing would describe the political goodwill that India has amassed in the Maldives better than the 2009 incident when the Opposition Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (DRP) of former President Gayoom snuffed out criticism of India. The issue concerned the visit of India’s Defence Minister A K Antony to the Maldives, heading a high-power

delegation. New Delhi and Male expressed their desire to work closely on security matters, and India also offered a helicopter to the Maldives for keeping a watch on its borders and maritime interests. New Delhi also promised to help in networking security surveillance for the Maldives. When a DRP associate of the People’s *Majlis*, or Parliament, said that it amounted to the Nasheed-led MDP Government compromising the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the nation, the DRP was the first to protest and distance itself from it.

#### IV CONCLUSIONS

Emerging environmental concerns the world over have at its centre, the Maldivian apprehensions of the nation going under, and literally so, in the foreseeable future. President Nasheed made a mention of the same in his first public statement after being elected Head of State and Government. He has since followed it up with initiatives and actions that have symbolised the global concern on the environmental front – but more so, have been symptomatic of what awaits the island-nation.

President Nasheed’s heading an under-water Cabinet meeting ahead of the Copenhagen Summit in December 2009 made international news. However, the immediate Maldivian concern relates to the need for relocating the nation and/or the people elsewhere. Early on, President Nasheed listed Sri Lanka, India and Australia as among the nations that the Maldives would have to approach in this regard.

From among them, India may be the best and the most willing of nations to play host to the Maldivian population, which number around 400,000 by a 2009 estimate, up from 300,000 (approx.) by 2006 Census.

One possibility is for the Maldivians to be allowed to melt into the larger and diversified Indian mainstream, alongside a host of local communities, and yet encouraged to maintain their separate identity and tradition. Another could be an ‘SEZ kind of arrangement’, where they all could work and live from within an earmarked territory – enclave or enclaves. Considering issues of sovereignty on the one hand, and secularism of the Indian constitutional on the other, a greater understanding and promotion of a working relationship with India and Indians in particular would serve the long-term interests of ordinary Maldivians more than any other initiative with any other nation would.

*Views expressed are author’s own.*