
The Maldives: Return of democracy and challenges ahead

Introduction

A chain of about 1,200 tiny islands spread over 90,000 sq km, the Maldives are the central part of a chain of islands that begins on the west coast of India with the Lakshadweep Islands and ends deep in the Indian Ocean at the Chagos Archipelago. The major United States (US) military base at Diego Garcia also lies on this chain. An Islamic nation with a population of only about 418,000 people, the geo-strategic significance of the Republic of Maldives stems from its location straddling the major Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) passing through the Indian Ocean that take traffic from the Suez Canal and the Straits of Hormuz to India, Southeast Asia and East Asia.

The image most foreigners associate with the Maldives is of an idyllic tropical holiday destination. Underneath this serene surface, however, the country is in the midst of a desperate fight for its political and democratic future. The 23 September presidential elections sprung a welcome surprise that led to the unanticipated ouster of the much maligned incumbent Abdulla Yameen despite his all-out efforts at subverting the electoral process to his advantage. Yameen's presidency since 2013, had ushered in an era of excesses – unbridled corruption, subversion of hard-earned democracy through violent repression of political opposition, widespread human rights violations, use of religious extremism and gang-wars for political purposes, and a pandering to China that not only left the Maldives deep in debt, the exact quantum of which the new government led by Ibrahim Mohamed Solih is still grappling to fathom, but also allegedly involved the sale of entire islands at throwaway prices. The international community, especially India, in whose strategic sphere of influence the Maldives lies, and similar liberal democracies like the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) that were chary of the unprecedented access to the Indian Ocean islands that Yameen had given China, were relieved at the results the elections threw up and were quick to welcome them.

The results of the 23 September elections present an opportunity to the democratic forces to set their house in order and help democracy dig deeper roots in the country. The legacy of Yameen's rule will, however, continue to throw up prickly challenges before the new government, as will the nuances of running a coalition of disparate parties in a fledgling democracy. The involvement of external actors that are not renowned for their enthusiasm towards democracy and rule of law, but contrarily are known to excel in "*debt diplomacy*", threatens to further complicate matters.

Recent political history of the Maldives

Even prior to the British takeover of the Maldives in the 1880s, the country was a crossroad for trade across the Indian Ocean. It was at that time a Sultanate with strong ties to the Arabian Peninsula and India. The British governed the country as a colony till 1965, exercising control over foreign policy but leaving internal governance to the Sultan. After independence, a national referendum in March 1968 did away with the Sultanate and established a Republic. After having served two consecutive terms, the first President Ibrahim Nasir decided to retire in 1978. He rejected a third term that was offered to him and facilitated an orderly and peaceful transfer of power. Subsequently, the Maldives was ruled for a major part of its post-independence period – from 1978 to 2008 – by Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, a former university lecturer and Maldivian Ambassador to the United Nations (UN). He grew up in

Egypt and studied at Al Azhar University, then a stronghold of radical Islamic ideas. Gayoom modeled his regime after Hosni Mubarak's Islamic regime, and his reign was marked by a proclivity towards autocracy, corruption and intimidation, and no challenger was allowed in elections that were invariably manipulated. International human rights organizations accused Gayoom of employing terror tactics including arbitrary arrests, detention without trial, torture, forced confessions, and even politically motivated killings against dissidents.

The nascent simmering of political discontent that had begun brewing during the later period of Gayoom's reign found expression in popular protests in September 2003, following the brutal killing of an inmate in a Maldivian prison. A coalition of opposition parties led by the charismatic Mohamed Nasheed of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) capitalized on the wave of public discontent and forced Gayoom to open up the political system and hold free elections. In the country's first free and fair elections in 2008, Nasheed defeated Gayoom in a run-off to become the Maldives' first freely elected President. He inherited the monumental task of repairing the damage caused by 30 years of dictatorship. Gayoom's rapid transformation of the economy in the direction of luxury tourism was extremely beneficial for the wealthiest one percent of Maldivians, but disastrous for the rest. Nasheed introduced wide-ranging reforms. Political prisoners were freed and Maldivians were able to speak freely and internationally. He tried to open the political process and rally world attention to global warming. He also introduced a new economic policy that expanded the economy from negative growth in 2008 to a growth rate of 9% per year, set up a universal healthcare system, a pension fund for the elderly, and the nation's first university. He removed import duties on staple goods and implemented progressive methods for mitigating the problem of drug addiction in the capital city, Malé.

Nasheed's reign, however, was challenging from the outset. He faced stiff resistance from the deeply-entrenched remnants of the Gayoom era, especially the judiciary, and an opposition that seemed more interested in getting rid of Nasheed through any means, fair or foul, than in consolidating the gains of the transition to democracy. Nasheed was eventually forced to resign in February 2012, after sections of the Maldivian security forces revolted and backed the opposition demand that he quit. This heralded the inglorious end of the country's first short-lived tryst with democracy. Nasheed was imprisoned on trumped-up charges, and he subsequently went into exile in the UK and Sri Lanka from where he continued to galvanize his pro-democracy supporters back home and simultaneously engage with the world's major democracies to sensitize them of the pitfalls of looking the other way, while the new government led by Gayoom's half-brother Yameen spirited the country on the path of authoritarianism, extremism and potentially destructive foreign liaisons.

An *Al Jazeera* investigation titled '*Stealing Paradise*' in 2016 made shocking revelations about Yameen's regime. It showed that the President and Vice President coordinated the theft of millions of dollars from the State coffers and used part of the proceeds to buy complicity or silence. When this did not work, they used force. *Al Jazeera* quoted Mohamed Latheef, a Maldivian businessman who helped Yameen with his embezzlement, as saying in a clandestinely filmed video that "*Since he (Yameen) came to power, he has been bribing the Members of Parliament (MPs), the judges, lawyers and everyone else. The whole system is corrupted*". In the midst of this plunder of the State by its elected safe-guarders, the plight of the common Maldivian went unheeded. As Zaheena Rasheed, the editor of the prominent English-language news website *Maldives Independent*, poignantly puts it, "*...in no other country would you find that in one lagoon you have an island that is catering exclusively to tourists with all the best services of the first world. Then, right next to it, where the Maldivians live, it's a slum. There's no fresh water. There's no education. There's no hospital. This is what it's like for a majority of Maldivians, who live in the atolls*".

This milieu also provided fertile conditions for breeding radicalization. As per Norwegian researchers, the Maldives produces more Jihadis per capita than any other country in the world. Over 200 had gone to fight in Syria for Al Qaeda or the Islamic State.

Yameen consciously sought to use China, which did not even have an Embassy in the Maldives before 2012, to further his interests and strengthen his hold on power. Saudi Arabia was also encouraged to invest heavily in the Maldives, and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was a frequent visitor. The Saudis reportedly bought entire islands for private use, much to the consternation of the local population.

That Nasheed succeeded in his endeavours is demonstrated internally by the unanticipated victory of Solih, the unheralded, low-profile candidate of an opposition coalition led by Nasheed's MDP. Given Yameen's vice-like hold on power and his oft-demonstrated willingness to go to extremes to preserve it, Solih was palpably the underdog in the face of Yameen's no holds barred measures to rig the elections. Externally, Nasheed nudged all prominent democracies to wake up to the imperative of exerting serious pressure on Yameen's regime.

Yameen's dispossession, however, needs to be viewed merely as a necessary first step towards a reversal of the discordant and destructive trends that he had bred in the country and a return to the ideals on which the pro-democracy movement was based in the first decade of this century.

Challenges confronting the new Solih government

I. Internal

The chequered political history of the Maldives brought out above would suggest that the country will remain prone to high political drama in the years ahead. Democracy entered the Maldivian political landscape just a decade ago, and even in this short span of time it has already been both interrupted and deformed. As also witnessed in Nepal, another inchoate democracy in South Asia, in the 1990s and 2000s, the absence of experience in party politics combined with political opportunism and an unwavering focus on attaining power rendered political alignments fluid and slick, with earlier held party principles and positions being conveniently thrown out the door every time parties switched back and forth to get into or remain in the lucrative galleries of power. While the politicians squabbled, the deposed monarchy lurked in the shadows in Nepal, as will Yameen in the Maldives, eager to snatch back lost glory.

Solih's victory at the elections was on the back of the support of the Maldives United Opposition, a coalition of four political parties – those of former Presidents Nasheed and Gayoom, tourism tycoon Qasim Ibrahim's Jumhooree Party, and the Islamist Adhaalath Party. Some leaders of these coalition partners have questionable pasts themselves. The motive behind the alignment of these four strange bedfellows, who have serious ideological differences and have been at loggerheads with each other in the past, is best explained by the fact that the leaders of all four parties were either in jail or in exile when the elections were held.

The following exemplifies how twisted political alignments in the Maldives have historically been. In 2008, Nasheed and Qasim formed an alliance to end Gayoom's 30-year rule but their coalition fell apart within months of achieving this objective. Qasim then teamed up with Gayoom in 2012 to overthrow Nasheed. In 2013, Gayoom's Progressive Party of the Maldives (PPM) nominated his half-

brother, Yameen, to run against Nasheed. It entered into a coalition with the Jumhooree Party and Islamist Adalat Party, both of which had backed Nasheed's MDP against Gayoom in the 2008 presidential election.

It is amply clear that the first critical step towards political stability and re-establishment of the rule of law in the country would be for the four coalition partners to stick together through their differences of opinion and interests, which will inevitably occur. Solih is known for his calmness and fortitude. Even Yameen's close aide, Ahmed Nihan, has described Solih as *"patient and a good listener"*, adding that *"If there is one politician who can hold a coalition together, it is Solih"*. Such high regard from an opponent aside, Solih is keenly aware of the apprehension amongst a large section of Maldivians about the fate of the coalition. Given the past track record, he also knows that he has his work cut out to keep the flock together. He will face his next big test when the Majlis (the 85-member national legislature) elections are held next year.

The judiciary in the Maldives has been highly partisan, especially in shielding autocrats in power and in facilitating continuity to their reigns. Dozens of prominent citizens including Nasheed, Gayoom and Qasim, as well as two ex-defense ministers, two Supreme Court judges and a top prosecutor were jailed during Yameen's reign after trials that were widely condemned as politically motivated. In contrast, very few suspects accused of crimes, including murders, have been successfully prosecuted. Judges are seen by locals as corrupt, unqualified and susceptible to external influence. Shockingly, as per the US Department of State, an estimated quarter of the country's 183 judges have criminal records. Many do not hold law degrees and cannot interpret common law or Islamic law because they do not have the required English and Arabic skills. It was, therefore, not surprising that Solih in his inaugural address identified reforms to ensure judicial independence as a *"highest priority area"*.

Among Solih's pre-poll promises were investigations into the corruption and human rights abuses under Yameen. At his oath-taking ceremony on 17 November he reiterated these commitments and pledged to disclose the findings from such investigations so that the Maldives could *"move ahead as a nation"*. However, delivering on these promises is not likely to be an easy task. Mariyam Shiuna of anti-corruption group *Transparency Maldives* pointed out some serious impediments that would bog down such investigations. Politicians from across the spectrum as well as powerful business leaders had benefitted from the corruption under Yameen, including in the tourism scam, in which dozens of coral islands were leased at throwaway prices for tourism development. She said, *"This will prove to be a huge challenge as a lot of officials accused of corruption and rights abuses continue to be part of the system"*.

In the run-up to the presidential elections, Human Rights Watch (HRW) in a report titled *'An All-Out Assault on Democracy: Crushing Dissent in the Maldives'* on 6 August stated that *"the government of President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom has used decrees and broad, vaguely worded laws to silence dissent and intimidate, arbitrarily arrest, and imprison critics. These include counterterrorism laws widely used against opposition activists and politicians; anti-defamation laws used against the media and social media activists; and restrictions on assembly that prevent peaceful rallies and protests. Religious extremists and criminal gangs – including many that enjoy political protection – have assaulted and sometimes murdered dissenters with impunity. This has had crippling effects on the Maldives' nascent democracy and struggling civil society"*. Brad Adams, Asia Director of HRW, was quoted as saying that *"the Maldives government has cracked down on any and all dissent, from activists and journalists to Supreme Court judges. Immediate steps are needed to restore political freedoms and democratic rule to ensure free and fair elections in September"*.

Dinushika Dissanayake, Deputy South Asia Director at Amnesty International, in an article on 9 December wrote that *“In the Maldives, the year 2018 began with violent attempts to reverse the nation’s commitments to human rights and human dignity. In the preceding years, human rights violations allegedly committed by or at the behest of state agencies were ignored, and impunity was rife; the murder of blogger Yameen, the abduction of journalist Rilwan, and the as many as ten deaths in custody since August 2016 were some of the most egregious violations that showed us the dire state of human rights in the country... This was the context in which the Presidential elections took place in September 2018. The election results offered a new space for human rights in the country. President Ibrahim Solih was elected after campaigning on a series of promises to uphold human rights, including to release prisoners detained for political reasons upon his election to office. Within a week of his election, Former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom and his son Faris Maumoon, were released on bail. The conviction of former President Nasheed on terror charges under the previous regime was also suspended in October 2018 and the conviction was then quashed by the Supreme Court just a month after”*.

Dissanayake summarized the tasks before the new government, *“The new government faces a number of challenges in reforming both the criminal justice system and the prisons, and there is hope that this will be one of the first projects of the administration given the manner in which the opposition was jailed or exiled over the last number of years. The Maldives ends the year 2018 as a sure sign of hope for human rights and human dignity... While the challenges before President Ibu Solih are not easy, the path of reform is clear, and the steps thus far taken show signs of a commitment to human rights and dignity that must be expanded in order to bring the country out of half a decade of continuous deterioration of the human rights situation”*.

Economic reforms that generate jobs and opportunity and diversify investments in sectors beyond tourism are also vital for the prospects of democracy in the Maldives. The World Bank has estimated that 32% of the youth in the Maldives, aged between 20 and 24 years, neither participate in education nor work. The youth constitute over 60% of the population of the country. Rising youth unemployment is contributing to other social ills, such as drug abuse and gang-related violence. Even more dangerous is the recent trend of angry, disenfranchised young people being lured into violent religious extremism.

II. Extremism and Gang-war

In September 2014, over 300 people waving the black flags of the Islamic State marched in Malé. They chanted slogans against democracy and held banners that read *“Shariah is the only solution”*. According to a 2015 UN Report, the Maldives is *“facing a challenge in terms of religious issues posed by different interpretations of religious teachings, the high prevalence of drug abuse and gang violence”*.

Endemic poverty and deprivation, the political repression of the Gayoom regime and the destructive Indian Ocean tsunami that killed hundreds and uprooted entire communities were the catalysts that in the early 2000s encouraged the transformation of the moderate traditions of Islam that were followed by Maldivians. Alongside the popular non-violent movement for democracy, a section of alienated citizens began forming militant and ideologically rigid radical groups. Blogger Yameen Rasheed, who was brutally murdered in April 2017 for his secular outlook, allegedly by religious extremists, had written, *“Preachers began touring the islands, armed with cash from Islamic charities*

who had arrived from Pakistan and the Middle East. Their message was simple: Maldivians were paying for their sins and must atone to avoid Allah's wrath".

The role of the Maldivian State, especially under Yameen, in fanning the flames of radicalism even amongst students at an impressionable age, merits attention. The Islamic studies school textbook taught to 14-15 year olds emphasizes the obligation to *"carry out jihad against people that obstruct the religion"*, while postulating that *"Islam ruling over the world is very near"*. Claiming that the establishment of a Caliphate was imminent, the textbook asserts that *"this is something that the Jews and Christians do not want. It is why they collaborate against Islam even now"*.

Since the early 2000s, youth from the Maldives have been going to Pakistan for training under the Lashkar-e-Taibah (LeT), a proxy of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Maldivians have participated in major terrorist attacks in Pakistan and were caught trying to enter Afghanistan from Pakistan's restive Waziristan region. At least two Maldivians are known to have died fighting in Jammu & Kashmir in early 2007, and Maldives national, Ali Assham, was alleged to have been involved in the LeT-linked attack on the Indian Institute of Science in Bengaluru in 2008. Nasheed in November 2009 also pointed to *"a Maldivian connection"* in the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks.

After initial forays into Pakistan and Afghanistan to fight for terrorist groups active there, these radicalized Maldivians in recent years had proceeded in large numbers to Iraq and Syria to join radical groups like the Islamic State and the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra there. Media reports suggest that over 200 Maldivian youth have joined these terrorist groups.

One of the primary recruitment grounds for potential terrorists who are ready to wage wars in the name of Islam in distant lands are the powerful street gangs that operate in the Maldivian capital of Malé. According to the UN Rapid Situation Assessment Report, there are between 20 and 30 gangs operating in Malé, each having between 50 to 400 members. Gang violence in the Maldives is becoming *"increasingly commonplace and the nature of violence more brutal"*. Indoctrinated by fundamentalist Maldivian clerics returning from Madrassas in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Pakistan who have brought back a puritanical version of Wahhabi Islam and Salafism, members of these gangs capitalized on the protection they received from the Yameen regime and were allegedly used by the regime against its opponents. As reported by prominent Indian journalist Praveen Swami, the main gangs, Masodi, Kudahemveiru, Bosnia, Buru and Petrel, have together contributed over 100 fighters to jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria.

While terrorist attacks by religious radicals on Maldivian soil have so far been few and far between, with the 2007 bomb explosion in Malé being the most serious incident till date, Mohamed Hameed, a former police intelligence chief, believes that abatement of the flow of Maldivians to the Middle East on account of the Islamic State and other groups losing territory in Iraq and Syria, would result in serious security challenges for the Maldives in coming years, brought about by highly-trained, battle-hardened fighters returning home. The well-entrenched gang culture and growing radicalization in the Maldives threatens not only the country's security, but also that of its closest neighbours, India and Sri Lanka.

With the leaders and members of several terrorist groups, including the Islamic State, on the run, the geography of the Maldives makes it highly vulnerable to exploitation. The country consists of about 1,200 islands, of which only 200 are inhabited. Policing the Maldivian islands is also not an easy task as the islands are strewn over an area of about 90,000 sq km. In this situation, the possibility of terrorists, with local support, setting up base in any of the country's 100-odd remote uninhabited

islands also exists. The Solih government, therefore, will need to prioritize action against terrorist and criminal elements while also addressing the root causes that breed them.

III. China's Neo-Colonial tactics

China's imperialism and its implications for the Maldives have been brought out in [EFSAS Commentary of 05-10-2018](#). Since then, disquieting details of the extent to which the Yameen regime has indebted the Maldives to China have come to light.

A week after assuming power on 17 November, the Solih government said that the country's finances were in worse shape than had been anticipated, and that it had no idea of how much it owed China. This would take weeks or months to assess since all the deals were struck in secret. Nasheed, appointed by President Solih as his Advisor, then made the shocking revelation that the Chinese Ambassador to the Maldives, Zhang Lizhong had at a meeting on 6 October handed Solih an invoice for \$3.2 billion – equivalent to about \$8,000 for every inhabitant of the archipelago. China refuted the figure and claimed that the amount was about \$1.5 billion, but Nasheed insisted on the correctness of his assertion by saying that *"...it was an invoice. It just had a figure, \$3.2 billion. It was shocking. It wasn't just a conversation, it was a written note handed over, it was clear, you owe us this much"*. He added, *"...direct debt or direct bilateral government-to-government debt is one thing, but there is on top of that sovereign guarantees for the private sector. And there is also on top of that our State-owned enterprises that have gone into debt"*.

Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid disclosed that the Yameen government had given sovereign guarantees not just to State enterprises but also to individuals, and that the huge debt had not translated into projects. The Yameen government is also suspected to have pocketed a part of the grants and earned commission on soft loans.

Media reports quoted another member of the Solih government as saying subsequently that he too had been told about the Chinese note submitted last month, and that the figure may have swelled because of sovereign guarantees that were given. *"We are trying to unravel this. It looks like lots of IOUs were issued, pieces of paper. We are trying to find out, how many and to whom"*, he said. With annual revenues of \$1.5 billion and an annual gross domestic product of around \$3.9 billion, it would be difficult for the Maldives to service such a high debt. A member of the team that is reviewing the liabilities of State-run enterprises lamented, *"We cannot go into default. We will face a default situation if we agree the debt to be what the sovereign guarantees are saying"*.

Nasheed, even during his period in exile, had underlined the pitfalls of the deep Chinese influence over the Maldivian economy. He opined that this would only assist in building China's strategic muscle. He had written, *"Foreign powers, among them China, are engaged in a 'land grab' of Maldivian islands, key infrastructure, and even essential utilities. Shrouded in secrecy, all manner of projects have been awarded to foreign State-run companies"*. Claiming that China has already seized some 16-17 islands in the Maldives through an *"opaque leasing process"*, he opined, *"it always starts with a real estate project, but it can be turned into something else"*. His grim conclusion was, *"As I watch my country in exile, I fear that piece by piece, island by island, the Maldives is being sold off to China"*.

The Free Trade Agreement (FTA) that Yameen signed during his visit to Beijing in December 2017 and the 2015 law, allowing foreigners to own land if they reclaim 70% of it from the sea and invest over \$1 billion in the country, are also of particular concern to the new Maldivian Government. The FTA, as per which the humungous China and the tiny Maldives agreed not to impose tariffs on imports from

each other, was pushed through without even providing the opposition time to read its contents and has resulted in completely skewing the balance of trade against the Maldives. As Nasheed puts it, "*The trade imbalance between China and the Maldives is so huge that nobody would think of an FTA between such parties. China is not buying anything from us. It is a one-way treaty*".

The 2015 law, meanwhile, has enabled a Chinese company to lease the uninhabited Feydhoo Finolhu island, which is close to Malé and its international airport, for a period of 50 years for a paltry \$4 million. China has also been developing Gadhoo island, 437 km from Malé, since 2016. This island is seen by analysts as a potential future supply-berthing-maintenance base, similar to what China has in the Seychelles. China is also helping build a Joint Ocean Observation Station on the Maldives' northern-most atoll of Makunudhoo, which is close to the sea lane connecting to the Suez Canal.

Experts are convinced that China will endeavour to extract the value for its investments in the Maldives in strategic terms, possibly by setting up a military base on one of the islands. Any move in that direction would seriously concern the international community, especially India, the US and Member States of the European Union (EU).

Role of the international community going forward

The attention that affected international actors accord to the Maldives and the role they play there in the next few years will impact on the future of democracy in the country, as also the contours of broader security of the Indian Ocean region. The impact that external involvement can have has already been expressly demonstrated in the Maldives. The autocratic direction that the Yameen regime took the country in, allowed China to dig its claws into yet another asset in the Indian Ocean. China was accorded extraordinary largesse by Yameen, not just on account of its deep pockets and predatory instincts, but equally as much because unlike the democratically inclined international community China did not discomfit the Yameen regime with difficult questions on his undermining of the Constitution, crushing of civil liberties, rule of law and democracy, and on the mushrooming of extremism in the country. China's unqualified political and economic support, conversely, encouraged and emboldened Yameen to incrementally trample on democracy and ignore the indignation expressed by the international community. China single-mindedly focused on and succeeded in gaining a strong foothold in the strategically important Indian Ocean, and a pliant and dependent figure as the Head of State in that foothold suited its interests.

Solih's victory has provided the international community – especially the Maldives' neighbours India, and after the dust of its own political storm settles, Sri Lanka, as well as others with a strategic interest in the region, including the US, the UK, the EU and Japan, among others – with an unexpected and timely opportunity to play their part in strengthening the roots of democracy in the country, arresting the growth of extremism, and countering China's efforts at squeezing territory out of the clutches of a tiny, distant country as well as thwarting any aspiration it may have of setting up military installations on the islands.

India, in particular, will have a critical role to play. It has traditionally considered the Maldives to be within its core sphere of influence due to its geographical proximity and the socio-cultural ties and economic linkages that the two countries share. India has also been the unofficial security guarantor to the country, providing patrol vessels, helicopters, and military training. It has been at the forefront of the group of countries opposing the despotism of Yameen's reign and calling for a return to democracy, and as Sathiya Moorthy, a Senior Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) think tank puts it, "*India has clearly stated its position on the Maldives' need for free and fair elections. Not*

since the 1971 war with Pakistan (which led to the creation of Bangladesh) have they been as pronounced on the democratic issues in a neighbouring country. In doing so, India seemed to speak for its allies across the world including the Western nations". These like-minded countries will now look for decisive and effective Indian involvement going forward.

Solih's government, ever since it came into power, has also promptly reverted to the Maldives' *'India first'* policy. Both Solih and Maldivian Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid chose India as their first international destinations. Shahid during his visit stated that the Maldives owes close to 70% of its external debt to China, adding that *"...we hope that India will be generous enough to help us with the initial management of any shortfall we might face. We know that the Indian government is fully equipped to help us deal with issues like fresh water scarcity, sewerage and with our focus on the health sector"*.

The Solih government needs to be wary of the roles that Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have been playing in the Maldives. The two countries have reportedly contributed to the radicalization of Muslims in the country. While building an alternate non-democratic international support structure for his despotic regime, Yameen had actively courted Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Pakistan by using their shared religion as a tool. The country was also presented as an attractive investment option to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Saudi Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz was the first international leader to be welcomed to the country by Yameen after taking over power, and shortly thereafter Saudi Arabia opened an embassy in Malé in 2014. Among Yameen's endowments to Saudi Arabia was a \$10 billion project that comprised airports, residential areas and tourist resorts. In March this year, Saudi Arabia and the UAE agreed to provide a grant of \$160 million for development projects in the Maldives. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia and China have been collaborating on several projects in the Maldives. The Yameen regime, in turn, extended support to Saudi Arabia for the war in Yemen as well as for the Saudi-led boycott of Qatar last year.

In addition to development projects, Saudi Arabia has also provided a grant of \$100,000 for Islamic education in the Maldives and 50 scholarships for students to study in Saudi Arabia. It has also begun construction of ten *"world class"* mosques in the Maldives, including a new national mosque in Malé named after King Salman.

As for engaging Pakistan, it was more a matter of Yameen attempting to rile India for its disapproval of his regime's high-handed ways. Former Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif as well as Army Chief Qamar Javed Bajwa were welcomed by Yameen to the Maldives on visits that were well publicized. Pakistan was encouraged to invest in the Maldives, including in defense-related projects. Media reports stated that an agreement had been reached during Bajwa's visit for joint patrol of the Exclusive Economic Zone of the Maldives by Pakistani warships and Maldivian coast guard vessels.

The Solih government would need to draw the red lines for Saudi involvement in the Maldives, while not eschewing the investments that actually contribute to the country's development. As for Pakistan, the regional dynamics would counsel Solih to keep that country, which is itself near-bankrupt and has little of substance to offer to the islands, at arm's length. Pakistan's highly suspect role in promoting terrorism in the Maldives has been brought out above. The island nation can ill-afford a supposed partner that further fans the terrorist flames. India, meanwhile, will draw Pakistan's involvement in the Maldives as its red line. As Andrew Small, China-expert and author of *'The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics'*, puts it, *"...the Chinese are seen as strategic rivals, but Pakistan is an outright adversary. Direct military cooperation between the Maldives and Pakistan will not be viewed well in India... Adding Pakistan into the security mix, which is more clearly directed at India, causes a different kind of concern in New Delhi"*.

Conclusion

The forces of democracy and rule of law have emerged victorious, this time around, in the seesawing political battle in the Maldives. The victory, unless valued and protected by all the political players that have scripted it, may turn out to be just a fleeting interlude. The challenges before the new government are many and profound, and it will require copious amounts of courage, maturity and dexterity to overcome them. Equally importantly, the degree of support from the international community, especially from India, will be critical to the chances of success of the new government and the liberal political philosophy that it espouses.

That India will have to play a decisive role in supporting the Solih government as it seeks to reverse China's deep strategic inroads into the country made during Yameen's reign is not lost on the Indian leadership. This was visible during Solih's three-day visit to India, his first trip overseas since being sworn in, last month. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's statement during his bilateral meeting with Solih that, *"we will not allow our countries to be used for activities which can be harmful to each other's interests"* and Abdulla Shahid's earlier assurance that his government would be *"sensitive toward India's security and strategic concerns"* are indicative of the common desire to check China's influence in the region.

During Solih's visit, India, ostensibly to help the new government tide over its debts to China, agreed to extend an aid package of \$1.4 billion to the Maldives. Discussions on a \$700 million line of credit to facilitate moving the Malé Commercial Harbor to Kaafu Thilafushi were also held. The Joint Statement issued during the visit mentioned agreement on a range of issues – visa facilitation, cultural relations, eco-system improvements, joint projects in information and communications technology (ICT), developing human resources, tourism, and medical and legal collaboration. In the security sphere, amid the shared concern over radicalization of Maldivian youth, cooperation in counter-terrorism and training to the Maldives police and defense forces by India were agreed upon.

With India as the fulcrum, other like-minded countries invested in democracy such as the US, the EU, the UK and Japan would also need to step into the fray to assist the new Maldivian government with the onerous task of transition that lies ahead of it. As Nasheed had written in the *New York Times* a day after he was forced to resign in 2012, *"...dictatorships don't always die when the dictator leaves office... ..long after the revolutions, powerful networks of regime loyalists can remain behind and can attempt to strangle their nascent democracies"*.

Compounding such internal challenges will be the reality of China's geo-strategic priorities in the Maldives. China will seek to leverage its investments in the Maldives and use its preferred debt-trap diplomacy to demand further concessions. There is a distinct likelihood of China engineering political intrigues in the Maldives in the event of the Solih government coming across as reluctant to cede more strategic space to it.

It would, therefore, be in the best interests of democratically-inclined countries to limit China's role in the strategic Indian Ocean region by assisting the Solih government politically and financially.

Only then, will it be empowered enough to stand up to the Chinese pressure that will inevitably come upon it.

