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Open Letter to Maldivians The Maldives: From Charybdis to Scylla?

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"The Shah left people a choice between Savak and the mullahs. And they chose the mullahs. When thinking about the fall of any dictatorship, one should have no illusions that the whole system comes to an end like a bad dream with the fall. The physical existence of the system does indeed cease. But its psychological and social results live on for years, and even survive in the form of subconsciously continued behaviour. A dictatorship that destroys the intelligentsia and culture leaves behind itself an empty, sour field on which the tree of thought won't grow quickly. It is not always the best people who emerge from hiding, from the corners and cracks of that farmed-out field, but often those who have proven themselves strongest, not always those who will create new values but rather those whose thick skin and internal resilience have ensured their survival. In such circumstances history begins to turn in a tragic, vicious circle from which it can sometimes take a whole epoch to break free."

Ryszard Kapuscinski *Shah of Shahs*

There have been riots and troubles at other times in the history of Maldives, but never before has the unrest been so persistent and relentless. President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom used to pride himself of having brought stability to the country during his long tenure. However, his latest measures have included meeting every sign of civil strife with increased repression. This vicious circle is heightening the instability of the island nation and is making the situation in Male' more volatile day by day.

Maumoon's recent behaviour is marked by a lack of decisiveness and consistency. One day he promises to initiate reforms, the next day he arrests pro-reformist

people; meanwhile in the Maldivian media the charade that he enjoys unanimous popular support continues as usual.

However, in the light of his increased clumsiness, it is easy to view President Maumoon as being surrounded by cliques of advisers who on one side tell him to show no mercy and strike hard at his opponents, while others on the other side tell him to initiate dialogue and promote some limited reforms.

Maldivians both at home and abroad have triggered a protest movement that seems unstoppable. Some of the protesters are asking for freedom and democracy, but the most unanimous demand is that President Maumoon must step down.

Talking to Maldivian young people we noticed that almost none of them knows what they really want after Maumoon is gone for good. In a situation that seems confusing and uncertain, the only ones who know what they want, and they know it very well, are the religious hard-liners. They are already taking positions, preparing for the time when the dictatorship will be over.

One can easily picture the day when the few true freedom and democracy lovers of Maldives will be overrun by the highly organized religious fanatics.

Maumoon fared well during the first years of his tenure; by playing both the role of the Ayatollah and the Shah at the same time, he had all the aces up his sleeve. Let no one think that he was ever a moderate. His only expertise is Islamic religion and many of his ministers were appointed on the basis of having studied like him at the religious university of el-Azher in Cairo. He cherished the power that his religious halo gave him, for as both head of an Islamic state and religious leader he was invulnerable as long as he was at the forefront of keeping the Maldives as Islamic as possible. Thus, President *Al-Ustaadh* (Revered Teacher) Maumoon Abdul Gayyoom was a zealous Islamic missionary from the start, and embarked on an ambitious programme of propagation and reinforcement of the Muslim doctrine that spared no Maldivian and reached every corner of the nation. After having opened hundreds of mosques and Islamic schools all over the Maldives, he sent many young men and women on scholarships to foreign Islamic hotbeds. He conveniently didn't want to have any Universities or centres of higher education close to his palaces. But there seems to be no limit to the extremism that an Islamic education can produce, for the very people that *Al-Ustaadh* Maumoon Abdul Gayyoom trained have turned against him. The religious hard-liners that he himself bred in such numbers are now calling for his overthrow.

Compared to the present government and its long arm, the NSS (National Security Service), the fanatic hard-line religious leaders seem like good people. The NSS keeps people in fear; it is the Maldivian version of the former Iranian Savak. Police and Army at the same time, the NSS is not very competent when it comes to keep

law and order. Drug trade and robberies are rife, which is quite amazing in such a small and tightly-controlled country. But NSS agents are highly effective when it comes to keeping every Maldivian man and woman, old or young, in the grip of permanent terror.

Even though President Maumoon's detractors accuse him of not being Islamic enough, he has carried out such strongly religious-oriented Islamic domestic and foreign policies, that there is almost no room left for his potential successors to become more Islamic than him. They can hardly do anything new unless they crack down more ruthlessly on the personal lives of the Maldivian citizens and impose a Taliban-style rule whereby women die of hunger at home and everyone gets his share of Islamic Sharia' by being maimed, lashed or killed for the slightest offence.

It is not that President Maumoon is the best choice within the present scenario. He seems now almost certainly poised to be defeated, but he thought himself eternal and "forgot" to prepare the Maldives for the future. The brightest and most creative Maldivian intellectuals are now exiled or imprisoned, for they were easier to dispose of than the dissenting hard-line religious leaders. The atmosphere of lack of intellectual life and relevant knowledge of the Maldives was cultivated by President Maumoon to the extent that the only substitute for intellectuality is religious study.

When the present "law and order" situation breaks down, the average Maldivian person who never enjoyed any freedom or any power, whether political or religious, will be left without knowing what to do. Maldivian nationalism, the Islamic religion



and politics are so hopelessly muddled together that few people have clear ideas now, and their ideas will be even less clear in a changed scenario. Before the President is gone, and considering the dangers that loom ahead, this is the time that all Maldivians should brace themselves and think hard about what it is that they want for the future of their country.

The Maldives badly needs peace and a stable transition in which a democratic leader who knows how to train the people to be free and give freedom should emerge, but it definitely doesn't need another religious teacher cum tyrant.

Will the Maldivian people be able to rise out of the chaos and finally freely choose to live in a prosperous and free society where law and order, including respect for each others' freedoms, rule? Or will they have a continued religious hard-line threat looming over their heads which will inevitably produce more people like President Maumoon in the future?