

Political Change in the Maldives:

Implications for India in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract:

The political landscape in the Maldives has undergone significant transformations in recent years, carrying profound implications for regional dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, particularly concerning India. This paper probes into the intricate web of political change within the Maldives and analyses its repercussions for India's strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region. With a focus on key events, policy shifts, and diplomatic relations, the paper aims to offer an extensive understanding of how political developments in the Maldives resonate within the broader context of the Indo-Pacific.

Key Words: Maldives, India, Indo-Pacific, Political Change

Introduction:

India and Maldives boast a rich history of interconnectedness, characterized by ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious, and commercial ties that span antiquity. Their relations are not only close but also multifaceted and harmonious. However, India's keen interest in the Maldives stems from its strategic geography. Positioned at the crossroads of vital maritime routes, the archipelago plays a crucial role in ensuring the free flow of goods and vessels – a matter of paramount importance for India's own economic and security interests. The presence of China, an increasingly assertive rival, further intensifies the stakes for India. While historical ties between New Delhi and Male have been robust, tensions have risen since President Mohamed Muizzu assumed office in November 2023, following his electoral victory with an "India Out" campaign platform. Also, the very recent controversy surrounding remarks made by three suspended Maldivian ministers (Malsha Shareef, Mariyam Shiuna, and Abdulla Mahzoom Majid) about India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi coincides with Muizzu's departure for China on his inaugural state visit from January 8-12, 2024 [1]. This visit departs from the norm, as most Maldivian leaders traditionally opt for New Delhi as their first international destination. A day after Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu indirectly criticised India for "bullying," his government, issued a deadline of March 15 for India to remove its military personnel from the country. Local media reports also quoted Nazim on a March 15 deadline. "Indian military personnel cannot stay in the Maldives. This is the policy of President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu and that of this administration," In fact, soon after taking oath as the President of Maldives on November 17,

2023 year, Muizzu had formally requested India to withdraw its military personnel, saying the Maldivian people had given him a “strong mandate” to make this request to New Delhi.

In response, a prominent travel platform in India suspended flight bookings to the Maldives, a nation heavily reliant on tourism. Numerous Indians, including certain celebrities, posted on social media advocating for domestic destinations instead of the Maldives. Following this development, New Delhi summoned Maldivian envoy Ibrahim Shaheeb. This action took place a day after India’s mission in Male conveyed strong concerns to the Maldivian foreign ministry. Following this, several Maldivian news websites, focused on local news, and featured sensational headlines in the local dialect, alleging that India had initiated a campaign against Maldivian tourism. This prompted other Maldivian social media users to quickly join the trend, engaging in derogatory remarks and insults aimed at India and Indians, while also drawing comparisons between the Maldives and the Lakshadweep islands. In reply to the ridicule directed at the Maldives, certain Indian social media users pledged to refrain from vacationing there and actively endorsed a boycott of Maldivian hotels and resorts.

The occurrences at both Track-I and Track-II levels possess the capacity to compromise the warmth in India’s relations with the Maldives and unveil alternative policy avenues for India, especially considering its involvement in the Indo-Pacific.

Context:

Rosenau posits that international politics is a web of interconnected “linkages” where domestic and foreign policy issues are intertwined and influence each other [2]. This framework provides a valuable lens for examining the Maldives’ complex political landscape, where internal power struggles and external interventions are intricately linked. The Maldives’ strategic location in the Indian Ocean, spanning key shipping lanes and harbouring potential resource wealth, makes it a focal point for regional competition. India, as a major power in the Indo-Pacific, has traditionally enjoyed close ties with the Maldives, viewing it as a crucial partner in its efforts to counter China’s growing influence in the region. However, recent political turmoil including the disputed 2018 presidential election and the subsequent crackdown on dissent, have strained these relations. Rosenau’s Linkage Politics offers a nuanced understanding of these dynamics. By analysing the “transactions” between domestic actors in the Maldives and external actors like India and China, one can gain insights into how internal political changes have impacted the country’s foreign policy orientation. For instance, the rise of pro-China politicians in the Maldives can be seen as a consequence of domestic factors like economic grievances and dissatisfaction with India’s perceived interference in Maldivian affairs. Conversely, India’s recent efforts to improve relations can be understood as an attempt to manage the negative externalities of domestic political change in the Maldives and maintain its strategic interests in the region [3].

Colonial History of the Maldives:

The Maldives, especially when seen through the eyes of its Indian Ocean neighbours, and past and prospective allies, is a study of contradictions. An archipelago of nearly 1,200 islands, it is a specimen of small states that paradoxically managed to maintain relative independence from European colonisation throughout the colonial period, in contrast to large South Asian territories. A constitutionally Muslim nation, today, Maldivian culture is rooted in Buddhism, which once informed the nation’s script, language, architecture, culture, and manners. This was before the adoption of Islam in 1153 AD [4]. Due to its strategic

positioning in the Indian Ocean, the Maldives captured the attention of Portuguese, Dutch, and French explorers during the 16th and 17th centuries. Subsequently, it fell under British economic and strategic sway, leading to the signing of a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the British in 1887 [5]. While the Victorian administration assumed control of Maldivian foreign affairs, the nation managed to uphold its internal political sovereignty. Throughout the Second World War, the Maldives served as a British naval base and remained a British protectorate.

Political Transformation in the Maldives:

Upon gaining independence from Britain in 1965, the Maldives' social structure diverged from other colonial states, with the pre-existing elite maintaining considerable influence. This dynamic persisted during President Gayoom's authoritarian rule from 1978 to 2008, characterized by centralized control, political persecution, and instances of imprisonment and killings [6]. However, a growing demand for democracy prompted Gayoom to initiate reforms in 2004. These reforms included the recognition of political parties, a new constitution ensuring judicial and police reforms, enhanced freedoms, and the establishment of a Human Rights Commission.

The political landscape, marked by a directly elected president and parliament, allowed multiple parties to participate in elections and form alliances based on their interests. This introduced complexities and tensions in governance. These political dynamics eventually culminated in the resignation of President Mohammed Nasheed, marked by various controversies, including disputes over decisions like the GMR contract and the arrest of opposition leaders [7]. Subsequent elections, marred by irregularities, resulted in Abdulla Yameen assuming the presidency.

Historically, the Supreme Court of Maldives has intervened in the electoral process, as witnessed in the 2013 elections, where it rescheduled and intervened during the Presidential elections. The court also removed the election commissioner in the country's inaugural *suo moto* case during parliamentary elections, a move believed by many to have contributed to former President Yameen's victory. Another incident occurred in 2014 when the SC initiated legal action against the Human Rights Commission of Maldives (HRCM) following the Commission's assertion in its Universal Periodic Review report that the SC unduly influences and controls the judiciary. On December 14, 2014, using its parliamentary majority, the government decided to reduce the SC bench from seven to five. The U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, during her visit to Male in December 2014, remarked that 'judicial independence remains an issue in Maldives.

The political landscape in the archipelago witnessed a significant shift in 2018 with Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's electoral victory, indicating a departure from the pro-China stance under Abdullah Yameen and a return to closer ties with India. This shift presented promising opportunities for enhanced maritime security cooperation, countering China's influence, and expanding India's regional presence. However, the pursuit of a balanced foreign policy by the Maldives posed challenges, requiring a flexible and pragmatic approach from India. Domestic volatility in the Maldives and emerging non-traditional security threats, such as climate change, compelled India to adapt its strategies and build resilient partnerships. India's strategies in the Indo-Pacific have always been leveraging development initiatives, enhancing Maldivian defence capabilities, and fostering cultural exchange to safeguard its interests amid

evolving power dynamics. However, since President Mohamed Muizzu assumed office in November 2023, tensions have heightened. The situation escalated on January 8, 2024, with the Maldives government suspending deputy ministers Malsha Shareef, Mariyam Shiuna, and Abdulla Mahzoom Majid for derogatory remarks about Prime Minister Modi on social media. This outburst was triggered by a video of Prime Minister Modi's visit to the Indian islands of Lakshadweep, north of the Maldives, aimed at promoting local tourism.

Maldives' Engagement with Global and Regional Actors:

Though economic development remained a top priority in the 1970s, Maldives also pursued an independent foreign policy. Building diplomatic ties secured vital technical assistance and training programs for education and infrastructure. Notably, a cultural and scientific agreement with the USSR in 1980 demonstrated the country's commitment to international engagement beyond Cold War power blocs. This "equidistant relationship" with major powers fostered economic stability and addressed domestic demands [8].

Following the Cold War, the Maldives navigated a globalized world where regional and extra-regional alliances dominated. Despite internal political and economic challenges and the brutal suppression of dissent during Gayoom's rule, the country prioritized cordial relations with multiple nations. However, human rights violations continued to raise international concerns. For instance, a 2012 UN Human Rights Committee report expressed worry about un-investigated instances of torture and ill-treatment before 2008. The post-2008 era witnessed progress in governance and people's representation, signifying a gradual shift in the political landscape.

The moment India expressed apprehension regarding the unfolding events in the Maldives, emphasizing the significance of the Maldivian government maintaining democratic norms and institutions, the Maldives' Foreign Ministry asserted that the government would uphold the country's constitution, emphasizing that former President Abdulla Yameen's administration would not take directives from foreign governments regarding the governance of the nation. The Foreign Ministry called upon international partners to acknowledge the fundamental principle of the international system, urging them to refrain from actions and signals that could undermine the sovereignty of independent states. This statement underscores the Maldivian government's resolute stance, signalling its commitment to internal decision-making processes and a reluctance to permit international interference in the country's domestic politics.

India as a Catalyst to Maldives' Political and Economic Development:

As the Maldives' closest neighbor, situated just 70 nautical miles away, India has been a steadfast supporter across various sectors, including defence, education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Since the Maldives gained independence in 1965, India swiftly acknowledged it and established diplomatic relations, signifying a longstanding bilateral relationship. India has been a reliable "first responder" during crises, providing crucial aid during the 1988 coup attempt and natural disasters, such as the 2004 tsunami and the water crisis in Male in December 2014. Defence cooperation, formalized in the Action Plan for Defence in April 2016, constitutes a cornerstone, with India fulfilling about 70% of the Maldivian National Defence Force's training requirements. India is actively involved in diverse infrastructure

projects, including airports, the Greater Male Connectivity Project, and the development of Gulhifalhu Port. The Greater Male Connectivity Project, featuring a bridge connecting Male with adjacent islands, is a significant initiative with a USD 500 million investment [11]. In healthcare, India allocated Rs 52 crore to enhance the Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital, while in education, it has contributed to the establishment of technical education institutes and vocational training programs. Trade between India and the Maldives has seen a fourfold increase since 2014, reaching USD 501.82 million in 2022. India is a major contributor to the Maldives' tourism industry, with tourism revenue constituting nearly one-third of its economy. In 2023, India led with the highest number of tourists (2,09,198) and an 11.8% market share, reinforcing its pivotal role in the Maldives' tourism landscape [12].

Increasing Chinese Footprint in the Maldives:

During President Gayoom's tenure, Maldivian foreign policy displayed an apathetic inclination towards India, despite India's aid in preserving his regime during a coup attempt. As the democratic movement gained momentum, Gayoom sought to pivot towards China over India. Recognizing China's growing global influence and strategic interests in the Indian Ocean, the president visited China in 1984 and again in 2006 [13]. Throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries, China played a crucial role in the Maldives' infrastructural development, highlighted by the construction of the foreign ministry building and assistance during the devastating Tsunami of 2004. President Nasheed's regime, facing economic challenges in the tourism industry during the global recession, saw China capitalizing on the opportunity. China negotiated agreements to contribute to the Maldives' tourism sector, surpassing traditional contributors like the United Kingdom. The opening of China's embassy in Male in November 2011 marked a significant milestone. In 2013, Maldives' Minister of Defence and National Security, Waheed, praised China's foreign policy on small nations during his visit to Beijing, securing Chinese aid through infrastructural and military agreements. The Chinese footprint in the Maldives mirrored its presence in Sri Lanka. Under President Abdulla Yameen's leadership, Male appeared to distance itself from Western and Indian influences while strengthening ties with China. Despite Yameen's pro-China rhetoric, he chose India as his first overseas destination after assuming office, adding complexity to the narrative.

India's Policy Options:

The political situation in the Maldives remains fluid, and India needs to be prepared to adapt its approach accordingly. India walks a tightrope in the Maldives, balancing its traditional ties and strategic interests against the growing shadow of China. While India's historical and cultural links grant it a natural advantage, China's economic muscle and political assertiveness pose a significant challenge. However, the very recent development has given a relative advantage to China as India has already shown signs of its unyielding stand. As soon as the current situation improves, India should think over the following: Firstly, by prioritizing Maldivian priorities like infrastructure development, renewable energy, and climate resilience, India can solidify its position as a reliable and trusted partner. This soft power approach should be coupled with continued military cooperation and disaster relief assistance, further bolstering India's security credentials in the region. Secondly, investing in key sectors like tourism and fisheries, while offering competitive loan terms and trade

agreements, can help India woo Maldivian businesses away from Chinese clutches. Additionally, India can explore establishing a rupee-rufiyaa currency swap arrangement to facilitate easier financial transactions and counter China's yuan-denominated loans. Thirdly, regular high-level diplomatic visits, cultural exchanges, educational scholarships, and capacity-building programs can foster people-to-people ties that will not only strengthen the emotional bonds between the two nations but also create a more informed Maldivian populace, less susceptible to Chinese narratives. Finally, India must proactively address China's strategic ambitions in the Maldives. This involves working with like-minded regional and international partners to uphold the rules-based order and counterbalance Chinese assertiveness. India can also leverage its own growing naval and economic prowess to deter any potential Chinese misadventures in the Indian Ocean.

Conclusion:

The challenges faced by Indo-Maldivian relations appear to coincide with the broader challenges confronting the Maldives, including the growing Islamization of Maldivian society and concerns about the subsequent economic impact on the littoral state [14]. The ongoing challenges include political opposition voicing concerns about judicial reform, the influence of religious extremism, social and healthcare issues, and security matters. The rise of religious fundamentalism, fuelled by unemployment and a challenging economic landscape, has manifested in instances of radical groups advocating for the implementation of Sharia law and reported Maldivian involvement with ISIS, posing a substantial challenge to the nation and the broader South Asian region. Therefore, by pursuing an inclusive strategy that combines soft power, economic engagement, people-to-people ties, and strategic partnerships, India can effectively counter China's growing influence in the Maldives and safeguard its strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region. However, piloting this complex geopolitical landscape will require a delicate balancing act, ensuring that India's presence is seen as a source of support and stability, not a threat to Maldivian sovereignty.

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