



## Crisis in the Maldives

### Implications and Options for India

Group Captain Ashok K Chordia\*  
*Senior Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies*

#### Political Turmoil in the Maldives

In February 2018, the Maldives Supreme Court ruled that political detainees, including Mohamed Nasheed, a former president, be freed because their trials were illegal. It directed re-instatement of opposition Members of Parliament who were removed last year. Implementation of the order would have led to transfer control of the parliament to the opposition coalition along with the power to impeach the president. President Abdulla Yameen refused to comply with the decision, but instead, declared a state of emergency for 15 days; he arrested the Chief Justice Abdulla Saeed, Judge Ali Hameed and the former president, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom.<sup>1</sup> Dismissal of top police officers ensued.<sup>2</sup> Later, the Supreme Court order was revoked.

Mohamed Nasheed criticised Yameen's ambition to remain in power. India, the United States, and the European Union called on President Yameen to implement the court's ruling. The US State Department said: "President Yameen has systematically alienated his coalition, jailed or exiled every major opposition political figure, deprived elected members of parliament of their right to represent their voters in the legislature,

revised laws to erode human rights and weakened the institutions of government." The UN human rights chief warned that Yameen's state of emergency decree was undermining the checks and balances necessary in any functioning democracy.<sup>3</sup> As per media reports, Pakistani PM told the visiting Maldivian Foreign Minister that Pakistan would not support the Maldives emergency.<sup>4</sup> China responded differently; it

warned against military intervention in the internal matters of the Maldives. Occasional presence of its warships in the eastern Indian Ocean in the last few days is being reported by the media as a subtle

warning to India to refrain from military intervention.

It would be difficult for the Maldives to recover from this situation. Besides the political crisis, there are signs of radicalisation and influence of ISIS on the people--200 Maldivians have reportedly joined ISIS. Among others, a geography that makes life difficult for the people is at the root of the crisis.

#### At the Roots of the Present Crisis

In October 2008, Mohamed Nasheed, the Maldives Democratic Party (MDP) leader replaced

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Maumoon Abdul Gayoom—who had ruled the Maldives for three decades. Nasheed, in turn, was removed from office in February 2012 under disputed circumstances. Mohamed Waheed Hassan Manik replaced him. The controversial presidential election in September 2013 led to civil unrest. In October 2013, the Supreme Court annulled the election results after claims of irregularity by one of the candidates. Registration of ineligible voters was alleged.

The US State department had feared that the situation could destabilise the country.<sup>5</sup> Yameen was sworn in as the President in 2013, although the opposition doubted the credibility of his election. Those incidents sowed the seeds of unrest in the country. Conditions deteriorated when Yameen's Government reopened some pending legal cases against Nasheed, nudging the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) to protest and demand the President's exit. Nasheed was jailed and, in 2015, exiled. Ever since then, he has lived as a refugee between London and Colombo. He has been seeking support in India and Sri Lanka.

### A Scourge of Geography and Chinese Interest

The Maldivian islands, numbering nearly 1,200 are spread over 90,000 sq kms and distributed along an 800 kms long north-south axis in the Indian Ocean; just about 200 are inhabited. Owing to the difficulty of physical accessibility, successive governments have found it difficult to meet the very basic needs of the islanders—drinking water, food, shelter, communication, and boats to go fishing and to commute between the islands—to a uniform level of satisfaction. To describe just one of their woes: Large quantities of water need treatment and desalination to meet the demand of potable water, which is ever increasing because of a thriving tourism industry. The failure of a water treatment plant in Malé in December 2014 had led to a major crisis, which was overcome with Indian assistance.<sup>6</sup>

Limited scope for eking out a living<sup>7</sup> lures sections of population (the leadership included) to baits garbed as largesse. China has exploited this congenital weakness of the Maldivians. Yameen government's policies, which show a pro-China tilt, have enabled China to purchase the island of Feydhoo Finolhu. Purchase of another island is on the cards. A Chinese company has acquired the international airport on a lease for \$4 million.<sup>8</sup> A Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the Maldives allows China to run hotels, restaurants and allied businesses to promote tourism. In the bargain, Maldives owes over 70 per cent of its current foreign debt to China. The interest on the current loan is more

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than a fifth of the Maldives' budget.<sup>9</sup> Neck deep in debt, servicing of the Chinese loans would be difficult for the Maldives. This debt situation has given China the power to influence the internal affairs of the Maldives and, to some extent, over Maldives' foreign affairs.

China's interest in the Maldives emanates from its "One Belt, One Road"

(OBOR) project. The Maldives had joined the Maritime Silk Road Initiative in September 2014. It entails building of infrastructure like airports and seaports, oil and natural gas pipelines and telecommunications networks. Above all, China has agreed to help finance the "China-Maldives friendship bridge" which connects Malé to the international airport on Hulule Island.

The Maldives Special Economic Zones (SEZ) Act (2014) was enacted to attract investors. The Foreign Land Ownership Reform (2015), allowed absolute foreign ownership of land in the Maldives. There are allegations of norms being flouted and improper bidding process being resorted to while awarding contracts to foreign firms—to the Chinese firms, in particular. Nasheed has aired concern over China gaining control of the islands, key infrastructure, and even essential utilities. He fears, "Future generations of Maldivians are saddled with

gigantic debts they will never be able to repay.”<sup>10</sup>

China has shown how the leadership of an economically weak country can be influenced (read, “coerced”). It has also shown that Chinese largesse comes with strings attached. Under debt, Maldives is now being forced to toe the dragon’s line. The stressed out civilian population and various institutions are protesting to influence change.

There are constituencies within the Maldives that vehemently reject Yameen’s actions. There is a bruised judiciary whose judgement has been undermined. There is a demoralised police department whose heads have been removed like pieces on a chessboard. There is the NEWS media that is feeling suffocated on being gagged—Rajje NEWS has stopped broadcasting under protest. The opposition has been wailing against irregularities. Lastly, the fact that at one time close to 50 per cent votes were cast in Nasheed’s favour, suggests that the constituency that disapproves Yameen’s continuance in power, is large.

In the final analysis, although the climate in the Maldives is congenial to socio-economic—and perhaps, political change—such a possibility is less likely in the immediate future because of the physical difficulty of the islanders to congregate, exchange ideas and act collectively. The fate of a hapless population hangs in uncertainty.

### Appeal for Indian Intervention

Recently, a group of the opposition leaders of the Maldives interacted with Indian intelligentsia. They urged India to play a bigger role to “bring back Maldives’ democracy on track.” There has also been a flurry of newspaper articles (by the Maldivians) seeking India’s support. Mr. Ahmed Naseem<sup>11</sup> has accused President Yameen of selling his foreign policy for money. “I am reminded of a Maldivian saying: Whoever provides sugar is an uncle,” he laments. He fears that the Maldivian foreign policy is being compromised in return for undue favours.<sup>12</sup>

Nasheed too has repeatedly urged India to intervene.<sup>13</sup> According to him, Maldives is being sold off to China; radicals have occupied key positions and are lurking in the shadows to overrun the country.<sup>14</sup> Some in India too have been recommending military response to the ‘SOS’ call from the Maldivian opposition on the lines of Operation Cactus (November 1988), which was launched to thwart a coup attempt against, the then President, MA Gayoom. The success of Operation Cactus had proved the prowess of Indian diplomacy and the Indian armed forces and had led to stability in the archipelago, which lasted over two decades.

### India’s Dilemma

Anarchy in the archipelago is likely to lead to more radicalisation, which might some day affect India. Clearly, the developments in the Maldives are not in India’s interest. Besides, the Chinese presence in the Maldives is inimical to India’s strategic interest.

Today, the Chinese presence is supposedly for economic considerations; tourism, for example. But it takes very little effort to use the same islands and infrastructure for military purposes. Imagine the implications of China positioning surveillance equipment on the islands to pry on India’s activities in the region. Notwithstanding the developments, until now India has treated the crisis as Maldives’ internal matter—creating a perception of its indifference to the issue.

India cannot be a spectator to the Maldivian government’s actions leading to Chinese presence at India’s doorstep. What could possibly be India’s response? Disapproving Yameen’s actions, India declined a visit of a Maldivian envoy to discuss the crisis. There hasn’t been *formal* interaction with the Maldivian opposition either. Advisory on air travel to the Maldives is a token of India’s displeasure. More needs to be done.

As regards the ability to intervene militarily, suffice it to say that 30 years after Operation Cactus, and having undertaken several military exercises in the A&N Islands, India is well prepared for a contingency involving use of force.

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## Shadow Boxing

Presence of Chinese warships in the Indian Ocean has caused concern and is likely to de-moralise those opposing the government. Presence of Indian warships likewise, near Malé, to evacuate Indians, if required; an independent naval exercise by the Indian Navy (or a joint exercise with the navies of Australia, Japan and the US) in the waters around the Maldives; and a few fighter aircraft exercising in the region would send messages to the opposing side. To the Yameen Government the message would be to refrain from jeopardising India's strategic interests. To the Maldivian population it would be that '*help is at hand*'. It would also be in order to work up a coalition of countries of the Indo-Pacific region whose geostrategic interests are getting affected adversely due to Chinese actions anywhere in the region.

## Writing on the Wall

The street protests despite an emergency suggest that the patience of the Maldivians is wearing thin. Yameen might find it difficult to thrive purely with Chinese support. More rioting and arson could follow tightened government control. An irate population attacking public utilities and government buildings cannot be ruled out. Maldives is heading for turbulent times. Yameen would need local support to restore normalcy. Ignoring the people would exacerbate the crisis and might lead to a change of leadership. The new leadership might find it difficult to maintain peace and order in the initial stages; it is likely to seek external support to restore law and order.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Sam Meredith, "Trouble in paradise: All you need to know about the Maldives' ongoing political crisis," @smeredith19, February 8, 2018, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/08/maldives-crisis-all-you-need-to-know-about-the-political-turmoil.html>. Accessed on February 11, 2018.

<sup>2</sup>"Maldives acting police chief fired," *Maldives Independent*, February 3, 2018, available at <http://maldivesindependent.com/politics/maldives-acting-police-chief-fired-135589>. Accessed on February 16, 2018.

<sup>3</sup>Mederith, n. 1.

<sup>4</sup>"Pak 'will not back' Maldives emergency," *Hindustan Times*, February 11, 2018, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup>"Maldives election: Supreme Court delays run-off vote", *BBC News*, November 10, 2013, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-24887515>. Accessed on February 12, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> "Maldives hit by water crisis, India sends help," PTI, online edition of *The Times of India* dated December 5, available at <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/a-villain-in-paradise-maldives-president-abdulla-yameen-5053962/>. Accessed on December 7, 2014.

<sup>7</sup>Fishing and tourism are the two main vocations.

<sup>8</sup>This happened after cancellation of contract with GMR of India—a reason among several others for the deterioration of relations between India and the Maldives.

<sup>9</sup>Jayadeva Ranade, "Situation in Maldives Could Potentially Further Raise India-China Tensions," *Centre for China Analysis & Strategy* dated February 19, 2018. [www.ccasindia.org/maldives.pdf](http://www.ccasindia.org/maldives.pdf) Accessed on 26 February 2018

<sup>10</sup>Mohamed Nasheed, "A villain in paradise," *The Indian Express*, updated February 7, 2018, available at <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/a-villain-in-paradise-maldives-president-abdulla-yameen-5053962/>. Accessed on February 10, 2018.

<sup>11</sup>Mr Ahmed Naseem was the Foreign Minister in the Nasheed Government.

<sup>12</sup>"Maldives Opposition seeks active role of India," *Event Report ORF*, available at <http://www.orfonline.org/research/maldives-opposition-seeks-active-role-of->

[india/](http://india/). Accessed on February 14, 2018.

<sup>13</sup>Nasheed's request for military intervention, when he was removed under controversial circumstances in 2013, was not heeded by India, terming it as an *internal matter of the Maldives*.

<sup>14</sup>Mohamed Nasheed, "A villain in paradise," *The Indian Express*, Updated: February 7, 2018 available at <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/a-villain-in-paradise-maldives-president-abdulla-yameen-5053962/>. Accessed on February 14, 2018.

\*Group Captain Ashok K Chordia is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Air Power Studies. He has authored a seminal study on Operation Cactus titled: *Operation Cactus: Anatomy of One of India's Most Daring Military Operations*.



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Centre for Air Power Studies  
P-284, Arjan Path, Subroto Park, New Delhi 110010  
Tel: +91 11 25699130/32, Fax: +91 11 25682533

Editor: Dr Shalini Chawla e-mail: [shaluchawla@yahoo.com](mailto:shaluchawla@yahoo.com)

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