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RISING EXTREMISM AND RADICALISATION IN THE MALDIVES

RADHEY TAMBHI

On July 31, 2023, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated key leaders, financial facilitators, and operatives of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al Qaeda in the Maldives, along with the companies associated with these individuals.¹ It was a step to restrict and disrupt the financial support to carry out terrorism and related activities in the Maldives, and outside. The Maldives, a paradise for tourists in the middle of the Indian Ocean is also being labelled as a hub for terrorist activities. Extremist ideas and radicalisation have been brewing in the island state for quite some time now. In this context, this article will try to put the spotlight on the series of terrorist-related events since the turn of the century, and also explore the reasons for the flourishing of such activities. Further, it will also attempt to unpack how these activities are likely to unfold under the current regime of President

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1. U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Leaders and Financial Facilitators of ISIS and al-Qa'ida Cells in Maldives" July 31, 2023, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1659>. Accessed on September 10, 2023.

Dr. Mohamed Muizzu, and, lastly, conclude by emphasising its implications for India.

UNFOLDING OF EXTREMIST ACTIVITIES IN MALDIVES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

For the past nine centuries, the Maldives has predominantly been a Sunni society, practising a tolerant approach to religiosity since its ruler converted to Islam in 1153 from Buddhism. However, from the 1970s and 1980s, the society had become increasingly radicalised and intolerant, and more so during the closing years of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's role and the transition to multi-party democracy in 2008. This involved terrorist attacks not only on Maldivian soil but also sending Maldivians to foreign lands for *jihad*. Estimates suggest that compared to the population of Maldives, more Maldivians went to fight for the ISIS than from other foreign nationals.²

The earliest evidence of a Maldivian being involved in terrorist activities goes back to 2002, when an Islamic cleric, Ibrahim Fauzee, was arrested for having links with Al Qaeda and taken to Guantanamo Bay, until his release in 2005. In 2003, some schools in Edhyafushi Island displayed posters praising Osama bin Laden. One of the deadliest terrorist attacks that the country witnessed was in the Sultan Park of Male in 2007, in which 12 tourists were killed;³ in 2009, a Maldivian was involved in a suicide attack in Pakistan; in 2012, a Parliament member and a religious scholar were ruthlessly murdered; in 2014, a Maldivian journalist was abducted, and, in the same year, the Islamic State (IS) carried out a demonstration on the streets of Male; in 2020, the ISIS claimed responsibility for setting ablaze boats in Mahibadhoo Island; and the latest, in 2021, was an attack which targeted the ex-Maldivian President Mohamed Nasheed.⁴

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2. "Investigation, Prosecution and Adjudication of Foreign Terrorist Fighter Cases for South and South-East Asia", United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, https://www.unodc.org/documents/terrorism/Publications/FTF%20SSEA/Foreign_Terrorist_Fighters_Asia_Ebook.pdf. Accessed on July 28, 2024.
 3. "Tourists Injured in Maldives Bomb", Al Jazeera, September 29, 2007, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2007/9/29/tourists-injured-in-maldives-bomb>. Accessed on July 25, 2024.
 4. "The Fight Against Terror in Maldives", *Maldives Financial Review*, May 12, 2021, <https://mfr.mv/policy/the-fight-against-terror-in-the-maldives>. Accessed on September 1, 2023.

According to Indian analysts, strategic planning has revealed that two transnational terrorist organisations, i.e., Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) are also trying to penetrate the Maldives' security establishment, including the police, military, immigration division, and Education Ministry.⁵ The nexus between Al Qaeda and the Maldivians involved in extremism came to light through the social media page of Bilad al-Sham Media (BASM), which claims to be the media representative of Maldivian fighters in Syria and is affiliated with the Jabhat al-Nusrah (JN), which is Al Qaeda's official branch in Syria.⁶ The BASM has recruited many Maldivians who are active in carrying out attacks in Syria. The use of social media by terrorist organisations across regions has become rampant. This has added another layer for the security apparatus to deal with regarding the issue of rising violent extremism. The unregulated cyberspace⁷ has emerged as a fertile ground for many radical Maldivian preachers to have a presence on various platforms like Facebook, Youtube, X, Instagram, etc. In one of the recent addresses, Minister of Defence Mohamed Ghassan Maumoon was seen expressing deep concern about the use of technology to manipulate and harm the youth.⁸

The last terror-related violence that the Maldives witnessed was in 2022 when Maldivian Minister Ali Solih was attacked with a knife when he was returning home.⁹ The attacker chanted some verses of the Quran, attacked the minister, and then ran away; he was wearing a T-shirt with the logo of the IS. According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal, though the country has not recorded any terrorism-related incidents in the recent past, the underlying danger of radicalisation

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5. Anurag Sharma, "Radical Islam in the Maldives: Hotbed for al-Qa'ida and Islamic State", Vivekananda International Foundation, October 16, 2019, <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2019/october/16/radical-islam-in-the-maldives-hotbed-for-al-qaida-and-islamic-state>. Accessed on September 1, 2023.
 6. Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Radicalization of Syria", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/2638>. Accessed on September 1, 2023.
 7. Abdul Basit, "Threat of Urban Jihadism in South Asia", *Counter-Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, vol. 10, no. 3, March 2018, pp. 1.
 8. "Defence Minister Expresses Concern Over Extremist Tactics Targeting Youth", July 9, 2024, <https://psmnews.mv/en/140209>. Accessed on July 25, 2024.
 9. Sarah Mohamed, "BREAKING: JP Spokesperson Ali Solih Stabbed" *The Times of Addu*, August 22, 2022, <https://timesofaddu.com/2022/08/22/breaking-jp-spokesperson-ali-solih-stabbed/>. Accessed on July 31, 2024.

cannot be denied.¹⁰ To this end, the role of the Maldivians who return from Pakistan needs to be taken into account. They are infused with radical thoughts and later make attempts to spread the *Shariah* law in the country. This had been admitted by former President of Maldives Nasheed in 2009 that the Maldivians who left Male to study in *madrassas* of Pakistan and Afghanistan got into the clutches of the Taliban and started supporting the group.¹¹ A small group known as 'dot' has been mainly involved in spreading violent extremism in Maldives. Its members have been trained in Pakistan.¹² The people involved in these activities include students, religious figures, and also military personnel who use neighbouring countries like India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand as the springboard to travel to Pakistan for training, or to Turkey from where they cross into Syria.¹³

What further makes the picture of extremism ugly in Maldives is the involvement of the political leaders of the country which not only sets a bad precedent for the society but also makes things worse for the security agencies. In the 2015 speedboat attack aimed at causing harm to Abdulla Yameen, the involvement of then Vice-President Ahmed Adheeb came to light regarding weapons and bomb material.¹⁴ Later, in an interview by Transparency International with local criminals, it was found that politicians turn a blind eye to extremists, as they comprise an important vote bank for the former.¹⁵ Different political parties have supported extremist organisations for political benefits. Since the first democratic elections were held in 2008, subsequent governments have shared power with hardliners.¹⁶ Events related

10. "Maldives: Assessment -2024", South Asia Terrorism Portal, <https://www.satp.org/terrorism-assessment/maldives#:~:text=The%20abduction%20and%20killing%20of,each%20in%202021%20and%202022>. Accessed on August 1, 2024.

11. Sharma, n. 5.

12. Azim Zahir, "Islamic State Terror in the Maldives as COVID-19 Arrives", *The Diplomat*, April 18, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/islamic-state-terror-in-the-maldives-as-covid-19-arrives/>. Accessed on September 3, 2023.

13. Iromi Dharmawardhane, "Maldives", *Counter-Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, vol. 8, no. 1, December 2015-January 2016, pp. 63-69.

14. Ibid.

15. Abhinandan Mishra, "Maldives Going Down the Path of Pak-inspired Radicalism", *The Sunday Guardian*, January 14, 2024, <https://sundayguardianlive.com/top-five/maldives-going-down-the-path-of-pak-inspired-radicalism>. Accessed on August 1, 2024.

16. Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy, "Trouble in Paradise: Endorsed Extremism and Sustained Extremist Ecosystems in the Maldives", Observer Research Foundation, June

to extremism or terrorist attacks have taken place under every government that has come to power in the Maldives since 2008—whether it was the Yameen administration that was considered pro-China or the Solih government that followed an India-first policy.

WHY EXTREMISM IS THRIVING IN MALDIVIAN SOCIETY

There are several reasons for the tourism paradise of the Indian Ocean standing on the edge of becoming a terror hub. Some of these will be discussed below:

- First, and foremost, the role played by the last autocratic ruler of the Maldives, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, during the closing years of his administration, laid the foundation for shifting the Maldives towards a conservative model of Islam. This was seen in the restriction imposed on the clothing of women, the banning of the Christian missionary radio, and the creation of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs in 2008 to oversee religious affairs in the country¹⁷—the shift from a liberal model of Islam to a conservative one. The Islamic preachers in the Maldives complain about the Western customs like the sale of liquor and demand the closure of massage parlours, as well as strict laws for abortion, censoring of information, disrupting of the Yoga Day celebrations, claiming that all of these are against the traditional Islamic culture.¹⁸ This attitude has been further hardened due to the Western tourists who arrive in the country and follow more liberal social norms in the largely conservative Maldivian society.¹⁹

The earliest evidence of this was witnessed in 2005 when a shop in Male was attacked for displaying Santa Claus. In another media report, it was found that the religious conservatives in Himandhoo Island prevented students from going to a school where they

1, 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/sustained-extremist-ecosystems-in-the-maldives>. Accessed on August 1, 2024.

17. Animesh Roul, "The Threat from Rising Extremism in the Maldives", Combating Terrorism Centre, March 2013, v. 6, n. 3, <https://ctc westpoint.edu/the-threat-from-rising-extremism-in-the-maldives/>. Accessed on August 1, 2024.

18. Mahwish Hafeez "Growing Islamic Militancy in Maldives", *Strategic Studies*, 2008, vol. 28, no. 1, pp. 251-267.

19. "Expert Blames Saudi Arabia and Pakistan for Rise of Radicalisation in Maldives", *The Print*, March 21, 2023, <https://theprint.in/world/expert-blames-saudi-arabia-and-pakistan-for-rise-of-radicalisation-in-maldives/1408054/>. Accessed on August 1, 2024.

were taught non-Islamic subjects by the foreign teachers in the English language.²⁰ Later, in 2011, the cultural symbol that was given by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) member countries was destroyed by the perpetrators, along with the 2012 attack on the museum in Male where the pre-Islamic evidence of Maldivian history was destroyed by targeting Buddhist statues and history.

- There has been a mushrooming of mosques and *madrassas* in the country that are funded and supported by countries such as Saudi Arabia to undermine the inclusive Sunni Islam in the Maldives, and spread Wahhabi Islam.²¹ The Saudi-Maldivian cooperation over 'Islamic Affairs' in the name of creating religious unity is, instead, fuelling religious extremism in the country.²² It includes extensive collaboration in the sphere of education and training of Maldivian *imams* and students in Saudi Arabia, and indoctrinating them in Wahhabism. In 2019, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs suspended the preaching licences of three scholars accused of spreading hatred, encouraging inhumane and degrading acts, and supporting civil wars in another country.²³ In this context, the role of Pakistan is equally important. Many Maldivians also travel to Pakistan and enrol themselves in the *madrassas*. They return to the nation with extremist ideas about Islam, propagate the promotion of the *Shariah* law, and how that underlines the values of a true Muslim.

The role of Islamabad goes back to the post-tsunami period when various organisations globally extended help to the Maldives in dealing with the humanitarian crisis. However, not all organisations had a benign role. For instance, a Pakistani-based organisation, Idara Khidmat-e-Khalq (IKK), a charitable front of

20. Ibid.

21. Anushree Ghisad, "Saudi-Maldivian Ties: An Opportunity or Threat for India", Vivekananda International Foundation, March 31, 2015, <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2015/march/31/saudi-maldivian-ties-an-opportunity-or-threat-for-india>. Accessed on July 4, 2024.

22. Sudha Ramachandran, "The Maldives: Losing a Tourist Paradise to Terrorism", *Terrorism Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, vol. 14, no. 2, January 22, 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-maldives-losing-a-tourist-paradise-to-terrorism/>. Accessed on July 4, 2024.

23. Mishra, n.15.

the Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), spearheaded the Lashkar-e-Tayyiba's (LeT's) activities in the Maldives that were aimed at attracting the youth.²⁴

- The geographical location of the Maldives in the central Indian Ocean is between the two most vital drug operating routes of Asia, the Golden Crescent and Golden Triangle. To this end, the scattered nature of the island nation with a large Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) further adds to the problem. All this has made Maldives emerge as a transit point for drugs in maritime South Asia.²⁵ Additionally, as these drugs find a place in the Maldives, they are making space in the Maldivian society where an increase in their consumption has been noticed. According to the First National Drug Use Survey, there were nearly 7,500 drug abusers²⁶ in the Maldives which is a substantial number considering the small population of the island. According to a member of the Maldives Police Service, most of the drugs are smuggled from neighbouring countries like India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan.²⁷ Several Pakistani nationals have been caught for smuggling drugs in Maldives.²⁸ These drugs networks are being operated by international criminal gangs and terrorist organisations through their networks based in Islamabad.

However, the Maldives, being a tourist paradise, must realise that tourism and terrorism do not go hand-in-hand. Terrorism in any form is a blot for the Maldives as an island country that attracts tourists in large numbers. The major part of the Maldivian income is dependent on this sector, and, therefore, all steps must be taken to prevent the radicalisation and curb it in its nascent stages despite the

24. Animesh Roul, "Jihad and Islamism in Maldivian Islands", *Terrorism Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, February 12, 2010, <https://jamestown.org/program/jihad-and-islamism-in-the-maldivian-islands/>. Accessed on July 31, 2024.

25. n. 10

26. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "National Drug Use Survey: Maldives 2011/2012", https://www.unodc.org/documents/southasia/reports/NDUS_FactSheet.pdf. Accessed on August 2, 2024.

27. Umaima Rasheed Hussain, "Maldives Emerging as Hub of Illicit Drug Trade", WION News, January 9, 2018, <https://www.wionews.com/world/opinion-why-is-maldives-emerging-as-hub-illicit-drug-trade-28848>. Accessed on July 31, 2024.

28. n. 10.

political opportunities that come along with it. The new President, Mohamed Muizzu, has won both the presidential and parliamentary elections in the country and it remains to be seen how his identity as an Islamic fundamentalist will help in dealing with this growing menace.

EXTREMISM AND PRESIDENT MUIZZU

Apart from several challenges like the financial crisis and attracting tourists that the newly elected government of Muizzu faces, dealing with the rising extremism in the country will be one of the key issues. President Muizzu was one of the important participants in the anti-India campaign, and Islamism had a lot to add to this. The hardliners in the country have used Indian politics as a pretext to portray New Delhi negatively and make further inroads into Maldivian society.²⁹ Additionally, the developments in the Muslim world like in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and currently the Gaza conflict attract the youth and criminals and facilitate easy entry of the extremist ideology.³⁰ Some commentators also believe that Islamic fundamentalism helped Dr. Muizzu in winning the recently concluded elections. Before he was elected as the president, there were voices within the Opposition party claiming that Muizzu has close connections with the extremist groups in the country.³¹ There are also allegations that from 2008-10, Muizzu was a member of the Jhamoore Party (JP) and then of the Adhaalat Party (AP) from 2010-12, both of which have a close association with the Jamiyyath Salaf (JS). The JS is a religious organisation that has been supporting the ideological, financial, and physical roles of Maldivian youths in the Syrian war through *jihad*.³²

29. Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy, "The Challenges in Muizzu's Maldives: A Stocktaking", Observer Research Foundation, April 5, 2024, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-challenges-in-muizzus-maldives-a-stocktaking>. Accessed on July 15, 2024.

30. Ibid.

31. Navami Nandan, "Fayyaz Alleges Muizzu of Extremist Ties", *Maldives Republic*, <https://mvrepublic.com/main-stories-in-maldives/fayyaz-alleges-muizzu-of-extremist-ties/>. Accessed on July 29, 2024.

32. Savio Rodrigues, "Why is the President of Maldives Dr Mohammed Muizzu Turning a Blind-Eye to Jamiyyath Salaf?", *Goa Chronicle*, January 11, 2024, <https://goachronicle.com/why-is-the-president-of-maldives-dr-mohammed-muizzu-turning-a-blind-eye-to-jamiyyath-salaf/>. Accessed on July 25, 2024.

Events like hijacking of the celebration of International Yoga Day in 2022 by nearly 150 protesters at the Galolhu stadium, must not be repeated under any dispensation. According to Faran Jeffery, the deputy director of Islamic Theology of Counter-Terrorism, the incident involved two important organisations, the Salaf and Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM).³³ The PPM is one of the political parties of the Maldives that was involved in the anti-India campaign, and the party from which Dr. Muizzu won the presidential polls in November 2023. According to an Indian strategic and security expert, “Muizzu’s policies may reflect an attempt to reshape the ideological leverage”.³⁴

The present political dispensation of Muizzu must aim at avoiding the political rhetoric, and take steps to counter terrorism that can create both political and economic instability in a nation with a small population of 5.15 lakhs that is overly dependent on tourism for its economy. Turning a blind eye to the political dispensation in the wake of rising cases of extremism in the small island nation will have ripple effects on itself as well as its neighbouring countries like India.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

Being a close maritime neighbour, India shares historical, developmental, defence and security, and economic ties with the Maldives. The rising extremism through radicalisation and the terrorism-related events taking place in a close neighbouring country have mounting challenges for India which is a close neighbour. Two of the major challenges that India confronts in this regard include, first, the emergence of the Maldives as a terror hub in South Asia. Given its scattered and small land area that is highly disproportionate

33. Sushim Mukul, “Yoga Event was Branded ‘un-Islamic’, Attacked in Maldives as Part of Anti-India Hate”, *India Today*, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/india-maldives-row-international-yoga-day-against-islam-tenets-male-event-attacked-lakshadweep-tourism-2486450-2024-01-09>. Also see N. Sathiya Moorthy, “Yoga Day Disruption: A New Cause for Concern in Maldives”, Observer Research Foundation, June 24, 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/yoga-day-disruption>. Accessed on July 26, 2024.

34. “Is Maldives Vote a Victory for India Out?”, *South Asia Journal*, April 23, 2024, <https://southasiajournal.net/is-maldives-vote-a-victory-for-india-out/>. Accessed on July 28, 2024.

to its large maritime boundaries, the Maldives is susceptible to becoming a hub for terror-related organisations. The strong anti-India sentiment that has garnered a lot of attention under President Muizzu and under the previous administration of Yameen will only provide a fertile ground for the breeding of such activities. Second, the spillover of such terrorist organisations into India, especially in states like Kerala that lie close to the Maldives, are also victims of recruitment by organisations like the ISIS. Third, the infiltration of Indian terror groups like the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) after the crackdown on it in India.³⁵

As New Delhi joins hands with the Maldives to collaborate and strengthen the friendship in a multifaceted manner, Male must keep India's security interest at the forefront, and ensure that the Maldivian soil does not become a new breeding ground for such illicit activities that hamper the growth and development of any country. To this end, the formation of Joint Working Group on Countering Terrorism between New Delhi and Male, and multilateral cooperation through the Colombo Security Conclave are steps in the right direction.

35. N. Manoharan, "An Agenda for the New Government: Policy Options for India in Maldives", Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 2014,