

MOHAMED NASHEED'S RETURN WILL STRENGTHEN MALDIVIAN DEMOCRACY

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The former Maldivian president Mohamed Nasheed made a spectacular return to electoral politics with his Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) winning more than two-thirds of the seats in the 87-member Parliament. The return of Mr Nasheed in the election last Saturday comes after the victory of Ibrahim Mohamed Solih in the September 2018 presidential election and completes the political transformation in Malé. Mr Solih had defeated the pro-China despot Abdulla Yameen, who had jailed his political opponents and Supreme Court judges, curbed civil liberties, encouraged political Islamisation and actively cocked a snook at India.

Mr Yameen could get away with his authoritarian and provocative activities on the back of China's support. His dealing with China has put the Maldives neck deep in debt. The Solih government took a long time figuring out the tangled web of deals that had got the Maldives into such a massive problem. The results of Saturday's elections are significant because the Parliament can exercise checks over such abuse of executive authority as was seen during Mr Yameen's rule. In November 2017, he had got a free trade agreement with China approved by the Parliament in an emergency sitting with the opposition members not even attending. Mr Solih's victory and Mr Nasheed's return, therefore, are good signs for the resurgence of democracy in the atoll nation.

India has reasons to be pleased with these developments. Prime Minister Narendra Modi even visited the Maldives for Mr Solih's inauguration in November 2018. However, it would be a mistake to assume that China's influence has vanished from the Maldives. To begin with, debt itself allows China to exercise considerable leverage. One has seen it happen in Sri Lanka where the change in government did not lead to extermination of Chinese role in its economy and politics. India has had a natural geographic advantage over China in South Asia. However, with deeper pockets and a bigger military muscle, China has largely been able to offset India's primacy in the region. Electoral victories of democratic forces are good for India, but not enough to overcome the China challenge.

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