

DIFFERENT NARRATIVES: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON INDIA-MALDIVES TIES

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: South-East Asia, ASEAN and India

The [Maldives government's decision to ban the 'India Out' protests](#) shows how the campaign, which started as an online protest by critics of the Ibrahim Solih administration, has grown into a polarising political issue in the Indian Ocean island nation with which India has deep ties. [The campaign](#), which remained a fringe protest in the initial years, gained currency late last year after former President Abdulla Yameen took it over. Mr. Yameen, who served two years in jail after losing power in 2018, wanted a strong political narrative to make a comeback, particularly as the country heads to its presidential election in 2023. Critics termed the Solih administration “a puppet of New Delhi”, accusing it of allowing an Indian military presence, thereby compromising the country's sovereignty — an allegation the government has repeatedly denied. Mr. Yameen has organised several political rallies, openly attacking the government's ties with India. When Mr. Yameen was in power, he was largely seen as a friend of China. His government's ultimatum to India to withdraw two of its helicopters from two atolls had triggered tensions. But relations between the two countries improved remarkably after Mr. Solih's Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) came to power in 2018.

President Solih adopted an 'India first' foreign policy. In the past four years, India has emerged as the Maldives's main security and economic partner, committing \$1.4 billion towards its 'socio-economic development needs'. In February 2021, it signed the Uthuru Thila Falhu (UTH) harbour development deal with Male to develop the National Defence Force Coast Guard Harbour. The Yameen camp stepped up its attack on the government after this deal. India has historically played an important role in the Maldives as a friendly big neighbour. But China's rise in the Indian Ocean region has raised the strategic profile of this small, import-dependent island-nation of 5,50,000 people, where both countries vied for influence. Now, while Mr. Yameen is trying to regain his lost support by shoring up Maldivian nationalism and anti-India sentiments, the MDP is trying to counter it with another nationalist narrative. It argues that ties with India, the closest big neighbour of the Maldives, is important for the country's security, including food security. While these two narratives would clash in the coming election, India, being the centre of the political wrangling, would find itself in a difficult situation. Victory is not guaranteed for the MDP, which faces anti-incumbency problems and differences between Mr. Solih and the powerful former President Mohamed Nasheed. If it loses, India risks losing the influence it has built over the last few years. The challenge before India is to build closer ties with all political factions of the Maldives while helping the country meet its economic and security requirements.

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