

INDIA MUST STAY THE COURSE IN MALDIVES

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Indian Ocean Island nations

The diplomatic row between India and the Maldives has taken a turn for the worse with the Indian Ocean archipelago calling for the withdrawal of two Indian military helicopters and personnel posted there. Relations have been on the slide ever since President Abdulla Yameen briefly imposed a state of emergency in February and defied a Maldives Supreme Court order that called for the release of nine key opposition leaders who had been accused of treason. Instead of taking steps to improve the political situation by reaching out to opposition leaders ahead of the September 23 presidential election, Mr Yameen, perhaps emboldened by support from China, has persisted with a confrontational approach and kept top opposition leaders such as former president, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, in custody. The opposition, including exiled former president, Mohamed Nasheed, has repeatedly expressed concerns that the upcoming election may be rigged. The opposition leaders have also called on India to intervene, if necessary militarily, to end the impasse in the Maldives.

Reports have suggested that India is unlikely to immediately withdraw its two military helicopters and some 50 personnel, whose visas have expired, at least till the elections. The Indian assets are deployed at a location close to several islands that the Maldives has given to the Chinese to develop. New Delhi has criticised Mr Yameen's decision to go ahead with the presidential elections before the rule of law has been restored. Of course, India is also concerned about the Maldives' growing proximity to China, which has used its Belt and Road Initiative to provide huge loans for several key infrastructure projects in the Maldives, including the expansion of the airport servicing the capital Male by a Chinese firm after an earlier contract with India's GMR Infrastructure was cancelled.

Under the current circumstances, India's options for intervention in the Maldives are limited but it must stay the course by keeping up the pressure on Mr Yameen's government while maintaining contacts with key opposition leaders such as Mr Nasheed. At the same time, it must be mindful of the fact that antagonising the current dispensation in Male too much will only drive the island nation closer to China. In this context, an Indian lawmaker's comments about India "invading" the Maldives certainly weren't helpful. Tactful handling of the relationship is required as the fate of some India-backed projects and Indian workers in the island chain also hangs in the balance. Given the government's stated policy of "neighbourhood first", clearly some out of the box thinking is required by the mandarins in South Block to address the situation.

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