

# SOLIH ARRIVES AMID ANTI-INDIA STIR IN MALDIVES

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Strong bond:Maldives President Ibrahim Solih with PM Narendra Modi in New Delhi in December 2018.File photoMOORTHY RV

Maldives President Ibrahim 'Ibu' Solih arrived in Delhi for a bilateral visit on Monday, amid rows within his government over ties with India, the Yoga Day attack, and a bitter row with Maldivian Speaker, former President and party colleague Mohammad Nasheed. During his four-day visit, Mr. Solih will also visit Mumbai for two days, and is expected to focus on enhancing trade and connectivity between the two countries.

On Tuesday, he will meet with Prime Minister Narendra Modi for bilateral talks, discuss strategic ties, and the status of infrastructure agreements between them, and sign a number of MoUs (Memorandum of Understanding), officials said.

Ahead of the meetings on Tuesday, where Mr. Solih will become the first visiting head of State to meet President Droupadi Murmu, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar called on Mr. Solih. "Our Neighbourhood First and Maldives' India First policies are complementary. They take our special partnership forward," Mr. Jaishankar tweeted. "Both sides will celebrate the milestones, review existing projects, and set new targets for a stronger India-Maldives partnership," said Maldivian Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid in a statement.

The infrastructure projects include the Greater Male Connectivity Project of bridges connecting the capital city to neighbouring islands, to be built by Indian company Afcon with the help of a \$400 million Line of Credit and a \$100-million grant from India, along with other projects under India's \$1.4-billion assistance announced during Mr. Solih's last visit to India in December 2018.

However, in contrast to the last visit, which came right after his Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) won a landslide verdict, with 65 of the 87 seats in the Majlis or parliament, Mr. Solih's visit to Delhi comes amid a number of controversies involving a tricky balance between his erstwhile friend Mr. Nasheed, as well the religious extremist parties in his ruling coalition.

The political tussle with Mr. Nasheed could turn into a major rift this week, as members of the ruling party loyal to Mr. Solih are expected to submit a motion of no-confidence against the Speaker, and have begun to collect signatures of the 22 members of the Majlis (Parliament) required to make the submission. The move follows a public protest by Mr. Nasheed and his supporters over the arrest of his brother and attorney, Ahmed Nazim Abdul Sattar. Mr. Sattar was amongst three men accused of homosexual acts, in what Mr. Nasheed called a "selective" prosecution "motivated to appease hardline extremists in the coalition", referring to the right-wing Islamic conservative Adhaalath Party. In a statement last week, the party, whose leader holds the Home Ministry portfolio, publicly stated its opposition to Yoga events that were held by the Indian embassy for Maldives citizens, calling it "un-Islamic", and had earlier also pushed for a strong official reaction to the Prophet controversy in India.

Speaking to *The Hindu* on Monday, Mr. Nasheed said the case against his brother, as well as the no-confidence vote would only benefit radical elements in the country as well as the Opposition parties running the "India Out" campaign. "We founded the MDP to stand for liberal, inclusive values, and my worry is that the people who will really gain from ousting me, and splitting the party are those who want to push Maldives in a xenophobic and religiously radical

direction, and also those who are behind the “India out” campaign,” he said. While South Block made no comment on the issues between the two leaders, it has good ties with both, and the growing rift is viewed with some concern in New Delhi.

### **Close friends**

Relations between President Solih and former President Nasheed go back nearly 50 years, as the two men grew up as friends. In 2018, Mr. Nasheed stepped aside as MDP candidate for Mr. Solih due to cases against him by the previous government.

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