

Crisis in Male

Matters are coming to a head in the Maldives, with President Abdulla Yameen's government pitted against the judiciary, polity and sections of the bureaucracy. Mr. Yameen has ruled since 2013 when he won power in an election, the result of which is still contested. He defeated Mohammad Nasheed, who had been deposed in 2012 and who, in 2015, was sentenced to 13 years in prison on charges of terrorism. Mr. Nasheed is now in exile. In an order on February 1, the Supreme Court cancelled his imprisonment term and that of eight other political leaders, reinstated 12 parliamentarians who had been disqualified last year, and ordered Mr. Yameen to allow the Maldivian parliament, or Majlis, to convene. Mr. Yameen has thus far failed to comply with any of these orders, despite an official statement on February 2 about his government's "commitment to uphold and abide by the ruling of the Supreme Court". The most egregious failure is the government's refusal to cancel the imprisonment of the nine leaders, amongst whom is Mr. Yameen's former vice president and his former defence minister, members of parliament and leaders of major opposition parties, apart from Mr. Nasheed himself. The President has also refused to allow the Majlis to meet, which has led to the resignation of its Secretary General. In fact, the government sent in the army to stop lawmakers from entering the premises, besides arresting two parliamentarians at the airport. Meanwhile, several officials, including two police chiefs and the prison chief have resigned or been sacked, reportedly for seeking to implement the Supreme Court's orders. The Attorney General has now announced that only the Constitution matters, not "illegal orders" from the court. In short, the Maldives is in the midst of a constitutional crisis. Calling fresh elections, which are in any case due later this year, may be the best way out.

Amidst the turmoil, India has joined the U.S., the European Union and several other countries in calling for Mr. Yameen to carry out the Supreme Court's order. New Delhi said in a statement that it is monitoring the situation in Male "closely". But currently, Delhi's leverage in the Maldives is less than it has ever been. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's decision to cancel his visit to Male three years ago, has singled Maldives out as the only country in the South Asian and Indian Ocean Region that he hasn't visited. Given that the Maldives has pulled out of the Commonwealth, and there is little semblance of a SAARC process at present, India's influence in Male is further limited. It will require concerted action from the international community to persuade Mr. Yameen to steer the Maldives out of this crisis, without taking recourse to coercive means.

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