

## Male Turbulence

The dramatic new twist to the long-running political saga in the Maldives reopens the space for democratic politics that President Abdullah Yameen had gone about attacking determinedly. Last week, in a jolting indictment of Yameen's authoritarian rule, the court ordered the immediate release of the former president, Mohammed Nasheed, who was deposed in 2012 and arrested by the Yameen government in 2016 on terrorism charges. The court also ordered the release of eight others, ruling that all the trials were in violation of domestic and international laws. Nasheed, who left the country for medical treatment after a few months in jail, has lived in exile since then.

Significantly, the court reinstated 12 Opposition members of parliament who had been disqualified during a combined Opposition attempt to impeach Yameen in 2016. The landmark judgement, ahead of the presidential elections due this year, has given Nasheed and the Opposition a fighting chance in what was until now a one-sided battle. The order came in response to an Opposition appeal to the court for Yameen's dismissal. It is regrettable that the president has not yet implemented the verdict. Instead, the government sacked the police chief who said his force would implement it, and has put off the planned session of the Majlis due to begin on Monday. There are fears that Yameen may even go so far as to declare an emergency. But, for him, the writing is on the wall. Protestors are out on the streets of Male, demanding his resignation. The president has said he is prepared for early polls, but his actions thus far do not inspire confidence that a free and fair election will be possible with him still in office. For now, with the government looking set to dig in its heels against the Supreme Court order, it may precipitate a bigger crisis for the Maldives. The wisest thing for Yameen to do in the circumstances is to implement the court's verdict in full, which will enable the return of Nasheed without the fear of being put in jail. With presidential elections just months away, it would be best for Yameen to step down in order to create the conditions for peaceful, democratic voting.

India has welcomed the Supreme Court order, and said the Maldives government must abide by it, calling it "imperative" for "the spirit of democracy and rule of law". Uncharacteristically, New Delhi appears to be openly siding with Nasheed and the Maldivian Opposition. This is not surprising. India has felt especially put out by the Yameen government, first by the summary removal of an Indian private company that was developing Male airport, then by the growing closeness between the Maldives President and China. Two years ago, the Maldives rushed through legislation to enable foreigners to hold property freehold. More recently, parliamentarians were presented with a fait accompli free trade agreement with China and given a few hours to read through it and sign on the dotted line. Nasheed, who has openly canvassed India for political backing, may be more India-friendly than Yameen. But, as with Sri Lanka, which has steadfastly built its ties with China even under a "pro-India" government, New Delhi must be prepared to face up to the reality that if Nasheed were to return to power, the Maldives may end up doing the same. Countries act in their own interests. In south Asia, smaller nations have tried to balance their fears and insecurities of living in India's shadow by habitually playing it off against China, and to a lesser extent against Pakistan, using the leverage on both sides to secure their own interests. China's deep pockets do not give India a level playing field in this game, but deep historical and political connections give it a different kind of advantage. Yameen or Nasheed, in the long run, India must reach out to the Maldives without turning it into a zero-sum game with China.

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