

## India must tread lightly if it is called upon to resolve the crisis in the Maldives

The tussle between Maldives's Supreme Court and its president has raised the spectre of military intervention in the Indian Ocean nation, something that is bound to worry policymakers in New Delhi who have much at stake. The trouble began last week with the court clearing former president Mohamed Nasheed of terrorism charges and ordering the release of eight opposition leaders. The move prompted Nasheed, currently in self-exile, to say he would return to contest elections that are expected to be held later this year. The court also ordered the reinstatement of 12 disqualified lawmakers, a move that will give the united opposition the parliamentary majority needed to impeach the president. The government has so far refused to comply with the court's orders and the embattled President Abdulla Yameen has said the directive on the opposition leaders should be revoked.

The army, which has said it will not obey an unconstitutional order, and the police force appear to be rallying behind Yameen, and a top police officer who said the court's order would be enforced was hastily dismissed by the attorney general. On Monday, the army began patrolling around the Supreme Court – clearly an effort to show the judges who is in the driving seat. Since he took over as president in 2013, Yameen has progressively weakened the multi-party democracy that had emerged five years earlier, solely with the intent of clinging to power in the face of strong and legitimate challenges to his leadership. Last year, he used troops to prevent an attempt by the opposition to impeach the Speaker of Parliament. He has also detained political opponents and curtailed protests and freedom of speech.

The Maldives has been buffeted by one political crisis after another since Nasheed, the first democratically-elected president, was forced to quit in 2012. The political uncertainty has coincided with growing Chinese influence in the island nation. In December, the Maldives signed its first free trade agreement with China, after the pact was rushed through Parliament, and agreed to cooperate with Beijing's Maritime Silk Route initiative. Both developments caused considerable consternation in India, which perceives the Maldives as clearly within its sphere of influence. There are also worrying reports of the radicalisation of Maldivian youngsters, some 200 of whom are believed to be fighting with the Islamic State even as a front for Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Taiba has made a foray into the country. India may have to respond to calls from the Maldives' opposition to intervene, but in doing so, it will have to tread lightly so that it is not seen as taking sides.

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