

The making of the Great Ocean of China

The political impasse in the smallest country in the Indian Ocean is drawing global attention to India's power in the region and its leadership role in the world.

If India does not act swiftly to ensure that the Maldivian people's rights are protected and democracy is restored in the country, China, which has sided with the current Maldivian ruler Abdulla Yameen, is going to consolidate power in the region around India.

The Maldives has been on a downhill slope since the coup d'état in 2012, when former president Mohamed Nasheed was forced to resign under duress; the country's situation has deteriorated steadily since Yameen took office in a highly contested election. Soon after taking office, he has prosecuted every opposition leader and they are either in jail or exile.

For many Maldivians like me, the coup d'état still feels surreal. We watched parliamentarians getting beaten on the streets and peaceful protesters being met with batons and pepper spray. The death of Maldivian democracy stood in stark contrast to our euphoria after the hard-earned end of a 30-year dictatorship. Yameen's older half-brother, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who lost the first multi-party election in 2008, was the only president many of us had known our entire lives.

For four years, we tasted freedom and rule of law.

Today, voices demanding freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, or calling to uphold the rule of law are thrown behind bars. The door to jail cells is a revolving one, and there is a continuous flow of political prisoners.

Not even members of Yameen's own political party are safe if they are seen as a threat to his power. Not too long ago, we saw a member of Parliament (MP) stabbed to death with a machete on the stairwell of his home. When an investigative journalist, Ahmed Rilwan, started reporting on the murder, he was abducted from his home and hasn't been seen since. Shortly after, Rilwan's friend and political blogger Yameen Rasheed, who sought the truth of his friend's disappearance, was stabbed in the neck and chest multiple times in the stairwell of his apartment building. State-sponsored attacks on citizens and a culture of impunity have taken over our country. Despite being under constant threat, harassment and fear, Maldivians are still fighting for their rights every day.

It's clear that the current pressure from the international community, including our closest ally and neighbour India, has not stopped Yameen's blatant disregard for the rule of law so far. For example, the international community condemned the current administration's refusal to release former president Nasheed, eight other political prisoners and reinstate 12 members of Parliament. Instead of abiding by our Supreme Court ruling, Yameen's government declared a state of emergency, arresting and jailing two Supreme Court justices, three MPs, his half-brother, former president Gayoom, and anyone whom he saw as a danger to his rule.

We Maldivians share strong ethnic, linguistic, cultural and commercial ties with India but if our human rights abuses are not enough to compel India into taking more concrete steps to stop Yameen, their own security should be reason enough.

The rapid deterioration of the situation in the Maldives since 2012 has extended far beyond the shores of our islands because of our location, and it has brought India's significance in the region into question. The worth of this vast ocean to India cannot be exaggerated.

The Maldives lies next to crucial shipping lanes, one of the major choke points for the world maritime transit of oil which provides continuous energy supplies from the West to the Far East through the Indian Ocean (equivalent to just under half of the world's total oil supply). Also, according to India's ministry of shipping, about 95% of the country's trade by volume and 70% by value comes via the Indian Ocean. As China swiftly grows its military presence in the Indian Ocean in the garb of anti-piracy operations, India must come up with a more coherent plan; at the end of last year, it was forced to carry out a threat assessment due to the presence of Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean.

The Maldives, since its independence in 1965, has had an "India first" policy and leaders of both countries have held high-level exchanges on regional issues. But since Yameen took office, he has aligned with China, which has defended his authoritarian rule. The Maldives now owes about 80% of its foreign debt to China, which has been spreading its wings rapidly in South Asia and has been eyeing the atoll nation for its strategic location. China has already cosied up to Nepal by helping the latter reduce its significant trade deficit; it has invested heavily in Sri Lanka and Pakistan. China is strategically encircling India under the fancy name of the "Silk Road Project". A part of the road will also pass through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and may eventually help further Pakistani ambitions in Kashmir.

Is India losing its grip in the region and becoming a non-actor in the mighty Indian Ocean? Are we witnessing the making of the Great Ocean of China? If India loses its dominant power in Asia, it will not be able to safeguard its security or protect its interests.

Although ours may be the smallest country in the region, our economic and political value cannot be overlooked. Let's hope it's not too late by the time India recognizes this.

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