

'MALÉ MAKES NO APOLOGY FOR TIES WITH INDIA'

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Indian Ocean Island nations

Maldivian President **Ibrahim Mohamed Solih**, rose to power in 2018, promising democratic governance and justice to citizens. While the two years he has completed in office have seen major policy changes, his incumbent government faces many challenges, only heightened by the pandemic. In an email interview, President Solih speaks on economic revival plans, regional cooperation, and responds to criticism over his government's "over-reliance" on India. Excerpt:

Mr. President, you have completed over two years in office. How would you evaluate your performance?

This administration has accomplished much in the past two years across every major policy sphere. We have made education free up to the first undergraduate degree; initiated a health sector reform programme which has seen the upgrading of medical centres; we've strengthened our decentralisation legislation to empower local communities and reverse decades of over-centralisation.

We have also demonstrated our commitment to gender equality by legally mandating that 1/3rd of our local councils be comprised of women and by appointing the first ever women justices to the Maldives' Supreme Court. We have repealed regressive legislation such as a defamation act that criminalised speech critical of the government.

On the international front we have reinvigorated our relationships with our global partners, re-entered the Maldives into important organisations such as the Commonwealth of Nations, and reiterated our ambitions towards mitigation and adaption against the climate emergency.

Like the rest of the world, the Maldives too is reeling under the impact of the pandemic. How do you plan to revive your economy?

Our economy has long been reliant on tourism. The pandemic and the consequent restrictions on global air travel have adversely affected this industry and the overall economy. With the reopening of our borders, and stringent health measures in place at our resorts in accordance with guidelines developed by our health authorities and Tourism Ministry, the tourism industry is now slowly recovering, as is our economy. However, the pandemic has also made clear the danger of our economy being overly reliant on a single sector.

We will also need international assistance and support for our recovery efforts, to shore up our depleted foreign currency reserves, and reduce our debt burden.

The Maldivian Auditor-General recently voiced concern over your government's "heavy reliance" on a single country for grants, alluding to India. Given that Male-New Delhi bilateral relations improved drastically after your election, how do you respond to that?

We appreciate the proactive role that India has taken in economic relief efforts and providing financial assistance to the Maldives, as well as for its continued development assistance. We are also very happy that bilateral relations have improved with India, as it has between the Maldives and many of our partners across the globe. The Maldives is keen to engage with all our partners.

It is significant, because the political opposition and critics of your government have

accused your administration of “selling off Maldives” to India, taking out rallies on Male’s streets and leading ‘India out’ campaigns on social media.

Moving away from an isolationist foreign policy and engaging with our neighbours strengthen our national security and increase respect for us as a sovereign country. The Maldives makes no apologies for our positive engagement with our largest neighbour, and one of our closest international partners, India.

We welcome constructive criticism of our foreign policy, as well as other aspects of our governance. Undermining relationships that are in the interest of the Maldives for the sake of demagoguery and cheap political points is irresponsible.

One of your key election promises was that your government will revisit the deals signed by the Yameen administration with China - loans and infrastructure projects - if elected. Have you been able to restructure the debt — over \$ 1.4 billion — Male owes Beijing?

China is a close and valued partner to the Maldives. We welcome their participating in the G20’s DSSI [Debt Service Suspension Initiative], and appreciate that we have been able to positively engage with them to renegotiate the terms of ongoing development assistance and economic projects, in a manner mutually beneficial to both countries, and consistent with our friendly relations.

Your government recently signed a defence deal with the U.S., and another agreement with Japan to strengthen your Coast Guard. Last month, the Indian Foreign Secretary visited your capital. Is Male leaning towards the ‘Quad’ bloc?

The Maldives’ priorities lie in a peaceful Indian Ocean region. Our international engagements are to enhance our commercial cooperation, strengthen regional peace and security, facilitate economic prosperity for our country, and voice out on issues important to us on the international fora, such as climate change and environmental preservation. We will pursue our goals alongside our partners who share our mutual priorities.

The geopolitical contest in the region has escalated this year, especially after the border tensions between India and China. How does this impact the Maldives and your foreign policy choices?

Not at all. The Maldives believes that differences between international partners can be settled peacefully through dialogue and mediation. While this is ongoing, it does not hinder our ability to constructively engage with our partners on issues of mutual interest.

What, in your view, are the prospects for regional cooperation, including through SAARC, in the Indian Ocean Region in this difficult climate of the pandemic and persisting bilateral tensions between India and Pakistan?

I reiterate that regional differences should be settled amicably through means and solutions agreeable to all concerned. While it is not in the Maldives’s policy to comment on disagreements between two sovereign countries, we also believe that such disputes are best resolved through strengthening multilateral and regional cooperation mechanisms, and using such channels for frequent dialogue and mediation. While the pandemic may be a challenge towards realising such ends in the immediate future I believe it has made especially evident that major global issues and crises cannot be contained to borders, and will thus help galvanise efforts to strengthen regional cooperation frameworks in the long-term. The Maldives is happy to be part of such efforts.

***Moving away from an isolationist foreign policy and engaging with our neighbours
strengthen our national security***

Subscribe to The Hindu digital to get unlimited access to Today's paper

Already have an account ? [Sign in](#)

Start your 14 days free trial. [Sign Up](#)

Find mobile-friendly version of articles from the day's newspaper in one easy-to-read list.

Enjoy reading as many articles as you wish without any limitations.

A select list of articles that match your interests and tastes.

Move smoothly between articles as our pages load instantly.

A one-stop-shop for seeing the latest updates, and managing your preferences.

We brief you on the latest and most important developments, three times a day.

*Our Digital Subscription plans do not currently include the e-paper, crossword and print.

You can support quality journalism by turning off ad blocker or purchase a subscription for unlimited access to The Hindu.

[Sign up for a 30 day free trial.](#)

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

Crack