

A CHANGE FOR THE WORSE: ON THE RAPID DECLINE IN INDIA-MALDIVES TIES

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The rapid decline in ties between India and the Maldives, just a month after [Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with the newly elected Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu](#), should set alarm bells ringing. The trigger came from [tweets by three Maldivian Ministers](#), attacking Mr. Modi for promoting the Lakshadweep islands during [his recent sojourn there](#) at a perceived cost to the Maldives and for his close ties with Israel; the Ministers also made derogatory remarks about Indians. The tweets have been deleted, the Ministers suspended, and the Maldivian government has distanced itself from them, but the damage has been done. The respective Ambassadors were summoned. Hurt Indians have crowded [social media sites calling for an economic “boycott” of the Maldives](#) — Indian tourists make up the most arrivals post-COVID-19. However, the underlying reasons run deeper, and could have a broader impact on India-Maldives relations and the neighbourhood, accruing to the change in government in Male. Mr. Muizzu rode to power on the back of the PPM’s “India Out” campaign. Despite its disappointment with the win of ‘anti-Indian forces’, given the warm relationship it shared with his predecessor Ibrahim Solih, the Modi government sent a Minister to his swearing in, and there was a Modi-Muizzu meet at the COP28. However, Mr. Muizzu chose Turkey as his first bilateral destination, and is now [visiting China](#) — becoming the first President not to make India his first priority. Even President Yameen, who began the “India Out” movement and cozied up to Beijing, visited Delhi first in 2014. Mr. Muizzu has continued to press India on the withdrawal of its military personnel, even though India has clarified their role.

With the calls for boycotts and rising hypernationalistic rhetoric, Delhi and Male need to take a step back and reassess their responses. Mr. Muizzu can ill-afford to antagonise India, given its proximity, economic might and historical position as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean, something Maldives has relied on. India too must see the futility of muscling in a much smaller neighbour, however egregious the provocation. The last few years of ties between the Solih government and Delhi show the benefits of a stronger relationship: India’s infrastructure forays and development projects in the islands, an intense strategic partnership, support during the COVID-19 pandemic, and cooperation on the international stage. For India, in a region that sees several elections this year, it is paramount to ensure that domestic political changes in the neighbourhood do not change the basic structure of bilateral ties, or affect regional stability.

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