

'India backed Maldives in UN'

India had assured the Maldives of its support for a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council on at least three occasions, including one day before Friday's vote, its envoy said.

The Maldives lost the vote for the Asia-Pacific seat to Indonesia by a large margin, winning only 46 of the 190 votes cast at the UN General Assembly for the two-year stint. Given a downslide in India-Maldives ties over the past year, however, India's vote is particularly significant.

"India reassured us in writing as recently as June 7 of its support at the UNSC election, which it had reiterated twice in the past, and we highly appreciate India's stand," Maldives Ambassador to India Ahmed Mohamed told *The Hindu*.

Secret ballot

Though the External Affairs Ministry refused to comment on India's stand at the vote, which is conducted by a secret ballot, it is understood that its recent assurance of support was received by the Maldivian mission at the United Nations from India's Permanent Mission in New York.

In January 2014, the India-Maldives joint statement issued after a meeting between President Abdulla Yameen and then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, both countries had committed to supporting each other's candidature for the UNSC non-permanent seats.

While the Maldives stood for the 2019-20 term, India has announced it will stand for the Security Council seat in 2021-22.

According to officials, the Ministry had in mid-2017 repeated its support in reply to a query from the Maldivian Foreign Ministry.

Since then, however, relations between New Delhi and Male went into a tailspin over President Yameen's decision to rush through a Free Trade Agreement with China, and imposing an Emergency in the country in February that lasted several weeks and saw a crackdown on the Opposition parties. India objected strenuously, and even refused to entertain a special envoy sent by President Yameen to explain his decision. Meanwhile, the Maldives invited Pakistan's Army Chief to Male and discussed joint patrols in the Indian ocean, once an exclusive domain of the Indian Navy.

Adding to the uncertainty over which way India would vote was Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Indonesia last week, where the two sides upgraded their defence and strategic ties. Given the government's emphasis on its "Act East" policy as well as strengthening ties with ASEAN, while not so much importance was given to SAARC (the Maldives is not part of the other sub-regional groups BIMSTEC and BBIN that India is promoting), it was widely believed that India would cast its lot with Indonesia over the Maldives.

Never any doubt

"This was just media speculation, I think," said Mr. Mohamed, who said that there had never been any doubt in Male about India's support.

"The vote shows a continuity of good relations between our two countries, and as a small island state we particularly appreciate this," he added, referring to External Affairs Minister Sushma

Swaraj's recent statement at a press conference, that India's relations with the Maldives "are not broken and cannot be broken" as it is a neighbouring country.

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