

Islands apart: on India-Maldives ties

Recent moves by Abdulla Yameen, President of the Maldives, have put Malé on a collision course with New Delhi. Even the presidential election, which India has been calling for, is a point of contention. On Thursday, India criticised the government for its incarceration of former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom and Chief Justice Abdulla Saeed, sentenced to 19 months in prison for an alleged plot to unseat Mr. Yameen. India called the trial a sham, saying the sentencing put a question mark on the credibility of the presidential election process. This tough talk may not be taken kindly to in Malé. There has been a series of setbacks in India-Maldives ties, starting from March 2015 when Prime Minister Narendra Modi cancelled a visit in a show of disapproval of the treatment of Mohamed Nasheed, then in prison facing treason and terror charges. Since then, India has called out many actions of Mr. Yameen's government, including the conduct of polls, treatment of the judiciary and, in February, his declaration of a state of emergency. On the last, it also rejected Mr. Yameen's offer to send an envoy to explain his decision. Bolstered by a newly strengthened relationship with China, Mr. Yameen showed no inclination to heed India's advice. The strain is now evident in two areas where India-Maldives ties had been the strongest: strategic relations and people-to-people engagement. The Maldives has conveyed to India that it will not extend beyond June 30 the lease of Indian helicopters or the visas of personnel manning them. This signals a marked downturn in defence cooperation between the two countries, which normally coordinate maritime and EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone) patrols together. Meanwhile, hundreds of Indians offered employment in the Maldives at resorts, hospitals and colleges have been [denied work visas](#) for the past few months.

The Yameen government must reconsider these policies. India too must pause to consider why relations have soured so badly. Until a few years ago, the Maldives affirmed an "India First" policy. The fact that the Maldives is the only country in the neighbourhood that Mr. Modi hasn't visited is one reason, but there are many others. India's vocal protests on democratic rights in the Maldives have been at variance with the past policy of taking a more muted line in public while encouraging democracy in official conversations. Mr. Gayoom also ran a near-autocracy for three decades from 1978, and India's interventions always aimed at strengthening the government there, with any misgivings conveyed only through quiet diplomacy. India has been the first port of call in crisis for Maldivian leaders; when Mr. Nasheed was deposed in 2012, it was at the Indian embassy that he sought refuge. It's time to restore the bilateral trust.

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