

After the emergency: repairing ties with Maldives

The Maldivian government's decision to lift the state of emergency after 45 days, just ahead of the expiry of its second self-imposed deadline, comes as cold comfort for those concerned about the turn of events in the islands over the past couple of months. In a statement India said the withdrawal of the emergency is but "one step", and much more must be done to restore democracy in the Maldives. The opposition, mostly in exile and led by former President Mohamad Nasheed, says the emergency was lifted only because President Abdulla Yameen has established total control over the judiciary and parliament since the February 1 court verdict that cancelled the sentencing of 12 opposition leaders and ordered their release. In a dramatic turn of events Mr. Yameen had then ordered the arrest of two judges, as well as hundreds of activists and politicians including former President Abdul Gayoom, and imposed a state of emergency. The remaining judges overturned the February 1 release order, under what is seen to be coercion by the security forces, which had locked down the Majlis (parliament) and court buildings. Therefore, lifting the emergency does not automatically amount to *status quo ante*.

Repairing India-Maldives ties, that have taken an equally sharp dip since February 1, will be a tall order. Male has reacted sharply to India's public statements on the emergency, as well as now to the statement welcoming the lifting of the emergency, saying that the events of the past couple of months were "internal political matters", and India's statements of disapproval were "not helpful at all". The pushback from the Yameen government is in stark contrast to its desire over the past few years to work with India, and it isn't hard to see why. Bolstered by a close relationship with China, Mr. Yameen has in a matter of months gone from declaring an 'India first' policy to disregarding its concerns. With military exchanges, a free trade agreement with China and a slew of Chinese infrastructure investments in place, the Yameen government clearly considers itself sufficiently insulated from any counter-moves by India or the U.S. During the current crisis, China placed its diplomatic might behind Mr. Yameen, and even offered to broker talks between the government and the opposition, a role that India would have been naturally expected to play in the past. It is important to note that a military intervention by India was never a possibility, and comparisons made to India's actions in 1988 are pointless. India has been wise to keep its counsel and not over-react to the recent events. But going ahead, its challenge is tougher: to demonstrate its relevance to the Maldives as the biggest power in the South Asian region, while helping steer Mr. Yameen to a more reasonable and inclusive democratic course ahead of the presidential election later this year.

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