

BACK ON TRACK: ON INDIA-MALDIVES TIES

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

India and the Maldives appeared to return to the old days of strategic bonhomie when External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj met her counterpart Abdulla Shahid in Male during a brief visit this week. It is the first full-fledged bilateral visit at the political level from India to the Maldives after the new government assumed office in the wake of the historic election last September. President Ibrahim Solih assumed charge after a multi-party, pro-democracy coalition led by his Maldivian Democratic Party was swept to power. Mr. Solih's inauguration, which was marked by the attendance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, was assumed to be a potential inflection point in the trajectory of bilateral ties with India. The previous five years witnessed Male's disconcerting drift, under the aegis of the Abdulla Yameen government, into what many Maldivians felt was the stifling embrace of China. Chinese financing for infrastructure and construction projects poured in even as the functioning of the political Opposition and the judiciary was harshly curtailed. All of this flux appeared to have been washed away on September 23, 2018 when the Maldivian electorate voted resoundingly for the coalition that backed Mr. Solih for President.

Yet it would be unwise for New Delhi to take the Indian Ocean nation for granted. There is indeed an opportunity for reset on numerous policies, and some of that has already happened. In December, when Mr. Solih visited India, a \$1.4 billion financial assistance package for the Maldives was announced. While the proximity of the Indian general election may have precluded any major policy announcements from New Delhi, the two countries have agreed to exempt holders of diplomatic and official passports from visa requirements, inked an MoU on Indian grant-in-aid for "high-impact community development projects", and other agreements on energy efficiency and renewable energy, areas critical to the agenda of Mr. Solih. At a broader level, the archipelago and the larger Indian Ocean region could expect more collaborative approaches on regional maritime security issues, including counterterrorism and trans-national crimes. However, Male is still grappling with the legacy of the Yameen administration's headlong plunge into the orbit of Beijing. The massive debts the Maldives incurred, by some estimates to the tune of \$3 billion, linked to infrastructure investments need to be unwound. Second, the multiparty alliance must hold firm despite immense political pressures that arise from varying visions for governance. Some tensions already seem to be bubbling to the top: on February 25, Mohamed Nasheed, former President and important coalition-builder in the MDP, tweeted about the country's Supreme Court "meddling in elections — again". For genuine peace and bilateral harmony to take root in the region, building a shared vision for the future of the Maldives is the immediate task at hand.

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