

THE MALDIVES' NEW REGIME IS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR INDIA TO REGAIN ITS LOST GROUND

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

The Maldives and India appear to have struck all the right chords for a much-needed reset of the bilateral relationship as the new government headed by President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih assumed office in Male over the weekend. Mr Solih's swearing-in was immediately followed by a meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the only head of state or government to be invited to the ceremony — a clear signal, if any was needed, as to which way the new leadership of the Maldives is leaning. The two countries agreed to focus on the concerns and aspirations of both sides as they work to maintain peace and stability in the Indian Ocean region. Mr Solih spoke of the "dire economic situation" facing the Maldives and Mr Modi assured him that the Indian government was prepared to help the archipelago in "every possible way".

Even before he assumed office, Mr Solih had spoken of an "India first" policy, a significant shift away from his predecessor Abdulla Yameen's tight embrace of China, both for political support in the face of international condemnation of his repressive policies and for financial backing for massive infrastructure projects. It is the huge Chinese debt associated with these projects — with various estimates putting it at \$1.5 billion to as much as \$3 billion, or almost half the country's GDP — that will be the first challenge Mr Solih will have to face. Then there is the issue of keeping together the multi-party alliance led by the Maldives Democratic Party. Though Mr Solih enjoys the support of former president, Mohamed Nasheed, one cannot forget that Mr Yameen garnered almost 42 % of the votes in September's election and still enjoys considerable support. Mr Solih's government will also have to contend with the creeping rise of Islamic radicalisation, with the Maldives recently emerging as a country with one of the highest per capita numbers for foreign fighters operating with groups in Syria and Iraq.

Clearly, India will be glad to regain some of the space it had been forced to cede in the Maldives because of Mr Yameen's pro-China stance. The two countries will have an opportunity to discuss issues such as the continued presence of two military helicopters and associated personnel, which Mr Yameen had wanted to send back, and the denial of work visas to hundreds of Indians in recent months. India will also have to take the lead in working with the Maldives to strengthen both Mr Solih's government and democratic institutions.

First Published: Nov 20, 2018 18:00 IST

END

Downloaded from crackIAS.com

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com