

ONCE MORE, WITH MALE

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

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Maldives President Ibrahim Solih's swearing-in on Saturday marked the successful culmination of a democratic struggle. The government of his predecessor, Abdulla Yameen, had turned increasingly dictatorial. Yameen's rule saw concerted efforts to trample the institutions of the state — including the country's parliament and judiciary — as well as a clamping down on the Opposition and voices of dissent, notably the conviction of his predecessor, Mohamed Nasheed.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's presence at Solih's inauguration reflected the goodwill that seems to have been rekindled between Male and New Delhi. Equally, it is a sign of the high-stakes strategic game that continues to unfold in the island republic.

Yameen's years also saw the deepening alignment between the Maldives and China. The Maldives' geopolitical location on the major east-west sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean raised its strategic value for Beijing. As part of its quest for special political relationships with key island states in the Indian Ocean — including Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and Seychelles — China began to devote considerable political and economic resources to drawing the Maldives into its orbit. This involved directed tourist flows, investment in strategic infrastructure and political support for Yameen.

As he fended off India's pressure for democracy, Yameen found Beijing to be a valuable ally. Now, with Solih at the helm, it is an opportune moment for Male to renew its ties with India. Solih reportedly sought India's assistance to develop his country's infrastructure during his meeting with Modi and the two leaders discussed the modalities of deepening economic cooperation. On the other hand, on Monday, Nasheed has suggested that the new government will pull out of the Free Trade Agreement with China.

While India has reasons to view the turn of events in the Maldives with satisfaction, it would be unwise to assume that the country has become "pro-India" and return to the old ways of doing business in Male. New Delhi needs to realise that its smaller neighbours are not willing to offer uncritical and unquestioning support for India. It must also recognise Beijing's ability to win favours. We saw this in play in Sri Lanka where China compelled Maithripala Sirisena and Ranil Wickremesinghe to back Chinese infrastructure projects that they had initially opposed.

India must learn to engage the Maldives with sensitivity and devote sustained political attention and economic resources to transform the bilateral relationship into a genuine Indian Ocean partnership.

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