

# INDIA PINS ITS PRESTIGE ON MAURITIUS PROJECT

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

In 2015, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi had witnessed the signing of the agreement for Agalega Islands, the MoU had provided for “setting up and upgradation of infrastructure for improving sea and air connectivity” and enhancing “capabilities of the Mauritian Defence Forces in safeguarding their interests in the Outer Island.”

However, since then, there have been growing reports over the Indian Naval and Coast Guard’s interests in setting up transponder systems and surveillance infrastructure, which has led to some local protests.

In March this year, several islanders, including some from Agalega, which has a tiny population of 300, formed the “Koalision Zilwa Pou Lape” (Islanders Coalition for Peace), to lobby against the Agalega project. The protests were fuelled by the fact that Mauritius is in a major international legal battle over the ownership of its Chagos Island at present, which were turned into the U.S.’s “Diego Garcia” naval base in the 1960s. France maintains naval bases in the Indian Ocean and stations frigates off its Reunion islands, while China has a string of naval assets in the region from Gwadar to Djibouti, all leading to fears of their peaceful island region becoming increasingly militarised.

However, Indian officials point out that India’s projects in the neighbourhood have never been acquisitive or “colonial”.

“Unlike the military bases run by other countries, the Indian model is of a soft base,” explained a government official. “We don’t bar locals from moving through any Indian-made project. So these governments get more control over their domain, without diluting their sovereignty,” the official added indicating that the government believes the protests are the product of “misunderstandings and some motivated elements”.

## Opposition determined

Mauritian opposition members say they will continue to protest the government’s “lack of transparency” over the project, and the fact that the Mauritian government has exempted the project from any Environmental license process (EIA clearances).

Worries for India stem from the fact that it was just such protests, that began on a very small scale in the Seychelles, that led to plans for a coast guard facility on the Assumption Islands being shelved, after President Danny Faure said he lacked the parliamentary strength to ratify it. The setback, according to speculation, may have been chalked up to China’s heavy investment in the Seychelles.

A similar situation was believed to have led to former Maldivian President Yameen’s decision to cancel the loan of two Indian military helicopters and the visas of about 28 naval personnel, although after his defeat in elections, the decision may have been stayed.

“India needs to project itself as a credible and long term partner in a more persuasive manner, than what has been the experience in recent years,” Commodore (Retd) Uday Bhaskar of the Society for Policy Studies told *The Hindu*.

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