

THE MALDIVES RESULT CAN HELP COUNTER CHINA'S INFLUENCE ON THE INDIAN OCEAN

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Maldives strongman Abdulla Yameen's hopes for a second presidential term have been dashed with the victory of the candidate of the combined opposition, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih. According to unofficial results, Mr Solih won more than 58% of the votes, compared to Mr Yameen's 41%. This was after opposition parties accused Mr Yameen, who came to power in 2013, of widespread rights abuses and other unconstitutional measures to swing the elections. Hours ahead of the voting on Sunday, police searched Mr Solih's campaign office to investigate "acts of bribery", a move described by the opposition as yet another effort to influence the outcome of the polls. The elections were preceded by a months-long and sweeping crackdown on the opposition, as the autocratic Mr Yameen jailed or forced into exile many of his opponents, including former presidents Mohamed Nasheed and Maumoon Abdul Gayoom and declared a state of emergency early this year.

The elections in the Maldives were closely watched as an indicator of China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean region. Many observers believe the intransigent stance adopted by Mr Yameen was largely due to the unstinted support he received from Beijing, which poured billions of dollars into big ticket infrastructure projects and signed a free trade agreement with Male last December. As in Malaysia, where a pro-Beijing regime was ousted in recent elections, Mr Solih's victory is expected to lead to intensified scrutiny of China's investments in the Maldives. For India, which has described Mr Solih's win as the triumph of democratic forces, the latest developments provide an opportunity to forge a closer relationship with the new administration and counter China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean region. Mr Solih has the backing of former president, Mr Nasheed, an old friend of New Delhi, is perceived as being friendly towards India, and has expressed concerns about Chinese loans creating a debt trap for the Maldives.

Clearly, some deft diplomacy will be required to address a host of pressing issues but India can and should earn goodwill by extending whatever assistance is asked of it as Mr Solih takes on the task of rebuilding the fragile democracy in the Maldives.

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