

# A CHANGE IN THE MALDIVES

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

Democracy is a strange leveller. In domestic politics it has a way of springing up surprises which few anticipate. Even in foreign relations, it can make crises disappear in the same manner in which it can create them. When most had assumed that a second term for Maldivian President Abdulla Yameen was a done deal, given the controlled nature of the Maldivian elections, the people of the small archipelago in the Indian Ocean voted for change and brought to power the Opposition candidate, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih. They came out in huge numbers with the turnout being 89.2% and dealt a decisive blow to Mr. Yameen.

Belying concerns that he may not respect the outcome, after a few hours of election results, Mr. Yameen conceded defeat in a televised address by saying: "The Maldivian people have decided what they want. I have accepted the results."

Mr. Solih is a senior politician in the Maldives and was the joint presidential candidate for an opposition alliance of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), the Jumhooree Party and the Adhaalath Party. His victory underscores the commitment of the Maldivian politicians to secure the future of democracy in their country. The exiled former President of the Maldives, Mohammed Nasheed, who was ousted by Mr. Yameen in 2012, underlined this when he tweeted that Mr. Solih had done "an extremely good service" to the people. This was a do or die battle for democrats and they succeeded.

After the results came out, India's Ministry of External Affairs said Sunday's election marked "not only the triumph of democratic forces in the Maldives but also reflects the firm commitment to the values of democracy and the rule of law." Prime Minister Narendra Modi also called Mr. Solih, underscoring his support for better ties between the two countries. The U.S. State Department said the Maldivian people had "raised their democratic voices to determine the future of their country."

Voters' choice: on Maldives presidential polls

The Maldives has been in turmoil since its first democratically-elected leader, Mr. Nasheed, was forced out of office following a police mutiny in 2012. This was followed by the controversial election of Mr. Yameen in 2013 when the Supreme Court annulled the result. Mr. Yameen was trailing Mr. Nasheed, thereby providing him an opportunity to win in the second round of voting. Mr. Yameen's presidency saw the Maldives flirting with Islamist radicalism and the democratic underpinnings of the nation came under assault. This February, he imposed a 45-day state of emergency fearing an attempt by his political opponents to impeach him. This led him to target his own half brother and former President, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, and the judiciary. Even on the eve of the polling, the police was used to target the opposition MDP, amid concerns that the campaign had been heavily tilted in favour of Mr. Yameen.

Mr. Yameen also fostered closer ties with China and Saudi Arabia, ignoring India and even pulling the Maldives out of the Commonwealth in 2016.

The alacrity with which Mr. Yameen embraced China caught India off guard. During his China visit last year, the two nations signed 12 pacts, including a free trade agreement (FTA). Mr. Yameen not only fully endorsed China's ambitious Maritime Silk Road initiative but also made the Maldives the second country in South Asia, after Pakistan, to enter into an FTA with China. The Yameen government pushed the FTA through the nation's Parliament, the Majlis, stealthily,

with the opposition not attending the parliamentary session.

The opposition accused the Yameen government “of allowing a Chinese ‘land grab’ of Maldivian islands, key infrastructure, and even essential utilities, which “not only undermines the independence of the Maldives, but the security of the entire Indian Ocean region”. The massive infrastructure growth funded by Chinese debt was a key part of Mr. Yameen’s election campaign but the massive debt trap made it a difficult proposition to be accepted.

Mr. Yameen may have conceded defeat but many of the challenges the Maldives faces linger. The opposition may have been united in its desire to oust Mr. Yameen but this unity will be tested in governance. Democratic institutions have been weakened and a fragile democracy can also be susceptible to radical ideologies if not effectively governed. And China is not going anywhere in a hurry. Its economic presence in the Maldives is a reality that all governments will have to contend with.

Mr. Yameen’s ouster has certainly produced a favourable outcome for New Delhi and it should seize the moment to rebuild ties with Male. If there is one lesson out of the Maldives crisis, it is that political elites in India’s neighbours will come and go but if India can stand together with the aspirations of citizens of neighbouring countries, then the prospects of a long-term sustainable relationship will be much brighter.

*Harsh V. Pant is Distinguished Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi and Professor at King’s College London*

Sign up to receive our newsletter in your inbox every day!

Please enter a valid email address.

Last week Ram Kadam, a BJP MLA from Maharashtra, told the men in an audience that if they were interested in women who didn’t reciprocate the feeling,

Our existing notification subscribers need to choose this option to keep getting the alerts.

**END**

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com