

India's Role in the Restoration of Democracy in Maldives: Challenges and Options

*Journal of Asian
Social Science Research*
2022, Vol. 4, No. 2: 183-194
<https://cassr.net/jassr/>
© The Author(s) 2022

Hemanta Kumar Biswas*

Kazi Nazrul University, India

Abstract

This article examines the dynamics of politics and international relations in South Asia with a reference to the Maldives. The Maldives is a small, fragile nation in South Asia, with 198 of its 1,192 islands inhabited. The peaceful Maldives, at the dawn of democracy, turned volatile when Nasheed started a campaign to impeach a criminal court judge. At that moment, India consciously did not want to get involved in the internal affairs of the Maldives. But in this opportunity, some countries like China, Pakistan, USA wanted to increase their influence in the democracy of Maldives. Some Islamic fundamentalist groups also tried to put a stain on the democracy of Maldives. A weak judiciary, corruption, and nepotism have taken a terrible toll on the country's democracy. In the presidential election of 2008 and 2013 Maldives, India's cooperation was an unprecedented event in this electoral system. However, Maldives has wandered between various ups and downs leading to the establishment of democracy. As a small country in South Asia, the establishment and context of democracy are very important, and Maldivian foreign policy towards India is always influenced by domestic politics. So, this paper focuses on the role of India to establish democracy in Maldives. The content analysis method was used in this study. Hence, this article contributes to studies of politics and international relations among countries in South Asia.

Key Words

Maldivian democracy, domestic policy, India's role, opposition, radical forces

* Corresponding author:

Hemanta Kumar Biswas

Department of Political Science, Kazi Nazrul University, Asansol, West Bengal, India.

E-mail: hemanta.biswas07@gmail.com

Introduction

The Republic of Maldives is a small, weak, and vulnerable island state in the South Asian region that is geographically situated about 675 km southwest of Sri Lanka and about 700 km south of Lakshadweep. Maldives consists of 1192 islands of which 192 are inhabited. India- Maldives relationship is influenced by their geographical closeness and historical bond of friendship since 1965. As one of the largest democratic institutions, India plays a vital role in establishing democracy and sustaining political stability in the Maldives. So, India has been its most important development partner, and both countries maintain their diplomatic ties and neighbourly relations for regional stability. Although India-Maldives cordial relationships have faced many difficulties or challenges several times, it can be said that India and Maldives have already taken sincere steps in terms of their regional foreign policy.

The free and fair election of 2008 ended the autocrat Gayoom's regime of 30 years and the new constitution allowed Maldivians to elect Mohamed Nasheed democratically. Although the Maldives became turbulent at the dawn of democracy and emerged in the discourse of world politics, India consciously did not want to involve in the internal politics of Maldives. But, in this context, China, Pakistan and the USA wanted to influence the island nation. In addition, fundamentalist groups of the Middle East seek to infuse radicalism into the Maldivian political culture. The citizens of Maldives have adopted one religion and one language so national integrity is well established in Maldives.

Likewise, if we want to discuss the democracy of any country, the issue of women's participation in the political functions of that country is important. The contribution of women is equal to that of men in Maldivian electoral politics. In comparison to other Islamic states in South Asia, Maldivian women are faring well in terms of gender-based development. The first national university of Maldives was established in 2011 under the presidency of Mohamed Nasheed (Fernando 2011). Due to the low rate of higher education in the Maldives, civil society does not develop in the country whereas it is a necessary condition for the democratic development of a state.

This article aims to discuss the basic structure of Maldivian Democracy, analyze the challenges in the way of establishing democracy in Maldives and find out India's role and assistance towards Maldivian Democracy. The required data were collected through literature data collection from main and secondary sources such as books, journals, newspapers, and

websites. The content analysis method was used to analyse the collected data. By doing so, this article contributes to the studies of Maldives' politics and international relations in South Asia.

Historical Journey of Democracy in Maldives

In the 16th century, the Maldives was a Portuguese colony. After the Portuguese rule, from 1887 to 1965 the island nation was under British rule. However, they did not interfere in the internal affairs of Maldives, and at that time the island nation was ruled by the sultan. Sultan was the elected head of the state. After abolishing the sultanate in November 1968, Maldives became the Second Republic and Ibrahim Nasir was elected the first President of Maldives after Independence (Bussa 2018:44). He was the Prime Minister during the sultanate regime (*The Europe World Year Book* 1996:2089). In 1968, a new constitution was formulated in the Maldives by his initiatives. The most important aspect of this new constitution was that a presidential election will be held every five years and the President is the head of the state. The President will have all the administrative powers. President will also select the cabinet members by his own choice while the cabinet members are responsible to the Majlis, the Parliament of Maldives. Apart from that, the power of the president, cabinet, and legislature was specified in this constitution (Chowdhury 2019).

Under the presidency of Ibrahim Nasir, Maldives faced a few abortive strategies and the Maldivian economy was moving downward due to the collapse of the export of dried fish. So, the popularity of Nasir's government declined and was replaced by Mamoon Abdul Gayoom peacefully through the electoral process in 1978. During Gayoom's presidency, Maldives was undergoing political stability and economic development. But, the failure in basic human rights protection, the process of reforming the constitution, and the influence of autocracy became the major constraints to better democracy and faster development of the island nation. A series of constitutional reforms was proclaimed on February 2005 including the limitation of the number of years in presidential terms, the removal of the gender restriction on a presidential candidate, the establishment of a Supreme Court, the separation of powers among the executive, legislature, and judiciary, and the emergence of political parties (Bussa 2018:52). On 27th March 2006, the Government of Maldives adopted an extensive reform program entitled "Roadmap for the Reform Agenda" with specific goals of strengthening governance that will lead the country's democratic transition (Bussa 2018:52).⁶ Despite the widespread demand for reform,

Gayoom had no desire to weaken his position of authority while the people of Maldives were still denied their basic civil rights. Gayoom's government failed to establish a more democratic form of government because most of the reform bills were not fully implemented. The reform roadmap provided the first multi-party election in Maldives in October 2008 that recognized Mohamed Nasheed as the head of the state smoothly ending up the three decades of Gayoom's corrupt autocratic reign. However, the credit for introducing multi-party democracy went to Gayoom only. Adopting the new constitution paved the way for the multi-party electoral competition. But, Nasheed found it difficult to survive in power for long ignoring the influence of the longest-serving president of the island nation.

Towards Democratic Transition in Maldives and India's Responses

The first democratic presidential election was held based on the new constitution. As a dictator for 30 years, Gayoom did not try to block the multi-party platform so this development came with his exit and the election was very much a choice between democracy and autocracy. This democratic election of 2008 was a milestone in the history of an island nation that was held in the two sets of the electoral process. In the first round, 60% of a citizen of Maldives voted, and even registered citizens of Maldives who belonged to other country loyalty due to their jobs voted at the Maldivian embassy of that country. There were 396 and 403 polling stations in the first round and second one respectively. The total number of voters was 209294. Table 1 shows the result of the first round of the presidential election in 2008.

Table 1

The First Round of Presidential Elections, 8 October 2008

	Name of candidates	Vote received	Percentage
1	Gasim Ibrahim	27,056	15.32
2	Uz. Maumoon Abdul Gayyoom	71,731	40.63
3	Dr Hassan Saeed	29,633	16.78
4	Mohamed Nasheed	44,293	25.09
5	Ibrahim Ismail	1,382	0.78
6	Umar Naseer	2,472	1.40

Source: Elections Commission, Republic of Maldives, at <http://www.elections.gov.mv/presidentialelectionsresults2008.html>.

Table 2
The Second Round of Presidential Elections, 28 October 2008

	Name of candidates	Vote received	Percentage
1	Uz. Maumoon Abdul Gayyoom	82,121	45.79
2	Mohamed Nasheed	97,222	54.21

Source: Elections Commission, Republic of Maldives, at <http://www.elections.gov.mv/presidentialelectionsresults2008.html>.

As seen in Tabel 2, in the second round, Gayoom got 45.79% and Nasheed gained 54.21% votes to change in leadership (Bonofer 2010:439). On 11 November 2008, Nasheed became the first democratically elected president of Maldives who treated the former president and leader of the opposition with full dignity, respect, and privileges and they publicly promised to work together. After assuming the President's office, he took some initiatives that were administrative reforms that brought a new addition to the structure of Maldivian democracy. Nasheed was appointed Home Minister and Municipal Chairman of Male. He assigned Vice President to collect the opinion of the citizens of Maldives to maintain a good relationship with citizens. He also appointed two sub-ministers in the health and family department. He claimed that government will continue the process of decentralization. The president appointed the Deputy Commissioner of Police, a sub-Minister for Human Resources, Youth, and Sports, and six atoll Counselors. He tried to stimulate the tourism industry by developing the sea beaches. As a president, Nasheed established the Police Integrity Commission and instructed the democratic institutions to cooperate with the Anti-Corruption Commission as well as tried to secure human rights (*Maldives News Bulletin* 2008).

Nasheed also gave the pledge to introduce sustainable economic policies, establish good governance, and invite foreign investments. However, the new government faced many challenges in the political life of Maldives as Nasheed started to govern a nation that was economically bankrupt and took the enormous responsibility of repairing the damage caused by 30 years of dictatorship. Under the ratified constitution, Maldives was able to conduct the first multi-party parliamentary election on 9 March 2009, in a very transparent manner. In this election, MDP, the ruling party, failed to get a majority in the Majlis and the DRP along with the other parties won with 28 seats and MDP gained 26 seats (*Maldives News Bulletin* 2008). As a result, the Maldivian power structure was divided between

the parliament and the President of Maldives which changed the political scenario in the island nation and the aftermath Nasheed faced enormous problems in governance and opposition made hurdles in his every move in running the country. Failing to get a majority in Majlis, Nasheed was unable to pass any bills and did not get cooperation from parliament creating a political rivalry between the government led by MDP, the ruling party, and parliament led by DRP, the opposition.

The political environment of Maldives was showing a lack of understanding of democratic values. Since assuming power, Nasheed's government was met with a global economic crisis that showed the downfall of the country's GDP by 4.5% (Kumar 2016:24). The economy of the island nation, which was highly dependent on exporting fish and tourism industries, had a drastic decline. This financial crisis forced Nasheed's government to take some controversial steps which made him unpopular. To improve the economic condition, the World Bank and the Government of India agreed to provide loans as financial assistance to the Maldives.

Another prominent challenge facing Nasheed's government was the emergence of Islamic extremism in the Republic of Maldives for the President represented moderate Islam and liberal views. Losing control of parliament forced Nasheed to resign and the opposition seemed more concerned with ousting the President than with preserving the gains of the democratic transition. As the legislature was controlled by the opposition, the parliament could be able to impeach the president with two-thirds of the majority as well as Nasheed had no power to dismiss the assembly. Apart from that, the immature decision of resigning en- masse on 28 June 2010 created political instability in the Maldives. As a result, as Nasheed's team needed approval from the parliament to restore their position, they lost their position as ordered by the Supreme Court in December 2010 (Kumar 2016:37).

However, Nasheed acknowledged the decision for consolidating the constitutional democracy and he tried to handle the situation constitutionally while according to the constitution, the Maldives presidential system of governance imposed much power on the parliament to maintain checks and balances in power. The judiciary is one of the three pillars of democracy. In that case, the judiciary system of Maldives was weak and backward. Nasheed wanted a quick reform in the judiciary system of Maldives. As a result, the conflict between the executive and the judiciary reached a boiling point and the political crisis became worse when Nasheed ordered to arrest of the chief judge for his decision on 16 January 2012, creating

confusion between the government and the judiciary of Maldives that led to the exit of the first democratically elected president of the island nation on 7 February 2012 (Kumar 2016:39). Looking for a solution to the Maldives' political turmoil, Nasheed demanded India's military support as the cooperation between the MNDF and the Indian Army that became stronger during his presidency. But, India's first recognition of the Waheed government disappointed Nasheed and New Delhi also made it clear that India would not intervene in the domestic affairs of Maldives.

After the resignation of Nasheed, for the remaining part of his five-year term, Waheed Hasan Manik took over the presidency for 20 months. During his short period of the regime, Waheed focused to restore law and order, freedom, and authority of judiciary and legislature across the Indian Ocean archipelago to protect democracy and hoped for a "national unity government" in democratic transition. After assuming the power, Waheed released Judge Abdulla and appointed Home Minister, Foreign Minister, Attorney General, and six ex- ministers got the post in Waheed's cabinet.

The day after his resignation along with other MDP leaders protested against the coup and Waheed's government for its legitimacy, Nasheed faced several charges against him like terrorism and Waheed's government wanted to convict Nasheed's unconstitutional decision of arrest Judge Abdulla on 15 July 2012, that would not allow him for contesting the presidential election. For this reason, fearing arrest, Nasheed took shelter in the Indian High Commission on 13 February 2013 (Mulberry 2012). After the disposal of his presidency, Nasheed continuously kept demanding an early presidential election to regain his power in the Maldives and also claimed support from the international community including India and other countries.

Under former president Nasheed's administration, Maldives signed an agreement with the GMR group of companies in India for upgrading the Male International Airport in 2010. But, on 28 November 2012, Waheed's government cancelled the airport development agreement "ab initio" of \$ 500 million which raised a concern regarding the damage to the relations with India (Kumar 2016:49). In the aftermath, a serious economic crisis occurred in the Maldives due to political turbulence and the rejection of the GMR contract fuelled to decrease in foreign aid and diminish the interests and confidence of investors.

Under the pressure of continuous protests and demonstrations by the opposition and the influence of the international community, Waheed fixed up the second multi-party presidential election ahead of schedule held

on 7 September 2013 and continued till November (Kumar 2016:50). In the presidential election of 2013, Nasheed was allowed to take part and negotiate with the Maldivian Government. India gave assurance that Nasheed would not be arrested after leaving the Indian High Commission. However, being a leading candidate in the first round, Nasheed got 48.61% votes in the second round and Abdulla Yameen from PPM secured 51.39% to emerge as the new President of the Republic of Maldives. After the presidential poll, Yameen was also able to capture the majority in the parliamentary election which led him to run the government smoothly.

Gasim Ibrahim, the third-ranking candidate in the first round of the presidential poll 2013, went to the Supreme Court with allegations of deception in the first round and the Supreme Court imparted a greater role to the police than Election Commission and also ordered them to submit the voter list approved by the candidate. But, except Nasheed, no one endorsed the list. While Election Commission rushed to hold the election, the police and judiciary tried to delay it. With this advantage of misusing the democratic institution, Yameen managed to get achieve victory easily.

In his presidential campaign, Yameen used the religious sentiments of citizens and emerged as the saviour of Islam. After taking over the president's office, Yameen suppressed his opposition to cling to power. He also managed to send the opposition leaders behind the bars. In his presidency, Yameen ruled a dictatorial way to bring the internal and external circumstances in his favour that threatened Maldivian democracy. The worst came when the Supreme Court ordered Yameen's government to release political leaders including Nasheed. He disobeyed the court order and declared a state emergency on 5 February 2018 (Mallempali 2018). He also diminished the press liberty to consolidate his grip over power.

In this socio-political turmoil, the opposition continued to hope for the intervention of international communities including India in the Maldives to force holding the free and fair multi-party election for the third time and the US threatened to possibly sanction the Maldives if Yameen's government failed to conduct a free and fair election (Mallawarachi 2018). Yameen's presidency, which was full of excessive corruption, violation of civil rights, violent repression of political opponents, used religious fundamentalism and pro-China policy that drowned the Maldives in debt and left the Commonwealth contribute to his defeat in the third multi-party Presidential election held on 23 September 2018. Mohamed Ibrahim Solih of MDP won the election with 58.4 per cent of the vote and emerged as the new and Yameen from PPM go 41.6 per cent that ended up in his dictatorial (Mallempali 2018).

This significant result would strengthen democratic processes and institutions, establishing rule of law and protecting human rights in the Maldives. This significant victory of Mohamed Solih brought an opportunity for the democratic power to dig deeper roots in the country which needs its value, truth, and reconciliation mechanism to resolve decades of political instability. Yameen's embarrassment of China raised India's concern about its national security as the island nation is just 700 km away from Lakshadweep. After the winning of Solih, India was heartily congratulated on the triumph of democratic forces and was also relieved. At the same time, the legacy of Yameen's rule threw many challenges to the new government. With the support of four political parties -ex-Presidents Gayoom, Nasheed, Jhmhooree Party and Adhaalath Party- Solih's first step was to re-establish rule of law in the country despite their different views. He also promised to investigate the corruption and deterioration of human rights under Yameen's presidency. After a week of taking over the administration, Solih's government pledged a quick economic reform through investments and welcoming of foreign aid in various sectors for the prospect of Maldivian democracy. Growing radicalism under Yameen that truly threatened democratic values forced Solih's government to prioritize taking steps against extremism. Being trapped in China's "debt diplomacy" called upon complications in running the government for the new administration and serious security challenges not only for the Maldives but also its neighbour countries like India and Sri Lanka.

India and Challenges Towards the Establishment of Democracy in Maldives

Maldives is important to India from various aspects including its geo-strategic location. Since its prompt recognition of Maldives as a sovereign state, India has been interested in the political stability in the neighbour country and would like to prevent the Island nation from influences from external forces and that is why India always stands by Maldives. In the context of India's participation in the process of establishing democracy in the Maldives, there are three main challenges for India as follows: 1) India had an interface in the domestic politics of weak, small countries of South Asia showing his big-brother phobia; 2) The Islamic radicalized group which emerged in Maldivian politics of the influence of Pakistan and the Middle East is anti-India and that is a serious security issue for India; and 3) Maldivian's pro-China policy was decreasing India's influence in the Indian Ocean region.

Despite all this, India has maintained its cordial relationship with its neighbouring country and promised to support establishing a democratic government peacefully. In the post-Gayoom regime, India-Maldives relations faced many ups and downs. After Nasheed's resignation in February 2013, Maldives experienced political instability and Waheed's rejection of the GMR project made distances between India and Maldives. Nevertheless, India supervised the presidential election of 2013 at the invitation of former President Waheed. To conduct the democratic election, B.B. Tandon, the ex-Election Commissioner of India, J. M. Lindo, and N. Gopalaswami went to the Maldives as observers. Yameen's anti-India approach also restrained India from providing financial assistance to the Maldives. In 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi cancelled his tour of the Island nation due to its political turbulence. But, Solih's victory gave India relief from several prospects.

Conclusion

This article has shown that in the last few years, Maldivian democracy has faced critical challenges like extremism, dictatorship, infighting, violation of human rights, and nepotism which are very common in South Asian Democracy. Despite all these odds, India as a South Asian country has enjoyed democracy for over half a century. Since 2008, the long way toward the democratic transition has not been easy for the Maldives. But being one of the largest democracies, India always has supported the Maldives through financial assistance in the survival of democracy and given assurance that the Maldives does not fall into autocracy.

Apart from that, India has already assisted in Maldives' defence sector for its security purposes which is under threat of extremists. India has not shown its big brotherhood towards one of the smallest states in Asia and has not favoured Umbrella Diplomacy in the Indian Ocean Region but is rather interested in the growth of Maldives. In the post-Gayoom era, India-Maldives relations deteriorated in international politics and external forces including China and Pakistan. So, India should be careful in making foreign policy so that external powers do not influence the Maldives in opposing India. Only based on equality, cooperation, benefit, mutual trust, and respect will firm the bilateral relations between India and Maldives, the newly democratized nation ignoring the Big Brother-small state syndrome.

References

- Abdullah, Jameel. 2015. "China-Maldives Sign MOU for Free Trade Pact." *Haveru*, 9 September.
- Baksi-Lahiri, Sudeshna. 2004. *Women's Power and Ritual Politics in the Maldives*. Chicago: Cornell University Press.
- Baruah, Darshana M. 2015. "Modi's Trip and China's Islands: The Battle for the Indian Ocean." *The Diplomat*, 11 March.
- Bjarnegård, Elin. 2023. "The Continuum of Election Violence: Gendered Candidate Experiences in the Maldives". *International Political Science Review* 44(1):107–121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512120977111>
- Bonofer, Jacob Ashik. 2010. "The Challenges of Democracy to Maldives". *International Journal of South Asian Studies*, July-December.
- Bussa, Laxminarayana. 2018. *India Maldives Relations*. New Delhi: Avni Publication.
- Chowdhury, Iftekhar Ahmed. 2019. "The Maldives: Resolution of Constitutional Conundrum? Not Just Yet!", *Institute of South Asian Studies*, No. 539, 7 March.
- Fernando, Santhush. 2011. "Maldives: First National University Inaugurated", *University World News*, 20 February.
- Grover, Verinder. 2002. *Maldives: Government and Politics*. New York: Deep & Deep Publications.
- Jaschik, Kevin. 2014. "Small States and International Politics: Climate Change, the Maldives and Tuvalu". *International Politics* 51: 272–293, <https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2014.5>
- Kondapalli, Srikanth. 2014. "Maritime Silk Road: Increasing Chinese Inroads into the Maldives." *IPCS*, 13 November.
- Kumar, Anand. 2012. "Chinese Engagement with the Maldives: Impact on Security Environment in the Indian Ocean Region." *Strategic Analysis* 36 (2).
- Kumar, Anand. 2016. *Multi-Party Democracy in the Maldives and the Emerging Security Environment in the Indian Ocean Region*. New Delhi: Pentagon Press.

- Mallawarachi, Bharatha. 2018. "Timeline of Political Events Leading Up to Maldives Election," *AP News*, 21 September.
- Mallempali, Samatha. 2018. "2018 Presidential Election in Maldives Outcome and Implications", *Indian Council of World Affairs*, 17 October.
- Maldives News Bulletin*. 2008. December 24, No.1182.
- Mörner, Nils-Axel, Michael Tooley, and Göran Possnert. 2004. "New Perspectives for the Future of the Maldives, *Global and Planetary Change* 40 (1):177-182, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0921-8181\(03\)00108-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0921-8181(03)00108-5).
- Mulberry, Matt. 2012. "The Maldives- From Dictatorship to Democracy, and Back? (1978-2012)", *International Centre on Nonviolent Conflict*, July.
- Musthaq, Fathima. 2014. "Shifting Tides in South Asia: Tumult in the Maldives." *Journal of Democracy* 25(2):164-170. doi:10.1353/jod.2014.0030.
- Phadnis, Urmila and Ela Dutt Luithui. 1981. "The Maldives Enter World Politics", *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 8(3):166-179, DOI: 10.1080/00927678.1981.10553804.
- Robinson, J. J. *The Maldives: Islamic Republic and Tropical Autocracy*. London: Hurst.
- The Europa World Year Book*, Volume 1. 1996. New Delhi: Europa Publications Limited.
- Zahir, Azim. 2021. "India–China Rivalry in the Indian Ocean: Emergence of A New Indo-Maldives Strategic Dynamic", *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 17 (1):78-95, DOI: 10.1080/19480881.2021.1878584.
- Zahir, Azim. 2022. *Islam and Democracy in Maldives: Interrogating Reformist Islam's Role in Politics*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.