



CRISIS IN THE MALDIVES: THE BEGINNING OF AN INDO-CHINESE CHESS MATCH

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Maldives has been thrust into a major political crisis on February 2, after the Supreme Court in a surprise development ordered the government to release 12 members of the parliament who were stripped off their posts and held by the government under different charges.¹ This judgment pushed Maldives into a new political turmoil as the government of Abdulla Yameen refused to respect the court order and announced 15 days of state emergency. The Maldives Defense Force surrounded the Supreme Court and arrested the chief justice and another judge on charges of graft, while the three other judges party to this unanimous judgment declared the order null and void.²

While there was an international objection against the Yameen government and its dealing of judiciary and opposition politicians. The current government is more tilted towards China, thus it played the China card to repel pressure and seek help from China for the resolution of the current crisis. However, China called for political resolution of the crisis in Maldives through dialogue without external intervention. Conversely, the opposition leader and former president of Maldives

¹ Kewalramani, Manoj. "Maldives in crisis: Beijing faces tough choices." *Maldives Al Jazeera*, February 16, 2018. Accessed March 21, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/maldives-crisis-beijing-faces-tough-choices-180214122439606.html>.

² Ibid.

tried to counter this move by making an appeal to India to intervene militarily to save democracy in Maldives, an option that is not on the table for New Delhi.³

The tussle between the serving president and the Maldives United Opposition (MUO) has been deepening since last year after the Maldives United Opposition (MUO) was established by all the leaders opposed to Abdulla Yameen's regime.⁴ The opposition movement against the regime found political momentum after the president's half-brother and former president of Maldives Maumoon Abdul Gayoom broke away from the ruling party, Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM), after a tussle for the control of the party started.⁵

The main issue of dispute was Gayoom's refusal to nominate Yameen as the presidential candidate of the party in the 2018 election. However, the court, in June 2016, declared Abdulla Yameen as the legitimate leader of the party declaring former president and Yameen's half-brother Gayoom "incapable of attending to the duties of his job," forcing Gayoom's exit from the PPM. As a result, the party was divided between Gayoom's loyalists and Yameen's loyalists, reducing the government to a minority.⁶ Yet, it was the judiciary that kept the government alive, sanctifying all its decisions and joining hands to punish the political opponents.

Inside the Majlis, the opposition was not allowed to move a no-confidence motion against the speaker as the government made changes to the rules of procedure that increased the signatures required from 15 to 29 to 42 MPs.⁷ Therefore, the MUO could not succeed in overthrowing the government even after some ruling party MPs joined hands. The ruling party MPs were later banned and ultimately lost their seat in the parliament under the anti-defection law.⁸

The Supreme Court decision that ordered the release of the prisoners and retrial was an open challenge to the government that is preparing for the next parliamentary election scheduled this

³ Kumar, Sunaina, and Angela Stanzel. "The Maldives Crisis and the China-India Chess Match." *The Diplomat*. March 15, 2018. Accessed March 26, 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/the-maldives-crisis-and-the-china-india-chess-match/>.

⁴ "Maldives Crisis: US Remains 'concerned' about Developments in Island nation." *The Financial Express*. March 23, 2018. Accessed March 26, 2018. <http://www.financialexpress.com/world-news/maldives-crisis-us-remains-concerned-about-developments-in-island-nation/1108375/>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Maldives Crisis: US Remains 'concerned' about Developments in Island nation." *The Financial Express*. March 23, 2018. Accessed March 26, 2018. <http://www.financialexpress.com/world-news/maldives-crisis-us-remains-concerned-about-developments-in-island-nation/1108375/>.

⁸ Ibid.

year. Under no circumstance would the government allow its arch-rivals to contest the election which has meticulously been planned to see Yameen elected for another term.

The government defended its decision to impose emergency saying that it is necessary for the smooth running of the state as there was no other option. It used the Maldives National Defense Force (MNDF) to arrest the Supreme Court Chief Justice, Abdulla Sayeed, and his colleague Justice Ali Hameed, and pressurized the other three of the five judges who gave the decision to reverse it.⁹ Three judges reversed the decision of the Supreme Court that ordered the release and retrial of the arrested politicians and confirmed that the Supreme Judicial Commission has the power, authority and right to investigate the Supreme Court judges including the chief justice. It appears that as long as President Yameen has the support of the MNDF, it will be difficult to dislodge him even though President Yameen has lost majority in the Majlis.¹⁰

The crisis has international implications primarily because both India and China have interests in the Maldives archipelago. Though traditionally, the Maldives has had a close relationship with India, in recent years the island-state has pushed aside Indian projects in favor of Chinese investment, including cancelling a \$500 million contract for an Indian consortium to build an international airport.¹¹ Chinese tourists now make up the largest portion of visitors to the islands, and in December 2017 - two months prior to the State of Emergency – Maldives signed a free trade agreement with China as part of the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” project under the Belt and Road Initiative.¹² Notably, the Maldives’ Parliament’s approval of the free trade agreement occurred in an emergency session with no members of the opposition party present, drawing condemnation from the absent members.¹³

So far, India has chosen not to intervene directly in the crisis, instead passing statements and expressing its displeasure at the president’s actions and attempting to come to a diplomatic

⁹ "India Is a Brother, but China a Long Lost Cousin Found: Maldives Envoy." *The Economic Times*. March 23, 2018. Accessed March 26, 2018. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-is-a-brother-but-china-a-long-lost-cousin-found-maldives-envoy/articleshow/63431753.cms>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Kewalramani, Manoj. "Maldives in crisis: Beijing faces tough choices." *Maldives Al Jazeera*. February 16, 2018. Accessed March 21, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/maldives-crisis-beijing-faces-tough-choices-180214122439606.html>.

¹² "Maldives Signs Trade Pact with China." *The Hindu*. December 08, 2017. Accessed March 26, 2018. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/maldives-signs-trade-pact-with-china/article21341383.ece>.

¹³ "Maldives Parliament Approves FTA With China – But With No Opposition Present." *The Wire*. Accessed March 26, 2018. <https://thewire.in/200906/maldives-parliament-approves-fta-china-amidst-opposition-boycott/>.

resolution, despite a request from former president Nasheed to intervene militarily against the current government.¹⁴ The Maldives government has told India to stay out of their “internal matter,” citing its own lack of interference in the Kashmir question. Meanwhile, China has requested that the international community “play a constructive role on the basis of respecting the sovereignty of the Maldives,” and stay out of what it termed the Maldives “internal affairs.”¹⁵

India’s policies are not without a show of force. Immediately following the state of emergency declaration, the government deployed transport planes to a position of readiness and ordered paratroopers to remain on standby. It also launched a large-scale tri-service military exercise, “Paschim Lehar” on February 12, which included warships, submarines and an aircraft carrier.¹⁶

In turn, on February 20, a fleet of Chinese warships, including multiple destroyers and a frigate, entered the Indian Ocean for the first time in four years. China claimed its entrance into the Ocean was unrelated to the crisis, and warships were engaged in “normal exercises for this year not aimed at any third party.”¹⁷ Though China’s intervention was over 2,500 nautical miles from the Maldives and the Chinese warships quickly returned to the South China Sea, the naval deployment led to some consternation in the Indian media. Some outside experts have argued that China’s incursion into the Indian Ocean is the reason India has chosen not to intervene militarily.¹⁸

It is evident that there is a delicate balancing act that Beijing is attempting to perform, as it should. In the long run, China desires a supportive regime in Male. For that, it must keep Yameen in check, cooperate with regional and global powers and avoid alienating the Maldivian people.

¹⁴ "India Is a Brother, but China a Long Lost Cousin Found: Maldives Envoy." *The Economic Times*. March 23, 2018. Accessed March 26, 2018.
<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-is-a-brother-but-china-a-long-lost-cousin-found-maldives-envoy/articleshow/63431753.cms>.

¹⁵ Kumar, Sunaina, and Angela Stanzel. "The Maldives Crisis and the China-India Chess Match." *The Diplomat*. March 15, 2018. Accessed March 26, 2018.
<https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/the-maldives-crisis-and-the-china-india-chess-match/>.

¹⁶ "India Is a Brother, but China a Long Lost Cousin Found: Maldives Envoy." *The Economic Times*. March 23, 2018. Accessed March 26, 2018.
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¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.