

Growing Islamic militancy in Maldives

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Introduction

Maldives, famous for its tropical climate, sandy beaches, crystal clear lagoons is an island country in the Indian Ocean, south-west of India and Sri Lanka. It has a total land area of 115 square miles spread over a vast archipelago. In all, there are about 2,000 small islands which have been grouped into 19 atolls. The economy revolves around tourism, and scores of islands have been developed for the top end of the tourist market.

During past few years, the traditionally tolerant Maldivian Muslim society has undergone a dramatic change as more and more people are turning towards a more radical and violent form of Islam which is not only dangerous and lethal for Maldives but also for the rest of the South Asia as Maldives is no more an isolated country but a part of the global community. The Maldives has built South Asia's most successful economy based on tourism, but the country is now facing religious tensions and the tranquillity of the paradise holiday destination was shattered in September when Islamic radicals set off a home-made bomb, wounding 12 foreign tourists. This paper will focus on the historical background of the country and try to trace the root causes of the growing Islamic militancy in Maldives and what steps should be taken by the government to contain the problem.

Historical Background

It is not known when the first settlers arrived in the Maldives but it is believed that the Dravidians from south India were the first to arrive around fourth century BC followed by the Aryans from India and Sri Lanka who dominated the islands. Till about the middle of the 12th century, the people in Maldives continued to practice Buddhism. In 1153, the ruler of Maldives was converted to Islam by a Muslim saint, Abu al Barakat, and thereafter Islam rapidly spread in the region. This also marked the Sultanate form of government which continued till 1968 except a brief republican interval in 1953-54. Almost all Maldivians belong to the Shafi school of Sunnis.¹

The country was captured by the Portuguese in 1558 who ruled Maldives for about a quarter century. In mid-17th century, the Sultan of Maldives agreed to become a protectorate of the Dutch. In 1796, after the British took over from the Dutch in Sri Lanka, they assumed responsibility for the Maldives as well. In 1887, the Sultan of the Maldives formally confirmed the protection of the British by concluding an official agreement. However, the Sultan remained the chief authority and continued to rule in an autocratic manner. In 1932, as a result of a court rebellion, the Sultan was forced to adopt a constitution which restricted his powers. In 1953, Maldives became a republic with Amin Didi as its President. But this experiment did not last long and within a year, a coup was organised and Maldives again returned to the Sultanate system. In July 1965, the British protectorate over the Maldives was terminated and it became an independent state.² Since independence, there have been only three rulers, King Muhammad Fareed until 1968, President Ibrahim Nasir until 1978, and President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom.³

Reasons for Growing Militancy in Maldives

In recent years, Maldives, a traditionally Sunni and a moderate society, has increasingly radicalised. The culture of Maldives is being Arabised as the traditional bright coloured women's clothes are being replaced by headscarves and black robes. Men have started to grow beards and new mosques are springing up, allegedly with the help of foreign funds.⁴ Preachers have been advocating a more radical version of Islam on the poorer islands which are cut off from the media. This rise in Islamic militancy poses an unprecedented threat to Maldives's image as South Asia's most popular holiday destination.

In December 1999, Islamists launched attacks against the regime arguing that the millennium celebrations were part of a plot to spread Christianity. Concern over the growth of Islamic extremism in Maldives began in 2002 when a 28-year-old Maldivian named Ibrahim Fauzee was arrested in Karachi for

having links with Al-Qaeda and taken to Guantanamo Bay by the US.⁵ In 2003, some posters praising Osama bin Laden appeared on the walls of a school in Edhyafushi Island. Similarly, a shop in Male was attacked in 2005 for displaying Santa Clause. In 2006, the Maldivian Foreign Minister, Dr. Ahmad Shaheed, admitted that the Maldivian government is concerned over Islamic fundamentalism spreading throughout the country and reiterated the government's commitment to taking appropriate actions to "extinguish any radical developments."⁶

By mid-2006, Islamists succeeded in establishing a base in the island of Himandhoo and a new mosque, propagating neo-conservative Islam, was established in defiance of laws that mandate that religious institutions must be licensed. Sharia was also imposed on the residents. After a stiff resistance, the Himandhoo mosque was shut down in October 2006, but it soon revived.⁷

In January 2007, it was reported in the local media that a religious faction in Himandhoo, Alif Alif Atoll, has been issuing death threats to locals who do not collaborate with them causing fear in the island.⁸ Similarly, in February 2007, the media reported that religious conservatives in Himandhoo have banned their children from attending local school because of the impure influences of "foreign" teachers, the English language and non-Islamic subjects.⁹ According to the media reports, an extremist faction declared that Islam prohibits their children from attending school. The religious conservatives have set up their own school on the island dedicated solely to teaching children the Quran and the Hadith. Although full veil is technically illegal in the Maldives, many women in Himandhoo Island have started to wear full veil and therefore, were unable to vote as they could not prove their identity or reveal a patch of skin to receive an indelible pen mark used to identify voters.¹⁰

Different factors are responsible for this growing Islamic fundamentalism in Maldives. President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, a graduate from the Al-Azhar University and a fluent speaker of Arabic language, is widely criticised for promoting Islamic extremism in Maldives. After completing his degree from Al-Azhar University in Egypt, he was strongly influenced by both the teachings of Syed Kutb and the Baathist Philosophy. Gayoom first taught Islamic Studies in Nigeria before he came back to Maldives in 1971 and worked as a teacher in one of the schools in Male. He was inducted as a special Under Secretary to Nasir and soon held the post of Maldives's Deputy Ambassador at Colombo followed by the position of Under Secretary and Deputy Foreign Minister. He became the first Permanent Representative of Maldives to the UN during 1976-77 and was the Minister of Transport before he became the President.¹¹ He was seen by the locals as a very pious man and he came to prominence after leading a protest against former President Nasir's recognition of the state of Israel. It is generally believed that the day he came to power, was the turning point in the country's slide towards extremism. He promoted himself as the guardian of Islam and under Article 38 of the Constitution, he is also the supreme propagator of Islam. Discussion of religious freedom is denied and according to the UN Special Rapporteur Asma Jahangir, those who raise their voice are threatened and imprisoned. In early 1979, he campaigned against the system of religious education in the country and the text books, written by a revered scholar Muhammad Jameel Didi, were changed. Soon after becoming President, he opened the first Islamic schools, Mauhad and Arabiyya. A branch of Rabitat al-Alam al-Islami an organisation based in Saudi Arabia that coordinated the efforts of Islamic preachers the world over, was set up in Maldives.¹² His government retains considerable control over imams and preachers in the country through the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs. Often characterising his critics as apostates or Christians, he used religion to marginalise his political opponents thus giving a free space to extremists to cash in on the situation. Denial of basic human rights and freedom of expression are considered to be the hallmark of Gayoom's regime. With the absence of democracy, religious fundamentalism emerged as the principal language of dissent. Thus the Islamisation process progressed at a remarkable rate. Gayoom was quite critical of Nasir saying that according to Islamic Sharia, one who sells alcohol is committing just as grave a sin as drinking it which is forbidden in Islam. But after coming to power, he could not put an end to the selling and distribution of alcohol, thereby presenting the image of a hypocrite.¹³

The 1997 Constitution designates Islam as the official state religion. The Government interprets this provision to impose a requirement that citizens be Muslims. Freedom of religion is restricted significantly. The law prohibits the practice by Maldivian citizens of any religion other than Islam. The Constitution also stipulates that the President must be Sunni and has the "supreme authority to propagate the tenets of Islam." Chapter II of the Constitution, relating to the fundamental rights and duties of citizens, does not

provide for the right to freedom of religion or belief. The Constitution precludes non-Muslims from voting, obtaining citizenship, and holding public positions. Furthermore, some experts also believe that reforms unveiled by Gayoom some two years back to allow political parties to function for the first time in history of Maldives, has also led to open defiance of authority. President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom is criticised for using Islam for both his personal authority and as a useful tool of social control. His portrayal of himself as a “protector of Islam” has created a paranoid atmosphere in which radical ideas have spread. Founder of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MPD), Mohamed Latheef, puts the blame solely on President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. “He is the person who brought Islamic fundamentalism into the country. Before he came into power, there weren’t all these madrassas espousing extremist form of Islam at all. Now he has been using Islam as a tool of governance.”¹⁴

Socio-economic factor is also believed to have created this disturbance in the society. Luxurious resorts, where foreign tourist pay a handsome amount to stay a night in beach villas with their own private pools and butlers and where all sorts of fruits, vegetables, wine and water are provided in abundance, whereas any Maldivian citizen caught drinking alcohol faces the penalty of hundred lashes.

One quarter of children under the age of five are said to be suffering from underdeveloped growth. Women whose husbands work away from their homes in hotels and resorts are asked by the Islamic preachers to send their children to mosques to be taught by Islamic preachers. These preachers go to the women in villages and tell them that your men are working at those hotels surrounded by westerners and alcohol and if you want to save your soul, you must be virtuous. You should cover up and stay inside.¹⁵ It is also believed that Arab donors are exporting ideas and cash in an attempt to undermine the Maldives’s traditionally tolerant and inclusive Sunni Islam.¹⁶

The 2005 tsunami worsened the economic situation and took the country back by about 20 years in terms of socio-economic development. Out of the archipelago’s 199 islands, 20 were totally devastated and another 53 were severely damaged. Schools, clinics and pharmacies were destroyed in 50 islands and worst, the seawater contaminated the ground water and reservoirs that supplied drinking water.¹⁷ The government of Gayoom is blamed for failing to share the income generated through the tourism industry with the majority of the population while he and his close allies became rich thus encouraging the people to turn to violence.¹⁸

Male Explosion and its Aftermath

On 29 September, 2007, in what appeared to be the first attack on the Maldives’s tourism industry, 12 tourists, eight Chinese, two Japanese and two British, were injured in an explosion in Male’s Sultan Park. According to the reports that appeared in the local media, the explosion was triggered by a home made device involving a mobile phone and a washing machine motor attached to a gas cylinder. The device exploded as a large tour group reached the gates to Sultan Park and there were no locals around. Tourists were the only people injured in the explosion which alarmed the government and according to an official, it looked “like an attack by jihadists on our tourism industry.”¹⁹ He further pointed out that the explosion had taken place on the 17th day of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, which commemorates Prophet Muhammad’s first victory in battle.²⁰

It may be mentioned here that Maldives receives over 500000 tourists a year, and the industry is responsible for the country’s \$1 billion economy.²¹ The government was quick to condemn the attack and in a press release described it as an “inhuman and degrading act” and said “the Maldivian authorities will pursue the culprits and attempt to bring them to justice and give them the harshest punishment within the law.”²²

Just days after the Male explosion, on October 4, the police, after naming five people who were allegedly responsible for the explosion, raided a mosque in Male where, according to newspaper reports, wahabi prayer meetings took place.²³ Similarly, on 7 October, police and army laid siege to another Dhar-ul-Khair mosque (which is considered to be a magnet for Muslim radicals from across the Maldives to pray and plot terrorist attacks) in Himandhoo Island looking for any connection to the explosion in Male. The problem in Himandhoo started in October 2006, when a dispute broke out between supporters of the then Khatib of the island and religious conservatives comprising most of the local population. The centre of the

disagreement was a government built mosque where most locals refused to pray because according to them, it was built on a former cemetery in violation of the teachings of Islam. As a result, the residents constructed their own mosque named "Dhar-ul-Khair". The mosque was subsequently demolished by the government which only added to tension in the island. Dhar-ul-Khair was, however, rebuilt by the locals. On arriving there, the police was confronted by completely masked and red-helmeted men carrying wooden planks which gave the impression of an organised mosque militia. These people, who refused to recognise the government's religious authority, gathered outside the mosque, promising to defend it "to the last man."²⁴ Police issued repeated warnings to the group to lay down their arms, to leave the area and to uncover their faces. Police also announced that they were not there to confront them but to carry out investigation. In response, the group said that the police too should lay down their arms, take off their helmets, protective armour and switch off their cameras. The group also warned the police that they were there to protect the mosque which is used exclusively by the group and that the previous year also, during the month of Ramadan, police had destroyed their mosque.²⁵ After repeated warnings, police attempted to disperse the group and people in the mosque resisted by throwing fire balls and stones at the police. Although the exact number of people in the group, who were there to confront the police, is not known but, what is striking is the fact that the group included women, children and elderly people as well. A woman wearing full black veil was forced to unveil to confirm her identity. Police conducted house to house searches on the island despite resistance from the residents. Finally on 9 October, after a violent confrontation, when the police alone could not control the situation, the Maldivian National Defence Force (MNDF) had to come to their help. The agitating group surrendered to the joint forces without any conditions.²⁶ The confrontation resulted in heavy casualties on both sides and the fingers of one policeman were sliced off. Around 17 Maldivian defence force officers sustained varying degrees of injuries.

On 7 November, the police alleged that 10 men linked to the Male explosion were absconding in Pakistan where they learnt bomb making techniques in madrassas. The police further alleged that some of the suspects in custody also received training in bomb making in Pakistani madrassas and were receiving support from "associates in Pakistan and Sri Lanka". Among the key suspected figures in planning the Sultan Park bombing is believed to be one Saeed Ahmad who is considered to have links with Jamia Salafiya Islamia, a seminary in Faisalabad, which has allegedly received many Maldivian students and has produced several key leaders of Lashkar-e-Taiba.²⁷

According to the police, three men in custody told police that they planted the device to "target, attack and injure non-Muslims, to fulfil jihad."²⁸ Islamic preachers complain that tourists have imported western values and undermined traditional Islamic culture. They oppose revenues from tourism, including the sale of liquor, which is prohibited by Islam.²⁹ On 9 November, Office of the Attorney General issued red notice required to bring the 10 fugitives who were allegedly hiding in Pakistan to Maldives for trial.³⁰ These allegations, however, were categorically denied by the Second Secretary of Pakistan High Commission in Maldives, saying that he is disappointed and saddened by the allegations but promised that Pakistan would make every effort to find out if they are in Pakistan and would apprehend them if they are in Pakistan.³¹

Former Attorney General Dr. Hassan Saeed, who resigned from his position in September 2007 in protest at government's policies on its handling of Islamic fundamentalism, has criticised Gayoom, saying that the government had received explicit warnings of the dangers of rising Islamic fundamentalism but failed to take action to address the issue. He claimed that a detailed action plan was submitted to the government seven months ago but it failed to take any measures and just "sat on the report."³² Dr. Saeed further alleged that "a growing number of Maldivian students are going to study in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan where they are learning a radical wahabi interpretation of Islam."³³ He also branded the Supreme Islamic Council as a failed institution ignored by the government.

Dr. Rohan Gunaratna, an Al-Qaeda expert at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University, was appointed by the government as a counter-terrorism advisor, submitted his report after the Male explosion, warning that "the ability of the government to address the growing problem of fundamentalism and its potential to become violent will determine the security future of the Maldives."³⁴ He said that there is still time to implement a strategy that places community engagement and rehabilitation at the heart of the counter-radical efforts. He suggested that instead of blaming each other, all political parties in

Maldives should come together to combat extremism if “the image of an Asian Paradise” is not to be “lost forever.”³⁵ (It may be mentioned here that initially, the main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party accused the government for using police to lock up its political opponents instead of catching the people responsible for the law and order situation in the country whereas, the government blamed MPD for jeopardising the stability and peace of the country.) Dr. Rohan also cautioned the government that reliance on the hard security approach may lead to further radicalisation and violence. Gunaratna said that the Supreme Islamic Council must be overhauled to equip it for a battle of ideas against Islamic extremism.³⁶

Steps Taken to Counter the Situation

On 19 October, President Gayoom’s office posted a news item on its website revealing that the government has been implementing measures advised by the Committee established by the President to counter the Islamic fundamentalism arising out of differences in religious opinion and to seek out measures to increase awareness among the general public on religion. The Committee was established by the President on 2 October, 2006, and former Attorney General Dr. Hassan Saeed and former Justice Minister Mohamad Jameel Ahmed were also appointed to assist the Committee. The report submitted by the Committee highlighted important issues like increasing religious awareness of the general public, to clarify and explain issues that may lead to differences in religious matters. The Committee suggested to allocate topics to be addressed at the programme held each Ramadan by the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs to renew the spirit of Islam. Furthermore, the Committee also identified other issues including strengthening the role of the Supreme Council, changing the Friday prayer sermon to suit the modern times, highlighting the evils committed in the society and the importance of the role media can play to disseminate religious information.³⁷

In the aftermath of the Male explosion, the government instructed the Supreme Council to enforce a ban on women covering from head to toe. The Council appointed by the government to control and promote state approved Islam was at a loss on how to respond and several religious scholars openly questioned the President’s right to define Islam and called for some fundamental change in the relationship between the state and mosque. Adhaalath Party, a conservative Islamic party, also called on the people to ignore the ban on full veil, describing it as an attack on Islam. The Party also suggested that the government must empower the scholars to contain the threat of Islamic militancy.³⁸ In this regard, the President of the Supreme Islamic Council hit out at the narrow mandate of the body and said that “obviously an advisory role by us is not enough. We need to empower our scholars to tackle all issues.”³⁹ President announced plans to bar Maldivians from travelling to extremist religious schools in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia which advocate Taliban style practices.

The Government of President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, while talking to an international news agency said that the unrest caused by these Islamic preachers “could allow international terror groups to capitalise and set up cells in the country” and assured that his government would take all possible measures to prevent foreign terror organisations from establishing their cells in the country. He said that “Maldivians are influenced by what is happening in the world. They go to Pakistan, study in Madrasaa and come back with extreme religious ideas.”⁴⁰ He also alleged that he has evidence that these militants are receiving funds from abroad.⁴¹

He announced several steps to counter this threat. He made it clear that those foreign Muslim clerics eager to bring Taliban style extremism to Maldives should not be allowed entry without special permission. The government also barred women from covering themselves from head to toe and punishment for those who continue to wear the head to toe covering is not specified but it is said that those who violate the decree are initially expected to be warned and that tougher action could follow.⁴² A group of female police officers also reported to the media that permission to wear headscarf, which was previously granted to some of the female police officers, has been revoked.⁴³ It has also been ordered that educational qualifications from foreign madrassas will not be recognised.⁴⁴ He ordered an investigation into whether religious schools in Maldives were sticking to official texts.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Unfortunately, most of the Islamic countries in the world are being ruled by the governments which are not popular among the masses and Islam has been used by these rulers to legitimise their dictatorship. Absence of democratic forces and healthy means of constructive criticism has encouraged people to opt for militancy, resulting in the propagation of a negative image of a religion which actually calls for peace and harmony. Islamic fundamentalism and Islamic militancy is being debated around the world and even a moderate Muslim is suspected in the western world thus creating further frustration in the Muslim world. Maldives, a country which up till now was considered to be peaceful and unaffected by the events happening around the globe, is also in danger of unrest which some other Muslim countries are facing today. In order to prevent this scenario, the government of Maldives will have to introduce true democratic values in the country. Forcing one's own ideas on other people will only bring more confusion in the society and steps like banning veil will only result in more resentment. In this regard, it is important for all the Muslim countries to understand the difference between Islamic fundamentalism and militancy and educate the people in the West. Believing in the fundamentals of one's religion should not be a problem for others. If a man wants to grow a beard or a woman wants to cover herself from head to toe, it does not make them a terrorist unless they start forcing their ideas on other people, using violence. And those who use violence usually do it to achieve their own political agendas in the name of religion. Open and healthy discussions on various issues regarding religion will enhance awareness among the masses and will enable them to decide the right course of action. Scholars, having true knowledge of religion, should be encouraged to interact with people and propagate the true meaning of jihad so that the militants, who brainwash people and compel them carry out acts against humanity and stability of their own country, could be isolated. Without the support of local population, the militant organisations (which are generally having their own agendas other than Islam) would ultimately meet their end. Media in this regard can play a very active and positive role. Furthermore, social and economic development of the country would also contribute in combating this menace. Basic education, health facilities, job opportunities would allow people to concentrate on issues related to development rather than militancy. The recent attack on the life of President Gayoom, which took place on Hoarafushi, where the motive behind the attack is suspected to be either political or religious, is a clear indication of growing frustration in Maldives. The government of Maldives must address this issue in the right manner before another moderate Islamic state falls prey to people preaching violence in the name of Islam.

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