

# ISAS Brief

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## **Malaise in Maldives: A Pristine Paradise or a Painful Purgatory?**

*The implications of recent events in Maldives go far beyond the pristine shores of that enchanting archipelago. The paper discusses the larger geopolitical implications of the suspension of democracy, and options for China and India – the major players in the region.*

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Shakespeare's Julius Caesar wanted men around him that are fat. He feared those with lean and hungry looks, such as Cassius, whom he described as dangerous. His sixth sense proved fatefully judicious. For soon after he expressed those premonitions, Cassius drove a knife into him. President Abdulla Yameen of Maldives, whose habits are no less imperious than that of the Roman dictator, appear to be having an entirely different experience. His suspicions seem to focus on his somewhat corpulent Vice-President Ahmed Adeb, whom he has now thrown into prison, following an alleged assassination attempt, on the Presidential speed-boat on 28 September 2015, for which the President holds his deputy responsible. While Adeb was in a

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state of incarceration, explosives were said to have been found in a mosque and near the Presidential Palace. The opposition was planning an anti-government rally. To nip such activities in the bud, Yameen declared a 'state of emergency' for 30 days. So governmental actions inconsistent with the norms of constitutional law and human rights may just be beyond the rim of the saucer, such as fast-tracking of the Vice-President's impeachment, by tweaking the Constitution.

Maldives is a picturesque country of about 400,000 people. They are spread across 26 pretty atolls, comprising 1192 islets, some uninhabited, surrounded by crystal blue waters of the Indian Ocean. The archipelago has been compared to a paradise, not without reason, because of its scenic bounties that attract droves of wealthy tourists to frolic in the sun and the sea. It has recently graduated out of the United Nations list of Least Developed Countries (LDCs). It has thriving fishing, garment and hospitality industries, and it used to be said in the UN circles that it is so tiny that the day one catches a big fish there, one doubles its Gross Domestic Product!

Mindful of not confusing its people with a plurality or even a duality of choices, for thirty years the country had the same President, Abdul Gayoom, Yameen's half-brother. Also with regard to religion, all Maldivian citizens must be Muslims, as they are, of the Sunni sect. But such uniformity did not result in the desired harmony. For instance, though all are Muslims, some are more so than others, and those seen to be less so are labelled '*la dinis*' (literally 'those without faith') a risky recognition to acquire in these parts. So concerned are the extremists to display the strength of their values, that Maldives, as it came through at a recent workshop on rehabilitation of radicals, provides, per capita, the largest number of recruits among South Asian nations (some say, in the broader region) travelling to Iraq and Syria to wage 'holy war', responding to the clarion call of the Islamist 'caliphate'. Clearly their choice is not the paradise on earth, whose attractions had woefully diminished, but that which is promised them in the hereafter. In other ways, the law and order situation in the capital Male, has been worsening over time. Apart from religious extremism (for no obvious reason), drug violence and street gangster-ism are common. There is a perceptible decline of paradise-like qualities to those of a painful purgatory.

In 2008, democracy of sorts was tried out, and Mohamed Nasheed, of somewhat liberal predilections, was elected to power. Nasheed, as the new President, moved close to India, and

heightened the small nation's profile by his global leadership on 'climate change issues'. The phenomenon of the rising sea-level is said to severely threaten the isles. To drive home his point, he held a cabinet meeting under seawater, with Ministers wearing diving gear, in October 2009. But what seemed to be sinking was not so much the land but the practice of the nascent democratic governance. Nasheed focussed less on home as he did on foreign affairs, and fell from favour in some quarters. A group of uniformed personnel forced him to resign in February 2012. His presidential bid, in the following year, at the 2013 elections was foiled (that eventually led to Yameen's election), and now he finds himself in jail serving a thirteen-year sentence, much to the chagrin of India, and indeed the international community. There was no end to Yameen's problems with his colleagues, and the brunt was borne by Adeb's predecessor three months ago, who was impeached, and by the Defence Minister after the speed-boat incident, who was imprisoned. Of course, 'assassinating' Yameen would have been one way for Adeb to secure the highest office in the land ( and water), but his lawyers have denied he harboured any such motives, and interestingly, the United States' Federal Bureau of Investigation found no evidence of any bomb on board the vessel. But these conclusions cut no ice with the President's decision to imprison his rivals and declare emergency.

As for the interplay of big-power politics in the nation, the two competing actors in the region are China and India. The arrest of Adeb was a tad uncomfortable for China, as he was actually returning from Beijing, having discussed the 'new silk route' with the Chinese leadership. But China kept stoically mum, affirming its non-interference in the 'internal affairs of other countries', a very useful formula in difficult cases. The Chinese have reasons not to upset the apple cart when things are positively moving in their direction. Xi Jinping was the first head of state to visit Maldives in 2014 after the most recent elections. An Indian company's major contract to extend the existing airport was cancelled. The Chinese were asked to help build a key US \$300 million road link between Male and the airport. Also, consider the recent passage of a law allowing for foreign ownership of land in the country for the first time. It would allow outsiders who invest more than US\$ 1 billion to own land in perpetuity, as long as 70% of it is reclaimed from the sea. Everyone knows the Chinese are past masters at reclamation and infrastructure construction projects. In both these aspects they have a comparative advantage. So what is to prevent the Chinese from transforming their advantages into building bases, and thereby securing footholds in India's backyard? Yameen has claimed that he has the wherewithal to do so. He has given assurances to India that Male will ensure that the "Indian Ocean is kept a demilitarised zone". India is understandably unconvinced. New Delhi believes

that even if Maldives has the will, it may not have the way (to prevent China from carrying out contrarian plans, if they have them).

The Indian worries have mounted in recent times. Yameen is sounding definitely unfriendly. Just to stave off any possible Indian intervention of any kind (the Indian embassy had once given former President Nasheed refuge in its premises), Yameen said, in a recent statement, that his “government would not tolerate foreign parties to interfere in the country’s domestic issues”, and warned that all “must respect a country’s (territorial) integrity and national sovereignty”. The Indian External Affairs Minister brushed this aside, with an explanation that the remarks were aimed at a “wider audience” like the United Nations or the Commonwealth, and “not for India only”. Male did not issue any endorsement of this interpretation. India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose stated foreign policy objective is to improve neighbourhood relations, is truly caught between the proverbial devil and the deep blue sea. He had earlier postponed a visit to Male to protest Nasheed’s prison term. Should he now give a stronger signal against Yameen’s actions by altogether cancelling it? Should he impose sanctions? Drawing lessons from New Delhi’s relations with Nepal, where its hands have been singed if not burnt, India is rightly having to be circumspect, calculating that discretion is the better part of valour. For China may stand to gain, if India does too much, too soon!

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