

# ISAS Brief

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## The Maldives: A Paradise in Peril?

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The Maldives is small and beautiful. Its picturesque scenic bounties lend the smallest member state of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation certain paradise-like qualities. Its people enjoy a reputation of being mild-mannered. However, despite these attributes, a combination of politics and geography is increasingly rendering the future of this tiny nation somewhat perilous. Its vulnerabilities to the vagaries of nature are well known. Much of the world is aware by now that, due to climatic changes, a slight rise in the sea level can spell disaster for the country, immersing much of its land space. However, less reported in the world is the fact that the Maldives' recent transition from authoritarian rule to democracy stands threatened if the parliamentary elections, due on 9 May 2009, throw up results that would effectively block governance.

The smallest Asian country, with a total area of 298 kilometres spread over 26 atolls and comprising 1,192 islets, less than a hundred of which are inhabited, the Maldives is also the smallest predominantly Muslim country in the world, with a population of 300,000. It is also a country which, at 2.3 metres, has the lowest highest point in the world. Given its natural splendours, it is not surprising that tourism is its biggest foreign exchange earner, drawing 60 percent of the receipts.

By the existing criteria determined by the United Nations, it is on the list of the 50 Least Developed Countries (LDCs). However, it enjoys a high per capita income of over US\$3,000. As such, there have been pressures upon it at times to graduate from the LDCs list. However, since being on this list brings it some benefits in terms of trade preferences, the Maldives has used diplomacy to resist such pressures, and with help from fellow South Asian friends such as Bangladesh, the Chair of the Group of LDCs, it has so far succeeded in doing so.

In October 2008, the Maldives experienced what was generally seen as a positive political transformation. Much will now depend on the forthcoming parliamentary elections.

Having obtained its independence in 1965 from the British, the Maldives was run with an iron hand for three long decades from 1978 onwards by President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. He ruthlessly suppressed all opposition and won six consecutive elections without anyone running against him. Anyone on President Gayoom's wrong side found himself in prison,

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including the current Head of State, Mr Mohamed Nasheed, a long-time political activist. However, even this remote island could not remain indifferent to international and local calls for political liberalisation. The Maldives experienced several coup attempts mostly in the 1980s which were put down by the government with Indian assistance. However, these eventually led to President Gayoom relenting and allowing for multi-party elections. The first round of elections was held on 9 October 2008 and a run-off poll between the two highest vote-winners took place on 28 October 2008.

It was an interesting process. President Gayoom secured the highest number of votes in the presidential elections, totalling 70,000, with Mr Nasheed coming a somewhat distant second with 40,000 votes. However, in the run-off poll, several key candidates in the presidential elections such as Dr Hassan Saeed, who had the third highest votes, and Mr Gasim Ibrahim, a billionaire, supported Mr Nasheed. This ultimately resulted in a 54-percent majority votes for him. This, thus, ended the rule of the longest serving leader of any Asian nation, with winds and waves of change blowing across these pleasant islands.

However, the Maldives has had to contend with less savoury winds and waves such as those brought by the Tsunami of 2004 which completely destroyed at least six islands and seriously damaged 57 islands. A total of 21 resort islands had to close down. It must be said to the then-President Gayoom's credit that he displayed strong leadership in the aftermath and individually approached many world leaders for help, which was forthcoming. He also acted as a spokesman for the environmentally-threatened countries in many international forums and, in that sense, put the Maldives on the global diplomatic map. This is something his successor is continuing with. Indeed, President Nasheed has floated an interesting idea of creating a sovereign wealth fund from resources generated by tourism to purchase lands in Sri Lanka, India and even distant Australia for the Maldivians to relocate if their country is indeed inundated. The Maldives continues to be seriously imperilled by the effects of climate change.

Another threat to its stability may sadly come from human resources such as through the mismanagement of the democratic process. After a brief euphoria following the toppling of the authoritarian Gayoom, President Nasheed began to face challenges from within the willing coalition. His first 100 days witnessed the departure of Mr Saeed who resigned from the post of Adviser and Mr Ibrahim who quit as the Home Minister. Both of them had supported him in the run-off poll.

President Nasheed began to drag on his promises of early parliamentary elections which he argued were prompted by pressures from his former colleague, Mr Saeed. Foreign Minister, Dr Ahmed Shaheed, who belongs to Mr Saeed's party, went public to say that should President Nasheed's party win the majority votes in the forthcoming Parliament elections, it would impede checks and balances on the government, thereby severely compromising the democratic process. Perhaps the lack of a democratic culture led to friction between the government's political appointees and civil servants, so much so that President Nasheed was compelled to write to the Parliament complaining that the Civil Service Commission has failed to implement the government's policy.

Unfortunately, that was not the end of President Nasheed's travails. Upon his return from a successful trip to Europe and to the United Kingdom where he was feted by the Queen (President Nasheed has maintained good connections with British politicians), he received a letter from the Attorney-General cautioning him that the candidates for the parliamentary

elections are not intimidated by the ruling party (the Maldivian Democratic Party [MDP]). President Nasheed has now claimed that the letter was politically motivated because the Attorney-General is a member of his former ally (and now opponent) Mr Ibrahim's Jamhoory Party. There were also accusations that President Nasheed's MDP was trying to buy votes which also prompted a warning from the Election Commission. At long last, the election date for the 77-member parliament or *Majlis* has been set for 9 May 2009.

Is it possible that President Nasheed's ruling MDP, due to these manifold crises, becomes a minority party in a dead-locked *Majlis*, imperilling governance so soon after the democratic transition? It may not necessarily be the case. President Nasheed may still have several tricks up his sleeve. His MDP is contesting all of the 77 seats, the only party to do so, and, as of now, it is slated to win at least 32 seats. This is, of course, insufficient to constitute a majority. However, it would be a better result than that of any of the other parties. His principal rival remains Mr Gayoom and his Drivehi Rahiyyithunge Party (DRP), which, unfortunately, recently had troubles of its own. For instance, a strong Gayoom supporter, Mr Aneesa Ahmed, is leaving the party. The forecast is that Mr Gayoom's DRP will win about 10 to 15 seats. Mr Saeed's and Mr Ibrahim's parties are not likely to win more than 10 seats each. There will be several independent members in the Parliament, as many such candidates are running for the elections. As the growing political culture demonstrates, President Nasheed will not fight shy of using his many wherewithal and opportunities as President to lure away many independent members and even other party members. This may not be strictly ethical but it would be in line with democratic practices elsewhere in South Asia and it will only go to show that politics in the Maldives has come of age.

The transition in the Maldives could still and, hopefully, would have positive ramifications for democracy in South Asia. President Nasheed, of course, has a long 'to-do' list. The economy has to be restored in the post-Tsunami period. The concerns of the effects of global warming have to be addressed. He will need to focus on unemployment, corruption and widespread drug-use, especially among the youth. He must be able to assert the authority of elected persons over the bureaucrats. Most importantly, he must contribute to the evolving liberal, pluralist and democratic culture in the South Asian Muslim nation. The friends of the Maldives will help, as President Nasheed discovered on his trips abroad. The world is not ready to see a 'paradise lost' in these otherwise serene and idyllic isles.

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