

The Maldives Archipelago: The Indian Ocean As A Prize Or Crisis Of Multipolarity?

Part I

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Region: [Asia](#)

Global Research, November 11, 2015

[Oriental Review](#) 10 November 2015

The tropical paradise and world-famous tourist destination of the Maldives has been put under a month-long state of emergency over fears that a violent regime change scenario is about to commence. The tiny but geographically disperse Indian Ocean archipelago sits along a key maritime transit route linking the expanding East African economies with their counterparts in South, Southeast, and East Asia, thus making military-political events in this otherwise relatively obscure country of heightened global significance. Although it's still too early to conclusively say, circumstantial evidence points to the islands' instability being part of the broad Chinese-Indian rivalry playing out all throughout the Indian Ocean rimland, and that the Maldives are just the latest in a chain of competitions this year that have also included Sri Lanka and Nepal.

Part I begins by describing the current situation and explaining how it's really just the latest act of a decades-long drama that's been unfolding in the island nation. Following that, [Part II](#) sheds light on the heated struggle for influence that China and India are partaking in over the strategic orientations of the Indian Ocean island states, strongly suggesting that the current turmoil has something to do with their rivalry. Wrapping everything up, [Part III](#) concludes the series by arguing that the situation in the Maldives should be seen in the larger picture of the Cold War between China and India that's been actively unfolding since the beginning of this year, and offers some closing thoughts about what this means for the future cohesiveness of BRICS.

The Seesaw Of Stability

The post-independence history of the Maldives has been marked by bitter personal rivalries that periodically upset its tranquil stability. The present predicament is actually no different, and it perfectly correlates to the political trends that the country has experienced throughout the course of the past half century.

General Information

✖ The Maldives have traditionally been stable and largely unaffected by global events owing to their oceanic isolation. Fishing had been the dominant industry for generations until the advent of tourism in the early 1970s, after which the latter eventually came to occupy the top spot and bring in loads of much-needed foreign currency. With time, this helped the Maldives become an [upper middle income country](#), although the reliance on fishing to provide jobs and exports still remains, with the country's expansive [859,000 square kilometer](#) exclusive economic zone guaranteeing that this isn't likely to ever change. The

country's nearly 400,000 people live on only 200 of the total 1,190 islands that make up the Republic, with more than a quarter of the population residing in the capital of Malé. Just about all of the citizens are Muslim and Islamic law has a special place in the country's system, but society is relatively moderate and extremism hasn't historically been a problem.

Nasir vs Gayoom

Ibrahim Nasir was the second President after independence (1965) and served from 1968-1978, during which the Maldives began to develop its tourism industry and establish consistent contact with the outside world. The 1975 closing of a British airbase in the southern reaches of the archipelago hit the country's economy hard at the time, and his government was blamed for the difficulties that ensued. In 1978, instead of seeking a third term in power, Nasir fled the Maldives for Singapore amid rising public resentment over his rule, and from then on out, he became the arch-rival of his successor, Maumoon Gayoom.

Just as parliament had done with Nasir and per the constitutional configuration at the time, it selected Gayoom to be the only candidate to stand in the upcoming election, and he won heartily. His victory marked the beginning of 30 years of non-interrupted over the Maldives, during which the economy soared and the political situation largely stabilized. However, it wasn't without any 'hiccups', as there were three coup attempts during the 1980s that were widely suspected to be attempts by Nasir and his loyalists to return to power.

The most dramatic of these occurred in 1988 when the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam, a Sri Lanka-based ethno-separatist group along the lines of the Tamil Tigers, invaded the capital island of Malé and nearly succeeded in overthrowing the government. Gayoom was forced to rely on a rapid military intervention by India ([Operation Cactus](#)) to restore order and remain in power, and the successful conclusion of the mission deeply strengthened bilateral relations between the two. Interestingly enough, this was also the last conventional coup attempt in the Maldives, and Nasir was later pardoned for his in absentia conviction in an earlier 1981 incident and somewhat rehabilitated as an independence-era hero (although he never returned back to the Maldives).

Nasheed vs Gayoom



Mohamed 'Anni' Nasheed

The neutralization of Gayoom's primary rival, Nasir, only led to the emergence of another one, albeit in a completely different manner. [Mohamed Nasheed](#) was born in the Maldives in 1967 but spent a large portion of his life abroad in Sri Lanka and later the UK from 1981-1990 (8 years of which were in the latter). He was arrested the year after he returned when he wrote an article about how the 1989 presidential election was supposedly falsified, and his imprisonment (the first in a chain of 12 others on various charges) catapulted him to international fame in 1997 when Amnesty International bestowed him with the pro-Western 'honor' of being a "[prisoner of conscience](#)".

The so-called "human rights activist" behaved in the style of 1989-era revolutionaries, in that his goal wasn't to lead a military coup like his Cold War predecessors, but rather a social one that would be broadcast all across the world as a "pro-democratic" victory. His

first step in getting there was when he entered parliament in 2000 and founded the unofficial Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), but he suffered a temporary setback when he was accused of corruption and fled the country for the UK in 2003, where he was granted “political asylum” the year after. [The Telegraph](#) notes that “he forged close ties to Britain’s Conservative party” during the 18 months he was in self-imposed exile, and he returned to the Maldives a few months before political parties were legalized there in June 2005.

In August he was arrested after a failed Color Revolution attempt that he staged under the ‘plausibly justifiable’ grounds of commemorating an earlier “pro-democracy” destabilization the year prior. As would have been expected, this earned him global fanfare from the West and endeared him as a ‘daredevil of democracy’ in their eyes, and the increasing international pressure that this put on the Gayoom government pushed it into acceding to political reforms. The 2008 presidential elections that followed saw Nasheed beating Gayoom in a run-off vote by an 8% margin (53.65% vs 45.32%), which came off as somewhat surprising considering that Gayoom was ahead in the previous round with 40.3% to 24.9%. No matter how it happened, though, the result was still the same, and it’s that the “Maldivian Suu Kyi” had usurped power in a “democratic coup” and was now in charge of the geostrategic state.

The People vs Nasheed

While hailed by the West as a posterchild for “democracy” and buoyed abroad by the [cult-like following](#) he gained for being a “green” president obsessed with combating climate change, Nasheed could barely govern his own country owing to the multiple defections from his powerbase, which eventually came to include all of his coalition partners and his [entire cabinet](#). The politicians resigned from Nasheed’s government in protest for him overstepping the new constitutional limits on the presidency and trying to impose himself on parliament. The irony wasn’t lost on anyone, it seemed, since it became patently obvious that the pro-Western “democratic reformer” harbored authoritarian ambitions that were bolder than his predecessor’s, but because he received the ‘stamp of approval’ from Western leaders and “democratic” NGOs like Amnesty International, he behaved as though he has a blank check to do as he pleased. Being a globally recognized “climate change crusader” also helped, since it filled him with reservoirs of international goodwill no matter what actions he decided to take at home.

Nasheed wasn’t shrewd enough to heed the glaring signs of skyrocketing opposition to his rule, and his politically fatal moment happened when he blatantly overstepped his constitutional authority by ordering the arrest of perceived pro-Gayoom judge Abdulla Mohamed on corruption charges. This outraged the entire country and would prove to be the catalyst needed to galvanize the people’s will and initiate a popular movement against him. After protesting against him for weeks, the demonstrators gained a major victory when the police forces that were ordered to violently disperse them [abruptly switched sides](#) and turned against the government. That same day on 7 February, 2012, Nasheed [resigned from his post](#) as president and was replaced by his second-in-command Mohammed Waheed Hassan, in a stunning reversal of political fortunes that left many in the West scratching their heads at what happened. They seemed unable to understand how their “pro-democratic” and “green” “prisoner of conscience” could produce such popular outrage against his presidency that he would be overthrown by the masses before he could even finish his first term, but lo and behold it happened, and the changes it brought would lead to significant international repercussions (which will be explored at length in [Part II](#)).

Nasheed vs Yameen (Gayoom's Half-Brother)

The 2013 Presidential Election that followed Hassan's year-long caretaker government led to the narrow victory of Abdulla Yameen (former President Gayoom's half-brother) over Nasheed by a 51.39% to 48.61% margin in what was essentially the second round. As it would be, the earlier round where Nasheed won 46.93% to 29.72% (still not a clear majority to have clinched the presidency) was [annulled](#) after the country's highest court found that extensive fraud had been practiced. It was this second round (legally a re-do of the first round) that Yameen, the current president, won. Despite what many would have suspected to have been a controversial victory at least in the eyes of the West, the results were recognized the world over and a brief period of stability returned to the island nation, although it wasn't to last for long.



The former Maldives president Mohamed Nasheed, centre, is driven away after attending a hearing on the terrorism charges filed against him in Malé on 5 March, 2015

In February of this year, Nasheed was jailed on the grounds that he illegally arrested judge Abdulla Mohamed back during the time of his presidency, and he was sentenced to [13 years in prison](#) one month later after having been found guilty for violating the country's anti-terror laws through his action. A [brief controversy](#) occurred in the summer when he objected to returning to prison after having been temporarily released on house arrest for medical reasons. He says the government promised to commute the rest of his sentence to house arrest and alleges that he had a document to prove it, but the state said that it was a forgery and swiftly returned him to jail where he's remained ever since. It misleadingly appeared as though Nasheed and the external backers behind him had thrown in the towel and recognized the futility of their efforts in staging a comeback, but then all of a sudden three assassination plots emerged against President Yameen in the course of only a little more than one month.

The Three Assassination Plots And The State Of Emergency

The first plot was an actual attempt on the President's life, and it dealt with a [bomb exploding in his speedboat](#) on 28 September. Yameen was uninjured but his wife and two associates were hospitalized in the aftermath. 33-year-old Vice-President Ahmed Adheeb was [arrested](#) on 24 October over his involvement in the plot, and President Yameen [said](#) that the decision to do so to his recently appointed protégé was "not easy". Then on 31 October, the security forces retrieved a cache of weapons and explosives that were hidden 42 meters underwater off an island resort, concluding that they were to be used in a forthcoming violent seizure of power. Even more disturbing, they discovered that the munitions were actually [stolen from the state armory](#), raising the uncomfortable prospects that they could have been used to implicate the government in a false-flag attack. Just a few days later on 2 November, a remote-controlled bomb was [found and defused](#) near the presidential palace, clearly confirming that the President is indeed the target of very powerful forces that are desperately intent on killing him.

Amidst all of this, Nasheed's MDP announced that they'd be holding an anti-government rally on 6 November to pressure the authorities into releasing their leader. Considering that

the government had already realized by this time that an unspecified number of weapons had been stolen from the armory and might be used against the protesters by the regime change elements conspiring against Yameen, the authorities enacted a month-long [state of emergency](#) on 4 November in order to ensure both the citizens' safety and overall national security. The last thing that the Maldives needs at this moment is for a Kiev-like false-flag sniper attack to target the protesters as they march against the President, as this would surely be interpreted by the Western media (without any shred of proof whatsoever) as Yameen "killing his own people", just as Yanukovich was wrongfully accused of, with all of the resultant international (Western) hostility and potential sanctions that this could bring to his administration. Depending on the intensity of the false-flag violence that breaks out, it might even lead to a lightning-fast pre-planned Indian "humanitarian intervention" to depose of his government, a reverse-Operation Cactus, if one will, for reasons that will be explored in [Part III](#).

In hindsight, Yameen wasn't being paranoid but actually quite pragmatic in having declared the state of emergency, since the day after the MDP protesters were supposed to rally, the authorities [arrested a Sri Lankan sniper](#) that had been tasked with assassinating the President. Keeping in mind the lessons from Kiev, it's very probable that this individual and any of his fellow contractors (whether he was even aware of them or not owing to what looks to be the ultra-clandestine nature of this operation) could have also turned their sniper fire or even possible small arms and explosives on the opposition protesters and committed a massacre of shattering proportions.

The reader would do well to realize that Malé is a tiny island of 5.8 square kilometers and 153,379 people, giving it a record-setting population density of 26,000 people per square kilometer. To put that into relative perspective, it's about five times as dense as the Gaza Strip, which is conventionally recognized as one of most densely populated places on earth. Combined sniper fire, small arms fire, and strategically placed and timed explosions by a small team of Unconventional Warfare experts (urban terrorists, in this specific context) could turn the tropical paradise into a chilling cemetery in no time, and coordinated expertise in this lethal manner inevitably has to have some degree of state sponsorship behind it.

[To be continued...](#)

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