



INSIGHT: SOUTH ASIA

Political infighting tests Maldivian democracy as China and India look on



THE TAKEAWAY

With just months to go before Maldives' presidential elections in September 2023, the archipelagic country's political landscape is in a state of flux. The two major parties — the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) — have been unable to unite behind their respective leading candidates due to internal factionalism and criminal allegations. Meanwhile, China and India have been [watching](#) from the sidelines as both have their own favourites to protect and ideas on how to advance their own interests in the strategically located Indian Ocean nation.

IN BRIEF

On January 28, a [presidential primary](#) for the MDP saw President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih comfortably defeat friend-turned-rival Mohamed Nasheed. While Nasheed accepted the primary results, he also alleged that thousands of his supporters were wrongfully disqualified, and vowed to rally his backers to create a separate MDP faction. Nasheed, a charismatic leader, became the country's first democratically elected president in 2008, and Solih will likely need Nasheed's

support if he wants to retain the presidency beyond 2023. But internal party fractures could split the pro-India votes typically attracted by the MDP.

IMPLICATIONS

Since Maldives emerged as a multi-party democracy in 2008, its electoral landscape has been dominated by either the pro-India MDP or the pro-China PPM. Typically allied with India, the nation of 1,192 islands saw a significant shift towards China from 2013-18, when the PPM's Abdulla Yameen served as president. Yameen attracted multiple development and infrastructure projects through China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and even pushed (unsuccessfully) for a China-Maldives free trade agreement, but also led the country to incur heavy debts to China, amounting to 20 per cent of Maldives' GDP.

The MDP administration has followed an "India-first" policy, both under Solih and former president Nasheed. Currently, the party is on the verge of splintering into competing factions and diluting the pro-India vote bank. Although Solih [won](#) 61 per cent of the votes during the MDP's presidential primary, Nasheed alleged that around 39,000 of his supporters

were wrongfully disqualified, promising to rally them through a campaign of “Fikuregge Dhirun” (i.e. ideological revival), indicating that MDP could split.

Nasheed has been the face of MDP for decades and fielded Solih as a candidate in 2018 after being barred from running for office due to a terror conviction, which was later overturned. The two have since had a fallout over alleged corruption and misgovernance in Solih’s administration and [Solih’s failure](#) to act on promises of electoral and judicial reforms.

While the MDP’s intra-party rivalry could benefit the opposition, the PPM is in no position to capitalize on it. On December 25, 2022, PPM’s leader and former president [Yameen](#) was found guilty of corruption and money laundering and sentenced to 11 years in prison. To be considered as a [presidential candidate](#), Yameen needs to get his conviction overturned by the August 2023 deadline for filing nominations.

Maldives’ domestic politics has clear ramifications for the country’s foreign policy: the 2023 elections will determine whether India or China will have a strategic advantage in the Indian Ocean, a space that is central to maritime trade and security aspirations for both countries.

While Solih’s presidency has seen New Delhi [commit](#) over C\$2.71 billion (30.7 billion Maldivian rufiyaa) to various projects, the increased Indian presence in the country has also led to the opposition’s call for protecting Maldivian sovereignty, and became the ostensible reason for an “India Out” campaign in 2022. A Solih-Nasheed united front would be in New Delhi’s best interests, while Beijing hopes for a second Yameen administration to advance its BRI goals, particularly the [Maritime Silk Road](#) component.

WHAT’S NEXT

1. Concerns over second round, fraud

If smaller parties, such as the newly formed Maldives National Party, field their own candidates, while the larger parties like PPM and MDP continue with their fragmented approach, the chances of the presidential elections going into a second round are high. With

growing concerns of possible election fraud, several amendments have been proposed to the General Elections Act, including [preserving](#) ballot papers for 30 days after the declaration of results, and broadening the [criteria](#) for bribery.

2. Media freedom, misuse of laws

Observers are also focusing on press freedom and the misuse of laws and regulations, including [blasphemy](#) law, to curb dissent and control information.

On February 6, police appeared to assault two Maldivian [reporters](#) covering protests calling for Yameen’s release. Yameen’s presidency between 2013-18 saw violent media crackdowns, with these crackdowns continuing under Solih. The General Elections Act [states](#) that “only reporters, who are approved by the Elections Commission under the Act, can monitor voting areas,” leading to potential abuse by the regime.

3. Impact on tourism

The Maldivian economy is heavily dependent on tourism, with a direct [contribution](#) of 25.8 per cent to the country’s GDP in 2021. For a decade prior to 2020, China was the biggest source country for tourists, partly due to concessions that allowed Chinese citizens to travel to the country with fewer restrictions. This has changed somewhat since 2020, when India established an [air bubble](#) with Maldives to promote tourism. If Solih is re-elected this September, the reciprocal tourism between India and Maldives can be expected to grow. If Yameen returns to power, China’s contribution to Maldives’ tourism industry might increase. Beijing’s ability to use tourism as [a geopolitical tool](#) would also be keenly scrutinized.

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