

Maldives government releases former president

By Wasantha Rupasinghe
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Under intense pressure from the US and Britain, President Abdulla Yameen's government in the Maldives, a small island nation in the Indian Ocean, last month allowed jailed former President Mohamed Nasheed to leave the country.

Nasheed travelled to Britain, ostensibly for medical treatment, where British Prime Minister David Cameron met him on arrival. Nasheed held media conferences denouncing Yameen's close ties with China and indicated that he would not return to Maldives this month, as promised, but would seek to stay in Britain, India or Sri Lanka.

The island archipelago has a population of just 300,000 but it has increasingly become a focal point of Washington's "pivot" to the Indo-Pacific region to confront China. Because of its location near crucial sea lanes on which China, in particular, depends for its imports of energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa, Maldives has been drawn into the maelstrom of US plans for war against China.

According to media reports, US Secretary of State John Kerry was personally involved in the push for Nasheed's release. Kerry spoke to Nasheed after his departure, and telephoned Yameen "to thank" him.

As an indication of the central US and British role in his release, Nasheed met top diplomats in Colombo, including US Ambassador Atul Keshap and British High Commissioner James Dauris, before leaving for London via Sri Lanka on January 21.

Speaking at a media conference in London on January 25, Nasheed alluded to the geo-strategic interests at stake. He declared: "There has also been increasing reliance on trade with China [in Maldives]. There is a cold war brewing in the Indian Ocean. There's an arms race in the Indian Ocean and the Maldives is strategically placed."

Nasheed's clear objective is to secure the support of the major powers for a regime-change operation in Maldives. He called on the US and its allies to consider imposing sanctions on senior Maldives officials, on the pretext that they were "directly responsible for gross human rights abuses."

Nasheed, the leader of the opposition Maldives Democratic Party (MDP), was jailed last year for 13 years under the country's draconian anti-terrorism laws for ordering, as the then president, the detention of Criminal Court Justice Abdulla Mohamed in 2012. Despite a series of MDP protests, Yameen initially refused to release Nasheed. In a bid to suppress dissent and shore up his position, Yameen imposed a state of emergency in November but, under intense international pressure, was forced to withdraw it a week later.

While Yameen's decision to free Nasheed was described by local media outlets as a "surprising U-turn," it is a desperate attempt by the government to deflect the increasing pressure of the imperialist powers, which have been supported by India and Sri Lanka.

Just three days before his release, Nasheed's legal team met with US State Department officials and senators in Washington requesting the imposition of economic sanctions, on the grounds of human rights concerns. A report issued by the Washington-based Freedom Now, headed by Jared Genser, a member of Nasheed's legal team, pointed to the real geo-strategic interests involved behind the cloak of "human rights abuses."

The report stated: "Maldives is located in a highly strategic location in the middle of the East-West trade route and has a strong relationship with China whose investment has replaced that of India and ensure that

the Maldives will be indebted to China for the foreseeable future. Coupled with the increasing instability in the country, as exemplified by the recent state of emergency, these factors constitute a threat to critical US interests in the Indian Ocean and those of its strong ally India.”

China has stepped up its investments and ties in Maldives in recent years, in the face of increasing military encirclement by the US. Beijing also signed an agreement with Maldives as a partner in China’s Maritime Silk Route Project, which aims to protect its access to the vital Indian Ocean sea lanes.

The Indian government, which regards the Indian Ocean as its sphere of influence, has adopted a carrot and stick approach to Yameen’s government in recent months. Last March, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi cancelled a scheduled visit to Maldives, signaling opposition to Nasheed’s jailing and Yameen’s closer relations with Beijing.

At the same time, India has opposed calls for sanctions on Maldives and has not issued any public statement about Nasheed’s release. While expressing concerns about China’s influence in Maldives, India is also seeking to develop ties with Yameen to draw him away from Beijing. On January 18, Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar met his visiting Maldivian counterpart in New Delhi to discuss military ties.

Significantly, Sri Lanka acted as a key agent of the major powers in preparing the deal on Nasheed. The Colombo-based *Sunday Times* reported that the Sri Lankan foreign affairs and finance ministers, Mangala Samaraweera and Ravi Karunanayake, acted as mediators at the request of the US and Britain. They visited the Maldives secretly on January 14 and met with Yameen.

Since President Maithripala Sirisena came to office in January 2015, as the result of a Washington backed, regime-change operation, his government has worked closely with the US, India and the European powers. Former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse, who had built up relations with Beijing, faced intense international pressure to break with China before being ousted.

The involvement of Britain, which retained Maldives as a colony until 1965, is also revealing. After meeting Nasheed, British Prime Minister Cameron told parliament: “We are prepared to consider targeted

action against [Maldives] individuals if further progress isn’t made... Britain and its allies, including Sri Lanka and India, are watching the situation very closely.”

Britain plans to use a Commonwealth action group meeting in Maldives next month to put more pressure on the Yameen government. While Britain backs the US intervention in the region to undermine China, it has its own economic and strategic interests in asserting its influence in the archipelago.

By freeing Nasheed, Yameen is evidently seeking to balance between China, the US and India to maintain his rule. However, this is an untenable high-wire act as the US aggressively seeks to assert its dominance in the Indian Ocean over China.

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