

Maldives president mobilises military and police against opposition MPs

By Wasantha Rupasinghe
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Maldives President Abdulla Yameen deployed Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) officers and police on July 24 to stop opposition MPs entering the parliament.

The unprecedented move was to prevent a no-confidence motion by the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) against parliamentary speaker Abdulla Maseeh Mohamed, an ally of the president. MDP chairman Hassan Latheef told Reuters: “We were dragged, pepper-sprayed, and tear-gassed by the police and brutally stopped from entering the parliament.”

Last Monday’s events are the latest chapter in the ongoing, and increasingly bitter faction fight within the country’s ruling elite. The Maldives, an archipelago of 1,192 islands with a population of just under 400,000, is strategically located astride major sea-lanes across the Indian Ocean.

The MDP-led opposition has been planning for months to oust the speaker. MDP leader and former president Mohammed Nasheed opposes Yameen’s close relations with China and has openly declared that he is ready to serve US and Indian geo-political interests in the region. Nasheed and his supporters want to remove a law that bans anyone convicted on so-called terrorism charges from running in presidential elections.

Yameen introduced this anti-democratic law in 2015 to sideline Nasheed, who was convicted of terrorism charges after ordering the arrest and detention of former chief justice Abdulla Mohamed in 2012. Nasheed was sentenced to 13 years’ jail but was later released under pressure from the US and Britain.

Last April, the MDP, together with Jamhooree Party, Adhaalath Party and supporters of former Maldives dictator Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, attempted to remove the parliamentary speaker from the 85-member

parliament. This failed after 10 MPs from Yameen’s Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) refused to support a no-confidence motion.

The pro-US Yameen-led opposition over the recent months, however, has secured support from 45 MPs, including PPM members, for another no-confidence resolution, which was scheduled for July 24.

Although Yameen failed to persuade the 10 PPM defectors to support this vote, he reportedly used other tactics. The Maldives police claim that opposition MP Faris Maumoon bribed some members of parliament to win their backing. He denied the allegation but was arrested and taken into custody on July 18. Another opposition supporter has also been accused of bribery.

Yameen has secured a Supreme Court ruling that any MP who changed their political party affiliations would be unseated. He claimed that four government MPs had lost their seats. The parliament secretary responded by declaring that the July 24 vote would not be allowed.

The MDP and its opposition allies attempted to hold protest rallies following last Monday’s police and military blockade of the parliament. On Wednesday night seven journalists from two television stations were arrested while covering a protest outside a MDP meeting in Malé, the national capital. The journalists were accused of obstructing police attempts to disperse an “unlawful gathering.” They were released later.

The Maldives is an important focal point in Washington’s “pivot” to the Indo-Pacific region to confront China.

Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Malé in September 2014 during Yameen’s presidency. Yameen declared that the Maldives would join Xi’s Maritime Silk Route, a key element in China’s “One Belt and One Road” initiative. India, which is a key partner in the US military buildup against China, is hostile to

Yameen's relations with Beijing.

While MDP leader Nasheed was jailed on terrorism charges, the Maldives government, under pressure from the US and Britain, allowed him to leave the country under the pretext of taking medical treatments in London.

Nasheed, who has been in exile for the past two years, told the *Indian Express* on July 21 that he would "terminate all the Chinese projects" if elected president in next year's elections. "What is in Maldives' interest very much depends on what is in India's interest," he said, adding, "If India feels that its security and safety is compromised in the Indian Ocean, and then we must be mindful of that."

According to the *Indian Express*, Nasheed said that the Maldives "was in danger of becoming another Sri Lanka," a reference to the Chinese infrastructure loans taken out by former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse. Nasheed accused Yameen of "selling Maldives' national interest to the Chinese."

US, British, German and French embassies and EU representatives covering the Maldives but located in Sri Lanka issued a joint statement last week opposing Yameen's attempts to muzzle the opposition. It declared that it was "alarmed by the recent actions of the government of Maldives which seriously damage and undermines democracy" and the country's "international human rights obligations."

The statement also condemned the forcible closure of the parliament to opposition MPs and their harassment and arrest, and demanded that the parliamentarians be allowed "to conduct their rightful duties."

The "concerns" of these imperialist powers about democratic rights in the Maldives are a fraud. All these powers, within their own countries and internationally, readily violate democratic rights and commit war crimes in pursuit of their economic and geopolitical interests. The increasingly violent political instability in the Maldives is a direct result of the US-led war drive against China.

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