

Amid growing great power rivalry

Maldives political crisis deepens

By Rohantha De Silva
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The ongoing political crisis in the Maldives has thrown into sharp relief that the strategically-located Indian Ocean archipelago has become a focal point of the increasingly explosive geopolitical competition between India and the US on one side, and China on the other.

This competition extends across South and South-East Asia, and is increasingly being played out in Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa. However, the Indian Ocean—the world’s most important commercial waterway—is very much at its heart.

On Tuesday, Maldives President Abdulla Yameen got the country’s parliament to extend for a further 30 days the 15-day state of emergency he had declared on February 5. Yameen said the extension was needed because of “threats to national security and the constitutional crisis.”

With this anti-democratic move, Yameen is seeking to strengthen his hand against his political opponents within the Maldivian elite, principally former President Mohamed Nasheed, who from exile has been denouncing Yameen for “selling-off” the Maldives to China and imperilling the “security” of the Indian Ocean.

Within hours of Yameen’s initial suspension of core democratic rights, Nasheed publicly appealed for India to invade the archipelago. He has since issued a flurry of statements spelling out that were he to return to power, he would curtail ties with China and align Maldives with India, the US and other western powers.

India has long viewed the Maldives as part of its “backyard.” In 1988 it deployed military forces to the Maldives to thwart an attempted coup against Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who for three decades, ending in 2008, ruled the tiny 1,000-plus island state as an autocrat.

India has let it be known that its armed forces are ready for “any eventuality.” But thus far, New Delhi has publicly confined itself to demands Yameen end the state of emergency and allow the opposition to contest elections, slated for later this year, unimpeded.

Sections of India’s military-security establishment and corporate media, however, are becoming increasingly

impatient and have issued warnings that if New Delhi does not demonstratively take matters in hand, its claims to be a “net security provider” for, or policeman of, the Indian Ocean will be undermined.

“Make no mistake,” wrote Indian strategic commentator Brahma Chellaney in Tuesday’s *Hindustan Times*, “India’s rapidly eroding influence in its strategic backyard holds far-reaching implications for its security, underscoring the imperative for a more dynamic, forward-looking strategy.”

Reflecting both the anxiety over, and depth of the hostility toward, China within broad sections of India’s elite, this week also saw a barrage of alarmed media reports about Chinese naval manoeuvres in the easternmost reaches of the Indian Ocean. Many of these drew a direct connection between these manoeuvres and the events on the Maldives well over 1,500 kilometres away.

The current crisis erupted on February 1 when the Maldives Supreme Court, which had hitherto been supportive of Yameen’s increasing authoritarian moves, vacated the convictions of Nasheed and eight other opposition politicians and ordered that twelve parliamentarians who had defected to the opposition be allowed to take up their seats.

Both rulings represented a grave threat to Yameen’s presidency, since the first would allow Nasheed to return to the country and contest the coming elections, and the second would deprive Yameen of majority support in parliament.

In response, Yameen declared the state of emergency, ordered the arrest of two Supreme Court judges, including the Chief Justice, on the charges of corruption, and then bullied the three remaining judges into reversing their February 1 rulings.

In extending the state of emergency, Yameen once again ran roughshod over basic democratic norms. The government declared parliament had extended the emergency, although fewer legislators than required when adopting a “matter of public compliance” were present. Speaker Abdullah Maseeh, nevertheless, declared the vote valid, saying the constitutionally-mandated quorum was

irrelevant when extending a state of emergency.

Tuesday's extension of the state of emergency was carried out in defiance of India, which less than 24 hours before had issued a statement saying it hoped the emergency would be allowed to lapse, so that the "political process in Maldives can resume with immediate effect."

After the emergency was extended, India's Ministry of External Affairs quickly issued a statement that expressed "deep dismay" and said it was "important that all democratic institutions [in the Maldives be] allowed to function in a fair and transparent manner in accordance with the Constitution." The US soon followed suit, with State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert demanding Yameen end the state of emergency and Maldives "respect its international human rights obligations and commitments."

The real concerns of New Delhi, as exemplified by its decades-long support for the autocrat Gayoom, and of Washington, which has armed and sponsored bloody dictatorial regimes the world over, have nothing to do with the democratic rights of the people of the Maldives.

Their keen interest in the political crisis in the Maldives is motivated rather by their determination to ensure that unbridled control over the Indian Ocean—the principal conduit for the oil that fuels China's economy and for its exports to Europe, the Middle East, and Africa—remains in the hands of powers hostile to China.

The Maldives are situated near key Indian Ocean sea lanes. In fact, shortly before Yameen came to power the US was attempting to prevail on Maldives' government to sign agreements that would have allowed US warships to routinely use its harbours and paved the way for the establishment of one or more US bases.

There is no question that India, egged on by Washington, is determined to be rid of Yameen, who in pursuit of investment (and no doubt healthy returns for the faction of the elite with which he is aligned) has accepted Chinese offers to incorporate Maldives into its One Belt One Road transport infrastructure scheme.

But for the moment, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his BJP government are proceeding cautiously, calculating that there may be less risky options than an outright invasion to bring about regime-change in Malle.

Thus far Maldivian security forces have remained loyal to Yameen. A second and much bigger concern for India is the impact a military intervention in the Maldives would have on its already deeply fraught relations with China.

Since the Maldivian political crisis erupted, Beijing has repeatedly warned against any "foreign"—read Indian—intervention in the archipelago's "internal affairs," and said it doesn't want the Maldives to become a fresh

"flashpoint" in Sino-Indian relations. The state-owned *Global Times* went further, threatening New Delhi with unspecified retaliation, if "India one-sidedly sends troops to the Maldives."

Last summer, India and China came to the brink of war as the result of a 10-week military stand-off on a Himalayan Ridge, the Doklam Plateau, jointly claimed by China and Bhutan.

The Modi government is also aware of the explosive impact an Indian military intervention in the Maldives—supported, if not actively assisted, by the US, and patently aimed at countering China—would have on popular consciousness in India. Among India's workers and toilers there is no enthusiasm for the Indian bourgeoisie's plans to serve as a satrap for US imperialism.

That said all sorts of intrigues, including no doubt active planning for an Indian assault on the Maldives, are underway.

On Sunday, Nasheed met Indian Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on the side-lines of a media event sponsored by the *Hindu* in the South Indian city of Bengaluru (Bangalore). New Delhi apparently hoped to keep the meeting secret, but Nasheed tweeted a photo of himself with Sitharaman: "Pleasure to meet and brief Indian Minister of Defence Nirmala Sitharaman on the situation in the Maldives."

An Indian government spokesman responded with the implausible claim the meeting had been "unscheduled" and "no discussion on the situation in the Maldives" had transpired.

In a subsequent interview with the *Hindu*, Nasheed repeated his call for India to mobilize its military to pressure the Maldives government, but tried to distinguish this from an invasion. "Gunboat diplomacy," he said, "doesn't mean an attack; it means a show of strength. I feel we are at a defining moment in the Indian Ocean ... We have always seen India as a net provider of security and safety in the region, for the past 600 years. So, we mustn't lose the moment."

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