

EU threats add to pressure on Maldives government

By Rohantha De Silva
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The EU foreign affairs council has demanded that Maldivian President Abdulla Yameen immediately lift a state of emergency, restore constitutionally guaranteed rights and release all political prisoners. A statement on Monday declared that “if the situation does not improve,” the EU “may consider targeted measures.”

The EU move follows escalating US and Indian attempts to undermine Chinese influence on the strategically-located island nation in the Indian Ocean. The EU has no concerns about the democratic rights of the people of the Maldives but is attempting to advance its own interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

The current political crisis in the Maldives emerged early last month. The country’s Supreme Court ordered the dropping of all convictions and immediate release of opposition leader and former president, Mohamed Nasheed, and eight other political leaders.

The Supreme Court directive followed its inquiry into a petition accusing Yameen of corruption, filed by the opposition parties, led by Nasheed’s Maldivian Democratic Party.

If the court’s order had been carried out, Yameen would have lost his parliamentary majority and his arch-rival Nasheed would be able to contest the forthcoming presidential elections.

Instead, Yameen defied the order, declared a state of emergency and arrested two of the Supreme Court judges, including the chief justice, on charges of corruption and conspiring against the government. The three remaining judges then revoked the court’s order.

Nasheed, a stooge of Washington and New Delhi, immediately responded by calling on India to invade the Maldives. He claimed that China was transforming the archipelago into its colony and threatening security across the Indian Ocean.

While New Delhi has not mounted an invasion, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is increasing pressure on Yameen. Modi is fully supported by the Trump administration, which is harnessing India as a strategic partner in its aggressive geo-political confrontation against China.

The heightened international pressure is destabilising Yameen’s government. On Tuesday, Health Minister Dunya Maumoon, a niece of Yameen, resigned in protest against the arrest of former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, her father. She tweeted a call for the “international community” to help “overcome this crisis and to build a stronger democratic system.”

Police allege that Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, an autocratic ruler for 30 years, conspired and bribed the judges in a conspiracy to overthrow the government.

On February 23, Maldivian Prosecutor General Aishath Bisham sent a letter to police declaring that the state of emergency was unconstitutional because the parliament had not followed established procedures.

Bisham referred to the parliament’s extension of emergency on February 20. Although 43 of the 85 assembly members should have endorsed the emergency extension, only 40 members voted for it. The remaining MPs had been barred from entering the parliament.

Bisham’s letter also said all detentions made under the emergency were illegal. Attorney General Mohamed Anil, a loyalist of the president, advised the police to carry out Bisham’s advice but Yameen overrode this.

Desperately fighting for political survival, Yameen is implementing increasingly repressive measures. Last Sunday, the police imposed a curfew banning all political gatherings between 10.30 p.m. and dawn. Daytime political gatherings are already banned and the

police have violently suppressed protests.

The ongoing political crisis is affecting the tourist industry, which is worth \$US3.5 billion annually and is the country's main source of foreign income. Hundreds of hotel bookings are being cancelled daily, despite the government's assurance that the situation is normal in the popular resort islands. If the crisis continues, Moody's rating agency said it would lower this year's growth forecast of 4.5 percent.

In another indication of strained relations, the Maldives turned down an Indian invitation to participate in an Indian Ocean multilateral naval exercise on March 6. In attempt to assuage New Delhi, Maldivian ambassador Ahmed Mohamed said his country was not participating because its military was on standby due to the emergency situation.

The Indian media is continuing its anti-China campaign, claiming that Beijing is threatening India's strategic interests. A *Times of India* article on February 26 noted that the Maldives is establishing a Joint Ocean Observation Station with China at Makunudhoo, its westernmost atoll. The Maldivian opposition claims the deal involves a provision for a submarine base.

The *Times of India* report said the facility would provide an important vantage point in the Indian Ocean and be "uncomfortably close to Indian waters and [will] test red lines with regard to ties with the Maldives." Consisting of 1,192 islands, the Maldives is located astride Indian Ocean sea lanes through which flow 70 percent of world's petroleum shipments and half of its container traffic.

Concerns are being raised in Indian ruling circles that New Delhi is not aggressively defending its interests in the Indian Ocean. Brahma Chellaney, a former adviser to India's National Security Council, told the *Times of India* this week: "The underwater ocean observation centre in the South China Sea will be dual purpose, with civilian and military applications. China's supposed plan to build such a centre in the Maldives would effectively open a Chinese maritime front against India."

Chellaney called on New Delhi to warn China and the Maldives that it would not tolerate such a centre. China responded by declaring that the observation station had no military application and was not a submarine base.

In 2015, India signed an agreement with the Maldives

to establish 10 radar observation points to watch the movement of ships, particularly Chinese vessels, in the Indian Ocean. That plan has been abandoned because of the tensions between India and the Maldives.

This week, the Japanese foreign ministry issued a statement claiming that its maritime self-defence force observed a Maldivian flagged tanker lying alongside a North Korean flagged tanker in the East China Sea. It claimed there had been "ship to ship transfers" banned by the UN Security Council.

The Maldives government denied the allegations but Nasheed immediately tweeted that the Maldives had violated the UN resolution.

These developments underscore the global strategic dimensions of the Maldivian crisis and its dangerous implications. The US and Indian campaign against China throughout the Indo-Pacific could erupt into direct military conflict with catastrophic consequences.

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