

The Maldives: Pro-US President Solih sworn in

By Rohantha De Silva
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Ibrahim Solih, 54, was sworn in as the Maldives' seventh president at a special parliamentary assembly at the national football stadium in the capital Male last month.

Solih replaced former President Abdulla Yameen following elections in September and a lengthy regime-change operation conducted by the US and India. Washington and its strategic ally New Delhi were hostile to Yameen's close economic and military ties with Beijing.

Over the past five years the US and the European Union placed increasing pressure on the Maldives, supporting the parliamentary opposition, accusing Yameen of human rights violations and threatening international sanctions if the presidential election was not conducted "fairly" and democratically.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the most senior foreign leader attending Solih's swearing-in ceremony. Last year Modi cancelled a visit to the Maldives during his tour of the region in a clear snub to Yameen.

Addressing about 12,000 people at his swearing-in ceremony, Solih demagogically declared that he would end corruption and theft, establish justice and equality, and investigate alleged human rights abuses under Yameen.

Solih's promises are bogus and aimed at covering up the fact that his administration will bring the Maldives into line with Washington's military preparations for war against China and reorient the island-nation towards India.

In a political jab at former President Yameen and China, Solih claimed the Maldives was in a "precarious financial situation" caused by "reckless mega-development projects undertaken purely for political gain."

The US has accused China of "debt trap diplomacy" to secure regional influence, citing the Maldives and Sri Lanka as examples. The Maldives has been heavily dependent on Chinese investment and concessionary financing, including a \$737 million loan from Beijing.

Former opposition politicians claim the previous government was given more than \$US1.5 billion to finance massive infrastructure development. The Solih government has issued appeals to various Western countries and international aid organisations for economic assistance.

During his five-year term Yameen cracked down on the US- and India-backed political opposition. Former President Mohamed Nasheed and leader of the Maldives Democratic Party (MDP) openly called for Yameen's ousting and was directly involved in the regime change operation.

Yameen banned protests, jailed or forced into exile nearly all the opposition leaders, detained Supreme Court judges, including the former pro-Indian Chief Justice Abdulla Saeed, and suspended parliament for long periods.

Solih, who criticized these repressive measures while in opposition, has made clear that he will crack down against supporters of the previous administration. The new government, he said, will seek "justice for those subject to abuse and unfair treatment" and investigate unaccountable "deaths and disappearances."

The US and India claim that China plans to use the strategically located the Maldives as a key component in its massive Belt and Road Initiative plans for infrastructure development linking the Eurasian landmass and Africa by both land and sea.

The Maldives is southwest of India near important Indian Ocean sea lanes from the Middle East and Africa to South East Asia and East Asia. Diego Garcia,

the principal US military base in the Indian Ocean, is some 1,200 kilometres south of Male.

Former President Nasheed, who is now serving as a senior advisor to Solih, has attempted to whip up anti-China sentiment. He claims that the Chinese ambassador to the Maldives, Zhang Lizhong, handed the new Solih government a \$3.2 billion invoice, or around \$8,000 for every person in the country, when it came power. Beijing immediately rejected this allegation, describing it as “deeply exaggerated.”

Notwithstanding Solih’s promises, his government will reorient its foreign policy towards the US and India, and impose the pro-market reforms and austerity measures demanded by the banks and international financial capital. Predictably, Solih now claims that the Maldives are in worse shape than anticipated. A senior unnamed government official declared last month the country could default on debt repayments.

Underscoring its moves to strengthen relations with India, Solih released a joint statement with Indian prime minister Modi following the presidential swearing-in ceremony. The statement “expressed confidence in the renewal of the close bonds of cooperation and friendship” and emphasised, the “importance of maintaining peace and security in the Indian Ocean and being mindful of each other’s concerns and aspirations for the stability of the region.”

In 2012, the former Maldives government cancelled a \$US271 million contract with India’s GMR group to develop and operate the Ibrahim Nasir International Airport. Although New Delhi and Male signed a defence pact, “Action Plan for Defence Cooperation” in April 2016, India made little progress in bringing The Maldives under its orbit.

Late last month, however, the Indian Coast Guard as well as Sri Lankan forces held security threat exercises with the Maldives. Indian Coast Guard chief Rajendra Singh will also visit Male with advanced offshore patrol vessel ICGS Samar and fast patrol ICGS Aryaman.

Washington’s approval of Solih and his administration was indicated in comments by Alaina Teplitz, the US ambassador for Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Teplitz attended Solih’s swearing-in ceremony and described it as a “historic moment for Maldives.”

The Maldives’ Raajje TV network reported that

Teplitz said the US “wishes to renew its friendship with The Maldives and discuss topics of mutual interest and cooperation such as a free and open Indo-Pacific region, security, and economic interests, in particular, public financial management.”

Teplitz’s comments follow Washington’s standard script to justify its military build-up against China in the Indian Ocean region. The regime change operation that brought Solih to power will deepen the geopolitical tensions between major powers in Asia and internationally.

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