

Maldives president launches “anti-corruption” campaign to undermine Chinese influence

By Rohantha De Silva
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Ibrahim Solih, the new Maldives president, is rapidly changing the previous government’s pro-China orientation and strengthening the Indian Ocean nation’s relations with India and the US.

On January 8, Solih initiated an “anti-corruption” investigation of multi-million dollar contracts awarded to Chinese companies by former President Abdulla Yameen. Solih’s office called for written complaints about “cases of corruption and abuse of power within state institutions” since January 1, 2012, which includes former President Mohammed Waheed’s final two years in office.

Waheed became president in February 2012, after the forced resignation of pro-US President Mohamed Nasheed. Under Waheed, the Maldives negotiated a \$US500 million loan from China for infrastructure, including a bridge linking the capital Male to the main airport in another island, and various housing projects.

Anti-China critics claim that infrastructure projects were given to Chinese companies at inflated prices and corruption was “institutionalised” after Abdulla Yameen became president in 2013. Yameen has denied the accusations, insisting that the loans were in order to accelerate economic development in the Maldives.

The purpose of the government’s investigation is to witch hunt Yameen and other pro-Chinese factions of the Maldives ruling elite. The government has already begun investigations against Yameen. On December 16, a Maldives court ordered a freeze on Yameen’s bank accounts, which hold \$6.5 million. He has also been accused of receiving close to \$1.5 million in “illicit” payments during last September’s presidential elections.

Solih came to power last year as part of a

regime-change operation against Yameen orchestrated by the US and India. Yameen’s orientation cut across US strategic interests in the region.

The new government has accused the former Yameen administration of creating a debt crisis for the Maldives and appealed to India for financial assistance. Beijing claims that the Maldives’ debt to China is only \$1.5 billion but the Solih government insists that it is much larger.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended Solih’s swearing-in ceremony in November and the two leaders signed a joint statement which declared 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.”

Solih’s first foreign visit was to India in December and was followed by an announcement that New Delhi would provide \$1.4 billion in financial assistance to the Maldives.

India and the Maldives have agreed to deepen security and maritime cooperation between the two countries, which includes coordinated patrol and aerial surveillance of the Indian Ocean. The Indian External Affairs Ministry will also provide the Maldives with a Dornier aircraft. The Maldives has asked India to assist in housing construction, and establishment of water and sewerage systems in the outlying islands.

The US has accused China of engaging in “debt trap diplomacy” in the Maldives. The term was invented by Washington, which has for decades used direct and indirect financial assistance to further its interests around the world, to blacken Beijing and undermine its relations with other countries in the Indo-Pacific region.

The US has no concern about the debt problems confronting the Maldives or other countries in the region but is determined to prevent anything cutting across its efforts to encircle China and prepare for war.

The Maldives is strategically located off the southwest tip of India and just above the important sea lanes from Middle East and Africa to East Asia, South East Asia and Australia. These sea routes, which provide China, Japan, South Korea and India with access oil from the Middle East, are a focal point for rivalry between the US and India on one side and China on the other.

India and the US are concerned about China having deep-sea ports under its authority in the region, including at Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka. Beijing has signed an agreement to build a \$1.3 billion port at Kyaukpyu in Burma on the Bay of Bengal and is also to develop the Chittagong port in Bangladesh.

These ports are part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which includes road, rail and pipelines to more closely link the Eurasian landmass with China.

Nervous about the new Maldives' government reorientation towards Washington and New Delhi, China's foreign ministry publicly stated that it hoped the government would continue backing Beijing's BRI and the Free Trade Agreement signed by the previous administration.

The rapid reorientation of the new government in the Maldives away from China and towards the US and India can only heighten political conflict and crisis in the small Indian Ocean state.

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