



Indian Council of World Affairs

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by

H.E. Mr. Abdulla Shahid

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Republic of Maldives

on

"Challenges to Democracy in Maldives"

Sapru House, New Delhi

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentleman,

It is always a privilege to visit India, especially this vivacious and beautiful city of New Delhi, the capital of the world's largest democracy.

I am deeply honored, and indeed greatly indebted by the kind invitation of Madam Speaker the Honorable Meira Kumar; my delegation and I have been profoundly touched by the warmth of the reception, and the generosity of hospitality, extended to each and every one of us since our arrival.

This is not the first time that I have had the pleasure of being in New Delhi, both on official occasions and otherwise. But this is the first time that I am visiting India on a bilateral official visit as the Speaker of the People's Majlis, the parliament of the Maldives, and so, this visit has a special significance for me; for I come to you with a special message from the people of the Maldives.

And that message, dear friends, is one of utmost love and respect, friendship and admiration; and unbounded gratitude and appreciation for the steadfastness with which India has always stood by the Maldives and her people, in good times and bad, unwavering, undeterred and uncompromising, in extending its generosity as a good neighbor.

Time and again, there are many who point to the glaring differences in size and power of our two countries, alluding in some way that such differences are prone to bestow an inequality in our relationship that would somehow be disadvantageous to the 'little brother' – that our sovereignty and independence would somehow be compromised; that we would be expected to always defer to the interests of our very large and powerful neighbor.

But, nothing could be further from the truth!

As a person who has experienced Indo-Maldives relations, up close and personal, for over more than two decades, I can testify that, while there are innumerable examples of brotherly relations between our two countries, we have never been made to feel like a 'little brother', in our interactions with India. Indeed, India has always dealt with the Maldives as an equal partner, our differences in size and might notwithstanding. As good friends and close neighbors, we have had our differences and disagreements on various issues, but such differences have never affected our trust and faith, or the mutual respect we have always extended to each other.

As a one-time career Foreign Service officer, and more lately as a politician, I have had the opportunity to interact with the Indian government at various levels on many occasions, including, at times, at the very highest levels. On each and every occasion, India has never failed to step up to the plate and deliver, without equivocation or a quid pro quo, as was

evidenced so remarkably during the 2004 tsunami disaster and the 1988 November 3rd armed attack on the Maldives sovereignty. Of course, these were not the only times that the Maldives experienced Indian generosity; there have been many more. Such unreserved cooperation and good faith built over many decades between our two countries have strengthened the foundations of our friendship, widened and deepened the scope of our cooperation, both at the bilateral level as well as in the multilateral sphere.

Ladies and Gentleman,

Today, the Maldives is faced with the equivalent of a 'political tsunami', as we struggle to come to terms with the chaos caused by the sudden change in Government in February of last year. Political discourse in the country has become intensely partisan, fuelled by mutual mistrust and a lack of good faith among the political leaders. The intensity of the rivalry between the opposing political parties has been further fuelled by the prevailing uncertainty regarding the eligibility of certain candidates to participate in the upcoming presidential elections. As we move towards the second presidential elections under the 2008 Constitution to be held later this year, we will, once again be needing the wise counsel, constructive engagement and cooperative assistance of our international friends, to rekindle the hopes and dreams that the people of Maldives vested in their democratic transition.

When the Maldives embraced multi-party democracy and held its first free and fair election in 2008, our friends in the internationally community joined us in rejoicing the peaceful transition of power through the ballot box. In a world full of endless conflicts and innumerable setbacks, the transformation of the Maldives from an authoritarian regime to a democratic state, without bloodshed, stood out as a stellar victory for not only the people of Maldives, but also the international community, who regarded it as their 'success story'.

Sadly, it is today evident that the 'success' we had been celebrating in 2008 was more apparent than real. Beneath the dignified ceremonies lay deeply intrinsic problems of cultural heritage, severe resource limitations in both monetary and human terms as well as inexperience in the art of deliberative governance. For some, it seemed that democracy had brought nothing but chaos and disarray; for them, the promise of democracy had failed to deliver; for a people who had been nurtured on a culture of authority and obedience, democracy had become a vile and 'uncivilized' system, with no respect for authority and the elderly. Debate and dissension, rather than being a productive discourse, had come to be regarded as a waste of valuable time, compromising efficiency and destroying the country's social fabric, rather than contributing towards building a more just society through making wise decisions.

It is well to remember that for more than 800 years, the Maldives had been ruled by authoritative Sultans who yielded

near absolute power, notwithstanding the adoption of a written Constitution in 1932. The transfer of power from the Sultan to an 'elected' President in 1968, following the adoption of a Republican system of governance, did not in any way diminish the powers of the executive, who continued to control every aspect of the political economy and the social well-being of the people. He was not only the Chief Executive but also the final arbiter of justice and the enforcer of the laws of the country. In actual fact, presidential discretion often held far more sway than legislation passed through the parliament, an institution that was firmly held in the grip of the President through members, both nominated and elected, who remained yielding to the wishes of the executive.

Thus, for a population which had been nurtured on a diet of absolute authoritarianism and subservience to their rulers for many centuries, the newly adopted doctrine of separation of powers was an alien concept that was not readily digestible. Nor was the sudden emergence of political parties with their very loud and public displays of differences in opinion resonant with a population that had been fed on a diet of 'homogeneous unity'. Similarly, the newly created independent State bodies were overly eager to establish their separate and distinct identities, interpreting their mandates in an expansive manner that often brought them into conflict with other State institutions.

Ladies and Gentleman,

While it would be premature to claim that democracy has failed in the Maldives, it is also evident that the mere presence of political parties, a hastily drawn up Constitution establishing separation of powers, conferring freedom of expression, setting up independent State Institutions and even holding an internationally verifiable free and fair election do not provide for a sustainable democracy. Looking back at the political developments that had shaped the new political environment, and the practice of democratic governance since the adoption of the new Constitution in August 2008, we realize now a number of fault lines that were systemically inherent and instrumental in contributing to the unraveling of the first democratically elected government of the country.

I would contend that the upcoming presidential elections pose a crucial challenge for the future of democracy in the Maldives. It can help consolidate the tentative steps we have taken towards a sustainable and vibrant democratic future, or it may end up tearing the country further apart, as the intensity of the rivalry between the supporters and detractors of potential presidential contenders become increasingly partisan and ever more emotional.

Maldives remains intensely divided, despairingly in need of urgent healing. Such a healing process can only be realized by all political stakeholders coming together, in unison, to take a solemn pledge to respect unreservedly the verdict of the people

conveyed through the ballot box in September. A free and fair election in which all the chosen representatives of the people are allowed to compete without hindrance remains the best, if not the only, route left for the country to get back on a path of democratic normalcy and hope for the future. Political leaders must commit themselves to abide by the principles of democratic governance, to being bound by the larger national interest, rather than seeing themselves as winners and losers in the election outcome.

I would urge the international community to become more intensely and actively engaged in the electoral process by being on the ground in the Maldives, during the preparations for the elections, while the election is being conducted and following the results. We need them, not just on the day of elections to make a few spot observations, but be familiar with the totality of the electoral process. I believe an election comprise more than just the mere act of casting a vote; a free and fair election is just as much about the total electoral atmosphere prevailing prior to, during and immediately after the elections. As the Maldives strives to restore its democratic credentials, a vote of confidence by the international community in the newly elected leader will be an essential factor in conferring legitimacy for the new leader both at home and abroad.

Ladies and Gentleman,

Before concluding my remarks today, I want to take this opportunity to reaffirm the sentiments of boundless goodwill and heartfelt friendship that burn infinitely in the hearts of the Maldivian people for the people India.

For us Maldivians, India is not just a neighbor. For us, India is not just an emerging world power. For us, India is not merely a source from which we procure many of our essential needs; nor is India, the 'mighty protector' that we turn to in times of peril.

India is our friend.

And we are confident, will always remain so.

Thank you!