



Indian Council of World Affairs
Sapru House, Barakhamba Road
New Delhi

ICWA Guest Column

Visit of Maldives President Abdulla Yameen

by



Ambassador Skand R Tayal

27 April 2016

President of Maldives HE Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom (AYAG) came on a short and business like visit to New Delhi on 10-11 April 2016. This was AYAG's third trip to India. The first visit was in January 2014 and was important as it was the first official visit of AYAG after assuming office in the aftermath of political unrest and a controversial election. AYAG's second visit was in May 2014 when he attended the swearing in ceremony of Prime Minister Narendra Modi along with other SAARC leaders.

Maldives is a rather small country of about 350,000 population spread over 185 islands south of Lakshadweep islands in the Indian Ocean. The country is of considerable security and strategic interest to India as its islands are adjacent to the sea lanes in the Indian Ocean.

India has historically been a friend, well wisher and net security provider to the government and peoples of Maldives. Maldives attained independence from UK in 1965 and last year India and Maldives marked the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations. Former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom ruled over the country with an iron grip for thirty years (1978-2008) and still wields considerable influence through his extended family and appointees in the judiciary, army and internal security apparatus. Present Maldivian President is his half brother. India intervened and thwarted a coup attempt against President Gayoom way back in 1988 which was masterminded by Sri Lankan Tamil mercenaries.

In the first free and fair elections in the country a liberal, young and popular leader Mohamed Nasheed was elected President in 2008. His attempts to introduce genuine democracy were resisted by the old entrenched establishment and he was ousted from power by a judicial coup in 2012. Since then the country has been beset with internal political unrest, arrest of political opposition and control of the press. In 2013, former President Nasheed was sentenced to 13 years jail on questionable charges. Mohamed Nasheed is presently on parole on medical grounds and is undergoing treatment in England.

The Nasheed regime had a liberal democratic orientation and had pronounced pro-India leanings. His attempts to introduce impartiality and accountability in the judiciary and other organs of the state led to his downfall. While the Maldivian Democratic Party led by Mohamed Nasheed represents the forces of change the Maldivian Peoples' Party represents the interests of the establishment and the Armed forces .

After an interregnum and two presidential elections, Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom managed to defeat Mohamed Nasheed and assumed power in early 2014. However, from the very beginning the new regime had an overt anti-India stand. It openly courted China and cancelled a huge US\$500 million contract awarded to the Indian Company GMR for up gradation and operation of the Male airport. This contract has recently been awarded to a Chinese company. Also, there are proposals for Maldives to lease an island in perpetuity to China and Maldives is an enthusiastic partner of China in the Maritime Silk Road disregarding India's reservations.

Relations between India and Maldives have therefore been rather uneasy since 2012 and Maldives is the only South Asian country which has not been visited by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. President Xi Jinping had been to Maldives and Sri Lanka in September 2014 on his way to India.

While in Delhi, AYAG attempted to pacify his uneasy hosts. In a press interaction, he declared that Maldives has an 'India First' foreign policy. He also said that Maldives would always take care of India's security concerns. He reiterated continued Indian participation in the Uthuru Thila Falhu project to create berthing and dockyard facilities for Coast Guard. He also invited India to participate in the ambitious "IHavan Integrated Development Project" which is planned as a major trans-shipment and logistics hub, mainly with Chinese investment.

In the joint Press Conference with Prime Minister, Narendra Modi on 11 April, the Maldivian President publicly said that the main purpose of his visit was to seek India's support at the forthcoming review meeting of Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) slated to be held later on 20 April 2016, so that no punitive sanctions are imposed by the Commonwealth on the Maldivian regime. President Yameen candidly admitted that, "we look at India for continued support in preventing any unfair, any punitive action by the CMAG on Maldives.....smaller countries are unfairly punished."

The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group has been considering the situation in Maldives in the aftermath of a succession of dubious Presidential and Parliamentary elections, civil unrest and suppression of democratic opposition and arrest of dissenting political leaders.

A 3-member CMAG Mission which included Foreign Secretary S Jaishanker had visited Maldives on 6-8 February 2016 and its report was considered by the Group on 24 February 2016. In its concluding report the Mission refrained from proposing any punitive measures on Maldives and welcomed the “commitment given to CMAG by the Government of Maldives to an inclusive national political dialogue.” However, the report was forthright in its critical observations and expressed:-

“...their continued concern regarding political space available to the opposition, including both the detention or custody in the country and absence abroad from the country of political leaders; the separation of powers and independence of the judiciary; and the independence and lawful functioning of democratic institutions.” For consolidating past Constitutional changes and transition to a multi party democratic state, the Report underlined the importance of a set of actions which include an inclusive and time bound political dialogue, release of detained political leaders and their full participation both in political dialogue and in the 2018 elections.

The issue was discussed by CMAG on 20 April .CMAG did not place the Maldives situation on its formal Agenda but expressed grave concern on limited progress on all-party talks and release of jailed opposition leaders. The Group called for “ clear, measurable progress” by September 2016, when it would assess “ progress, take stock, and take decisions accordingly.” Maldives has expressed satisfaction that the situation was not considered serious enough to be placed on the formal agenda of CMAG.

Another source of worry to India is the courting by the present regime of religious fundamentalist forces. In a bid to consolidate his hold over the masses the former strongman, President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom declared Maldives to be an Islamic Republic in 1997. Orthodoxy, mosques and religion were mobilized to counter the forces of democracy, equality and liberal thought.

Following a rather risky policy the present Maldivian regime is consolidating religious links with Saudi Arabia opening the doors to toxic Wahabi influence on the hitherto tolerant Islam practiced by the Maldivians. President Yameen has visited Saudi Arabia thrice in the last two years and a Saudi Embassy has been opened in Male. The Maldivian Ministry of Islamic

Affairs is aggressively pushing the agenda of rapid Wahabization of Maldivian Islam. Already, presence of visible symbols of Islam, skull cap, hijab etc is increasing in the country. How this increasing state supported orthodoxy would square with the open lifestyle of tourists is for the Maldivian policymakers to decide. Tourism contributes more than 30% to the Maldivian GDP and more than 3 million foreign tourists visited the country of 350,000 in 2015!

Radicalisation of Maldives would need to be watched carefully by India as its ripples would be felt in Kerala which has old cultural and people to people links with Maldives. More than 40 Maldivian youth are reported to be operating with ISIS in Syria/Iraq.

The brief visit by AYAG should therefore be seen as an initiative by Maldives to repair its relations with India. This is the time for some frank talks and deft diplomacy between the two neighbours. Maldives needs to be made aware of India's Red Lines vis-à-vis both China and religious fundamentalism. Maldives needs to realize that it should avoid provoking India and fully appreciate and accommodate the security and strategic interests of its giant immediate neighbour.

India, on its part, needs to reassure Maldives that while as a principle we support democracy and a liberal polity, we would not take sides in the internal political struggle in that country.

In the final analysis, safety, security and stability in the region is of paramount importance and it can best be ensured by the countries of the region themselves. In this context, the MOU on Action plan for Defence Cooperation signed during the Presidential visit is significant.

** The author is a former Indian ambassador to the Republic of Korea.*