

Maldives president ousted in US-backed coup

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On Tuesday, Maldivian President Mohamed Nasheed, head of the Maldives Democratic Party (MDP), was forced out by the military after a three-week opposition protest and a police mutiny. He was replaced by Vice President Mohamed Waheed Hassan Manik, who sided with the opposition.

In a televised address on Tuesday, Nasheed said only: “I feel my staying on in power will only increase the problems, and it will hurt our citizens.”

The next day, however, he declared that he had been forced to resign in a coup: “There were guns all around me and they told me they wouldn’t hesitate to use them if I didn’t resign.”

A protest in the capital, Male, by hundreds of Nasheed’s supporters, during which he addressed the crowd, was suppressed by police with tear gas attacks and baton charges. Riots then erupted in Male, with supporters of Nasheed throwing petrol bombs at police and attacking a private television station that was critical of his government.

Nasheed was elected in 2008 with a sweeping majority, in the first multi-party elections in the country’s history. His election marked the end of 30 years of autocratic rule by former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, during which Nasheed was arrested and detained several times and also forced to live abroad for several years.

The Maldives, with a mostly Sunni Muslim population of 330,000, is one of the poorest countries in the region. It depends mainly on tourism and exporting dried fish. Tourism generates two-thirds of the country’s GDP of about \$1 billion. Many daily needs including food, clothes and energy have to be imported.

The opposition—including Gayoom’s Maldivian People’s Party (MPP) and the Muslim extremist Dhivehi Qaumeey Party (DQP) of Hassan Saeed—called protests when on January 16 Nasheed ordered the military to arrest Criminal Court Chief Judge Abdulla

Mohamed. The judge had obtained the release of DQP Vice President Mohamed Jameel Ahmed, whom Nasheed wanted detained on charges of slander. Ahmed had reportedly said that Nasheed was insane, a Christian, and promoting vice.

Later, the police joined the protesters, refusing the government’s orders to shoot. On Tuesday, about 200 policemen stormed Maldives TV and issued statements calling people to come to the streets. Sections of the military soon took the side of the anti-Nasheed protesters.

Nasheed failed to make any improvement in living and social conditions of workers and toiling people in the country. While he was voted in by 54 percent of voters in the 2008 election, rising inflation and International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity measures implemented by his government have increased popular opposition to his rule. Right-wing forces, including Muslim fundamentalists, have exploited this to oust him, with the help of the military and police.

The Maldives are situated in a strategically important location in the Indian Ocean, astride major sea lanes; global and regional powers, particularly the US, China and India, keep an eye on this 1,190-island archipelago. India sees Maldives as within its sphere of influence. In this context, it is significant that India and the United States rapidly recognised the new Maldivian president installed by a coup.

US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland told the media that the new president had said, “the security situation in the Maldives was now under control and generally peaceful.” US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, Robert Blake, will travel to the Maldives tomorrow.

Nuland brushed aside concerns about a coup against Nasheed: “We have obviously seen the statement from President Nasheed. As I said to you yesterday,

Assistant Secretary Blake was in contact with President Waheed [Manik]. His view of events obviously differs.”

Nasheed reportedly asked help from New Delhi to quell the opposition but was refused. Having worked to boost its influence under Nasheed’s rule, New Delhi nonetheless welcomed a new government installed through a coup, hoping to pursue its geo-political interests through a deal with the new regime.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh sent the new president “warm felicitations” for “assumption of office as President of the Maldives.”

Singh noted the “common interests” of both countries, adding: “India is committed to working with you and the government in Maldives to further enhance our close, bilateral cooperation to mutual benefit and for the continued security, progress and prosperity of our two countries.” According to reports, the new Maldivian president has offered to visit India soon.

Underlining India’s interests in the Maldives, Vice Admiral Raman P. Suthan, former Vice Chief of the Naval Staff, Indian Navy, said: “Maldives is almost like an outpost of India. The Indian Navy has been supporting Maldives forces by providing infrastructure support like patrol boats and radar stations. So we need to watch the developments there.”

He noted: “Other nations like China and Pakistan can have an interest in developing a base there. We have the String of Pearls in front of us.” He was referring to China’s so-called “String of Pearls” strategy of building ports and bases in the Indian Ocean, close to the sea lanes through which its energy supplies travel from the Persian Gulf and Africa to China.

New Delhi has a critical strategic interest in the Maldives, which sit off India’s south-western coast near Sri Lanka and key trans-Indian Ocean shipping routes. According to the *Times of India*, “97 percent of India’s international trade by volume and 75 percent by value passes through the Indian Ocean.”

China has worked to boost its influence in the archipelago, making the Maldives a focus of rivalry between New Delhi and Beijing. China has built Maldives’ Ministry of Foreign Affairs building and the national museum. Bilateral trade increased to \$US64 million in 2010, up nearly 56 percent from 2009. In 2010 several cooperation agreements were signed between China and Maldives.

There are reports that China negotiated with Maldives during the rule of Gayoom to build its naval base in Marao, one of the largest islands of the archipelago. According to these reports, the deal was finalized after two years of negotiations, when Chinese premier Zhu Rongji visited Male in May, 2001. However, Gayoom has denied these reports, calling them rumours.



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