

US, Indian envoys intervene to back coup in the Maldives

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Last weekend US and Indian envoys visited the Maldives to back the government of President Mohamed Waheed Hassan, installed in a coup last week. They discouraged ousted President Mohamed Nasheed from continuing his campaign to demand Hassan's resignation and the holding of snap elections.

On February 7, Nasheed, the head of the Maldives Democratic Party (MDP), who was elected president in the country's first multi-party elections in 2008, was forced out at gunpoint after a three-week protest and a police mutiny. His vice president Hassan, who sided with the opposition, was installed as the new president.

On February 11, US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, Robert Blake, met Hassan and Nasheed separately in the capital, Male. He endorsed Hassan's government and asked Nasheed and his supporters to join a "unity government" with Hassan, a demand that Nasheed rejected.

Blake dismissed Nasheed's demand for immediate presidential elections, claiming it is "too early" to hold an election because police, the election commission and the judiciary are not "sufficiently prepared for a free and fair election process." This echoed the comments of Hassan, who is insisting that no elections be held until 2013, as scheduled.

Blake did not respond to Nasheed's calls for an independent investigation into his ouster and his accusations that the police and military are carrying out arrests of MDP members and supporters. But he said: "It is important for the US that all parties exercise restraint and refrain from violence."

This was widely seen as a call for Nasheed and his MDP to end their protests against the Hassan government. Dodging the question of whether there had been a military coup or a constitutional transfer of power, Blake said: "The matter was for Maldivians to

debate."

The Obama administration has yet again shown that its policy is based not on promoting "democracy," but defending its global strategic interests. It will stop at nothing—backing autocratic regimes and military dictatorships as it sees fit.

On the same day of Blake's visit, Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh sent his special envoy M. Ganapathi, Secretary (West) in the Ministry of External Affairs, to the Maldives. Ganapathi met with both Hassan and Nasheed, stressing the need to speed up a political process and form a "broad-based coalition government that could restore peace and stability."

Asked about Nasheed's requests for an Indian intervention, Ganapathi told reporters: "This is an internal development in The Maldives which should be resolved peacefully and democratically by the people of Maldives." Insisting that India's response to the Maldivian crisis was neither delayed nor partisan, he added: "We respect states and not individuals."

This statement further indicates that New Delhi supports the newly-installed Hassan government.

The US and India have intervened ruthlessly to assure their domination over the Maldives by supporting the Hassan government, in line with their strategic interests in the Indian Ocean region. They want to block any other power, particularly China, getting any advantage in advancing their influence in the Maldives, an island chain that is strategically located along busy shipping lanes. Beijing is also seeking to increase its influence in the region, to counter the US policy of encircling China.

The US and Indian interventions have strengthened Hassan's hand. He has gone forward with a crackdown on Nasheed and his party, expanding his cabinet by inserting veterans of the 30-year autocratic regime and

party of former president Moumoon Abdul Gayoom, whom Nasheed defeated in 2008 elections. This again clearly indicates the role of Gayoom's party in the coup that ousted Nasheed.

The Maldives criminal court issued an arrest warrant for Nasheed without any clear charges, but the warrant has not been implemented amid fears of further unrest and international pressure. Thousands of Nasheed supporters, who protested demanding the immediate resignation of Hassan and calling for snap polls, met with police attacks. Dozens of people were injured, and hundreds have been arrested and subjected to beatings and torture.

About 90 supporters of Nasheed's MDP were arrested in Addu Atoll, the northern cluster of islands in the Maldives, forcing Nasheed to call off a planned trip to the islands accompanied by the foreign journalists who had arrived in Male.

Soon after taking power, Hassan announced the appointment of retired Colonel Mohamed Nazim, who was removed as defence minister by Nasheed in May 2011 on insubordination charges. He also appointed Mohamed Jameel Ahmed, the former minister of justice under Gayoom, as the home minister.

On February 12, according to Reuters, Hassan stocked his cabinet with ministers who were "almost all veterans of the government of Gayoom." Uza Aishath Azima Shakooru, attorney general under Gayoom, was appointed to the same post. The Adhaalat, or Justice party, which wants to introduce Islamic Shariah law, also got a ministerial post according to presidential spokesman Masood Imad.

Hassan, however, left three ministries aside, including finance and foreign affairs, as a sign to Nasheed's MDP; however, Nasheed has refused to take part in the new government.

Hassan served in the UN from 1991 to 2005 and is "quite well known" to the US, according to news reports. He had headed the UN office in Kathmandu and spent three years in Kabul, developing close ties "with US civilian bureaucrats and military officers stationed there."

Nasheed, who tried to maintain good relations with India as president, voiced his disappointment with India's endorsement of Hassan against him. In an interview with *Headlines Today*, Nasheed said: "Indian response was slow. We had expected a quicker

response and had hoped India would be a relevant voice. ... Unfortunately that did not happen."

Claims that Hassan will form a stable and viable government have no basis, as protests continue and the Maldives faces the effects of the continuing world economic crisis. The country has been under a US\$92.5 million debt arrangement with the International Monetary Fund, undertaken by the Nasheed government in December 2009 to deal with a very large fiscal deficit, a sharply weakened balance of payments position and reserve losses.

Although Nasheed's opponents in Gayoom's party and the Islamic parties exploited popular anger towards the ousted president's implementation of IMF-dictated austerity measures in line with the loan, the Hassan government backed by them will continue with the same policies.

The Hassan government has no popular support, but only the backing of global and regional powers like the US and India. Their open support for Hassan's installation in a coup will further deepen tensions in the Indian Ocean region.



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