

# Former Maldives president mounts challenge to government

Wasantha Rupasinghe  
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In the wake of a visit to Sri Lanka last month, Maldives' opposition leader Mohamed Nasheed is seeking to form an alliance to take control of the parliament (Majlis) and oust President Abdulla Yameen.

Nasheed's trip to Colombo was significant as it came just one week after the Sri Lankan presidential election in which Maithripala Sirisena defeated the incumbent, Mahinda Rajapakse. Sirisena, whose candidacy was engineered with US support, is rapidly reorienting Sri Lankan foreign policy away from Beijing and towards Washington.

Nasheed is apparently looking for Western backing to bring about a similar shift in the Maldives. His Maldives Democratic Party (MDP) is about to sign a formal alliance with the Jamhooree Party (JP), which was a major partner in the ruling coalition until last June. President Yameen's Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) currently has 49 of the 85 seats in the country's parliament while the MDP and JP have 22 and 13 seats respectively.

In a similar manner to Sirisena in Sri Lanka, Nasheed is now campaigning to "defend the constitution and democracy" against Yameen's allegedly autocratic methods. The MDP has criticised the president for removing two pro-opposition Supreme Court judges and sacking the country's auditor general arbitrarily. However, the opposition's real target is the close relationship that the government has developed with China.

Nasheed, who became the country's first elected president in 2008, resigned in 2012 amid mounting opposition protests particularly over his attempt to arrest the chief justice. Nasheed claimed he had been removed by the military in a coup. Vice President Mohamed Waheed Hassan took over as president.

Nasheed won the delayed presidential election in November 2013, but the supreme court annulled the result amid opposition claims of vote rigging. In the next round, Yameen narrowly won with the backing of all opposition parties.

The political turmoil in the Maldives, with a population of just 300,000, is closely bound up with rising geo-political tensions. The collection of islands off the tip of India is strategically located across major sea lanes in the Indian Ocean—midway between Strait of Malacca to the east and Suez Canal to the west. India considers the Maldives as part of its sphere of influence.

The US has been seeking to strengthen its influence in the Maldives at the expense of China as part of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia." Washington signed an Access and Cross Service Agreement with the Maldives with the Nasheed government in 2010. In 2013, information leaked out that the Pentagon had been in negotiations with the Maldives for a Status of Forces Agreement to open the way for basing arrangements, but Yameen, on assuming office, blocked the move.

Nasheed used his visit to Sri Lanka last month to underscore his pro-Western orientation and again criticise Yameen for orienting to China. In an interview with the *Daily Mirror*, he declared: "We can't isolate ourselves and move ourselves away from the outside world. It doesn't work like that. We must have good relations with the West as much as with East."

Nasheed accused the Maldivian government of "giving more room to China," saying: "We want a new Maldivian government to work more closely with the Sri Lankan government and synthesise their foreign policy." He was one of the first high-profile foreign visitors to meet with the leaders of the new Sri Lankan

government—President Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe—who are shifting firmly into the US camp following the January 8 election. He also met with European diplomats including the German ambassador to Colombo.

In an interview on Sri Lanka's MTV channel broadcast on January 31, the interviewer asked Nasheed to respond to the accusation that he was acting on the "whims and fancies" of Britain and the US. Nasheed replied: "We should not be removed from the international world we live in... What happens in Sri Lanka has a strong impact in the Maldives."

Nasheed added that because the Maldives relied completely on Europe for foreign trade and tourism, "We must have an amicable relationship with these people." The European Union is the largest market for fish exports from the Maldives and also accounts for over half of the tourists who visit the island archipelago. Tourism is the country's largest foreign exchange earner.

The US and India are both concerned about growing Chinese influence in the Maldives. Waheed Hassan, who took over from Nasheed in 2008, turned to China for financial assistance. He cancelled a contract signed with the Indian company, GMR, to construct the Male International Airport, straining relations between two countries.

After Yameen came to power in 2013, the tilt towards China became more pronounced. Last September, Xi Jinping became the first Chinese President to the Maldives as part of his South Asia tour. Xi signed nine agreements, including an upgrade of the Male airport. During the visit, Yameen also agreed to join China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative aimed at securing Beijing trade and influence across the Indo-Pacific.

Speaking on the country's independence day in November, Yameen criticised "Western colonial powers" and praised China for not imposing "compulsions" on the Maldives.

Nasheed has responded by stirring up anti-Chinese sentiment. He recently accused the government of planning to sign the MSR agreement and "hand over large parts of Laamu Atoll to China for the establishment of a military base for 99 years in return for US\$2 billion." The Chinese embassy quickly denied the claim, saying that China "does not maintain any military in any foreign country."

On his return to the Maldives, Nasheed is seeking to build momentum for the removal of the government. On January 20, Yameen sacked Defence Minister Mohamed Nizam for unspecified reasons. Nizam was key player in the manoeuvres that led to Nasheed's ouster in 2012. However, the opposition MDP has defended him and Nizam, in turn, has declared he will support anti-government campaign.

The Maldives Trade Union, which has been formed in May 2014 to protect small- and medium-sized businesses, has also decided to join the MDP-initiated campaign. JP deputy leader Ibrahim Ameen has called on "individuals, NGOs and political parties to join the cause of defending the constitution."

While there has been no overt Western support for the opposition, Nasheed undoubtedly used his trip to Sri Lanka sound out backing from the US and the EU.



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