

Sharp political infighting in Maldives

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Bitter political infighting is continuing within the ruling elites in Maldives following the arrest of opposition leader and former President Mohamed Nasheed on February 22. The arrest has followed by ongoing protests by Nasheed's Maldives Democratic Party (MDP) and its allies demanding his release and the resignation of President Abdulla Yameen.

The intense rivalry between the government and opposition is bound up with sharpening geo-political tensions throughout Asia and internationally. Nasheed visited Sri Lanka in January and drew inspiration from the election of President Maithripala Sirisena, who was installed with the backing of the US and India in a bid to undermine Chinese influence in Colombo.

During his visit to Sri Lanka, Nasheed accused President Yameen of "giving more room to China." On his return to Maldives, Nasheed launched a campaign to "defend the constitution and democracy" against the president's allegedly autocratic methods.

Nasheed sealed an alliance with the Jamhooree Party, which was part of the ruling coalition until last June. The MDP has also backed former Defence Minister Mohamed Nizam, who was sacked in January and then arrested in February on charges of conspiring against the government.

Nasheed's arrest on dubious anti-terrorism charges appears to be an attempt by Yameen to pre-empt a mounting regime-change operation against his government. Nasheed has been charged over his decision to order the detention of Chief Justice Abdulla Mohamed in 2012—a move that provoked large protests and eventually forced Nasheed's resignation.

The MDP claims that Nasheed's arrest is politically motivated and is aimed at preventing him from contesting the 2018 presidential election. His lawyers withdrew from the case on Monday, saying their client could not receive a fair trial.

The MDP and the Jamhooree Party have been

mounting daily protests to demand Nasheed's release and to push their political agenda. The first major rally on February 27 was joined by an estimated 20,000 people—in a country of just 300,000 people. Last week, another protest of 10,000 on Monday was followed by smaller demonstrations, including a motorcycle parade through the capital Male.

The government's crisis intensified last week after the Islamist Adhaalath Party, which is a partner in the ruling coalition, called for Nasheed to receive a "fair trial." Its leader Sheikh Imran Abdulla told a press conference: "We can see the government violating the individual rights of the people. We can see corruption within the government in broad daylight."

Nasheed and the MDP are clearly making a pitch for the support of the US and India by offering to stem Chinese influence. Interviewed by the Indian-based *Economic Times* just two days before his arrest, Nasheed accused the Yameen government of "pursuing a 'Look East' foreign policy." He added: "If the new alliance comes to power in Male, it will pursue a different foreign policy where India will get due recognition."

The *Economics Times* referred to the election result in Sri Lanka where a US-backed regime-change operation ousted former President Mahinda Rajapakse. Nasheed enthusiastically said: "We believe if all opposition parties can come together, as in Sri Lanka, and form an alliance, they can defeat the ruling dispensation."

Both the US and India are hostile to Chinese influence in Maldives, an archipelago that is strategically located across key shipping routes in the Indian Ocean.

Last September, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Male as part of a tour of South Asia. During the visit, the Yameen government supported Beijing's initiative of a "Maritime Silk Road" across the region. It angered New Delhi by revoking a contract with an Indian

company to develop the Male International Airport and re-assigning it to a Chinese corporation.

Last week, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi cancelled a planned visit to Maldives, which was part of an Indian Ocean tour that includes Sri Lanka, Mauritius and Seychelles. An Indian foreign ministry spokesman said: “We are concerned at recent developments in Maldives, including the arrest and manhandling of former President Nasheed.”

An editorial in the Indian-based *Hindu* last week commented: “Given that India is keen to assert its strategic presence in the Indian Ocean region, it should not worry that this postponement would push Maldives closer to Beijing but convey a strong signal of its concern over the increasing volatility of the situation there.”

The Obama administration has also signaled its support for the opposition in Maldives. Following Nasheed’s arrest last month, US State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki declared that the US was “concerned” by reports of the arrest. Psaki said Assistant Secretary of State Nisha Biswal spoke to the Maldivian foreign minister and urged the government “to restore confidence in their commitment to democracy, judicial independence, and rule of law.”

US pressure on the Yameen government is part of its broader “pivot to Asia,” formally announced in November 2011, which is aimed at undercutting Beijing diplomatically and economically throughout Asia, as well as encircling China militarily.

Following Washington’s lead, Canada, the European Union, the UN and the British Commonwealth all chimed in with expressions of concern. Maldivian Foreign Minister Dhunya Maumoon responded by declaring: “Maldives is an independent, sovereign country. Maldivians don’t want to be under influence of any other country.”

The British High Commissioner for Sri Lanka and Maldives, John Rankin, countered by saying: “Maldives and the United Kingdom are parties to international treaties which guarantee the right to fair trial, to freedom of expression, to freedom of lawful assembly.” Like the US, Britain cynically uses the issue of “human rights” on a selective basis as the pretext for intrigues and interventions to advance its strategic and economic interests.

Rankin’s comments highlight how quickly Colombo

has been transformed under President Sirisena into a base for British and American operations in South Asia. During his visit to Sri Lanka, Nasheed met with European diplomats. Following his arrest last month, Maldivian opposition leaders travelled to Colombo, not only to meet with Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe but also to “brief” diplomats in Colombo and seek their support for Nasheed’s release.

Obviously concerned at the mounting campaign against his government, President Yameen lashed out on Sunday at foreign interference. “It’s their own personal problem if it [the government] is unacceptable to people in faraway lands,” he said. “We will not give in an inch of our independence and sovereignty. That’s not something we want.”

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