

# Maldives president declares state of emergency

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Amid bitter infighting in the country's ruling elites, Maldives President Abdulla Yameen declared a state of emergency on Wednesday, banning public demonstrations and giving the police sweeping powers of arrest. The political instability in the small, strategically-located island nation in the Indian Ocean is being fueled by Washington's hostility to the government's close relations with China.

The emergency declaration came just two weeks after the arrest of Vice President Ahmed Adeep, who is accused of having links to an alleged attempt to kill Yameen on September 28. Yameen escaped unhurt from an explosion on a speedboat, but his wife and two members of his entourage were injured. Adeep denies the charges. Yameen also sacked the defence minister and the police chief.

The pretext for the state of emergency, the first in 11 years, was "a threat to citizens' safety and national security." The Maldives National Defence Forces allegedly found a remote-controlled bomb near the president's residence on Monday. Attorney General Mohamed Anil told journalists that the army had found several explosive devices and there was "credible intelligence of an imminent attack using explosives and weapons."

However, the immediate target of the crackdown is an anti-government rally planned for today by the Maldives Democratic Party (MDP). The opposition party has held protests for months to demand the release of its leader, former President Mohammed Nasheed. He was arrested under questionable anti-terrorism charges in February and sentenced to 13 years in prison for ordering, as president, the detention of Chief Justice Abdulla Mohamed in 2012.

Yesterday, the ruling Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) rammed through an impeachment motion

against the arrested vice president, securing 61 votes in the 85-member parliament. The MDP abstained from voting. The government can now try Adeep under harsh new terrorism laws and jail him for up to 25 years. Adeep is the second vice president to be impeached in three months.

MDP spokesperson Hamid Abdul Ghafoor declared: "President Yameen has lost control of the country. He has openly admitted having no proper control over the police or the military and for the past four months, hasn't been receiving any police intelligence reports." He demanded that Yameen resign. According to Ghafoor, 1,700 opposition activists have been charged.

Yameen is nervous about mounting pressure from the MDP, which has backing from the US and its allies. On October 27, the Maldives parliament passed a draconian anti-terrorism bill that gave exclusive powers to the president to declare any group a "terrorist organisation" without a court order or an investigation.

Under the legislation, inciting violence at demonstrations and threatening the country's sovereignty are considered acts of terrorism, with penalties of up to 25 years' imprisonment. Encouraging terrorism is also a crime, punishable by 10–15 years in jail.

The opposition MDP represents sections of the ruling elite that advocate closer relations with the US and India. The MDP and Nasheed's lawyers are calling for Western sanctions targeting government ministers and top officials.

US State Department spokesman John Kirby has weighed in on the side of the opposition, voicing "deep concern" over the state of emergency and urging its immediate termination. He also called for "an end to politically motivated prosecutions and detentions, including that of Nasheed." Britain, the country's ex-

colonial ruler, issued a similar statement.

The island archipelago has a population of just 300,000 but is strategically placed astride key sea lanes through the Indian Ocean. As part of its “pivot to Asia” aimed against China, the US is seeking to maintain its naval domination and ability to block vital Chinese imports of energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa. Its campaign against Yameen seeks to prevent China obtaining an important foothold in the Maldives.

Senator Patrick Leahy, with the backing of 31 senators, introduced a resolution into the US Congress on November 3 calling on the Maldives government to free Nasheed and other political prisoners. Significantly, the resolution declared that political instability in the Maldives posed “a threat to regional security due to the Maldives being strategically important,” citing its location, “which straddles major trade routes in the Indian Ocean.”

This reference highlights Washington’s overriding aim in the Maldives, which is not to defend democratic rights but undermine Yameen’s ties with China. China has become a major investor in the Maldives, building housing projects and roads. Chinese tourists accounted for a nearly one-third of arrivals in 2014, outstripping all other countries.

Last December, the Chinese and Maldives governments signed an agreement for the construction of a \$US300 million bridge connecting the island that houses the country’s international airport to the capital of Male. Beijing pledged \$100 million as free grant aid, as well as a \$170 million loan at a 2 percent interest rate to pay for the project.

India, which regards Maldives as part of its sphere of influence, is determined to not to leave space for Beijing. While New Delhi has not yet made a statement on the situation in the Maldives, foreign ministry officials told the *Hindu* they were “monitoring the situation.”

In August, India’s foreign secretary Subrahmanyam Jaishankar visited the Maldives to express New Delhi’s “concerns” about a new law passed in July allowing foreigners to own land if they invest \$1 billion and reclaim 70 percent of the land from the sea. India implied the law could pave the way for China to establish a military presence in the Maldives.

In response, Yameen wrote to Indian Foreign minister

Sushma Swaraj assuring him that the Maldives would remain a “demilitarised zone.” On October 10, Swaraj visited Male and pledged that “India will always be the net security provider for the Maldives.”

In January’s presidential election in Sri Lanka, Washington, with the backing of New Delhi, engineered the ousting of Mahinda Rajapakse, whom the US regarded as too closely tied to Beijing. There is no doubt that the US is prepared to carry out a regime-change operation in the Maldives to further its strategic ambitions.



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