

Foreign minister resigns as Maldives political crisis intensifies

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Maldives Foreign Minister Dunya Maumoon resigned from President Abdulla Yameen's government early this month in protest against the reintroduction of capital punishment.

A former strong supporter of the government, Maumoon's decision followed the resignation, three weeks earlier, of Home Minister Umar Naseer who announced he will contest the next presidential election in 2018. Thirteen cabinet ministers have now quit the Yameen government since it came to power in November 2013.

The intensifying political crisis of the Maldives government is a direct result of the US-led "pivot" to Asia and its alliance with India, aimed at undermining Chinese influence throughout the region, including in the strategically-located Maldives archipelago and across the Indian Ocean as a whole.

Maumoon's resignation came three weeks after the Maldives Supreme Court upheld the death sentence of Hussein Humaam, 22, convicted for killing Afrasheem Ali, a high-profile parliamentarian in October 2012. The court rejected a plea by family members of the murdered MP to delay the death penalty because of significant unanswered questions about the investigation into the murder. Political opponents of the government allege that the Maldives judiciary is biased.

In her resignation statement, Maumoon said she had "profound differences of opinion" over the reintroduction of the death penalty and that there were serious questions about "the delivery of justice in Maldives." The former foreign minister, who voiced no opposition to Yameen's restoration of the death penalty in May 2014, is responding to criticism by the US and the EU. These concerns have nothing to do with capital punishment, but are over the Yameen government's political tilt toward China.

Maumoon's resignation also underscores an increasing rift between her father, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, head of the ruling Maldives Progressive Party (PPM), and President Yameen. The PPM leader has publicly criticised constitutional changes made by the Yameen government in July 2015 to authorise foreign freeholds in the Maldives.

The Indian media noted at the time that these changes would open the way for China to construct military bases in the Maldives. This claim was echoed by the pro-US opposition Maldives Democratic Party (MDP).

Last month, Gayoom called on PPM parliamentarians to vote against Yameen's amendments to the Tourism Act that would allow the government to lease islands, lagoons and plots of land without a competitive bidding process. While Yameen was able to persuade the MPs to pass the bill, Gayoom's son, Faris Maumoon Gayoom was expelled from the PPM when he voted against it.

The political bitterness continues, with Gayoom refusing to give Yameen PPM endorsement for the presidential elections due in 2018. In retaliation, Yameen is attempting to remove Gayoom as party president, has sacked Gayoom loyalists from party positions, and initiated an Anti-Graft Commission probe of Gayoom.

Thus far, Gayoom, a pro-US dictator who ruled the Maldives from 1978 until 2008, has not voiced any concern about Yameen's close relations with Beijing. The country's relations with China were, in fact, first boosted under the Gayoom administration.

China is now the main investor in the Maldives, building houses, roads and key bridges, including "China-Maldives Friendship Bridge" linking the eastern edge of Male to western Hulhule Island. At the end of 2014, the Maldives joined China's 21st Century

Maritime Silk Road project.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has increased diplomatic pressure on the Yameen government. Early last year, Modi cancelled a scheduled visit to Male, the Maldives capital, but has sent a host of envoys, including external affairs minister Sushma Swaraj, to the country. In April, Yameen signed an “Action Plan for Defence Cooperation” with India.

Yameen is also facing international and domestic pressure over human rights abuses and the jailing of political opponents, including opposition MDP leader and former President Mohamed Nasheed. Nasheed was jailed for 13 years in 2015 under the country’s anti-terrorism laws for ordering the detention of criminal court Justice Abdulla Mohamed in 2012.

In January, Yameen, under intense pressure from the US and Britain, allowed Nasheed to leave the Maldives, ostensibly for overseas medical treatment. In May Nasheed was granted political asylum by the British government, which is backing his campaign against Yameen.

On June 1, five rival opposition groups, including the MDP, announced the formation of the United Opposition of Maldives (UOM) to remove Yameen. It is urging supporters to overcome their differences in order to “restore” democracy in the country.

Established in London, the UOM has formed a 19-member shadow cabinet and is run by key leaders in exile. These include Yameen’s former defence minister, Mohamed Nazim, and former Maldives vice president Mohamed Jameel Ahmed. It has called on the Indian government to take a more active role in “restoring democracy” in the Maldives and consider imposing sanctions.

Giving voice to India’s growing concern about the escalating political crisis in the Maldives and increasing Chinese influence in the archipelago, an article in the *Business Standard* commented: “In seeking to balance its geo-strategic interests, along with the need to remain engaged with the Yameen government, India cannot afford to trust Yameen’s enunciation of an ‘India First’ approach. Especially when at stake is India’s influence in the Indian Ocean region.”

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