

Maldives opposition intensifies campaign to destabilise government

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An impeachment motion by the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) against Abdulla Maseeh Mohamed, the parliamentary speaker, failed last week following a violent confrontation. The motion was part of ongoing moves to oust President Abdulla Yameen and his government by Mohammed Nasheed, the pro-US MDP leader and former president.

While the MDP only has 26 MPs in the 85-member parliament, it hoped several parliamentarians from the ruling Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) which supports Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, would break ranks and vote with the opposition. Gayoom, a long-time leader of the PPM and president of the Maldives from 1978-2008, has opposed Yameen—his half-brother—after being marginalised in the party.

MDP lawmakers began a protest in parliament, claiming that the ruling coalition had changed the usual electronic voting system, in order to conceal how MPs voted on the impeachment motion. Military officers were called in by the speaker to remove 13 protesting MPs from the parliament. The opposition claimed that MPs were manhandled and dragged from the chamber.

The impeachment motion was voted down by 48 MPs. The public, media, and non-government organisations were barred from parliament house during the vote.

While increasingly isolated, President Yameen is attempting to muzzle the opposition and block its attempts to oust the president. Nasheed told the *Economic Times* that there are currently 1,700 political activists, either under threat, on trial or in jail. Nasheed and his party, however, have no concern for the democratic rights of the Maldivian people.

The infighting between the opposition and President Yameen is bound up with US and Indian geo-political manoeuvres against China. The Maldives, an

archipelago of 1,192 islands with a population of just 400,000, is strategically located astride major sea lanes across the Indian Ocean.

Following the failure of the impeachment motion, Yameen sacked Gayoom as the nominal president of the PPM. Gayoom's three-decade rule of the Maldives ended in 2008 when Nasheed became the first president elected in a contested election. Nasheed and Gayoom recently announced an alliance to oppose Yameen.

Before launching the impeachment resolution, Nasheed said: "If we succeed, as we expect, the president will be reduced to a lame duck and will have to carry out reforms reversing the anti-democratic measures he has introduced." Nasheed claims that he is attempting to make the forthcoming 2018 presidential election free and fair.

Nasheed wants the removal of a law introduced last year by Yameen banning anyone convicted of terrorism from running for president. The anti-democratic law was specifically introduced to prevent Nasheed from contesting the election. MDP leader Nasheed was charged and convicted of terrorism, after ordering the arrest and detention of former Chief Justice Abdulla Mohamed in 2012. Nasheed was sentenced to 13 years jail but was later released under pressure from the US and Britain.

Nasheed is openly attempting to bring the country's foreign policy into line with Washington's agenda. Speaking to Colombo-based foreign correspondents on Wednesday, he said that if elected, his government would change the terms of China-funded projects in Maldives. "We will learn from the experience of the Sri Lankan Ports Minister Arjuna Ranatunga in re-negotiating the deal over Chinese built Hambantota project," he said.

Nasheed's comments are significant. Sri Lankan

President Maithripala Sirisena was elected in January 2015, following a regime-change operation against former President Mahinda Rajapakse orchestrated by the US with the backing of India. The US was hostile to Rajapakse's close relations with Beijing.

After coming to power, Sirisena and his new government suspended all Chinese-funded projects—the terms of these projects are still under discussion—and has developed close political and military relations with the US.

Nasheed said that Chinese loans constitute about 70 to 80 percent of foreign debt and if elected his administration would “seek the restitution of transactions and properties unlawfully seized from citizens by the government.” The MDP has attacked the Yameen government over the 99-year land leases granted to Chinese companies that open the way for Beijing to build a permanent base in the archipelago.

Nasheed accuses Yameen of corruption and authoritarianism. He told Colombo-based journalists that the US, EU and Canada were openly supporting the Maldives opposition and suggested that he had behind-the-scenes support from India and Sri Lanka.

Former Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga has called on Nasheed and Gayoom to come together against Yameen. This, she declared, would “ensure democratic governance and the guarantee of civil and political rights.” Kumaratunga was a major player in the Washington inspired regime-change operations against Rajapakse in Sri Lanka.

The US embassy to Sri Lanka and Maldives also issued a statement on March 28 favouring Nasheed. “We call on the government to restore faith in democratic processes by ensuring free and impartial proceedings in parliament,” it said, and that “irregularities” over the impeachment motion had impeded a free and fair vote in the Maldives parliament.

The US-based *Foreign Policy* magazine has also backed Nasheed. In an article entitled “Democracy is Drowning in Maldives” on March 29, it states that his “decision to run for office has guaranteed a game-changing year not only for his own political carrier but also for the future of democracy in the South Asian Island.”

While the Yameen government is authoritarian and anti-democratic, Nasheed is not concerned about

“future of democracy” in Maldives. In power, Nasheed used the state apparatus to suppress opposition protests. The MDP leader is attempting to integrate Maldives into the US war preparation against China. Like Sri Lanka, Washington is determined to secure this strategically important location in the Indian Ocean as a key component of any future war.



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