

Political crisis erupts in the Maldives

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Maldives President Abdulla Yameen on Monday declared a 15-day state of emergency, suspending democratic rights and arresting two Supreme Court judges. The draconian measure was in response to a Supreme Court order on February 1 to immediately release jailed opposition MPs, including former President Mohamed Nasheed and eight other political leaders.

The latest political turmoil in the Maldives is part of the deepening conflict between the Yameen government and the parliamentary opposition led by the pro-US Nasheed. In line with US and Indian geopolitical intrigues against China, Nasheed opposes close strategic and economic relations with Beijing and is fighting for removal of Yameen's government.

Nasheed issued a statement yesterday calling on India to militarily intervene. "We would like the Indian government to send an envoy, backed by its military, to free the judges and the political detainees," it stated. He also urged the US to ban all financial transactions by the Maldives government leaders and, in an appeal to India and the US, added: "We must remove him [Yameen]."

Last Thursday's unanimous Supreme Court ruling favouring the Maldives opposition was a major blow to the Yameen government. Prior to last week's order the Supreme Court backed Yameen's authoritarian rule. Its sudden about-face was in response to intense pressure from the US, the European Union and India that have backed the opposition campaign.

The Supreme Court order would remove the current legal obstacles preventing Nasheed from contesting the presidential election due later this year. It declared that prosecutors and judges had been unduly influenced "to conduct politically motivated investigations" into the accusations against Nasheed and other opposition leaders.

The ruling also restored 12 MPs to their seats. They

were sacked by Yameen's Progressive Party after they defected to opposition last year—a move that effectively handed a majority to the opposition.

Fighting for his political survival, Yameen declared in a special television address that the court verdict was "an obstruction of the very ability of the state to function." Justifying the crackdown, he said that the state of emergency was necessary in order to expose a "plot and a coup" against his government.

As soon as the state of emergency was declared, security forces entered the Supreme Court premises, arresting Chief Justice Abdulla Saeed and another judge Ali Hameed. Abdul Gayoom Maumoon, the half-brother of Yameen and the country's authoritarian ruler from 1978 until 2011, was also arrested.

The emergency decree gives the security forces sweeping powers of arrest and detention, curtails the authority of the judiciary, scraps immunity for Supreme Court judges and bans public gatherings and protests. The police and military have already used batons and pepper spray against protesting opposition supporters.

Late last night the Maldives government announced that the remaining three Supreme Court judges had revoked last Thursday's order. In a statement, the judges declared that they had reversed the order "in the light of concerns raised by the President."

Yameen had opposition leader Nasheed jailed for 13 years on trumped-up charges concerning his arbitrary removal of a former chief justice. Nasheed was released in January 2016 under the pressure from US and Britain and since then the opposition has intensified its campaign to oust Yameen.

Pitching for support from the US and India, Nasheed declares that, under Yameen, the Maldives is on the verge of becoming Beijing's "colony." China, he claims, is "buying up" Maldives land, key infrastructure and "effectively buying up our sovereignty."

Yesterday India's external affairs ministry issued a statement declaring that it was "disturbed" by the declaration of a state of emergency and "the suspension of constitutional rights of the people." But to date, New Delhi has not responded Nasheed's call for military intervention.

India's has no concern for the democratic rights in the Maldives. Rather New Delhi is determined to become the regional strongman and that means undermining Chinese political and economic influence in the Indo-Pacific.

Although the Maldives is a tiny archipelago of 1,192 islands with a population just over 400,000, it is strategically situated in the India Ocean. It sits astride key sea-lanes from Middle East and Africa to South East Asia and East Asia used by China, Japan, South Korea and India with access to energy and mineral supplies.

India has repeatedly voiced concern about the Maldives' close relations with China, and in particular its free trade agreement with Beijing last December. Yameen sent Foreign Minister Mohamed Asim to New Delhi to try to reassure the Indian government but to no avail.

Writing yesterday in the *Hindustan Times*, Constantino Xavier, head of the pro-US Carnegie India think tank, called on India to intervene. Entitled "India must play hardball if it wants to be part of the Maldives' return to stability," the article declared, "Delhi should implement sequential pressure that deploys mediation, sets clear targets contingent on red lines, and balances inducements with punitive measure... In the most extreme scenario, India could execute a military intervention."

In response to the state of emergency declaration, the US National Security Council warned: "The Maldivian government and military must respect the rule of the law, freedom of expression and democratic institutions. The world is watching." The US State Department issued a similar message, criticising Yameen for jailing opposition leaders and suppressing human rights.

Like New Delhi, Washington's overriding concern is to install a pro-Western government in Maldives that serves its strategic interests. President Trump has stepped up the confrontational policy of the previous Obama administration towards China throughout Asia.

China has developed close relations with the

Maldives to counter Washington's aggressive moves. Its ambitious One Belt One Road (OBOR) envisages a huge expansion of infrastructure to link the Eurasian landmass, as well as Africa, both by land and sea. Yameen has declared his support for the project.

This week Beijing declared that it was watching the situation in the Maldives closely. Foreign affairs ministry spokesman Geng Shu said that "the relevant parties [in the Maldives] can properly resolve the differences through dialogue and consultation."

The political crisis and intense in-fighting in the Maldives ruling elite has brought into sharp focus the intense geo-political rivalry in the Indo-Pacific as the US intensifies its strategic drive against China.



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