

# Pro-US candidate wins Maldives presidential election

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Joint opposition candidate Ibrahim Mohamed Solih won the presidential election in the Maldives on Sunday defeating President Abdulla Yameen. Solih's victory is the outcome of a regime-change operation backed by the US and India in the strategically-located Indian Ocean archipelago.

Over recent months, the US, India and the European Union have intensified their hypocritical criticism of Yameen's anti-democratic methods of rule and his pro-Beijing tilt. Determined that Yameen be ousted, they overtly and covertly supported the opposition.

Yameen acknowledged his defeat in a televised address to the nation on Monday, declaring, "[T]he Maldivian people have decided what they want. I have accepted the results."

Although the final result will be announced in a week, the Electoral Commission declared on Monday that Solih had a majority winning 58 percent of the vote with Yameen receiving 42 percent from a turnout of nearly 90 percent.

Solih became the opposition alliance candidate because the Electoral Commission ruled that former President Mohamed Nasheed was ineligible to contest the election. The opposition front included Nasheed's Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), the Jumhooree Party and the Adhaalath Party. Solih has been the MDP's parliamentary leader since 2011.

Nasheed, who was previously jailed by the Yameen government on terrorism charges, is currently in exile in Sri Lanka. Under pressure from the US and Britain, Yameen allowed Nasheed to travel to London in early 2016 for "medical treatment." Nasheed immediately stepped up his campaign to oust Yameen.

Addressing reporters in Male, the Maldives capital, Solih said: "The message is loud and clear. The people of Maldives want change, peace and justice." Nasheed

congratulated Solih via twitter, declaring, "You have done an extremely good service not only to the people of Maldives, but also to freedom loving people everywhere. Democracy is a historical inevitability."

While Yameen violated basic democratic rights in order to maintain his rule, all claims that his ousting and the installation of a pro-western president represent the dawn of democracy in the Maldives are far from truth.

The election was held under pressure from the US and the EU, who threatened to impose sanctions if Yameen won. It was a clear attempt to intimidate the population into voting for the opposition candidate.

US State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert issued a statement early this month declaring that Washington was concerned about "democratic backsliding in the Maldives." She warned that the US would consider taking "appropriate measures against those individuals who undermine democracy, the rule of law, and a free and fair electoral process."

In July the European Union warned that sanctions, including travel bans and an asset freeze, would be imposed against those responsible for human rights violations and the undermining of the rule of law in the Maldives.

If Yameen had won the election, the US and the EU would have declared his victory unlawful and refused to recognise his government.

The US and India immediately welcomed Solih's win. The Indian External Affairs Ministry issued a statement complimenting Solih and declaring that it hoped "the Election Commission will officially confirm the result at the earliest."

The *Maldives Independent* reported yesterday that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had phoned Solih to offer his congratulations. The newspaper

reported that Modi “expressed his wish to repair strained relations and pledged assistance to restore democracy” and suggested that they meet soon. Solih immediately accepted the invitation.

US State Department spokesperson Nauert voiced her approval and said the election was “calm and respected the will of the people.”

The real concerns of the US and India had nothing to do with democracy, but involved the pro-Chinese orientation of the Yameen government which cut across their geo-strategic interests.

The Maldives, which has a population of just 400,000, is strategically located 400 km southwest of India and close to the world’s busiest shipping lanes from the Middle East and Africa to East Asia. The archipelago of a thousand small islands is spread across 35,000 square miles of the Indian Ocean and the focal point of intense rivalry between the US and India on one side and China on the other.

Reporting the election result, the *New York Times*, a leading mouthpiece for US imperialism, wrote on Sunday that “the Maldives has been caught up in recent years in Beijing’s growing global ambitions, which the United States and its allies have struggled to contain.”

In line with Washington’s propaganda against Beijing the newspaper declared “China has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on infrastructure projects in the Maldives, which critics, including the political opposition, warn amount to ‘debt-trap diplomacy.’” These claims have been denied by China and the Yameen government.

Responding to the escalating Western pressure on the Yameen government, the Maldives Supreme Court in February ordered the immediate release of jailed opposition MPs, including Nasheed and eight other political leaders. If this verdict had been carried out, Yameen would have lost his parliamentary majority and could have been impeached by the opposition.

Yameen responded autocratically, imposing a state of emergency, and arrested two Supreme Court judges, including the pro-Indian Chief Justice Abdulla Saeed. Saeed and the other judge were later sentenced to one year and seven-month prison terms, along with former Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom—a staunch Indian supporter—for plotting to overthrow the government. Under pressure, the remaining judges invalidated the previous Supreme Court order.

Indian media reports at the time revealed that New Delhi was actively considering directly intervening in the Maldives and that its military had been readied to deploy at “short notice.” Nasheed openly called on India to invade the Maldives.

India has always considered the Maldives, as well as other South Asian countries, such as Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh, as part of its sphere of influence and is hostile to Beijing’s influence in the region.

China, which consistently supported the Yameen government, began building infrastructure in the Maldives including ports and roads, and providing loans and investments as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to expand its influence across Asia, Africa and Europe and, in particular, protect vital energy imports.

Beijing, however, confronts Washington’s increasingly aggressive attempts to halt its rise and subordinate it to the US. Control of the Indian Ocean sea lanes, and thus China’s access to energy and raw materials in the Middle East and Africa, is vital to the US strategy.

Yameen’s election defeat, which will be used by the US and India to boost their political and strategic influence in the Maldives, foreshadows increasing geopolitical manoeuvres and tensions in the region.



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