

Pro-China candidate wins Maldives presidential election

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In the Maldives presidential elections held last Saturday, the pro-Chinese opposition candidate was elected in a second-round runoff. Mohamed Muizzu, 45, a member of the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) and currently the mayor of Male, will replace the pro-Indian incumbent President Ibrahim Solih of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP).

Muizzu was able to exploit the growing discontent over deteriorating economic and social conditions to secure the majority. He won 54 percent of the vote from the 282,000 eligible voters, while Solih received only 46 percent. Solih will serve as acting president until his successor is sworn in on November 17.

Maldives comprises 1,196 low-lying islands in the Indian Ocean with a population of under 521,000 people. It is strategically located near vital shipping lanes providing most of the energy and other supplies to Asia, including China, Japan and India. Roughly 30 percent of the world's oil trade and 90 percent of China's oil passes through this area.

Access to Maldives therefore confers a vital strategic advantage for projecting naval power in the Indian Ocean. The tiny archipelago has become a hotspot for geo-political rivalry between the US and India on one side and China on the other, with tensions now accelerating as Washington prepares for war against Beijing.

Following Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's four-day official visit to the US in June, Washington and New Delhi expanded their military-strategic partnership against China. It is now known that the Indian military is studying how it could support US and its allies in a war against China over Taiwan.

In this context, the election of a pro-China president will lead to intensification of the geo-political rivalry over influence in the Maldives. India has long treated the Indian Ocean as its exclusive sphere of influence and will not tolerate what it regards as China's intrusion.

After winning the election, Muizzu told reporters in Male: "Today, the people made a firm decision to reclaim Maldives independence." This was directed very clearly against India. He later stated, without naming any country, that foreign military detachments stationed in Maldives will be removed. India alone has a military presence.

As a minister under pro-Beijing president Abdulla Yameen before 2018, Muizzu oversaw several Chinese-funded infrastructure projects, including a \$US200 million causeway between the capital Male and the country's main airport. During an online meeting with Chinese Communist Party officials last year, he pledged he would expand the "strong ties between our two countries" if he came to power.

President Solih, who was a strong advocate for an "India First" strategy during his presidency, came to office in late 2018 following a US-led regime-change operation to oust his predecessor Yameen. Under Yameen, the Maldives joined Beijing's Maritime Silk Road infrastructure program, aimed at countering Washington's efforts to encircle China. China invested billions of dollars in the Maldives for bridges, airports, ports, and other projects.

After Yameen's ouster, India rapidly expanded its influence in the Maldives through defence treaties and investment. It became heavily involved in disaster management, infrastructure development, capacity building, marine security and humanitarian relief in accordance with India's "Neighborhood First" and "Security and Growth for All in the Region" (SAGAR) policies.

Solih, however, quickly lost popular support as the country plunged into economic and social crisis. The COVID-19 epidemic severely impacted the tourism industry, the backbone of its economy.

In 2020, Yameen launched an anti-Indian political

movement, the ‘India Out’ campaign, which was spearheaded by the opposition coalition—consisting of the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) and People’s National Congress (PNC), both of which he led. He accused the Solih government of expanding India’s military presence and influence, which the government denied. The campaign opposed Indian investments and initiatives and attempted to channel popular opposition over deteriorating social and economic conditions into anti-Indian chauvinism.

The deteriorating economic conditions opened up a split within the government. Former president Mohamed Nasheed broke away from the ruling MDP and ran his own candidate in the first round of presidential elections. He also chose to remain impartial in last Saturday’s run-off. According to Ahmed Shaheed, a former foreign minister, “Nasheed’s departure took the motherboard away from the MDP.”

Concerned over the split in the pro-Indian MDP, Indian defence minister Rajnath Singh made a three-day visit to the Maldives from May 1, in an attempt to reconcile the two factions, but failed.

Following Solih’s defeat, India congratulated Muizzu. Indian Prime Minister Modi tweeted: “India remains committed to strengthening the time-tested India-Maldives bilateral relationship and enhancing our overall cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region.”

However, there are clearly deep concerns in India. The *Times of India* declared that India had suffered a setback in the Maldives. An editorial in the *Indian Express* complained that “the somewhat surprising victory of Mohamed Muizzu” was widely seen as to China’s benefit.

There is no doubt that as in the past, intrigues are already being hatched in Washington and New Delhi to try to undermine Muizzu and ultimately replace him with a pliable client. As the US intensifies its war preparations against China throughout the Indo-Pacific, it cannot tolerate any expansion of Chinese influence.



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