

POLITICS

Maldives' nascent presidential race keeps India and China on edge

Jailed ex-President Yameen pushes anti-New Delhi message as party loyalties shift



From left: The Maldives' former presidents Mohamed Nasheed and Abdulla Yameen, who is currently in jail, are aiming to unseat incumbent Ibrahim Mohamed Solih in September. (Source photos by AP and EPA/Jiji)

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BANGKOK -- From his cell in the Maldives' largest prison, former President Abdulla Yameen is still making his presence felt as campaigning gets underway for the Sept. 9 presidential election.

While the 64-year-old is limited to communicating through his lawyers, it is no secret that he is beating the same drum he did following his defeat at the polls in 2018: "India Out."

Yameen, whose presidency was known for an open embrace of China, was once the face of the "India Out" movement to reduce New Delhi's influence in the strategically located Indian Ocean archipelago. Now -- after he was sentenced in December to 11 years in prison and fined \$5 million for accepting bribes and laundering money during his term -- he is pushing his message to supporters of his Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) as he tries to secure his freedom and revive his political fortunes.

The ex-president's unequivocally anti-India stance contrasts with the pro-New Delhi sentiments of incumbent Ibrahim Mohamed Solih. The looming contest highlights the rise of geopolitics as an increasingly critical factor in Maldivian elections, alongside domestic issues, as India and China vie for influence in a country best known for its idyllic island resorts.

In 2018, Solih handed Yameen a shock defeat in part by railing against the latter's tilt toward China, which included multimillion-dollar projects such as a bridge connecting the capital Male with an island that is home to the international airport. This time the roles are reversed, as India has gained a stronger foothold over the past four years through a combination of defense agreements and more than \$2.7 billion in loans and development assistance for infrastructure projects.

The "Indian military presence in the country is illegal ... [and] bilateral security agreements related to a [security base] and similar agreements are unconstitutional," Mohamed Saeed, a former minister for economic development in the Yameen government, told Nikkei Asia. "Therefore 'India Out' is a national call."

But while Yameen's message is being heard across the nation of nearly 1,200 islands and about 542,000 people, his fate as a candidate remains far from clear.

The clock is ticking for the PPM to get his name on the ballot by the deadline in early August. This likely depends on the outcome of Yameen's appeal process in the higher courts, the timeline for which is also uncertain. The PPM is considering nominating Yameen even if he is in jail, and then seeking a Supreme Court ruling on his eligibility, according to local media. But the Elections Commission may object.

Nevertheless, the obstacles have not dampened Yameen's appeal among other parties hoping to defeat President Solih.

The Democrats, a new party of former President Mohamed Nasheed, have conducted coalition talks with the PPM to field a common candidate against Solih.

"It is the politics of strange bedfellows because of the way Yameen hounded Nasheed, even throwing him in jail, like he abused other parliamentarians and judges during his authoritarian regime," remarked one insider in the capital, on condition of anonymity.

"But Nasheed is doing this because he knows under our system that you need coalitions to win the presidential elections."

Since the Maldives conducted its first presidential election in 2008, as it transitioned to a multiparty democracy, the winning candidate needs to secure 50% plus one vote. This raises the bar from a first-past-the-post system and has resulted in parties forging coalitions to back candidates.

The geopolitical irony of a Nasheed-Yameen alliance is not lost on observers, either.

Nasheed has been even more combative than Solih against China's presence in the Maldives, and brazen about his pro-India views. Analysts say the political influence of the two men enabled New Delhi to deepen its foothold in the archipelago straddling busy Indian Ocean shipping lanes.



A construction worker gazes at the China-funded Sinamale bridge in Male, Maldives, in September 2018. © Reuters

The election-season chatter about India's position does not surprise analysts like Nilanthi Samaranyake, a visiting expert on small states in the Indian Ocean at the United States Institute of Peace, based in Washington. "India is often politicized in Maldives' domestic affairs, and this election is no different," she said.

On the outlook for the rival big powers in the small island state, she said: "India's relationship with the Maldives is overall much deeper than China's ... [and] China needs to work with whoever wins the upcoming elections if it seeks to build bilateral ties with the Maldives."

How Nasheed and Yameen might bridge their own geopolitical gap remains to be seen.

The prospect of an alliance of convenience between them only emerged after a split in Solih's ruling Maldivian Democratic Party, which rocked the 87-member parliament in recent weeks. The charismatic Nasheed, still the speaker in the legislature, is among 15 MDP lawmakers who broke ranks due to "ideological differences" and the "leadership style of Solih."

"President Solih is not big on discussions with party members, he has a divide-and-rule style and he has refused to address reforming the political system," Eva Abdulla, deputy speaker and member of The Democrats, told Nikkei Asia. "Allegations of corruption in his term have also grown, which undermines the MDPs anti-corruption record."

Both Nasheed and Abdulla face no-confidence motions tabled by Solih's wing of the MDP, which after a landslide victory in the April 2019 parliamentary elections had a record 65-seat majority. But the two lawmakers have enough numbers in their breakaway faction to lead the opposition as the largest minority party. Abdulla expects "more crossovers closer to the presidential election."

Solih appeared unfazed as he recently toured four islands to launch his reelection bid. While trumpeting a coalition he is building with two other parties, his promises to voters include staples of an incumbent in an island country, ranging from coastal protection to harbor development.

Voters remain on the fence. A June opinion poll by the Baani Center for International Policy, a Maldivian think tank, revealed that 52% of respondents were undecided. Support for specific candidates was low: 15% for Solih, 10% for Yameen and 6% for Nasheed.

Maldivians "choose to make their political decisions closer to the

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