

Liberal democracies, don't give up on the Maldives



*If the Yameen government survives the current political crisis unscathed, it would set a dangerous precedent, only encouraging authoritarian-minded leaders in other nations to reveal their true selves when the timing is ripe for them. **Arafat Kabir** traces why the Maldives is in this situation, China's strategic response to the crises and what other democracies need to do now.*

Known for its sun-kissed white sand beaches, turquoise waters of the Indian Ocean, and breathtaking vistas, the Maldives offers a perfect tropical getaway for those seeking to get lost in peace and tranquility. But that was true until early February. The island nation is now teetering on the precipice.

On February 5, President Abdulla Yameen declared a 15-day state of emergency in what appears to be a brazen attack on the country's judiciary. The apex court had somewhat been acting as a check on the increasingly authoritarian president. When the supreme court ordered the government to release incarcerated opposition leaders, the task turned out to be too big to be carried out by Yameen's government, triggering an otherwise unavoidable crisis.

The international community, including [the United States](#), [Britain](#), and neighbouring [India](#), has expressed concerns. Given the Trump administration's insouciance toward smaller countries, the state department's statement is a welcome development. The former President, Mohamed Nasheed, who is in exile in Sri Lanka, [called upon on Delhi](#) for a military intervention to end the unrest which the government rejected this week. He also urged the US government to block the Maldivian government's financial transactions. The other important player China, however, is not breaking away from its standard [boilerplate diplomacy](#). Rather, Beijing hopes that the crisis will be "solved internally."

Understanding China's response

This different response reveals that the Chinese do not like to see any third-party interference to rupture the status quo in Malé, the capital city. In fact, why would they? China sees the Maldives, thanks to its strategic location, an important part of its much-touted One Belt, One Road initiative. China can count on Yameen to help cement its foothold in the Indian Ocean region, which Delhi considers as its sphere of influence.

Going by the playbook of the 21st century-Chinese diplomacy, Beijing has [lavished lucrative deals](#) on the Yameen government with virtually no strings attached on good governance and human rights. In fact, Yameen's allegiance to Beijing reached the point that last December the [Maldivian parliament approved](#) a thousand-page free trade agreement with China after just an hour of debate. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that China does not find it requisite to mount pressure on Yameen. Furthermore, China does not readily believe Nasheed, who favored a pro-Western foreign policy during his tumultuous tenure.

In 2013, Nasheed was convicted by a so-called anti-terrorism law, which the Amnesty International called "[a travesty of justice](#)." Later, while on a medical leave to London, Nasheed hired Amal Clooney as his lawyer and managed to secure [an asylum in the United Kingdom](#). Since then Nasheed remained the vocal critic of the Yameen government's lack of transparency and human rights violation.

Defiance to the judiciary is not uncommon in the Maldives, which has a long history of authoritarian rule. Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, Yameen's half-brother, ruled the country for thirty years until he ceded power to Nasheed through a multi-party election in 2008, ushering in democracy for a country so accustomed to a one-man show. Nasheed earned reputation on the global stage as a champion of climate change that threatens the Maldives' existence. However, the relationship between Nasheed and his collation partners as well the judiciary soured, leading him to arrest judges. That political miscalculation cost him his power and eventually led him to the prison.



Parliament under military. Image from tweet by MP for Maafannu North, Male; MDP Spokesperson. Source: [@ImthiyazFahmy](https://twitter.com/ImthiyazFahmy)

But President Yameen seems to have gone a little too far. He continued to stifle oppositions and turned against the judiciary. Perhaps emboldened by Chinese cash, Yameen disregarded international pressure. He did not hesitate to [pull the Maldives out of the Commonwealth](#) amid increased criticism against his government. The government became [increasingly hostile](#) to journalists and [passed draconian laws](#) in the name of fighting terrorism. The latest display of his ham-handed actions came in the past few days as he deployed the army in a show of force and arrested supreme court judges as well as Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who had a fall out with Yameen.

It is hard not to see that President Yameen is on an authoritarian streak to perpetuate his power. This current turmoil is likely to affect the country's tourism sector, which is the lifeblood of the national economy. China may bailout Yameen to weather any impending financial storm. If the Yameen government survives the current political crisis unscathed, it would set a dangerous precedent, only encouraging other authoritarian-minded leaders to reveal their true selves when the timing is ripe for them. We must not forget that a number transitional democracies in Latin America and Asia are still vulnerable to the reversal of the democratisation process. They need to see democratic countries act together when democracy is being choked elsewhere.

Therefore, established democracies should not give up on the Maldives just because hardly much at stake for them if the Maldives falls under an authoritarian grip. Those are sympathetic to Nasheed are echoing his call for India's direct intervention. But India must calibrate its policy with caution and in coordination with other concerned countries to counter a potential Chinese backlash. Sanctions can backfire and further drive the Yameen government toward the Chinese axis. But going easy on him is not an answer either. Finding the delicate balance of coercive diplomacy and co-optation is the key. It's tricky, but not impossible.

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