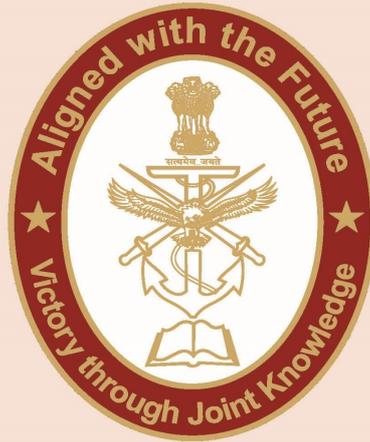


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TOO EARLY TO CELEBRATE THE MALDIVES RESULT

BY

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The recent elections in Maldives, which resulted in the victory of pro-Indian opposition leader, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, is being celebrated as an indicator of the anti-China wave sweeping through the subcontinent. It was a changed government in Sri Lanka, which bogged by earlier loans was compelled to hand over Hambantota port to China, while constricting its other projects. The present government is now balancing ties with India, hesitant to take further loans from China.

In Malaysia, the new government has already cancelled two major Chinese projects, while jailing the previous Prime Minister for corruption. The compensation for the cancellation is still being evaluated. Myanmar is seeking to cancel the hydroelectric projects which China was to finance and build, though may pay compensation to the tune of USD 800 Million. Pak too cancelled the Daimer-Basha Dam project.

In Nepal the new government changed its mind and decided to reoffer the construction of major hydroelectric plants to China. The press is agog with criticism and India has stated that it would not purchase excess electricity from these projects. Ultimately Nepal may also be forced to reconsider. Thus, slowly in the subcontinent China has begun losing its strong financial stranglehold which at one time appeared to be strengthening.

This is no way is an indicator of Indian success, but of nations in the region, realizing the futility of landing in debt traps and shedding strategic assets to China. India has not been able to even fulfil its promises of investments, nor utilize the funds earmarked for development in the immediate neighbourhood in this financial year. The recent 2+2 dialogue also had a mention of India and the US working jointly in the region to wean nations away from the Chinese stranglehold. Steps in this regard have yet to commence.

Abdulla Yameen tried every trick in the trade during the elections including ensuring that the opposition did not have a level playing field. In Maldives, this election is touted to be one in which there was no shortage of funds with Yameen's political party, Progressive Party of Maldives, as also no restriction on use of government machinery. Yet the results were a surprise. The win by Solih could be due to multiple factors which have recently impacted the island nation.

The first factor could have been the fear of the nation moving towards dictatorship. Yameen's arbitrary actions of arresting two ex-Presidents, his own Vice President and the serving Chief Justice of the Supreme Court on fake charges were an indicator of authoritarian rule, which if unchecked could have damaged freedom for a long time.

The second factor is that the entire opposition combined, ignoring differences, knowing it was the only way to win. How long will they manage to continue the coalition remains to be seen. Third, was the increased presence of the Chinese. Though everyone was aware of most projects being handled by China and claims of an improved economy by Yameen, however the work force is also Chinese, thus there were no increase in employment for locals.

Fourthly, India had stopped even their ministers from travelling without visa's adding to the fear of being shunned by their once closest ally. India was the destination for medical treatment, which it began discouraging, even returning a minister from the airport. Fifthly, were the regular comments being made by Nasheed, the ex-President from his self-imposed exile in Sri Lanka warning the public of the impact of Chinese investments. Finally, was the fear of a debt trap, similar on the lines of Sri Lanka.

While Solih may have won the elections, yet there is still time before the new government is sworn in. Yameen may have accepted defeat, however considering the way he had treated his opposition and controlled the nation's security agencies, there are fears of similar action. Having consolidated his power through force he knows that a change of guard at Male would result in him being now investigated. Hence, his future in the

island nation is uncertain. Sri Lanka has already sent him an offer of shifting base.

Rumours began making the rounds that Yameen may not stick to his promise of a smooth turnover. The opposition began warning the world of such developments. Simultaneously are reports of the Maldivian defence forces and police mentioning that they would guarantee the result of the election. The acting chief of the Maldivian police, Abdulla Nawaz, stated that the decision made by the 'people of Maldives would be respected and upheld.' A similar statement was also made by the information officer of the Maldivian National Defence Force.

Initially the election commission headed by Ahmed Shareef, a close associate of Yameen, stated that Yameen's party had raised some serious concerns and asked the commission to delay the announcement of official results. However, under pressure it was compelled to declare Solih as the winner. A spokesperson of the President's office stated that though Yameen had conceded defeat but declined to rule out whether he was considering a legal challenge. Here again, the court has his appointees. Hence, there is still a long way to go.

China on the other hand has possibly accepted that there would be a change of guard and this would impact future Chinese investments in the island nation. It has therefore, in a series of articles in their state-run Global Times recently, stated that India and Maldives could work together in joint projects as is now being considered for Afghanistan. The articles have even stated that Indian companies could use Chinese facilities. Since Maldives 70% debt is owed to china, it cannot be ignored. Hence, it is unlikely for China to support any illegal action by Yameen and protect him from global isolation.

The future remains uncertain till the actual date of handing over the reins which is in Nov. The Indian PM has been invited for the swearing in, but India has cautiously stated that the PM would only go, if the changeover was smooth. Indian commentators who have been gloating over the success of the elections and already stating the challenges Solih faces, need to hold their horses. A month is still a long time for anyone desperate to hold onto power to act.

Yameen has shown that he can go to any extent to remain in the chair. The Island nation needs to re-establish its relations with the world. It needs to re-consider the impact of Chinese loans before it gets into a debt trap and loses out strategic assets. It will only be sustained international pressure which would prevent Yameen from adopting any illegal actions. India should join the chorus of world leaders pushing for peaceful transfer of power. If PM

Modi is to attend, India must have a package ready for the Maldives. An announcement in Male at the swearing in would re-establish Indian prominence in the country.

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