

Political transition in Maldives

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THE dramatic events which took place in Maldives on February 7, 2012 has led to the 'involuntary' resignation of the country's democratically elected president. Although the political situation is likely to stabilise in the short-term with the elevation of Vice President Dr. Mohamed Waheed Hassan Manik to the position of president, multi-party democracy established in the country after the 2008 elections has received a definite setback.

Waheed has vowed to uphold the rule of law. He intends to form a government of national unity and has assured that presidential elections would be held in 2013 as planned. Justice Abdullah Mohamed, whose arrest triggered these developments, was released soon after the presidential change over.

A section of people in Maldives as well as in the international community have described the resignation of Nasheed as a coup. In fact, the Maldives Democratic Party (MDP) to which Nasheed belongs has alleged that the resignation had been engineered by "rogue elements" of the police and military, along with supporters of former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. MDP also alleged that the opposition threatened the president with a bloodbath if he refused to resign. For his part, Nasheed stated in a televised address that he chose to resign to protect the public from further violence.

Political uncertainty has been prevailing in Maldives for some time now.

Nasheed's problems began when his party failed to get a majority in the Maldivian parliament after the 2009 general elections. Nasheed wanted to relax strict Islamic laws to promote tourism, which is the largest foreign exchange earner for the country. However, his attempt to step-up facilities for tourism was defeated because of the assertion by the religious right and the judiciary. In the year 2010, Nasheed was forced to roll back his plan of allowing more multi-national companies from setting up resorts on unutilised islands.

Nasheed had received the economic crisis as a legacy from former president Gayoom who had left the country on the verge of bankruptcy. Maldivians have been protesting against soaring prices. Last year, the country also faced a major dollar crunch. India has been helping Nasheed's government with occasional financial support to tide over these problems.

In the present political crisis Islamic radicals have also played an important role. There has been growing Islamic radicalism in Maldives. Islamic radicals have been trying to create problems for the government of Nasheed who represented the moderate stream in the country. Islamic radicals even demolished the monument constructed by Pakistan at Addu city on the occasion of the 17th SAARC summit in November. Showcasing Pakistan's pluralistic heritage, the monument showed the different stages of cultural development in Pakistan from the Harappan and Buddhist past to its Islamic heritage before being proclaimed an Islamic Republic. However, inflamed religious passion in a section of the Maldivian population



Mohamed Nasheed, center, attempts to address protesting policemen in Male, Maldives, Feb. 7, 2012.

impelled them to destroy the monument.

The hardliners also opposed Nasheed's restoration of diplomatic relations with Israel, his attempts to transform the school curriculum which was narrowly focussed on Islamic principles, and his defence of a 'modern' Islam that is open to other faiths. They also wanted the government to stop Israeli flights and tourists from coming to Maldives.

The country plunged into a constitutional crisis when Nasheed ordered the arrest of the Chief Criminal Judge Abdulla Mohamed in a joint operation by the Police and Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) on January 16. The judge had ordered the release of a government critic and opposition leader Mohamed Jameel Ahmed, who, according to him, was illegally detained. The arrested person had allegedly defamed the government during a television interview in which he accused Nasheed's government of working against the state religion, Islam, with the support of

Christians and Jews.

There is no doubt that the judiciary in Maldives is in a mess. A large number of unqualified and incompetent people have come into the judiciary towards the end of Gayoom's dictatorship. However, the public in general disapproved of the arrest of Judge Abdullah. The Supreme Court of Maldives passed an order for his immediate release, but it was ignored by the Nasheed government. This alienated some conscientious lawyers and led to the resignation of SAARC's first woman Secretary General, Fathimath Dhiyana Saeed. She joined the protestors along with her husband.

It also created confusion in the country and rumours started circulating that Nasheed wanted to fill the judiciary with his men. Nasheed is an honest man but unfortunately he is not an astute politician. Due to the mishandling of the situation a political stand-off with religious overtones was transformed into an impasse between his government and the judiciary, which prompted many of his supporters to desert him. Nasheed's mishandling of the situation precipitated the crisis resulting in his ouster.

In recent times India has invested a great deal of political and economic capital in the Maldives. When Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Maldives for the SAARC summit, he also visited Male and signed a framework agreement with the Maldivian government. This includes joint efforts against piracy and joint patrolling of seas and aerial surveillance. The Indian Navy helps the MNDF in preventing piracy. And the Indian private sector GMR group is building a new airport in Male.

For India, political uncertainty in Maldives is a cause for concern. Maldives is strategically located and sits astride important sea lanes of communication. Several external powers including China and Pakistan are looking to gain footholds in the country. They might use the prevailing political uncertainty to their advantage. It is in India's interest that Maldives is able to tide over the present political crisis successfully and multi-party democracy survives in the country.

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Bangladesh on the Tipaimukh Dam: A print media analysis

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THE dilemma between India and Bangladesh over the construction of the Tipaimukh dam has been augmented by raging controversies within both countries. This article brings out perspectives from Bangladesh through the opinions roofed in three prominent Bangladesh dailies: *The Independent*, *Financial Express Bangladesh* and *The Daily Star*. Significant variations in perspective can be noted on the question of whether the Tipaimukh dam will be a boon or bane for the lower riparian Bangladesh.

Volume of electricity generated and shared

The Tipaimukh venture is a multi-purpose hydropower plan initiated by the Government of India to be located on the border of Kolashib district of Mizoram and Churachandpur district of Manipur, where the Tipai River meets Barak River.

It is a run-of-the-river project and the water stored in the dam will be discharged continuously to enable electricity generation and regulated to mediate flood in the plains. The Prime Minister of India has offered a joint stake to Bangladesh to invest in the project and to share the power generated (Gowher Rizvi, 'Tipaimukh: A plea for rational and scientific discussion', *The Daily Star*, 13 December 2011).

The question here arises; will India be able to share its electricity with Bangladesh? The proposed project site in the upstream area of the Barak River has a catchment of 1200 sq km. Compare this to the Kaptai Dam in Bangladesh with double the catchment area, rainfall intensity, and storage capacity, which only manages to produce 450 MW. How then is the Tipaimukh dam expected to generate 1500 MW of electricity? (M Inamul Haque, 'Tipaimukh Dam: For whose benefit?' *The Daily Star*, 20 December 2011).

Diversion of water flow

Given the Farakka Barrage experience, many Bangladeshis are reluctant to accept any assurances from the Indian government. M A Muid Khan in 'Dealing with the issue of Tipaimukh Dam', *The Financial Express Bangladesh*, says, 'history will testify that India has never kept her promise before erecting any dams on the common rivers'. With this background, Bangladesh is concerned because although the agreement signed between the Government of Manipur and National Power Corporation of India Limited (NPCIL) states that no barrage or diversion of water flow on the Barak River will be built, the GOI and Government of Assam have met with an understanding to build a barrage at Fulertal in Cachar district. This will divert the water flow and have a major impact on the irrigation and agricultural production of Bangladesh's lower riparian areas such as Sylhet and Maulvi Bazar. (M Inamul Haque in 'Tipaimukh Dam: For whose benefit?' *The Daily Star*, 20 December 2011). The operation of the dam itself will increase the water flow during summer seasons causing flash floods during the Boro harvesting in Sylhet. (Barrister Harun ur Rashid, 'Tipai Dam: Response to Dr. Rizvi', *The Daily Star*, 21 December 2011).

However according to Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury in 'Tipaimukh and the call for engagement' (*The Daily Star*, 22 December 2011) this assurance of the Indian Government is official, and as also stated by Rizvi, is binding and unequivocal.

Assuming that there is no diversion, Albelee A Hague in his 'Tipai dam and science' (*The Daily Star*, 26 December 2011) has analyzed that the dam will result in irregular flow of water which will have an adverse impact on the ecosystem of the entire Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna Basin.

In contradiction to Inamul Hague and Rashid, Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury's 'Tipaimukh and the call for engagement' (*The Daily Star*, 22 December, 2011), states that the overall impact which is believed to affect the lower riparian Bangladesh will be mitigated by additional rain water that flows from lower Assam, Mizoram, Nagaland and the northern slopes of Tripura to the downstream of Tipaimukh into Barrak river. Be that as it may, the fact that any mega dam can alter river dynamics, and constant irrigation can waterlog the ground causing siltation upon evaporation cannot be ignored. (Enam A Chaudhury, 'A response to Dr. Rizvi', *The Daily Star*, 29 December 2011).

Tipaimukh dam site: Seismically active zone?

Another major concern is that the dam site and the adjoining areas are fragile geo-tectonic regions which lie in an active seismic zone and has experienced more than eight major earthquakes, with a magnitude of more than 8.

Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, in 'Seismo-tectonic risk of Tipaimukh Dam', (*The Daily Star*, 23 December 2011) states that Rizvi's assertion that such environmental disasters are unlikely to have any adverse impact on Bangladesh as the site location is nearly 140 miles away from its border exposes his ignorance. An environmental disaster can cause unimaginable destruction in the lower Surma-Kushiyara-Maghna basin causing flooding in the lower riparian districts. However Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury disagrees: "there are many dams in seismically active zones of the world. Any engineering structure can fail, so can a dam; what is needed is a proper earthquake resistant design."

Summarizing the debate, it can be understood that a joint in-depth evaluation and more realistic discourse between Dhaka and New Delhi will not only reduce the bilateral contention but also the domestic one. In 'The significance of data collection' (*The Independent*, 24 December 2011), Enamul Hoque outlines the importance of information-sharing and in-depth surveys before constructing a hydropower project over a shared river. It is also important to note that for Bangladesh, environmental concerns and energy security are equally important. Besides benefitting the Indian states, the project will also enhance power capacity in the Sylhet region and irrigation in Maulvi Bazar.

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Russian support for Syria: Why?

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THE head of the Arab League and the prime minister of Qatar urged the UN Security Council on January 31, 2012 to take swift action to stem the escalating violence in Syria and to endorse an Arab plan for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to give up power. Arab League Secretary-General Nabil Elaraby urged the Council to take "rapid and decisive action" while Qatari prime minister warned the 15-nation body that Syria's "killing machine is still at work." Elaraby added that Arab nations are attempting to avoid foreign military intervention in the 10-month-old Syrian crisis, a point the Qatari prime minister also emphasized. He suggested the council should use economic leverage instead.

Earlier, Syria's government has firmly rejected a call from Qatar for Arab troops to be deployed in the country to end the deadly crackdown on protesters. A Syrian foreign ministry statement said such a move would "worsen the crisis... and pave the way for foreign intervention. The Syrian people... will oppose any attempt to undermine the sovereignty of Syria and the integrity of its territory. It would be regrettable for Arab blood to flow on Syria's territory to serve known [interests]," the statement added, without elaborating. President Bashar al-Assad has blamed a "foreign conspiracy" for the 10-month uprising, and officials say "armed gangs and terrorists" have killed 2,000 security forces personnel.

The BBC's Jonathan Head, who is in neighbouring Turkey, says the Arab League is divided over what to do, and in any case has little experience of forming a multi-national peacekeeping force. Such a force would also need either an invitation from the Syrian government, or the approval of the UN Security Council and neither is likely.

At the UN Security Council, Britain, the US, France, Germany, Portugal and Morocco drafted a revised resolution which called for a "Syrian-led political transition to a democratic and plural political system." When it was put to vote on February 4 at the Council, Russia and China vetoed it. Mohammed Loulichki, Morocco's ambassador to the UN and the sole Arab member of the current Security Council, voiced "great regret and disappointment" that Moscow and Beijing had struck it down. The Arab draft-resolution was however supported by all 13 other members of the Security Council.

Russia explained its veto by saying that the resolution was unbalanced and singled out the govern-

ment of President Assad, and did not contain measures against armed opposition groups. Russia further said that "it is determined to seek the soonest possible stabilization of the situation in Syria on the way toward pressing democratic transformations." It sought to characterize its veto not as support for the Assad government but as the expression of a more balanced position on the conflict. China's top newspapers have defended Beijing's veto of a UN resolution and said the Western push for a regime change in Syria was erroneous, citing previous campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. On February 6, The China Daily newspaper wrote in its editorial: "by only exerting pressure on the Syrian government and explicitly trying to coerce



Syrian regime supporters thank Russia for voting to block a UN Security Council resolution condemning Syria for its brutal crackdown.

its leader Assad to step down, the resolution sends the message to armed groups and opponents of his regime that they have the support of the international community. This will undoubtedly make the Syrian situation even more complicated."

Since the beginning of 2005, Russian-Syrian relations appear to have undergone a dramatic improvement. President Bashar al-Assad visited Moscow and met with Putin in January 2005, his first visit since becoming Syria's president in mid-2000. On that occasion, it was announced that Moscow had agreed to write off 73% percent of Syria's \$13.4 billion debt to Russia. Moreover, as Vremya novosti noted, Moscow allowed Damascus to repay the rest of the loan on terms extremely favorable to Syria. In addition, Russia agreed to sell to Syria the Strelets air defense missile system,

which includes vehicle-mounted short range surface-to-air missiles. According to a Kommersant commentator, this deal was worth up to \$100 million. Russia values the Assad regime's position regarding Chechnya. Syria does not support the Chechen rebels. Indeed, Chechnya's Moscow-backed president was received both by Assad and his prime minister in Damascus in September 2005.

Furthermore, Russian support depends on other factors some of which deserve mention as follows:

- Russia needs an access to the Mediterranean Sea through Syria. Tartus, a Syrian port on the Mediterranean Sea, is an ideal sea port for Russia which garrisons Moscow's growing Mediterranean fleet.
- Russian arms sales to Syria continues and currently worth \$4 billion including fighter jets and advanced missiles.
- Russia has large commercial interests in Syria and it invested about \$20 billion in energy, infrastructure and tourism. A natural gas processing plant is being constructed in Syria.
- Through Syria, Moscow is a player in the Middle East and maintains its influences in the region as global power. Syria also offers Moscow the chance to counter the West's influence in the Middle East.

Given the background Russia has given total support to Syria at the UN even when Syrian regime is becoming isolated from the Arab League.

Meanwhile Iran's supreme leader Ayotollah Ali Khamenei reportedly warned against the "US interference" in the internal affairs of Syria. As pressure on Assad grows, Tehran feels the pinch because the Syria-Iran axis provides access to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip and opposes the presence of the US in the region. The uprising in Syria has caused extreme discomfort to Hamas and on January 27, Khaled Meshal, Hamas' supreme leader, left Damascus with no plans to return.

Moscow also understands that while both the United States and Israel have little love for Bashar Assad, their fear that he will be overthrown and replaced by a worse regime give them both some interest in Moscow helping to prop him up.

For if Assad's regime begins to falter, there is little that Russia or any other country may be able to do to prevent it from falling. Furthermore, if an Islamic fundamentalist regime does replace Assad's, American, Israeli, and Russian interests will all suffer.

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