

BOTTOM LINE

# Is democracy in Maldives in danger?



BARRISTER  
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THE Maldives, the 1,200-atolls archipelago, with about 400,000 people, is strategically located in the Indian Ocean, and countries like India, China, the US and Britain, are worried about its political instability. Support and assistance to the island-state are necessary to prevent non-military maritime threats -- piracy, gun-running, and trafficking of people -- and to protect sea-lanes of the Indian Ocean..

The dramatic events commenced on February 7 when President Nasheed resigned, but later claimed his resignation was given under duress. He said: "I was forced to resign at gunpoint. There were guns all around me and they told me they wouldn't hesitate to use them if I didn't resign." Nasheed called the alleged plot a "coup" and called for the chief justice to investigate.

Nasheed's aides have backed up his account of his ouster, saying that more than 50 soldiers arrived at the presidential office and surrounded Nasheed, who promptly called a press conference to announce his resignation.

It was alleged that Vice President Mohamed Waheed Hassan, who was sworn in as Nasheed's replacement, was involved. Hassan denies conspiring to seize power. "Do I look like someone who will bring about a coup d'etat?" he said. "There was no plan. I was not prepared at all."

Former President Nasheed, who rejected Waheed's rule, called for daily demonstrations demanding the president's resignation and a snap poll. However, presidential elections are due in November 2013.

Although initially President Waheed Hassan ruled out holding elections earlier than the scheduled date, but agreed on February 16 to the Indian-brokered deal for early elections, which would likely be held by the year-end.

Indian Foreign Secretary Ranjan Mathai who visited Male reportedly said: "Our understanding is that elections would be held as early as considered feasible by all concerned." Till then, a national unity government comprising all political parties will run the country. Nasheed's party too will join such a government.

Earlier, US envoy Robert Blake visited Male on February 13 and had talks with both Nasheed and Waheed Hassan but failed to reach a compromise with Nasheed.

Meanwhile, a Commonwealth Ministerial Mission reached Maldives on February 14th to probe the controversial power transfer from former president Mohamed Nasheed to his successor Mohammed Waheed. A spokesman from the Commonwealth Secretariat said a three-member team would talk to all parties, including President Waheed, former president Nasheed, members of other parties, and members of the judiciary.

Although political turmoil has been avoided this time, democracy in the idyllic island-country of the

In 2008, a fresh breeze had wafted over the island heralding democracy through a fair election. And charismatic human right activist Mohammad Nasheed, a prisoner of conscience, won the election defeating veteran politician President Gayoom who ruled the country with an iron hand for 30 years.

President Nasheed, then only 41 years of age, captured attention across the world for his valiant struggle to install democracy in the Maldives. After victory, he showed respect and took a reconciliatory approach to former president Gayoom.

*If the island-country suffers from political instability, there is a distinct possibility of rivalry among big powers to influence the course of its politics considering the nation's geo-strategic location.*



Maldives has been in danger because of four factors, among others:

- Sudden resignation of the elected President Nasheed under controversial circumstances;
- Rise of intolerant version of Islam in the country;
- Judiciary's gross failure to apply rule of law;
- Confrontation among three organs of the state

Although Nasheed was directly elected as president, his party, Maldives Democratic Party (MDP), did not enjoy a majority in the 77-member Parliament. In the 2009 parliamentary elections the MDP had secured 28 seats and managed support of four independents, but that was still short of the halfway mark.

The latest Constitution of 2008 took away considerable powers from the president, including the authority to decide on subsidies and levying taxes. Also, each cabinet member has to be confirmed by the Parliament.

Since the president lost control of the parliament, a confrontation between the executive and legislature commenced. The judiciary also did not help the president. Nasheed found it difficult to get the Parliament to approve his cabinet members, and at one point the ministers even resigned in protest.

A flash point was Nasheed's effort to overhaul the judiciary, which had been staffed by appointees of the previous government. The judges are appointed for life, and many of them failed to take action against officials who were accused of corruption in land-deals for resorts. President Nasheed faced obstruction from the judiciary.

Frustrated by the actions of judiciary, Nasheed took the unusual step of arresting Justice Abdullah Mohammad. This drastic action was seen as unconstitutional, and analysts say that Nasheed was seen as an authoritarian ruler. This was his great political blunder as he crossed the "redline" of the doctrine of separation of powers inherent in the three organs of the state -- executive, legislature and judiciary..

Incidentally, the then Vice-President Mohamed Waheed Hassan criticised the president's action, and so did the former Maldivian Secretary General of Saarc Ms. Fathimath Dhiyana Saeed.

It is important to note that another line of attack by political groups has been that former President Nasheed was un-Islamic, and supported construction of statues, opened tourist spots for Israeli visitors and allowed massage parlours for tourists on islands, although no Maldivians live on those islands.

The negative image of Nasheed was propagated by a group of conservatives Islamists who want to turn Maldives into another "Taliban-ruled Afghanistan." The Islamists, who have grown bolder in recent years, could gain a bigger foothold in the Maldives, which might be a headache for South Asia and beyond.

The fragile democracy in the Maldives needs to be nurtured by all political parties and, if the island-country suffers from political instability, there is a distinct possibility of rivalry among big powers to influence the course of its politics considering the nation's geo-strategic location.

The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

# Myanmar's by-elections key to reform process

LARRY JAGAN

CAMPAIGNING for the forthcoming elections is already in full-swing. Myanmar's pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who is contesting a seat in the parliamentary polls scheduled for April 1, has already made several forays into the countryside, including touring parts of the constituency on the outskirts of Yangon in which she is running.

Much is riding on the outcome of these forthcoming polls, and more particularly the way in which these by-elections are conducted, though initial signs are not encouraging. The election is going to be a real test of strength between the liberals who support the president's reform agenda and the hardliners, who seem intent on de-railing the reform process despite publicly declaring their support for democratic reform.

Tens of thousands of supporters and well-wishers have flocked her route on these occasions to glimpse the iconic figure, who has spent much of the last twenty years under house arrest, often in virtual solitary confinement. Everywhere, her reception has been the same, adoring crowds yelling their support for her. "She's been treated like a pop star," said freelance journalist Min Thu, who has been following her entourage. "The excitement is overwhelming as people want to see her, wave to her, and for those close enough, to touch her."

"Now we can have democracy," said Aye Win, a retired school teacher in Yangon. "When she is elected she will help end poverty and repression in the country," she told *The Daily Star* by email.

Although only a relatively small proportion of seats are being contested in the by-elections -- to replace MPs who have taken up ministerial posts -- the results will have a significant effect on the country's fragile reform process, according to analysts and diplomats who closely follow events in Myanmar.

"Aung San Suu Kyi's decision to run for parliament is an extremely important move for the future of the country," Professor Sean Turnell, a Myanmar specialist at Macquarie University in the Australia who recently visited the country, told *The Daily Star*. "She is uniquely placed to drive reform forward and bring on board a substantial constituency to help maintain that momentum."

The leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD) is contesting from Kawhmu, a poor rural district on the southern outskirts of the former capital Yangon -- the country's largest city and the Nobel Peace laureate's hometown.

Her party is fielding candidates in almost all the 48 seats that are vacant -- forty in the lower house, six in the upper house and two in provisional assemblies. While this represents less than 15% of the seats in the national assembly -- 440 seats in the lower house and 224 in the upper house -- the results are less important than the way in which these by-elections are conducted.

"We hope the government keeps its word and allows a free and fair election," a NLD spokesman, Nyan Win told *The Daily Star* after the NLD had registered to contest the polls. All eyes are now on

tal Yangon -- the country's largest city and the Nobel Peace laureate's hometown.

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these by-elections; something the Myanmar government is painfully aware of.

US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton stressed the need for these by-elections to be free and fair when she met government leaders in December in the capital Naypyidaw. She told the speaker of the lower house, U Shwe Mann, that this was a prerequisite for Washington to seriously consider reducing sanctions against the country, according to diplomats in her entourage.

Since then, the mantra has been constantly repeated -- by the UN human rights envoy Tomas Ojea Quintana on his mission last month, and this week by the German development minister and a European Commissioner -- that any consideration of rolling back sanctions was dependent on the by-elections being free and fair.

There is no doubt that the liberals in the government want these elections to be as free and fair as possible -- it is essential for their long-term game plan. President Thein Sein, the speaker of the lower house Shwe Mann met with the chairman of the Election Commission Tin Aye a few months ago -- before Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD agreed to contest -- and agreed that the by-elections would be free and fair. Even if it meant the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) took a

severe drubbing in the poll.

"We have taken the necessary measures so that the upcoming by-elections will be free, fair and credible," Shwe Mann boldly told EU Development Commissioner Andris Piebalgs, speaking through an interpreter, recently.

This is nevertheless going to be difficult, because it is the USDP leaders -- who are mainly hardliners -- who will be campaigning in the election, even though Shwe Mann is nominally the head of the party.

So far the signs are ominous, and there is growing evidence that the hardliners are trying to scupper the NLD's campaign. Some senior USDP leaders

have instructed government officials to block the NLD's electoral campaign in any way they can. This was already evident a few weeks ago when Aung San Suu Kyi wanted to speak to her supporters in Mandalay -- the EC gave her permission to speak but refused approval to use the main stadium there to address the rally.

The signs that this is going to be a dirty campaign were even evident before her first trip to the Dawei industrial zone area in southern Myanmar. In a clear preview of things to come, former fisheries minister and USDP central executive member, Maung Maung Thein, warned residents in the area in mid-January that if they did not vote for the USDP they would lose their jobs, according to sources in the area.

More ominously though, he instructed the local officials to make sure they manipulated the vote in same way that the November polls were rigged, senior military sources told *The Daily Star*. Maung Maung Thein has considerable business interests in the area -- especially in the fishing industry -- though he has also been accused of colossal corruption.

All along the main road in Aung San Suu Kyi's constituency there are big colourful bill-boards proclaiming to voters that the roads were being repaired by the USDP. In many places throughout

the country USDP is taking credit for infrastructure projects, medical centres and schools, built by the government. This may not sway voters from electing Aung San Suu Kyi -- but may have a greater influence in other parts of the country.

The pro-democracy leader is not anxious to cry foul -- at least just yet. "We have certainly come across a few hitches in the last couple of weeks with regards the campaign of the NLD," she told reporters recently. "We hope that these will be sorted out because free and fair elections depend on how a campaign goes, not just how people are allowed to cast their vote on the day itself."

"The problem is access to resources, and when so much is at stake there will be setbacks," said Aung Naing Oo -- a former activist and now development specialist who has just returned to Burma for the first time in 20 years. "There will always obstacles to democratic change in the short-term, especially the danger of vote-buying," he told *The Daily Star*.

The problem is that at the local level government officials' allegiances will be to the local mafia and cronies, said a Myanmarese journalist who declined to be identified. And they are likely to be swayed by the local party bosses, rather than the president's edicts.

Even if the NLD wins most of the seats it contests, it will be a minority party in the parliament. More than 70% of the parliamentary seats are already held by the pro-military MPs who belong to the USDP, including a quarter of the MPs who are serving soldiers directly nominated by the army chief.

"Even if she is the leader of a minority party in parliament, Aung San Suu Kyi will be a potent symbol for national reconciliation and democratic change," said Nyo Myint -- a political analyst and pro-democracy activist close to the NLD leader based in Chiang Mai. "The lady is showing her trust in the government," he said.

Her electoral victory -- provided the campaign and vote is relatively free and fair -- is likely to give the reform process a boost, and provide a valuable basis of support for the liberals. "Aung San Suu Kyi is uniquely placed to cut through the divisions in Burmese society, some of which are opposed to change or at least want to slow it," said Sean Turnell. "At a time when many log jams threaten the reform momentum, this could be the singular event that marks the tipping point."

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