

Maldives polls seen as vote on ties with India

AFP, Male

Maldives leader Ibrahim Mohamed Solih will seek re-election tomorrow in a presidential vote also serving as a referendum on his pursuit of renewed ties with India, the archipelago's traditional benefactor.

Solih, 61, moved swiftly to repair relations with New Delhi after defeating his predecessor Abdulla Yameen, who banked on China for loans and diplomatic support. Yameen was jailed for 11 years last December after a corruption conviction. He is not a candidate in tomorrow's vote, but is backing a proxy.

During his autocratic tenure, Yameen borrowed heavily from China for construction projects, making the nation - better known for its upscale beach tourism and celebrity travellers - a hotbed of geopolitical rivalry.

Solih's administration has criticised Beijing's lending as a debt trap and worked to restore the Maldives' traditional diplomatic posture after taking office.

International diplomacy would play a crucial role in the vote, former foreign minister Ahmed Shaheed told AFP.

Yameen's party is keeping up its "India Out" campaign, but his proxy Mohamed Muizzu, the mayor of the capital Male, has avoided risking his chances by openly criticising New Delhi.

"No one can be in power in Male after defying India," said Shaheed, who is now a law professor at University of Essex in Britain. But a former Maldivian civil servant, who requested anonymity, said he believed China would regain its hold on the archipelago should Muizzu be elected.

Solih was a substitute candidate from his Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) in 2018 when its exiled high-profile leader Mohamed Nasheed was barred from contesting.

Nasheed, a globally recognised climate activist, had helped Solih secure an unexpected landslide win in the last election.

But the pair fell out earlier this year after years of squabbling over political reforms, and after both sought to become the MDP's presidential nominee. Analysts expect Solih to do well, but he could be in trouble if he fails to secure a majority in first round.

A run-off election usually helps the underdog in the Maldives, which has a history of opposition parties successfully uniting against the leading candidate.



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken tours farmland that's being cleared of unexploded ordnance, after a building reportedly used by Russian forces to store ordnance exploded, in Yahidne, Ukraine yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

With G20, US fetes India's rise while accepting differences

AFP, Washington

For two and a half decades, it has been a top and consistent goal for the United States across very different presidencies - encouraging the rise of India.

As New Delhi takes the global stage by leading the Group of 20 summit, President Joe Biden will be there as a cheerleader, even as US policymakers come to accept that India's interests will at times be at odds with Washington's.

The gathering comes the same year that India topped China as the most populous nation and surpassed its former colonizer Britain as the fifth-largest economy, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi being feted on visits to Washington, Paris and elsewhere.

"I think in some ways, Prime Minister Modi has wanted to make it India's coming out party to the world - as a major power, with its own independent voice, whose time has come," Tanvi Madan, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said of this weekend's G20 summit.

The US has viewed the fellow democracy as a natural ally that can rival an autocratic and increasingly assertive China, which has clashed with India on their disputed border.

But India has stood firm against another US priority by refusing to isolate Russia over its invasion of Ukraine, a nod to its historic ties with Moscow. Heading into the G20, India has sought to play down geopolitics and seek consensus on development issues such as debt relief and climate change.

Rights groups also charge that Western courting of Modi comes despite democratic backsliding under the Hindu nationalist leader, with attacks on minorities and harassment of critical media.

Alyssa Ayres, who helped build relations with New Delhi as a State Department official, said it should come as no surprise that India, a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War, remains "fiercely independent."

She said that India saw no contradiction as it seeks "ties with all across the board."

The Biden administration has repeatedly saluted Modi's leadership and said it will work with India to achieve success at the G20, including on reforming international economic institutions.

Aparna Pande, a South Asia expert at the Hudson Institute, said that India, in its quest to boost its own global role, has always favoured a multipolar world rather than one dominated by a single power.

Despite its differences with US, India still offers a strong partner at a time that China is wooing developing countries, she said. When Russia invaded Ukraine, the United States was "very concerned" about India's position but has "grudgingly accepted it," said Michael Kugelman, a South Asia expert at the nonpartisan Wilson Center think tank.

"I think that Washington may even see India's position as one that could have advantages for the US if there is a desire down the road to try to push for some type of mediated, negotiated end to the war," Kugelman said.

'Responsibility will lie with US'

Russia denounces US plan to give depleted uranium tank rounds to Ukraine

AFP, Moscow

The Kremlin yesterday denounced US plans to provide depleted uranium tank rounds to Ukraine, saying Washington would be responsible for any negative lingering impact of the munitions' use. Depleted uranium munitions are controversial due to their association with health problems such as cancer and birth defects in areas where they were used in past conflicts, though they have not been definitively proven to have caused such issues. The Pentagon announced this week it would provide Ukraine with the rounds as part of a \$1 billion aid package that coincided with an unannounced visit to Kyiv by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. "This is very bad news," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said. "The use of these shells has resulted in a galloping increase in the number of cancer patients ... The same situation will inevitably await those Ukrainian territories where they will be used." "Responsibility will lie with the US," he added. Russian President Vladimir Putin has warned that he would deploy depleted uranium ammunition if Ukraine received the arms.

Putin not planning video address to G20: Kremlin

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin is not planning to make a video address at the upcoming G20 summit in New Delhi this weekend, the Kremlin said yesterday. The meeting comes amid fraught relations between Moscow and the West over the conflict in Ukraine, which caused deep tensions at last year's summit in Bali. Asked whether Putin would make a separate video address, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters: "No, there are no plans." He said "all the work" would be led by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who is leading Russia's delegation. Lavrov also represented Russia at August's BRICS meeting in Johannesburg, following a row over whether South Africa would be forced to arrest Putin under an International Criminal Court warrant. In the end Putin made an address by video link, in which he blamed the West for the conflict in Ukraine. Putin's invitations to international summits has angered some Western nations, which have sought to cast him as a pariah over Moscow's actions in Ukraine. Disagreements over the conflict and phasing out of fossil fuels will likely hamper any agreements being made at the two-day summit in New Delhi.



A Meitei woman, who was injured during a protest demanding the removal of the army barricades, is being carried towards an ambulance in Bishnupur district, in the northeastern state of Manipur, India. The photo was taken on Wednesday and released yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

VIOLENCE, DESTITUTION Children fleeing LatAm in record numbers: UN

AFP, United Nations

A record number of children from Latin America and the Caribbean are leaving their homes in search of a better life, risking disease, injury and abuse, a United Nations children's agency (Unicef) report said Wednesday, urging a stronger humanitarian response.

Driven by violence, destitution and severe weather, some 40,000 children crossed the perilous Darien jungle separating Central and South America last year, compared to 29,000 in 2021 and several times more than in previous years.

In just the first six months of 2023, over 40,000 children made the dangerous journey, indicating the total number is likely to be much higher at the end of the year.

Six hundred of the children were unaccompanied.

"Gang violence, instability, poverty and climate-related events are, alarmingly, gripping the region and pushing more children from their homes," Unicef regional director Garry Conille said. "When they cross several countries and sometimes the entire region, disease and injury, family separation and abuse may plague their journeys and, even if they make it to their destination, their futures often remain at risk," Conille added.

According to Unicef, children represent a total of 25 percent of migrants in the region, a proportion now as high as in sub-Saharan Africa, compared to around 13 percent worldwide.

UN calls for age limits for AI tools in schools

AFP, Paris

The UN yesterday called for strict rules on the use of AI tools such as viral chatbot ChatGPT in classrooms, including limiting their use to older children.

In new guidance for governments, the Unesco warned authorities were not ready to deal with ethical issues of rolling out "generative" Artificial Intelligence programs in schools.

It said relying on such programs rather than human teachers could affect a child's emotional wellbeing.

Advertisement for Bangladesh Technical Education Board (BTEB) regarding the admission of students to the Bangladesh Institute of Technical Education (BITE) for the 2023-24 academic year. The ad includes details about the exam schedule, application process, and contact information.