

Maldives polls seen as vote on ties with India

AFP, Malé
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.

Bigger bikes to hit roads from July

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home ministry meeting yesterday, the culmination of years of negotiations between bike manufacturers and the government. "We will allow the manufacture and distribution of 350cc motorcycles. From now on, these higher engine power motorcycles can legally ply the roads," said Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, who presided over the meeting. Currently, bikes with over 165cc engines cannot be manufactured or imported for the local market. According to the Motorcycle Industry Development Policy 2018, manufacturers can export motorcycles with up to 500cc engines. The Bangladesh Trade and Tariff Commission recommended raising the allowable engine

displacement to 350cc. The government allowed motorcycles with up to 165cc engines with its Import Policy Order-2015-18. Talking to The Daily Star, the home minister said law enforcers would also get bikes with higher displacement engines so that suspects cannot outrun them. Asked if the bikes would be suitable for Bangladeshi roads, he said, "There is no relationship between the engine capacity of the bike and its speed." The meeting was attended by the senior secretary to the Security Services Division, the Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation chairman, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police commissioner, representatives of police headquarters and the Ifad Group chairman.

Ifad Group had been asking for this change since it signed a memorandum of understanding with Royal Enfield in 2021 to become the brand's sole distributor here. The smallest displacement engine Royal Enfield makes is 346cc. Talking to this newspaper, Ifad Group Vice-Chairman Taskeen Ahmed said they expect to go into commercial operation from July 2024 and will launch four models - Royal Enfield Bullet, Meteor, Hunter and Classic. Royal Enfield has so far invested Tk 150 crore into production and this is slated to go up to Tk 250 crore, he said. Taskeen said permission from the home ministry had been the only hurdle before they could go for commercial production. Permissions

from the industries and commerce ministries have been received, he said. Three manufacturers had written to the government urging it to allow bikes with higher capacity engines on the streets. Rancon Motorbikes Ltd, manufacturer of Suzuki, and Runner Automobiles said they want the withdrawal of the existing engine capacity ceiling. Kawasaki on December 5 asked the commerce ministry to increase the allowable engine displacement to 250cc as it wants to expand its business in Bangladesh. The approval comes when a sharp and unregulated growth of vehicles, especially motorcycles and three-wheelers, over the last few years has contributed to a spike in the number of crashes and casualties.

Changes will merely be in wording

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clause-42 that allows law enforcers to frisk and arrest people without warrants. Journalists had been demanding omission of the clause, but the committee decided only to bring one change in the clause. As per the committee's decision, a change will be made to clause-42 to give the power to frisk and arrest people without a warrant to a police inspector instead of a sub-inspector. Once passed, the proposed Cyber Security Act will replace the controversial Digital Security Act-2018. The bill was placed in Jatiya Sangsad on Tuesday by State Minister for ICT Division Zunaid Ahmed Palak. Later, the bill was sent to the parliamentary standing committee on the ministry of posts, telecommunications and

information technology for scrutiny. The committee was asked to submit its report before the House within five working days. Yesterday, journalists were not fully satisfied with the JS body's decisions. Meeting sources said wording will be changed in clause-21 of the bill which cites offences relating to conducting any "propaganda and publicity" against the Liberation War, spirit of the Liberation War, Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the national anthem and the national flag. The committee decided that the words "propaganda and publicity" will be replaced with "publicity with intent to malice, defame, and confuse", they said. Also, the clause-32 of the bill will be dropped.

The clause stipulates that offenders will be punished for committing offences, punishable under the Official Secrets Act, in the digital medium. After the meeting, Law Minister Anisul Huq told reporters that they have brought several changes to the bill. "We have accepted a recommendation from the BFUJ regarding the clause-21. We have omitted clause 32 which incorporated the Official Secrets Act," he said. Journalist leader Monjurul Ahsan Bulbul told reporters that they were not satisfied with the change to clause-42 as they stressed the role of the Bangladesh Press Council in this regard. Jatiya Press Club General Secretary Shyamal Dutta said a few changes will be made to some clauses, including clauses-21 and

42. He said the amended bill will be made available online in a day or two. At the meeting, a faction of Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ) placed a 14-point demand. The president of the BFUJ faction, M Abdullah, said the parliamentary watchdog accepted some of their demands but they were not satisfied with it. He said they told the committee that they will accept the bill only if all those clauses which create obstacles to freedom of the press are dropped. The meeting was chaired by standing committee member Rejwan Ahammad Taufiq. Law Minister Anisul Huq and Post and Telecommunications Minister Mustafa Jabbar attended the meeting on special invitation from the committee president.

Advertisement for Bangladesh Technical Education Board (BTEB) regarding the admission of students to the Bangladesh Institute of Technical Education (BITE) for the year 2023-2024. The ad includes details about the exam schedule, application process, and contact information.