

The Maldives in a stalemate



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THE ANTI-DEMOCRATIC MOMENTUM IS, MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE, CREATED BY THE UNWILLINGNESS AND INCOMPETENCE OF POLITICIANS TO WORK TOGETHER IN ORDER TO IMPROVE THE PROSPERITY AND WELFARE OF THE COUNTRY AND ESTABLISH 'DEMOCRATIC PROFESSIONALISM' WHICH WOULD LEAD TO TRUST WITHIN SOCIETY

In the last decade it seems that South Asia witnessed a 'wave of democracy'. A quite grand and overstrained term used to describe a phenomenon which generally emphasises the successful transition towards non-authoritarian regimes. However, there is no doubt that the Indian subcontinent was marked by several critical junctures influencing the trajectories of old political patterns. Bhutan became a constitutional monarchy and carried out its first electoral exercise. In Nepal, after a major socio-political movement, the king was ousted from power and far-reaching democratic reforms were introduced. Similarly in Pakistan, where after the resignation of former COAS and President Pervez Musharraf, a new civilian government came into office. And last but not least Bangladesh experienced the re-introduction of parliamentary democracy after a two-year phase of a non-elected caretaker government. But it is in the nature of waves to break and change direction. In some South Asian countries there is a tendency towards reversing democratic transitions. Despite the introductions of electoral systems, decision-makers still remain in the patterns of established autocratic style of governance and political culture. In this context, the Maldives are the most recent and dramatic example for a democratic setback. After a promising political movement enforced several democratic reforms, e.g. a new constitution, rudimentary separation of power and the formation of political parties. These democratic steps led to the first free and fair presidential elections of 2008 and the Island state's three decade long rule of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom was

brought to an end. However, the ousting of Gayoom -branded as the sole symbol of autocracy in the country by self-declared liberal democratic forces- as well as the elections, did not initiate a successful consolidation of democracy. For some observers it might come as a surprise, but the political situation in the Maldives is more complex than the size of the country may indicate. The Maldives resemble a 'miniature laboratory', a reference point for all kinds of social, political and economic dynamics which are paradigmatic for the whole region and beyond. A deeply polarised society, highly politicised security sector, epidemic corruption, patronage, nepotism, weak political institutions, rising crime, an unemployed frustrated youth, religious extremism, as well as the personal rivalry of two politicians and their political parties. Although the first democratically elected president Nasheed was able to remove members from the old regime out of office he was not able to eradicate their well-established power structures and zones of influence, thus giving them room to manoeuvre within the political landscape. His inevitable decline began when his Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) failed to win a majority in 2009 general elections. This led to the establishment of an opposition-led parliament which heralded the start of a political stalemate. One might raise the legitimate questions: How could this happen and do the Maldives provide evidence for the often mentioned critical (western) predication of an antagonism between Islam and Democracy? Such a statement is naïve and narrow-minded, but the current turmoil in the Island state does not help to

rebut it either.

Today it seems that the Maldives are not only beset with climate change, but also marked by lack of tolerance. Whereas the natural calamities – especially the rising sea level – are already well-known, the tendency of increasing intolerance is quite new. This finds its expression in two phenomena: A continuation of

doubtlessly enhancing each other mutually and can be identified as major causes for the recent 'coup-like' situation facilitated by Nasheed's political opponents and carried out by segments of the police and the military. Having this in mind, one can state that a main characteristic of the Maldives political landscape is unrestricted political struggle. A tussle featured by a

democracy to the Atolls was contrasted by the inability to establish a constructive, parliamentary working relationship between the government and the opposition. On the one side the opposition was guided by its main interests to undermine the government by not only blocking all its decisions but also by trying to displace the ministers through no-confidence votes. On the

President Nasheed was overwhelmed by an opposition which stopped at nothing to paralyse his government and in addition by tensions within factions of his own political alliance as well as between the different governmental institutions. This prompted Nasheed to threaten members of the opposition through charges of corruption.

Consequently, the governments' support started eroding tremendously, turning the political institutions in dysfunctional bodies. Furthermore, effective and efficient parliamentary work was hindered by the tendency from both the government and the opposition to move political debates out of the parliament on to the streets which led to violent clashes. This did not only worsen the economic situation but also laid the foundation for a political and constitutional crisis. It created a power vacuum which was easily filled by radical religious forces. Being backed by elements of Gayoom's former regime as well as a benevolent judiciary, the Islamists have the necessary tailwind to promote radicalism and turn this moderate Islamic nation into a new hub for religious extremism.

To sum up, the ongoing political deadlock most likely has the potential to create the political space necessary for a 'Wahabisation' of the archipelago. The hope that under democratic governance, religious extremism would be routed out automatically by liberal forces was obviously a misperception. It might be true that Islamic radicals were gaining a foothold in the Maldives during the authoritarian regime of Gayoom, but their political prominence and influence was definitely growing

more rapidly during the past few years under Nasheed. The fact that radical Islamic parties do not win much of the votes does not necessarily reflect their political influence. Furthermore moderate forces tend to overestimate their own position within the ongoing 'ideological battle' for the Maldives.

One should not be fooled and mistake the rise of Islamist forces with a religious radicalisation of the general public. The anti-democratic momentum is, more than anything else, created by the unwillingness and incompetence of politicians to work together in order to improve the prosperity and welfare of the country and establish 'democratic professionalism' which would lead to trust within society. The rejection of the proposal for a 'united government' comprising the new president as well as the ousted Nasheed including their respective political camps is another milestone of elite failure in the Maldives. Ongoing violent clashes, tactical maneuvers regarding the date for new elections are processes which have the power to sink Maldivian democratic hopes. However, it is definitely too early to give up the emergence of a genuine Islamic democracy in the Maldives. Maldivians might not be able to stop rising sea levels, but they do hold the power for stopping rising fundamentalism and autocracy.

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A supporter of ousted Maldivian president Mohamed Nasheed throws a bottle at riot police in Male

a non-democratic culture and the growth of radical Islamic elements. Both are distinct occurrences, but they are

disastrous display of behaviour of all involved actors. For example, the latest commitment by Nasheed to bring sustainable

other side, the government increasingly followed in Gayoom's footsteps by adopting an autocratic style of governance.