

Maldives Presidential Election: India and China's Geopolitical Interests Take Center Stage

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Cover Image Attribute: India and China compete for leverage in the Maldives, a nation comprising approximately 1,200 coral islands in the Indian Ocean along the primary maritime route connecting the East and the West. / Source: MOHAMED AFRAH/AFP

The Maldives, renowned for its breathtaking beaches, vibrant coral reefs, and rich marine biodiversity, is now the backdrop for an unexpected geopolitical rivalry. Nestled in the heart of the Indian Ocean, this nation of approximately 1,200 coral islands and atolls will witness a runoff presidential election on September 30th, with President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih facing off against opposition candidate Mohamed Muizzu. However, there's more at stake than just the presidency; the ballots will also feature India and China, two major Asian powers vying for influence in this strategically significant region.

As both nations endeavor to strengthen their presence in these strategically located islands, which control vital east-west shipping lanes, the two presidential contenders represent opposing geopolitical interests. President Solih, hailing from the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), has reinforced ties with India since his surprise election victory in 2018, capitalizing on the cultural and financial connections between Malé and New Delhi. On the other hand, Mohamed Muizzu, a candidate from the Progressive Alliance coalition, advocates for closer relations with China.

Historically, the Maldives has been within India's sphere of influence, granting New Delhi a vantage point for monitoring a crucial section of the Indian Ocean. However, with its rapidly expanding naval capabilities, China is eager to secure access to this strategically vital location—a prospect that India seeks to thwart. Furthermore, Beijing is keen on safeguarding its energy supply routes from the Gulf that traverse these waters.

Both India and China have invested substantial sums in the Maldives through loans and grants for infrastructure and development projects. Yet, in this election, it appears that China holds the advantage.

In the initial round of elections earlier this month, President Solih garnered only 39% of the votes. One factor that may have contributed to his lackluster performance is the criticism that his administration has prioritized relations with India, often characterized as the *"India-first"* policy, at the potential expense of relations with China. However, President Solih rejects this characterization, asserting that international relations are not a zero-sum game, where improving ties with one country necessitates undermining relations with another.

One contentious issue that has fueled the *"India-out"* campaign is the acquisition of two helicopters in 2010 and 2013, along with a small aircraft in 2020 from India. While Delhi insisted these assets were intended for search and rescue missions and medical evacuations, the presence of approximately 75 Indian military personnel responsible for operating and maintaining the Indian aircraft in the Maldives sparked opposition concerns about national security.

This situation has now become a pivotal election issue, with President Solih insisting that there are no actively deployed foreign military personnel stationed in the Maldives. He emphasized that Indian personnel present in the country operate under the operational command of the Maldives National Defence Force.

During Abdulla Yameen's presidency from 2013 to 2018, the Maldives drew closer to China and joined President Xi Jinping's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, designed to establish key transportation links between China and the rest of the world. When India and Western lenders hesitated to offer loans due to allegations of human rights violations, Yameen turned to Beijing, which provided financial support without stringent conditions. Yameen is currently serving an 11-year prison sentence for corruption, rendering him ineligible to contest this year's election. Mohamed Muizzu is widely seen as a proxy for Yameen, and given Yameen's strained relationship with Delhi, China becomes a logical choice for opposition support.

One of the most prominent Chinese-funded projects in the Maldives is the 2.1-kilometer four-lane bridge connecting the capital, Malé, with the international airport on a separate island. This \$200 million infrastructure project was inaugurated in 2018 during Yameen's presidency.

Despite India's efforts to match Chinese investments by providing loans and grants exceeding \$2 billion in recent years, Delhi's motives have generated skepticism among many in the Maldives. Critics argue that India indirectly maintains a significant presence in the country. Concerns also loom that escalating tensions between India and China along their Himalayan border could negatively impact the Maldives.

Azim Zahir, a Maldives analyst and lecturer at the University of Western Australia, notes a prevailing sentiment among Maldivians to refrain from substantive strategic alignments with any country, including India.

President Solih faces an uphill battle as the runoff election approaches, having failed to secure the support of key smaller parties to narrow the gap with his rival. Sensing the challenges the governing MDP faces in countering the "*India out*" narrative, the opposition alliance has intensified its campaign.

Mohamed Hussain Shareef, vice president of the opposition alliance, expresses concerns about the erosion of sovereignty due to the government's perceived over-dependence on India. He contends that every significant project in the country is financed and executed by Indian entities.

Despite these geopolitical tensions, many young Maldivians remain preoccupied with pressing domestic issues, including the rising cost of living, unemployment, and the existential threat of climate change. Fathimath Raaia Shareef, a student at the Maldives National University, emphasizes the youth's concerns about employment opportunities and their desire to contribute to the country's development.

Nevertheless, these local issues may take a back seat in the upcoming election, as the victor will play a pivotal role in determining which Asian power gains a crucial foothold in the battle for regional dominance.

With reporting by CNA, BBC, and The Christian Science Monitor

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