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Issue Brief

Maldives Presidential Elections: Fragmented Campaign

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S*ummary*

In the upcoming Maldivian presidential elections, none of the eight candidates in fray may secure the requisite 50 per cent vote in the first round. President Ibrahim Solih's ruling Maldivian Democratic Party and the ruling coalition have split with two coalition partners deciding to part ways. India, Maldives' largest development and security partner, is also a key agenda in the election campaign.

The fourth Presidential elections in the Maldives are due on 9 September 2023. Eight candidates are slated to contest the election. The main contest is likely to be between the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP)-led ruling coalition candidate Ibrahim Solih and the Progressive Congress Alliance¹ candidate Mohamed Muizzu. Chances, however, are bleak that any of the candidates will secure the requisite 50 per cent vote in the first round of elections. In such circumstances, the support of other political parties and independent candidates in the second round of elections will determine the final outcome. Even though the pre-poll political environment in the Maldives is relatively peaceful, the political fragmentation makes it difficult to project a certain outcome.

Past Presidential Elections

Maldives has been following an Executive Presidency since 1968. Till 2008, it was following a one-party system and the President was elected for five years through a referendum. The first executive President of the Maldives, Ibrahim Naseer, was in power from 1968 to 1978. As political unrest prompted Naseer to not contest for a third term, the People's *Majlis* selected then Minister of Transport Maumoon Abdul Gayoom as the country's second President. Gayoom was in power from 1978 till 2008. Through a referendum conducted in 2003, people's mandate was ensured. Nevertheless, from time to time, Gayoom had to face political challenges during his 30 years of rule. In addition to coup attempts, he faced challenges from the democratic reform movement. Until 2003, Gayoom succeeded in suppressing the political reform movement.

The intensification of the movement for reform and democratisation in 2003 forced Gayoom to initiate the reform process in 2004 which ultimately led to the registration of political parties in 2005 and the adoption of the country's third constitution in August 2008 which paved the way for Presidential elections under a multi-party system. As per the constitutional provision, Presidential elections were conducted on 8 October 2008.²

Out of 12 registered political parties at that time, only five parties fielded candidates for the 2008 Presidential election. In addition, one independent candidate contested the poll. In the first round of elections held on 8 October 2008, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, the incumbent president and leader of the Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (DRP), got the highest number of votes (71,731, 40%). As per the Presidential Election

¹ Progressive Congress Alliance, formed in 2019, includes the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) and the People's National Conference (PNC).

² The 2008 constitution specified that the election had to be held by 10 October 2008 and that the new President would assume office on 11 November 2008. Article 292 of the Constitution mentions that only the new People's *Majlis* to be elected by 15 February 2009 could amend the Constitution.

Act 2008, 18 (a) and (b), a candidate is declared elected only if the candidate obtains a majority and receives over 50 per cent of the valid votes cast in the election. 19 (a) of the Presidential Election Act says, if no one receives 50 per cent of the valid votes cast, then a run-off presidential election must be held within 21 days after the day of the election.

Since Gayoom did not receive the required 50 per cent of the total votes polled, the second round of elections was conducted on 28 October. In the second round, the contest was between Maumoon Abdul Gayoom and Mohamed Nasheed from the MDP. Nasheed emerged victorious in the second round by receiving 54.21 per cent of votes. The results were accepted graciously and with dignity by the winning and the defeated candidates. The immediate post-election environment was reported to be calm.³

Results of the 2008 Presidential Elections				
Party	Presidential Candidate	Vice Presidential Candidate	Votes Received in the first round	Votes Received in the Second round
MDP	Mohammed Nasheed	Dr Mohamed Waheed Hasan Manik	44,293 (25.09%)	97,222 (54.21%)
DRP	Maumoon Abdul Gayoom	Thasmeen Ali	71,731 (40.63%)	82,121 (45.79%)
Jumhooree Party (JP)	Gasim Ibrahim	Ahmed Ali Sawaad	27,056 (15.32%)	
Social Liberal Party (SLP)	Ibrahim Ismail	Fathimth Nahid Shakir	1,382 (0.78%)	
Islamic Democratic Party (IDP)	Umar Naseer	Ahmed Rizvee	2,472 (1.4 %)	
Independent	Hassan Saeed	Ahmed Shaheed	29,633(16.78%)	

Source: Election Commission, Republic of Maldives

Even though the power transition in the aftermath of the first multi-party Presidential elections was smooth and peaceful, the democratically elected President Mohamed Nasheed was ousted from power in February 2012 and was replaced by his Vice President Mohamed Waheed. The events following Mohamed Nasheed’s resignation made the Indian Ocean archipelago politically tumultuous.

After consistent pressure from the MDP and the international community, Presidential elections were conducted on 7 September 2013. Then President Mohamed Waheed participated in the election as an independent candidate and

³ [“Maldives Presidential Election, 1st Round of Voting, 8 October 2008 and Run-Off Election, 28 October 2008”](#), Reports of the Commonwealth Observer Group.

received 5.13 per cent of the total valid votes polled. Other contestants included Mohamed Nasheed from MDP (who secured 45.45 per cent of votes polled), Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom from Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) (25.35 per cent), and Gasim Ibrahim from Jumhhorie Party (JP, 24.07 per cent). Nasheed with 45.45 per cent got the highest number of votes, but since he could not receive the 50 per cent of votes, the country prepared for the second round of elections on 19 October.

The Supreme Court, however, annulled the 7 September votes amid allegations of electoral fraud. Therefore, the planned second round of elections had to be halted. Fresh elections took place on 9 November 2013 where MDP, PPM and JP took part. As nobody crossed 50 per cent of the total votes polled, the second round of elections took place on 16 November. In the second round, 51.39 per cent of voters elected Yameen as their president.⁴

Results of the 2013 Presidential Elections			
Party	Candidate	Votes Received in the first round on 9 November 2013	Votes Received in the second round on 16 November 2013
PPM	Abdulla Yameen	61,278 (29.72%)	111,203 (51.39%)
MDP	Mohamed Nasheed	96,764 (46.93%)	105,181 (48.61%)
JP	Gasim Ibrahim	48,131(23.34 %)	

Source: Election Commission, Republic of Maldives

Following the 2013 Presidential elections, Maldives witnessed the weakening of democracy, lack of respect for human rights, suppression of media and political dissent, and growing cases of crime, intolerance, and corruption. The authoritarian style of President Yameen made his alliances - JP, Adalath Party (AP) and Maumoon Reform Movement (MRM) barring Maldives Democratic Alliance (MDA) quit the ruling coalition and join hands with the main opposition party, the MDP, to field a common opposition candidate against him in the 2018 Presidential elections. The 2018 Presidential elections were a two-horse race between the PPM candidate Abdulla Yameen and the MDP-led united opposition candidate Ibrahim Solih. The 2018 elections were held under lots of political tension and uncertainty. Ibrahim Mohamed Solih won the elections with 134,705 (58.4 per cent %) votes in the first round itself. Abdulla Yameen received 96,052 (41.6 per cent) votes.

During the election campaign, Solih pledged to end presidential tyranny, injustice and corruption by bringing changes to the constitution and implementing institutional reforms. He also pledged to take took effective measures against counter-radicalism, violent extremism and counter-terrorism as well as rectify the foreign policy mistakes of the Yameen administration. Solih promised to initiate

⁴ [“Presidential Election 2013”](#), Election Commission, Republic of Maldives.

new projects to develop tourism, housing facilities, employment opportunities and to protect the heritage and Islamic identity of the country without placing an excess burden on the economy.⁵

Following the elections, President Solih formed an MDP-led coalition government with the JP, AP, and the MRM. With the support of the coalition partners, the Solih administration initiated the process to implement some of his election pledges. Solih claims that he has been able to fulfil 90 per cent of his election promises. His administration has been applauded for efficiently dealing with the COVID-19 challenges. Opposition political parties and common people have however expressed their concern about Maldives’ indebtedness to foreign countries due to loans taken for infrastructure projects. Mohamed Nasheed has also criticised Solih for not taking action against corruption, radicalisation, and for failing to change the system of government from the presidential to parliamentary.

In the field of foreign affairs, Maldives has made significant progress under the Solih administration. Solih’s management of relations with China while getting closer to India without offending competing foreign powers is commendable. His government, however, has to face severe criticism for its India policy, particularly from the Progressive Congress alliance. Solih has also been criticised for undermining and suppressing political dissent and media freedom for his action against the ‘India Out’ movement propagated by the Progressive Alliance.

The PPM-PNC alliance managed to attract the attention of youths but failed to make the ‘India Out’ movement a rallying point to mobilise other political parties against Solih. Just four months before the fourth Presidential elections, however, all the political parties except JP organised a common protest against the Solih administration for its stand on the Chagos island and for accepting the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) verdict on the maritime boundary delimitation between Maldives and Mauritius.⁶ Solih administration has been criticised by the opposition political parties for undermining the sovereignty of the country.

2023 Presidential Elections

Despite protests by the opposition political parties, the political environment in the Maldives in the run-up to the forthcoming Presidential election is relatively less chaotic than the previous two Presidential elections held in 2013 and 2018. The ruling coalition however faced a setback on the eve of the election as the ruling MDP

⁵ Gulbin Sultana, [“The 2018 Maldivian Presidential Elections: Two-horse Race between Development and Reforms”](#), Issue Brief, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, 17 September 2018.

⁶ Naizak Mohamed, [“Qasim: Nothing good can come out of tonight’s protest, it is a political event”](#), *Sun Online*, 2 June 2023.

got split and two coalition partners, JP and the MRM, decided to part ways. The ruling coalition currently comprises MDP, AP and Maldives Democratic Alliance (MDA). The split of the MDP did affect the Parliamentary function for a week, but the breaking up of the ruling coalition did not cause any political instability in the country as the MDP enjoyed a majority in the Parliament.

The split in the ruling coalition occurred on the eve of the Presidential elections due to the desire of former President Mohamed Nasheed, JP leader Qasim Ibrahim and MRM leader Faris Maumoon to fulfil their political ambition. These leaders felt sidelined in the Solih government and therefore, decided to not extend their support to Solih for a second term in office. Mohamed Nasheed wanted to be the presidential candidate from MDP's ticket. As the party primary chose Solih over Nasheed through a secret ballot, Nasheed along with his loyalists within the party formed a new party called the Democrats. However, he decided not to contest the election and backed Ilyas Labeeb as a unanimous candidate of the party.

The breaking up of the ruling party and the ruling coalition resulted in several negotiations among the different sets of political parties to form electoral alliances. Nasheed's party, the Democrats tried to enter into a formal alliance with Qasim Ibrahim, the presidential candidate of the JP, the Progressive Alliance, and the MRM. As of now, the Democrats has not entered into any formal coalition partner with anyone, but the leader of the party Nasheed has publicly expressed the party's support to the progressive alliance candidate if the election enters into the second round.

It may be noted here that the Progressive Alliance of PPM and PNC filed the nomination of former President and PPM leader Abdulla Yameen as its candidate. However, the Election Commission (EC) rejected Yameen's candidacy form on the grounds that he was serving an 11-year prison term in the V. Atoll Aarah case and was not eligible to contest the presidential election.⁷ The Supreme Court too supported EC's decision when the alliance approached the court against the EC's decision.

Following Supreme Court's verdict, Yameen asked the PPM to boycott the election. PNC, the other member of the Progressive Alliance, however, decided to nominate PPM leader Muizzu as the Presidential candidate.⁸ Since the PPM was indecisive, Muizzu quit the PPM and joined the PNC and participated in the PNC primary that was held on 3 August 2023 to choose the presidential candidate. Finally, Muizzu was elected through a secret ballot over PNC's Parliamentary Group leader Adam Shareef as the presidential candidate and filed his nomination as the PNC candidate.

⁷ Article 109(f) of the Maldivian Constitution stipulates that an individual sentenced to over 12 months in prison cannot contest a presidential election until three years have elapsed since the sentence's completion or pardon.

⁸ [“Yameen Asks PPM to Boycott Presidential Polls”](#), *One Online*, 6 August 2023.

Subsequently, the PPM senate and Yameen have decided to extend their support to Muizzu as a progressive alliance candidate.

The other contestants who have filed their nominations include Mohamed Nazim from the Maldives National Party (MNP), former Home Minister Umar Naseer, former Deputy Defence Minister Hassan Jameel and Faris Maumoon as independent candidates. Maumoon, son of former president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, wanted to contest as MRM nominee, but the Elections Commission rejected his candidature as MRM candidate as the party failed to get the required 3,500 signatures of its members. As a result, Maumoon is contesting as an independent candidate.

Lists of Candidates 2023 Presidential Elections		
Party/Alliance	Presidential Candidate	Vice Presidential Candidate
MDP Supported by AP and MDA	Ibrahim Solih	Mohamed Aslam
PNC Supported by PPM	Dr Mohamed Muizzu	Hussein Mohamed Latheef
JP	Gasim Ibrahim	Ameen Ibrahim
MNP	Mohamed Nazim	Dr Ahmed Adeel Naseer
Democrats	Ilyas Labeeb	Hussain Amr
Independent	Faris Maumoon	Dr. Abdul Sattar
Independent	Umar Naseer	Ahmed Saleem
Independent	Hassan Jameel	

A total of 282,395 voters are eligible to vote in this year's elections to decide the fate of the eight candidates contesting the election. There are 138,317 females and 144,355 males. Of these, 27,006 are new voters. According to the EC, a total of 574 polling booths will be set up across the country. There are 176 boxes in the Male area, 319 boxes in atolls, 65 boxes in resorts, eight boxes abroad, five in prisons, and one in industrial islands.⁹ EC has accredited 143 parties as observers and 22 parties as monitors for the upcoming elections. About 165 foreign observers are expected to be present during the elections. The observers will be stationed in six areas across the country during the elections. About 112 observers from 17 organisations will be active across the country during the elections. The group of observers will be led by former Sri Lankan Election Commission Chairman Varunasiri Mahindadesha Priya.¹⁰

⁹ [**“Permanent Voters' List Released, 282,395 Eligible Voters”**](#), *One Online*, 20 August 2023.

¹⁰ [**“EC Accredits 143 Foreign Observers and 22 Foreign Monitors for Elections”**](#), *One Online*, 20 August 2023.

Key Election Issues

Some of the key issues on which political parties are seeking people’s mandate include housing facilities, development and growth of the economy, preventing foreign military presence, improvement of the health, education, and governance system, women and youth empowerment, improved living standards, human resource development, addressing the drug menace, protection of the Islamic identity, and climate change.

In the last five years, India has emerged as the largest development and security partner of the Maldives. While India’s role as a development partner has been appreciated by many, a large section of Maldivians, particularly the youth, are getting attracted to the ‘India Out’ movement propagated by the Progressive Alliance. As a result, India is an agenda in this year’s election campaign.

JP which was the part of ruling coalition until June this year and opposed the ‘India Out’ movement, is now calling for the reduction of Maldives’ dependency on India by enhancing self-sufficiency, particularly in the security domain. According to the JP candidate Gasim Ibrahim, “Maldives should not ... expect India to bail Maldives out of crisis every time... India has its own issues to focus on. ... It is not feasible for India to keep providing aid to Maldives ...”¹¹ In order to reduce the country’s dependency on India, Qasim promised to establish a Maldivian Airforce to look after Maldivian sea and air space if he came into power. Additionally, he stated that a Navy will be established instead of MNDF to strengthen surveillance of the Maldivian seas.¹²

Independent candidate Umar Naseem also talks about the need to reduce the Indian influence in the Maldives. According to him, military personnel from other countries being stationed on the Island and the loans taken from countries like China and India are part of the major problems Maldives currently faced. Taking a jibe at the government’s ‘India First’ policy, MNP candidate Mohamed Nazim emphasises the need for implementation and enforcement of the ‘Maldives First, and Maldivians First’ policy.¹³ Progressive Alliance candidate Muizzu is promising to introduce air ambulances to reduce dependency on the Indian helicopters that are used during health emergencies.

It is noteworthy to mention here that the Maldives, as a strategically important country in the Indian Ocean, has been under the influence of several foreign countries including China, Saudi Arabia, India, the US, and so on. But Indian influence becomes an issue in Presidential elections because it is projected by the

¹¹ [“India Cannot Keep Looking After Our Affairs: Qasim”](#), *One Online*, 13 August 2023.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Mohamed Rehan, [“Nazim Announces 23 Pledges for First 30 Days of Presidency”](#), *The Edition*, 9 June 2023.

opposition as a close ally of the MDP. The rumour goes in the Maldives that India is funding the MDP campaign. According to some experts in the Maldives, the main reason Yameen is propagating the ‘India Out’ movement is the belief that India was responsible for his loss in the 2018 Presidential Elections.¹⁴

In June, though the opposition parties organised joint protests against the government over its stand on Mauritius’s sovereign rights over Chagos Island and the verdict of the ITLOS on the maritime boundary delimitation between Maldives and Mauritius, the issue is no longer an agenda in the elections campaign. The issue finds a mention only in the manifesto of Mohamed Nazim.

Main Contenders

Experience from the past suggests that in a multi-party contest, it is difficult for a candidate to cross the 50 per cent mark in the first round of elections unless there is a large coalition among parties pushing for a single candidate. In 2018, President Solih got more than 50 per cent votes in the first round because he was the common candidate of the opposition unity comprising of MDP, MRM, JP and AP. Moreover, there were only two contestants in the fray.

However, in the present case, the votes will be divided among eight candidates and it is unlikely that anyone of them will cross the 50 per cent mark in the first round. In such case, the second round will be conducted on 28 September, where the two forerunners in the first round will participate. In all probability, Solih and Muizzu will emerge as forerunners, even though both of them are likely to receive a lesser number of votes than their respective parties received in the previous elections as the traditional ‘support base of both MDP and PPM is fractured’.¹⁵

The pre-election split in the ruling party and the ruling coalition may affect Solih’s prospects in the elections. According to observers in Maldives, Solih no longer enjoys the same popular support as he did during the 2018 presidential elections owing to his failure to effectively address the issues of corruption, radicalisation and media. He has also been criticised for his role in suppressing political dissent, particularly the way he tried to criminalise the ‘India Out’ movement as well as for dealing with the issue of foreign debt ineffectively.

Dr Muizzu has his own problems too. He does not enjoy the same kind of popular support Abdulla Yameen does. Media reports suggested that Yameen was not fully supportive of Muizzu, although the PPM rejected the view.

¹⁴ Phone conversation with Maldivian Analyst, 26 August 2023. The analyst shared the views on the condition of anonymity.

¹⁵ Online Interview with Maldivian Analyst, 3 September 2023. The analyst shared the views on the condition of anonymity.

A comparison of the overall performance of the current MDP-led coalition government vis-à-vis that of the PPM-led coalition government during 2013–2018 would suggest that Ibrahim Solih may have an upper hand over Muizzu and attract larger number of popular votes. President Solih started campaigning for the elections early, and therefore may also have the first mover’s advantage. He has been able to reach out to more people across the country, compared to any other candidate, who started campaigning only after 7 August 2023, the final date for the submission of the nomination papers. Therefore, Solih is likely to poll the largest number of votes even if he may not get the magical number of more than 50 per cent of votes.

Uncertainty looms large as far as the second round of elections is concerned. Both in 2008 and 2013, the candidate who got the second highest votes in the first round emerged victorious in the second round with the support of other contestants who got excluded in the first round. Given the fragmented political scenario in the country on the eve of the Presidential elections, it is difficult to judge how the political parties and the independent candidates behave in the second round. So far, only the Democrats have expressed their willingness to go into the second round of the presidential election with Progressive Alliance.¹⁶ MNP is likely to support Muizzu. The stand of the JP and the three independent candidates is still not clear. In the past, JP did play the role of king-maker. Assessing the performance of the presidential hopefuls in the Presidential debate conducted by Sangu TV on 2 September, many in Maldives are expecting a crucial role of Faris in the final outcome and formation of the Government.

Even though the issue of sovereign rights of the Chagos Island is no longer an election issue, all the parties did come together earlier to protest against the Solih Government. Barring the Democrats, all the other Presidential candidates allege that Indian influence has grown in the Maldives under Solih’s watch. How far these foreign policy issues will influence the decision of the political parties in the second round to extend their support to one of the two forerunners is not yet clear. This uncertainty makes the elections interesting not only for the Maldivians but also for outside observers as well.

¹⁶ [**“Yameen Must Be Released Now, Will Join the Protest: Nasheed”**](#), *One Online*, 9 August 2023.

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