

MP-IDSA

Issue Brief

Attack on Mohamed Nasheed and Challenges Ahead for the Maldives

Gulbin Sultana

July 01, 2021

S*ummary*

The attack on Mohamed Nasheed has exposed Maldives' vulnerability to acts of terrorism. Developments following the attack point to the operational and political challenges for the government in tackling national security threats. The biggest test for President Solih is to overcome these challenges and address the concerns of the liberal Maldivians who doubt the government's ability to bring the perpetrators to justice.

The growing radicalism, violent extremism and terrorism in the Maldives is a matter of serious concern. While the Ibrahim Mohamed Solih administration has initiated institutional and legal reforms to tackle these national security threats since it came into power in 2018, the recent attack on the Speaker of *Majlis* and former President Mohamed Nasheed on 6 May 2021 in Male, has been an eye-opener and indicates that much more is required to be done.

The first recorded Islamist militant attack in the Maldives took place at Sultan Park in Male in September 2007. Ever since, the Maldives has been vulnerable to terrorism. In 2017, a plot to blow up an airplane was orchestrated by a Maldivian member of the Islamic State (IS) in Syria,¹ but the attempt was foiled by the local authorities working with “five biggest countries in the world.”² In April 2020 as well, the IS claimed responsibility for launching an attack and destroying seven vessels including a sea ambulance in Alifu Dhaalu Atoll on Mahibadhoo Island.³ The boats were destroyed using “incendiary bombs.”⁴

The 6 May terrorist attack was a remote-controlled explosion, in which an improvised explosive device (IED) was used, which caused life threatening injuries to Mohamed Nasheed. Several members of his security and some bystanders were also injured. Soon after the attack, it was confirmed by the police that it was a “deliberate act of terror” targeting Nasheed.⁵ According to the Chief of Defence Force, Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF), powdered razor was used in the attack, which is often used in homemade explosives,⁶ and is considered to be much more dangerous than the explosive used in the 2007 Sultan Park attack.

Attack by Radical Islamists?

Although no one has claimed responsibility for the 6 May attack, it is suspected that radical Islamists were behind the attack. Radicalisation began in the Maldives in late 1970s, and the political use of Islam over the years has further pushed the Maldivian society towards radicalism and violent extremism.

As per the reports, foreign-returned jihadis, who fought for the global terrorist groups in other countries, are freely preaching jihadi ideologies in the country. It has been observed that under the influence of social media too, several Maldivians got attracted to the ideology of global Islamist terrorist groups. The police revealed in

¹ Mohamed Junayd, “[About 1,400 Extremists ‘Willing to Kill’ in Maldives, An ISIS Bomb Plot was Foiled in 2017, the Police Chief Revealed](#)”, *Maldives Independent*, 17 December 2019.

² Ibid.

³ Alex Theodosiou, “[Islamic State Claim of Arson Attack on Government Property, Underlines Latent Threat in the Maldives](#)”, *Janes*, 28 April 2020.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See [Press Statement](#), Reference No. PMC/2021/07, *Maldives Police Service*, Republic of Maldives, 7 May 2021.

⁶ Lamya Abdulla, “[Explosion was Remote-controlled: MNDF](#)”, *The Edition*, 7 May 2021.

December 2019 that 423 Maldivians attempted to join the IS in Iraq and Syria, of which 173 managed to enter the war zone.⁷

It is worth mentioning that until 2019, there was no provision under the Prevention of Terrorism Act 1990 (PTA) to arrest those who returned after fighting for terrorist groups in foreign countries. In September 2019, the Solih government designated 17 terrorist organisations under the PTA.⁸ The amendments made to the Act in 2019 led to an arrest as well, yet many of those showing allegiance to the IS and other global jihadi groups are still roaming freely in the Maldives. The country is, therefore, extremely susceptible to terrorist attacks. Reportedly, on 20 April 2020, the IS in its *Voice of Hind* magazine called on the Maldivians to join jihad and launch extremist acts in the Maldives (and India).⁹

The radicalised elements in the Maldivian society have shown extreme intolerance for those holding secular and liberal ideas and consider them un-Islamic. As a result, several journalists and activists have lost their lives in the hands of violent extremists.¹⁰

Mohamed Nasheed too has been extremely vocal against the jihadi and radical elements in the Maldives, and is therefore considered un-Islamic and is heavily criticised by the radicals for his secular approach. Since no one has claimed responsibility for the 6 May attack, a definitive conclusion cannot be drawn whether it was an attack by the IS supporters or other local radical groups, or an assassination attempt by his political opponents, who perceive Nasheed as a potential threat to their political interests. It should be noted here that just a few hours before the attack, Nasheed revealed in the social media that he had obtained the full lists of people who benefitted from the misappropriation of fund from the state-owned tourism firm, the Maldives Marketing and Public Relations Corporation, during 2014-15. So far, five people have been arrested and around 200 people questioned in connection with this attack.

Government's Response

President Solih and his cabinet members condemned the attack in the strongest terms and expressed commitment to deal with the matter with utmost seriousness.¹¹

⁷ Mohamed Junayd, no. 1.

⁸ **"Country Reports on Terrorism 2019"**, Bureau of Counterterrorism, *US Department of State*, 24 June 2020.

⁹ **"Maldives: Extremism and Terrorism"**, *Counter Extremism Project*, 2021.

¹⁰ **"From Our Member Maldivian Democracy Network, the Maldives – Press Release: Maldives – Regarding the 6 May 2021 Terrorist Attack on the Speaker of Parliament, Former President Mohamed Nasheed"**, *Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development*, 13 May 2021.

¹¹ **"Emergency Cabinet Meeting Held after Explosion Leaves Speaker of Parliament Injured"**, Press Release, *The President's Office*, Republic of Maldives, 6 May 2021; and **"Cabinet condemns May 6**

The government has responded with immediate action, which includes taking prompt precautionary measures to ensure the safety and security of the people of the Maldives following the attack; bringing out changes in the Special Protection Group responsible for Mohamed Nasheed's security; and an instruction to the Attorney General to amend necessary laws to strengthen the security and protection provided to the Speaker of Parliament and the Chief Justice of the Maldives, including the designation of their official residences.¹²

While the police along with the MNDF has initiated countrywide counter-terrorism operations, the President has also sought help from the Australian Federal Police and the United Kingdom (UK) to assist the Maldivian police in the investigation.¹³ Abbas Faiz, the British human rights expert, has been appointed as a special envoy to monitor the investigation, prosecution, and trial of the alleged perpetrators, ensuring compliance with international best practices and national laws. The special envoy's oversight of the ongoing investigation will be conducted within the parameters set by the Prosecutor General.¹⁴

President Solih has also formed a four-member committee consisting of members of the President's Office and the Attorney General's Office to conduct an intelligence audit on the Maldives Police Service (MPS) and the MNDF with regard to the failure to detect the terrorist plot, and make necessary changes to prevent such an incident. The efforts of the committee are being supervised by the National Security Advisor's office.¹⁵

A parliamentary inquiry committee has also been set up to identify any security breach that led to the attack. The committee is summoning the state officials and ministers as well as members of parliament for the investigations.¹⁶ Further, the government has introduced a bill in the parliament to amend the Maldives Penal Code to criminalise hate speech and hate crimes.¹⁷

terror attack on Speaker of Parliament", Press Release, *The President's Office*, Republic of Maldives, 11 May 2021.

¹² **"Attorney General Instructed to Amend Laws to Strengthen Security Further and Designate Official Residences for the Speaker and Chief Justice"**, Press Release, *The President's Office*, Republic of Maldives, 11 May 2021.

¹³ **"Australian Federal Police to Aid Probe into Explosion that Wounded the Speaker, Says the President"**, Press Release, *The President's Office*, Republic of Maldives, 7 May 2021.

¹⁴ **"President Appoints Special Envoy to the Government of Maldives to Monitor the Investigation of the Terrorist Attack Against Speaker Nasheed"**, Press Release, *The President's Office*, Republic of Maldives, 19 May 2021.

¹⁵ **"Intelligence Audit Committee Holds Meeting to Discuss Expected Results"**, *PSM News*, 21 May 2021.

¹⁶ **"Senior Officials of MMA Summoned to Parliamentary Inquiry of May 6 Attack"**, *PSM News*, 17 June 2021.

¹⁷ Aishath Hanaan Hussain Rasheed, **"MP Hisaan Submits Bill Criminalizing Hate Crimes and Labelling of Persons as Non-Muslims"**, *Raajje TV*, 31 May 2021.

Challenges Ahead

President Solih and his administration seem to be committed to tackle the triple challenges of radicalism, violent extremism and terrorism. However, it is too early to assess the efficacy of the measures as the investigation is still going on and the process of bringing reforms in the system is in the early stages. At the same time, the issues confronting the government while responding to the terrorist attack make it amply clear that the road ahead will not be a smooth one.

Operational Challenges

After coming to power, the Solih administration initiated a “whole-of-government” and “whole-of-society” approach, and planned to formulate a national action plan to share information and intelligence on radical and extremist activities among the relevant stakeholder institutions by the end of 2020. However, no significant progress has been achieved in this regard. While the security forces, police, the concerned ministries, and policymakers are committed to addressing the issues of violent extremism and terrorism, there is an evident lack of coordination among them. The National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC), which is meant to facilitate and coordinate with these agencies, does not seem to be working too well as the interactions among these agencies are limited. Moreover, there is no single agency entrusted with the execution of the outcomes emanating from these interactions coordinated by the NCTC.

As per a media report, the Defence Minister had prior information of a plot to carry out an attack on Nasheed for a price of US\$ 3 million.¹⁸ The police, on the other hand, said that it did not have any prior information on a possible attack from the police intelligence.¹⁹ This clearly indicates a communication gap between the two security agencies.

Several other issues cropped up when the investigation on the 6 May attack was initiated and the individual security officials of the MNDF were summoned by the parliamentary investigation committee. In a press conference, the Chief of Defence Force, MNDF, Abdulla Shamaal, expressed his disappointment at the investigation team summoning the individual officers and breaking the “chain of command”.²⁰ He stated that individual officials are responsible to the Chief, and the Chief is responsible to the Defence Minister. It is, therefore, the Defence Minister who is answerable to the President and the Parliament.

¹⁸ Ali Faaiq, **“Umar Naseer Calls for Defence Minister Mariya’s Resignation”**, *The Times of Addu*, 14 May 2021.

¹⁹ Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development, no. 10.

²⁰ **“MNDF Issues Statement on the Inquiry by the Parliament’s 241 Committee”**, *Maldives News Network*, 3 June 2021.

Nasheed, who is in Germany for treatment, criticised the MNDF chief for expressing such concerns and in a message sent to his party, the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), implied that President Solih was behind MNDF's stand on parliamentary committee questioning the individual officers. He further criticised the Solih government for concealing information related to the attack and influencing the parliamentary investigation.²¹

Political Challenges

Nasheed raising doubt on President Solih, who is a friend and fellow party member, is a matter of concern, but not totally unexpected. Both the leaders have grown apart in the last few months on several issues of national concern. Nasheed has been disappointed with President Solih for not expediting the cases of assassination of journalists allegedly by the radical Islamist groups. Also, Nasheed is a strong supporter of the parliamentary system and expected President Solih to lead a discussion on changing the current presidential system to a parliamentary one. However, the coalition partners of the Solih government— Jumhooree Party (JP), Adhaalath Party (AP), and Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's Maldives Reform Movement (MRM)—are opposed to this idea. President Solih's stance on the matter is that the current system of governance had been chosen by Maldivian citizens and that it could only be changed by the will of the citizens.

As per a media report, President Solih said that he would like to concentrate on fulfilling the election vows rather than contemplating changing the governance system.²² Nasheed too had made a statement in the parliament in October 2020, that though he wanted to see the change in the governance system, the time is not apt to debate on the issue considering the COVID-19 challenges being faced by the country.²³ Nonetheless, on April 18, 2021, Nasheed sent a text message to President Solih and asked him to dissolve the government and cancel the presidential election due in 2023, and change the system into a parliamentary one. He also suggested bringing about the changes in February 2023, and allowing the parliament to run the country until the next parliamentary elections in 2024. In his message, he also communicated that he no longer wishes to be on the sidelines and expressed his desire to become Prime Minister.²⁴ President Solih, however, refused to take any decision on the same, and said that changes can be brought in only by the people's votes and that he is not contemplating conducting such an exercise at this point.²⁵

²¹ Fathmath Zunaam, **"Nasheed Accuses President Solih of Interfering with Parliamentary Inquiry"**, *The Times of Addu*, 7 June 2021.

²² **"No Time to Focus on Changing Governance System: President Solih"**, *Avas*, 24 June 2020.

²³ Ali Faaiq, **"Presidents Focus is to Fulfill Pledges, Not Changing Governing System: Mabrouq"**, *The Times of Addu*, 3 May 2021.

²⁴ **"Pres Solih Opposes Nasheed's Proposal to Switch to Parliamentary System"**, *Avas*, 19 April 2021.

²⁵ Ali Faaiq, **"Governing System Must be Changed by Referendum Vote: President Solih"**, *The Times of Addu*, 19 April 2021.

The differences between the two leaders led to a division within the party. Such intra-party differences can certainly emerge as a challenge in bringing reforms to address the issues of terrorism and violent extremism, even though the ruling party enjoys an absolute majority in the parliament.

Coalition partners can also emerge as a possible challenge; AP, known for its Islamic ideology, is one of the coalition partners of the Solih government, which has opposed the bill to amend the Maldives Penal Code. AP says that the “offences mentioned in the bill do not adhere to the international conditions required in deciding the offences that would lead to hatred.”²⁶ AP expressed its concerns that one of the rightful duties of Muslims, which is to call on to do right things and stop individuals from doing wrong things, would be considered a criminal offence in the Maldives, if the amendments to the Maldives Penal Code come in force.

Since democracy was introduced in the Maldives in 2008, differences among the coalition partners, as well as the split of Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) has caused instability in the country. All the political parties who had supported Mohamed Nasheed in the 2008 elections withdrew their support by 2012 and joined hands with the then opposition party to disempower Nasheed. After President Abdulla Yameen came into power, his party witnessed a split when his brother and former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom and his loyalists within the party withdrew their support. Subsequently, other coalition partners of the Yameen government too withdrew their support and joined hands with the MDP to defeat Yameen in the 2018 presidential election. With the support of three coalition partners (AP, JP and MRM), MDP candidate Ibrahim Mohamed Solih won the presidential election. However, all these parties did not form an electoral alliance for the 2019 parliamentary elections with the MDP. The MDP decided to contest alone and got 65 seats in the 87-member Parliament. MDP’s absolute majority in the parliament raised hope for political stability in the country after a long time.

However, the differences emerging within the MDP, is not a positive sign. As of now, the coalition partners have not raised any serious issues with President Solih, but there is a concern over ministers from the coalition partners having lost their cabinet seats, in the name of a good governance drive by the MDP in the parliament. The issues within the MDP or among the coalition partners do not point to any immediate threat to political stability in the country. Nonetheless, the political developments do suggest that the government is walking on a tightrope. Any uncalculated action has the potential to engender a serious political challenge that can divert the government’s attention from real issues of national concern.

²⁶ Mohamed Fathih Abdul Muhsin, [“Bill with Amendments to Criminalize Hate Crimes Opens for Public Opinion”](#), *The Times of Addu*, 17 June 2021.

Conclusion

The liberal Maldivians doubt that even after a high profile terrorist attack such as the one on 6 May, the Solih administration will be able to bring perpetrators to justice or implement any serious measure to address the issue of radicalism, violent extremism and terrorism, as there would be constant interference from the religious leaders, preachers, political parties, and people who are embedded with extremist ideologies.²⁷ If Solih fails to take any punitive action against the perpetrators of such a heinous crime, he will have to face the wrath of many within his party. A section within the MDP is already questioning President Solih's leadership role following the party's defeat in the Male local council elections in April this year. These are testing times for President Solih and it is to see how he overcomes the challenges.

²⁷ Zaheena Rasheed and Ahmed Naish, [“Who tried to kill Maldives’ ex-president Mohamed Nasheed?”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 8 May 2021.

About the Authors



Dr Gulbin Sultana is a Research Analyst at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses is a non-partisan, autonomous body dedicated to objective research and policy relevant studies on all aspects of defence and security. Its mission is to promote national and international security through the generation and dissemination of knowledge on defence and security-related issues.

Disclaimer: Views expressed in Manohar Parrikar IDSA's publications and on its website are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or the Government of India.

© Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) 2021