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Issue Brief

Attack on Nasheed and the Rising Tide of Radicalisation in the Maldives

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S*ummary*

The attack on former Maldivian president and current parliamentary speaker Mohammad Nasheed on May 6, 2021 has led to speculation that the assassination bid was planned either by Islamist extremists or his political opponents. The Brief examines key aspects of the country's tenuous social and political fabric and situates the problem of radicalisation in a historical as well as the contemporary context. In closing, it proposes a few measures India may consider taking to help Maldives strengthen its political stability and security.

At 8:39 pm on May 6, 2021, just before the COVID night-time curfew was to come into effect in Male, an IED blast struck the former President of Maldives and current Speaker of the Majlis (parliament), Mohammad Nasheed. The explosion also injured four other people accompanying him, including a British national. Reports noted that the home-made explosive device, packed with ball bearings to cause maximum damage, was planted on a motorbike parked near Nasheed's car.¹

In the initial hours after the attack, the 53-year-old Nasheed was in a 'critical condition' and underwent multiple surgeries to his head, chest, abdomen and limbs.² Thankfully, Anni, as he is affectionately called, recovered quickly and has now been flown to Germany for further treatment. In a tweet, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar wished him a speedy recovery and said that Nasheed can "never be intimidated."³

Political Rivals, ISIS, or Islamists?

The Maldivian police termed the attack a "deliberate act of terror", although no terrorist group has so far taken responsibility. The fact that the bombing was carried out during Ramadan points to the fact that only a terrorist group like ISIS could have justified such a dastardly act in the holy month. Many experts question whether ISIS would have resorted to a crude home-made device knowing it might botch up the assassination of a prominent leader.

Therefore, the finger of suspicion has moved to other Islamist groups within the country and even to Nasheed's political opponents. Maldivian authorities are being currently helped by Australian police investigators in this regard.⁴ So far, the police have held three out of the "four people of interest" it said showed "suspicious behaviour at the crime scene".⁵ The fourth suspect was still at large.

Just hours before the attack, Nasheed had announced on Twitter that he had obtained a list of all the people who benefited from the embezzlement of the state-owned tourism firm, the Maldives Marketing and Public Relations Corporation (MMPRC), in the period between 2014 and 2015. That scandal is said to have contributed to the defeat of former Islamist President, Abdullah Yameen, in 2018 and the victory of Nasheed's close ally and childhood friend - the current president Ibrahim Mohamed Solih.⁶

¹ ['Maldives ex-President Mohamed Nasheed "critical" after bomb blast'](#), *AlJazeera*, May 7, 2021.

² Rebecca Ratcliffe, ['Former Maldives President Critically Injured in Bomb Blast'](#), *The Guardian*, May 7, 2021.

³ ['Jaishankar expresses concerns over attack on Maldivian ex-president Nasheed, wishes him speedy recovery'](#), ANI, May 6, 2021.

⁴ Mohammad Sharuhaan, ['Australian Federal Police to Investigate Bombing that Hurt ex-Maldives Leader and Attacked Democracy'](#), May 7, 2021.

⁵ ['Two Held in Connection with Terror Attack on Former Maldives President Nasheed'](#), ANI, May 8, 2021.

⁶ Zaheena Rasheed and Ahmad Naish, ['Who Tried to Kill Maldives Ex-President Mohammad Nasheed?'](#), *AlJazeera*, May 8, 2021.

‘The most loved and loathed’

Mohammad Nasheed was described by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion, Ahmad Shaheen, as the most “loved and loathed man in his country”.⁷ The main spearhead of Maldives’ democratic transition, he has for many years received harsh criticism and threats from Islamists who see him as an apostate agent of the West.

In the 1990s, when Maldives was ruled by then President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, Nasheed was arrested more than twenty times for his protests and scathing publications against repressive government policies, be it over fraud in elections or over rampant corruption. In 2003, he played a key role in a civil unrest by requesting an autopsy on murdered teenage prisoner, Hassan Evan Naseem.⁸

Eventually, he won the country’s first multi-party elections in 2008, when he defeated his arch foe Gayoom, who had ruled the country for nearly three decades. But Nasheed had a very difficult time as president as he faced a hostile opposition from members of the Majlis that prevented him from implementing much needed reforms. In fact, the opposition carried out huge demonstrations against Nasheed’s ruling Maldives Democratic Party (MDP), which led the army to later side with the opposition, forcing Nasheed to resign in February 2012.⁹

In 2015, Nasheed was sentenced to 13 years in prison under a anti-terrorism act.¹⁰ Facing a serious medical condition thereafter, he was permitted to leave the country for treatment to the United Kingdom in 2016, where he was later granted political asylum.¹¹ In 2018, when the then President Mohammad Yameen declared a state of emergency, a wave of public support forced elections and Nasheed’s childhood friend, Solih, became the president.¹² Thereafter, the Supreme Court overturned Nasheed’s sentence and he returned to Maldives and became the Speaker of its Majlis.¹³

Catchment Area for Terror Recruiters

It was during Nasheed’s successor, Abdullah Yameen’s term from 2013-18, that radical Islamists became highly active in Maldives. Several liberal bloggers were attacked. Ahmad Rilwan was abducted by Al-Qaeda affiliates in 2014 and has been

⁷ [‘Who Tried to Kill Mohammad Nasheed’](#), Crime India News, May 8, 2021.

⁸ [‘Who is Mohammad Nasheed’](#), *India Today*, March 5, 2013.

⁹ [‘Maldives President Mohammad Nasheed Resigns Amid Unrest’](#), *BBC*, February 7, 2012.

¹⁰ Jason Burke and Zaheena Rasheed, [‘Former Maldives President Mohammad Nasheed Jailed for 13 Years’](#), *The Guardian*, March 14, 2015.

¹¹ [‘Maldives to let Jailed Ex-President go to Britain for Surgery’](#), *The New York Times*, March 14, 2015.

¹² Meera Srinivasan, [‘Maldives President Declares Emergency, Former Leader Arrested’](#), *The Hindu*, February 5, 2018; [‘Maldives Challenger Ibrahim Mohammad Solih Wins Presidency’](#), *AlJazeera*, September 24, 2018.

¹³ [‘New Majlis Gets to Work with Nasheed as Speaker’](#), *Maldives Independent*, May 29, 2019.

missing since. Another liberal blogger, Yameen Rasheed, was killed in his home in 2017.¹⁴

It was also in this period that at least 170 Maldivian youth (as per official figures) left for Syria to join ISIS and Jabhat ul-Nusra, while over 400 attempted to leave the shores.¹⁵ Nasheed says that up to 300 radicals from Maldives may have successfully travelled to Syria, although he does not rule out some international reports that put the figure at 1,000.¹⁶ Nasheed points out that his country has the highest per capita numbers in terms of ISIS radicals in the world, He even charged that many hardcore Salafis are embedded within the Maldivian security forces in key strategic positions, as well as in other departments like customs and immigration.¹⁷

Maldives has itself witnessed several terror-related attacks in recent years. On April 17, 2020, ISIS took responsibility for the huge blast at the Mahibadhoo border. Five bombs destroyed a sea ambulance, four speed boats and two dinghies.¹⁸ Thereafter, ISIS called on its supporters to carry more such attacks in India and Maldives in its e-magazine, *Voice of Hind*.¹⁹

Then on February 4 last year, three foreign nationals — two Chinese and one Australian, were stabbed and injured by Islamist militants near the Hulhumale Redbull Park Futsal Ground in the country's North Male Atoll. The hitherto unknown extremist media outlet, al-Mustaqim, released a video message the next day warning that “from now on, the only thing foreign travelers will taste in the Maldives is fire”. The language and style of the message was ISIS-like, even though the terror group did not officially claim responsibility for the attack.

Earlier in late 2015, Malaysian police raised an alarm that two Maldivian youths were planning attacks on the US and Israeli consulates in Chennai and Bengaluru.²⁰ A huge public demonstration was carried out by 300 ISIS supporters in Male in 2014, where the marchers brazenly held ISIS black flags and chanted slogans against democracy and the West.²¹

But the biggest terrorist incident remains the 2007 IED explosion, in which 12 foreign tourists, including eight Chinese, two British and two Japanese were seriously injured in Sultan Park in Male. Three Maldivian nationals — Mohammad Sobah (19), Mohammad Anas (21) and Ahmad Anees (20), were apprehended. It is believed, however, that 10 masterminds of the attack had already left for Pakistan a

¹⁴ [‘Maldives Journalist Ahmad Rilwan Abdullah killed by Al-Qaeda Group in 2014, Commission Finds’](#), Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), September 3, 2019.

¹⁵ Antonia Gough, [‘The Maldives: An Unlikely ISIS Haven’](#), *Global Risk Insights*, March 22, 2021.

¹⁶ Nasheed in an Interview to Al Jazeera documentary, [‘Maldives: Trouble in Paradise’](#), YouTube, October 31, 2019.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ [‘Maldives: Islamic State Claims Responsibility for April 15 arson Attack in Mahibadhoo \(Southern Ari Atoll\)’](#), *Garda World*, April 17, 2020.

¹⁹ [‘Maldives: Extremism and Terrorism’](#), Counter Extremism Project, May 2021.

²⁰ [‘US Consulate Terror Plot: India to seek info from Malaysia’](#), *Zee News*, May 18, 2014.

²¹ Gough, [‘The Maldives: An Unlikely ISIS Haven’](#).

day before the blast.²² Only two of the three arrested suspects received short prison sentences and were released by 2010.

Maldives makes an attractive catchment area for Arab terrorist groups for other reasons as well. The fact that the archipelago is one of the most geographically dispersed island-state in the world makes it easier for terrorist operatives to radicalise, recruit and smuggle men from remote islands without drawing the attention of the small-sized and overstretched Maldivian security agencies. Young fishermen who lead a life of hard labour also make tough fighters and are easy prey for terrorists to beguile, recruit and train.

There have been many incidents of Maldivian security forces clashing with terrorists in the remote islands. For instance, in 2007, when security forces were conducting investigative raids in Himandhoo after the Sultan Park attacks in Male, they clashed with jihadists.²³ Some of these jihadists were indoctrinated by elements belonging to Pak-based groups like the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT). People were prohibited from performing prayers in the government-built mosques on the islands, on the charge that they were built from the adultery and booze-tainted 'haraam' money of foreign tourists and were forced to instead hold prayers in the radicals' makeshift mosques.²⁴

Absence of Religious Freedom

These incidents present a picture of Maldives which is not consistent with the peaceful and idyllic images splashed on the archipelago's tourism brochures. One of the causes of extremism is the presence of only one community — Sunni Muslims, throughout the country, and the complete absence of any other religion to temper the predominant theological and socio-cultural outlook.

Even the revised constitution of 2008 firmly establishes that the country belongs solely to Muslims and bars non-Muslims from citizenship.²⁵ Only a Sunni Muslim can be the president and in case a Muslim citizen were to abjure his or her faith (even a child of the age of seven years and above), a law passed in 2014 states that the person or child should not only be stripped of their citizenship but also receive the death penalty for apostasy.²⁶

In addition, Maldives follows the more stringent Shafi'iya school of Islamic jurisprudence, which does not allow 'istishan' (i.e., discretion of scholars) in Islamic rulings.²⁷ This is unlike the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence that is more

²² Ajay Makan, '[Bomb Blast Wounds 12 Tourists in Maldives Capital](#)', *Reuters*, September 29, 2007.

²³ Randeep Ramesh, '[50 Held in Maldives Mosque Siege](#)', *The Guardian*, October 9, 2017.

²⁴ [Maldives: Extremism and Terrorism](#), Counter Extremism Project.

²⁵ Attorney General's Office (Maldives), '[Constitution of the Republic of Maldives](#)'.

²⁶ '[Maldives enacts Regulation for Death Penalty](#)', AlJazeera, April 30, 2014.

²⁷ Wael B. Hallaq, 'Shari'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations', Cambridge University Press, 2009, ISBN 978-0521861472, pp. 58-71

prevalent in India. Thus, Maldives finds itself more under the theological sway of African centres of Islam like Egypt, Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea and even Yemen than on the Hanafi centres of Islamic theology, particularly in north India.²⁸

The Shafi'i, as well as Salafi-Wahhabi linkage to East African and West Asian orientation, is even found in South Indian states, from where many Muslim youth migrated to Syria to join ISIS in recent years. However, more Maldivian youth joined ISIS as militants, than their relatively less strident Indian counterparts.

Radical-Criminal Nexus

The problem of radicalisation is not limited to the remote islands. In fact, it is far more acute in the narrow, overcrowded streets of Maldives' cities. For instance, Male is not just the centre of the country's politics and governance but also the main hub for its commerce, modern education and healthcare. As tourism boomed and became the mainstay of the Maldivian economy in the 1970s, better healthcare led to a rise in the country's population.

Over the decades, there has been a surging exodus of people from remote islands to Male in search of better employment, healthcare and education. Not surprisingly, the capital city that had a population of 20,000 in 1987, today squeezes in over 2.5 lakh people within a six to seven square kilometer area.²⁹ Having left its traditional seaside moorings, this migrant population finds itself stuck in congested neighborhoods, far from the open seaside areas in their places of origin.

In addition, reports note that Male is divided and controlled by many street gangs (about 30 in Male itself), whose members also work as religious and political vigilantes. Many of these gangs are involved in radical activities and drug abuse. A recent UNDP study estimated that up to 40 percent of Maldivian youth were using hard drugs.³⁰ Naturally, the drug peddlers in the gangs have deeply penetrated the social and administrative structures of the country.

Being prone to physical violence, many gangsters get easily radicalised by extremist elements and they often migrate in teams to foreign war theatres.³¹ They get trained and work together as exclusive fighting units for terrorist forces like ISIS. Currently, many of these radicalised gangsters have quietly returned to Maldives after the defeat of ISIS in Syria. Their ideological malaise, however, festers Male's dingy streets. When modern education and democracy fail to deliver the high expectations of an aspirational generation, then it becomes difficult for the youth to

²⁸ [Abu Abd Allah ash Shafi'i, Biography](#), Britannica.

²⁹ ['Introduction to Male'](#), Capital Male City Tour Guides; Resident population 2020 estimate; ["Population Projection 2014-2054"](#), *Statistics Maldives*, National Bureau of Statistics.

³⁰ Matt Mulberry, ['The Maldives: From Dictatorship to Democracy, and Back'](#), July 2012.

³¹ ['The Maldives' Foreign Fighters Phenomena: Theories and Perspectives'](#), *European Foundation for South Asian Studies*, April 20, 2020.

adopt liberal ideals or even revert to their earlier, traditional way of life. They are in fact more prone to adopt a criminal or a radical religious or political path.

Roots of Radicalisation

It can be argued that radicalisation in the country is a recent phenomenon and did not exist when the country first embraced Islam in the 12th century. It should be noted that historians like Clarence Maloney claim that the last Buddhist king of Maldives, Dhovemi converted to Islam in 1153 mainly to win favours of Arab seafaring traders of the times.³² He assumed the title Sultan and his dynasty ruled in a semi-Islamic manner until 1932, when a presidential system started to gradually emerge. According to Maloney, Islam in Maldives until that time was only part of the cultural substratum, limited to ‘mumbling incomprehensible Arabic supplications, ritual ablutions and fasting’.

Maldives had three Sultanates as its rulers in its medieval history, with its matriarchal society perhaps contributing to this. It was only from the 16th century onwards that Islam started to be observed a little more strictly, in response to the colonisation of the Portugese and the revolt led against them by Muhammad Thakurufannu from 1558-1573. It was now that the country changed its traditionalist Maliki school of Islamic jurisprudence to the Shafi'i code.³³

Thakurufannu was the first to instruct the Maldivian psyche that the calamity of the Portugese occupation was the result of laxity in the Maldivian mind to the principles of Islam. This was the same argument reportedly used by Saudi relief workers who arrived on Maldives' shores in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami to radicalise the impressionable Maldivian population in the name of providing them economic relief.

However, researchers on radicalisation in Maldives, like Hasan Amir, aver that the real architect of the Islamisation of Maldivian society and polity is the former president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who ruled the country as president from 1978-2008.³⁴ Having received education in Egypt's famed Al Azhar University and in other Islamic centres of East Africa, Gayoom was part of the 1968 cabinet of Ibrahim Nasir. On account of his Islamist objection to the opening up of the beaches to so-called nudist Westerners on Maldivian resorts, he was exiled by the then government in 1973. However, he later returned and even became the Transport Minister under President Ibrahim Nasir, until he himself assumed the high office in 1978.

³² Clarence Maloney, 'The Maldives: New Stresses in an Old Nation', *Asian Survey*, 16 (7), 1976, pp. 654-71.

³³ P. K. Balachandran, '[Understanding the Hold of Islam on Maldivian Society and Politics](#)', *Counterpoint*, May 11, 2021.

³⁴ Hasan Amir, '[Islamism and Radicalism in the Maldives](#)', Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, 2011.

Up until that time, the country was ruled by autocrats who had kept the clergy away from political power. Filled with the Islamist idealism of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, Gayoom is charged by his critics of becoming both the political autocrat as well as the country's supreme religious authority. He is the leader who restricted Maldivian citizenship to Muslims and even introduced the death penalty for apostasy.³⁵

Gayoom also established several Islamic educational centres with Saudi money staffed with Pakistani theologians in the 1980s and 1990s, mainly the Dhiraasaathul Islamiyya and Islamic Studies Institution. He used to personally deliver Eid and Friday sermons in mosques, and spoke on radio and TV on both political and theological issues. Any scholar at variance with Gayoom's religious views was either dubbed a deviant or an extremist and no event holding any contrarian views was given permission to convene.

In fact, Gayoom became the supreme authority on Islam in the country and called his religious outlook 'moderate and tolerant'.³⁶ This line of so-called Islamic moderation was meant to please both the Western world as well as Muslim countries. Under its cover, however, Gayoom is charged with carrying out repressive policies that quelled all forms of dissent in his country and all voices calling for a multi-party polity. Once multi-party democracy was established in 2005, many of the repressed Islamist forces such as the Adaalat party and liberal parties like the MDP were unleashed on to the Maldivian political scene. Thus, the Islamisation of Maldivian society, which eventually skewed its polity as we see it, is mainly the work of the Gayoom presidency.

India's Choices

Democracy remains in a fledgling state in the Maldives and the presidency of Ibrahim Solih may face uncertain times ahead, given the impact of the pandemic on healthcare and tourism and the rising tide of radicalisation. Factors like the Israel-Palestine conflict and the unconditional withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan by September 2021 add to the heady mix. Nasheed's assassination attempt shows that Islamist wolves have already started baying at the gates.

At this time, it might be wise for India to not only continue supporting Nasheed's ruling Maldivian Democratic Party, but also reach out to the democratically viable opposition parties that may restrict the malefic expansionism of China, Pakistan and other radical forces in and around that country. In this regard, the influence of Saudi Arabia and Gulf states, now India's close friends in the region, can be called upon to ensure peace and security in the country.

³⁵ Siddharthj Roy, ['The New Kid on the Islamist Block'](#), *The Diplomat* March 4, 2019.

³⁶ Amir, ['Islamism and Radicalism in the Maldives'](#).

Young people from countries with small population develop identity crises and they tend to look to migrate and become part of global causes (righteous or evil) in order to lead a life of significance. It is not surprising then that small states like the UAE and Qatar either build tall buildings like Burj Khalifa or host major events like the FIFA World Cup. This is undertaken to put their countries on the world map figuratively and enhance a sense of national pride that prevents their youth to look for fantastical identities outside their homes, cities and country.

India could help Maldives in hosting major international events or even help undertake unique architectural or landscape projects that might develop Maldives' profile on the international level. India's developed film industries in the southern states and in Bollywood as well as its sports leagues could promote Maldivian artistes and sportsmen. These initiatives could create celebrities and positive role models for that country's youth to look up to.

Invitations to Maldivian Heads of State to major national events in India could also develop recognition and respect among Maldivians for their elected leaderships. Such measures could help Maldivians to divert their attention away from the negative influence of radical forces according false glory to their dubious causes, as well as to look up to India as a friend that wishes well for Maldives.

Greater cooperation in counter-terrorism and intelligence sharing, exchange of luminaries from the fields of religion to culture etc., and other similar steps could help India prevent Maldives from sliding into the morass of violent extremism and socio-political turmoil.

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