

# An Unholy Alliance of Politics and Radical Islam in Maldives

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*According to the US Department of State's Country Report on Terrorism 2014, the Maldives is one of the countries from which increasing numbers of fighters are leaving to join terrorist organisations, including al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). According to the report, 200 Maldivians had travelled to Syria or Iraq in 2014 and at least 6 had been killed in action.<sup>1</sup> As of now, no known organised local terrorist group exists in the Maldives.<sup>2</sup> But several radical groups within the country are successfully propagating a radical form of Islam. The government's inadequate action on the radical groups makes the Indian Ocean archipelago a fertile ground for recruitment by foreign jihadi groups.*

*The paper argues that though some Maldivians are joining global terrorist organisations like al-Qaeda or the ISIS, the process of radicalisation was initiated not to garner support for the aspiration to re-establish a caliphate but to consolidate a base in the society to get the mass support to overthrow the incumbent regime. But in the process, the society got so radicalised that the global jihadists found it a fertile ground for recruitment as the radicalised Maldivian youths are increasingly getting attracted to the idea of transnational jihad.*

*To verify this hypothesis, the paper aims to investigate and analyse the use of radical Islam by the political parties in the Maldives to gain political power.*

Maldivian links with foreign jihadi groups first came to public knowledge in early parts of the twenty-first century, when Ibrahim Fauzee, a Maldivian cleric, was arrested in May 2002 in Karachi and subsequently held in the

Guantanamo Bay detention camp. He was released and repatriated to the Maldives in March 2005.<sup>3</sup> Posters of Osama bin Laden on walls in some parts of Maldives suggested that indoctrination and recruitment were carried on secretly by al-Qaeda.<sup>4</sup> It was reported that after the 2004 tsunami, the Idara Khidmat-e-Khalq (IKK), which is affiliated with the Pakistan-based Jammāt ud Dawa/Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), spearheaded LeT's activities in the Maldives in the name of tsunami assistance in the country.<sup>5</sup>

In April 2005, Indian police arrested Maldivian national Asif Ibrahim, a member of the UK-based extremist Islamic group Jama'at-ul-Muslimeen, who allegedly visited Kerala to procure arms and ammunition for LeT's Maldives operations.<sup>6</sup> Ibrahim confessed to planning an attack on a government-run mosque and assassinate the then president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. A Maldivian radical Islamist was also reported to have been part of the 2008 terrorist attack on Mumbai.<sup>7</sup> Nine alleged Maldivian terrorists were arrested in Pakistan's South Waziristan tribal region in March 2009.<sup>8</sup> They were repatriated to the Maldives in 2010. An al-Qaeda video circulated in November 2009 featured Ali Jaleel, a Maldivian national who fought for the Taliban forces in Pakistan.<sup>9</sup> In late 2013, Indian intelligence got information that eight Maldivians were called to join a Mumbai-like attack on another Indian city.<sup>10</sup> Currently, there are instances of Maldivians fighting for the ISIS in Syria. This was confirmed by the news of the deaths of two Maldivians in Syria while fighting for the ISIS. According to the Maldivian media, at least 13 Maldivians left for the Middle East in early January 2015 to fight for the ISIS.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, though there is no known local terrorist group that exists within Maldives, many Maldivians are being recruited by foreign jihadi groups as they find the archipelago very fertile for recruitment since society is becoming increasingly radicalised. Traditionally, Maldivians belonged to the Shafi School of Sunni Islam. But over a period, the country is gradually becoming Wahhabised and many of the Maldivians are adopting a Salafi-jihadi ideology.<sup>12</sup> Even though education imparted in schools of Maldives was mostly religious in nature after independence, Maldivians practised a tolerant version of Islam. However, Islamists from other parts of the world tried to influence the 100% Muslim society to adopt their ideology. Therefore, religious educational facilities were

provided to the Maldivian students in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and other Middle Eastern countries.<sup>13</sup> These resulted in a wave of foreign-educated religious scholars who allegedly tried to propagate radical Islam in Maldives. Several non-governmental religious groups, such as Jamiyyatul Salaf (JS) and the Islamic Foundation of the Maldives (IFM), and the radical political party Adaalath Party (AP) were formed by foreign-educated people to propagate an ultraconservative strain of Islam. Radical groups like JS, the IFM and the AP are propagating ultraconservative Islam by supporting Islamising education, banning music and also conducting moral policing. These groups have been demanding the strict implementation of sharia in all parts of the Maldives. They hold conservative views on gender issues. The AP has banned visits to Sufi tombs and shrines (which hard-line Islamists consider to be un-Islamic).<sup>14</sup> The AP supports reinstating a ban on public visits to the tomb of Abu Barakat Berberi, who introduced Islam to the Maldives. Influence of an extreme ideology can also be seen on the present-day attire of Maldivian men and women.

However, it should be noted that these groups were formed after the Maldives became a multiparty democracy in 2008, whereas instances of religious intolerance, extremism and fundamentalism had been reported much prior to that.

## **POLITICISATION OF ISLAM**

Maumoon Abdul Gayoom has been accused of having brought Islamic fundamentalism into the country. During the 1970s, Gayoom, who was a teacher then, called the government of President Ibrahim Nasir un-Islamic and challenged his authority.<sup>15</sup> As a consequence of challenging the president, Gayoom was banished to an island.<sup>16</sup> With the turn of the tide, Gayoom succeeded in overthrowing Nasir and he ruled the Maldives for 30 years. Gayoom used 'Islam as a tool of governance' during his 30-year rule. In 1994, the Protection of Religious Unity Act was passed, which restricted the freedom to practice any other religion than Islam.<sup>17</sup> Non-Muslims are forbidden from conducting public worship in the Maldives by adopting the new constitution. Numerous Christians were

imprisoned in June 1998 on religious grounds and held captive at the prison on Dhoonidhoo Island.<sup>18</sup> That same year, the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs barred Maldivians from listening to Christian missionary radio.<sup>19</sup> In 2005, Islamists attacked a shop in Male for displaying images of Santa Claus.<sup>20</sup> In 1996, Gayoom constituted the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, charged with overseeing religious affairs in the country. Under the influence of the council, the government encouraged moral and cultural policing of alleged 'anti-Islamic activities'.<sup>21</sup> In December 1998, the country's Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs appealed to the National Police Service to impose a ban on nightclubs on the eve of New Year celebrations. The government also prevents the import of non-Muslim books and other religious items.<sup>22</sup>

While on the one hand, Gayoom was propagating conservative Islam, he pushed for the Maldivian economy to be based on 'luxury tourism'.<sup>23</sup> However, income distribution was not equal; there was inconsistency between those who profited from the tourism industry and the employees who worked in this industry. Decades of political and economic repression under Gayoom had driven people to mobilise against him. Alienated sections of the population began forming radical groups that were more militant, secretive and ideologically rigid to oppose Gayoom.<sup>24</sup> The tourism industry in which Gayoom himself had a huge stake was criticised for practicing un-Islamic activities. In fact, the Gayoom administration was considered un-Islamic. Opponents of Gayoom, particularly the extremists, established a separate mosque for worshipping, rejecting the communal island mosque built by the government. The Dar-ul Khair mosque on the Island of Himandhoo had served as a major source for the propagation of conservative Islam.<sup>25</sup>

But Gayoom took immediate steps to nip them in the bud. By enacting a new constitution in 1997, Gayoom became the ultimate authority to impart the tenets of Islam. He took this step to keep the country away from the radical influence. Authorities in Male ordered demolition of the Dar-ul-Khair mosque in October 2006.<sup>26</sup> Himandhoo residents rebuilt the mosque and started disseminating Islamist ideology. Gayoom's religious authority was challenged by the Maldivian Islamic revivalist scholars educated in Pakistan.<sup>27</sup>

After the 2007 bomb blast, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom brutally cracked down on the practice of fundamentalist Islam. Involvement of members of the Dar-ul-Khair mosque was suspected in the Sultan Park bomb blast. Security forces were ordered to carry out a search-and-sweep operation in the mosques. This resulted in a violent confrontation between members of the Dar-ul-Khair mosque and security forces. The Maldivian police and the Maldives National Defense Force (MNDF), however, successfully put down the violent uprising. Many of the Islamists were tortured in the prison. President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom banned the full veil and foreign Islamic preachers. He ordered the strict implementation of the Religious Unity Act, which permits prayer only in government mosques.<sup>28</sup> Gayoom's heavy-handedness on the Islamists was severely criticised as it was seen as a violation of people's rights to free speech.

When the multiparty democracy was introduced in 2008, several political parties came together to defeat Gayoom. Mohamed Nasheed came to power by defeating Maumoon Abdul Gayoom in 2008 presidential elections with the backing of a coalition of parties, including the Jumhooree Party (JP), the Dhivehi Quamee Party (DQP) and the AP.

When Nasheed came to power in 2008, he was determined to end torture in the jails and promote freedom of expression for all. Radical Islamists made full use of the democracy and the multiparty politics.<sup>29</sup> Nasheed, though not an Islamist, joined hands with the radicals like AP to win the election. On the other hand, the AP thought that by allying with Nasheed it will be able to influence the government's policy through Islamic ministry.

Under the influence of the AP, Nasheed replaced the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs with the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, and most of the members of staff at the ministry were the members of the AP. As a result, all Islamic discourse was officially handled by the radical elements in the Maldives. In November 2009, a bill was proposed by an independent MP on outlawing places of worship for non-Muslims. A bill was also submitted in the parliament to ban the sale of alcohol on inhabited islands, airports and uninhabited islands, excluding tourist resorts.<sup>30</sup> In December 2009, Holiday Inn's head office building in Male, which applied

for a permit to sell alcohol, was vandalised. During November 2009, a music concert, part of Eid celebrations, was halted. Even though Nasheed's Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) government had ignored calls from extremists to shut down the country's luxury tourist resorts that serve alcohol and pork and facilitate 'pleasure tourism', his original agenda to maintain a distance between religion and politics failed completely.

Nasheed's emphasis on the promotion of secular democracy and AP's determination to make Maldives a pure Islamic country led to a rift between the MDP and the AP. The AP severed its ties with the MDP in 2011 and mobilised other parties to throw Nasheed out. It portrayed Nasheed as 'an enemy of Islam' and initiated the 'Defend Islam Campaign'. In February 2012, the JP, DQP and the AP joined Gayoom's newly established Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) to throw Nasheed out of power.<sup>31</sup>

Nasheed finally was thrown out by a 'constitutional coup' and his vice president, Mohammed Waheed Hassan, became the president. Mohammed Waheed was seen as more favourable to radical Islamist ideas, allowing the radicals to freely advocate their beliefs.<sup>32</sup>

According to the Department of State report, there were increasing reports of abuses of religious freedom, religious intolerance, and governmental restriction of religious freedom and pressure to conform to a stricter interpretation of Islamic practice under Mohamed Waheed.<sup>33</sup> There was an increasing use of religion in political rhetoric, which led to derogatory statements about other religions and harassment of citizens calling for a more tolerant interpretation of Islam.<sup>34</sup>

Abdulla Yameen, half-brother of the former president Maumoon Gayoom, won the election in 2013 with the support of the JP, the Maldives Development Alliance (MDA) and the AP. Former president Gayoom during his tenure took strong action against the radicals, but his brother formed an alliance with parties like the AP, that share the ideology with the radicals. During the first year of his presidency, Yameen did not do much to curb the reported radical activities in the country. The Maldivian parliament (Majlis) passed a new penal code in April 2014 to improve the government's ability to prosecute individuals for recruiting, financing or otherwise supporting terrorism. However, no concrete step was taken to enforce the penal code. It is only after the May Day protest that the government has raised its voice against radical and terrorist activities.

It should be noted that the Gayoom-Yameen duo did not see the radical parties as a political threat in the first year of Yameen's presidency. In the Parliamentary election, the AP won only one seat. However, it was concerned about Nasheed and had apparently been looking for an opportunity to remove him from the political scene altogether. After the JP left the government coalition and joined Nasheed, his chances of making a successful run in the next presidential elections increased. This made the parties that opposed Nasheed's government pass a motion in the parliament to set up a committee to investigate allegations of illegal conduct on Nasheed's part, in particular, the possession of containers of alcohol at his residence and the arrest of Abdulla Mohamed, an allegedly corrupt Maldivian judge.<sup>35</sup> The judge's arrest was re-cast as a terrorist 'abduction'. In less than three weeks, Nasheed was arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced.<sup>36</sup>

Following the arrest of Mohamed Nasheed, the MDP and the JP organised a protest movement. The AP was initially hesitant to join the protest against the government, but finally joined the May Day protest. The AP joining the opposition made the government change its attitude towards the radicals.

Following the May Day protest, the government has started taking strong action against the radicals. The government is calling the May Day protest an act of radicals. Reportedly, an information brief from the Maldivian mission in Geneva on 1 May claimed that the organisers of the protest had 'mobilised people known to have radical connections in the Middle East and elsewhere, and paid for their travel to Male and join the demonstration with the explicit purpose of creating violence.' 'The police have intelligence that some of the hardcore radicals Sheikh Imran has paid for, were activists who took part in the incident on the island of Himandhoo in 2007,' read the brief.<sup>37</sup> Ambassador-at-large at the ministry of foreign affairs Mohamed Naseer has also told Sri Lankan media that the May Day protestors had attempted to promote Islamic radicalism through the protest march.<sup>38</sup>

The government has thrown out three religious scholars of the AP from the Fiqh Academy.<sup>39</sup> The Maldivian government has also become active and taken action against terrorists fighting in foreign countries. Maldivian law does not permit restrictions on travel of would-be foreign terrorist fighters or detention of those who have been turned back on

suspicion they were headed to a war zone.<sup>40</sup> As a result, the Maldivian police did not arrest any Maldivians who were returned to the country on suspicion they intended to fight in Syria or Iraq. Following the May Day protest, the government has drafted a new terrorism law that criminalises participation in foreign wars.<sup>41</sup>

Thus in Maldives, there has been a trend since Gayoom's period that the government takes action against radical activities according to its convenience. Gayoom, Nasheed and Yameen have continued to recognise that counter-radicalisation efforts are a critical component to long-term success against violent extremism. All of them seek to counter the influence of extremist ideology by actively intervening in religious life. Gayoom, through the Religious Unity Act and the 1997 constitution had become the ultimate authority on imparting Islam and silenced the radical. Under Mohamed Nasheed's period, the government's interventions in religious affairs took the form of mandating persons wanting to serve as imams to undergo six-month state-approved training, as well as disseminating approved sermons for Friday prayers.<sup>42</sup> The current government is also in the process of building an Islamic university in the capital city of Male that will offer courses in comparative religion in addition to Islamic studies. The university's key objective will be to expose Maldivian students to the academic study of religion as a counterweight to extremist discourses.<sup>43</sup>

However, all these parties joined hands with the radicals and demonstrated religious intolerance while not in power. The PPM exhibited an act of religious intolerance when it was in the opposition during Mohamed Nasheed's presidency. Allegedly, the cadres of the PPM vandalised the monuments donated by Pakistan and Sri Lanka during the concluding session of the 7th summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) on the pretext of violation of the Religious Unity Act of 1994. It was considered that the image of Mohammed Ali Jinnah gifted by Pakistan and the lion gifted by Sri Lanka, the country's national symbol, depicted 'objects of worship' that 'denied the oneness of God'.<sup>44</sup>

There has been a common tendency of the opposition parties to tarnish the image of the party in power by labelling it un-Islamic. At the same time, they try to strengthen their Islamic credentials by encouraging radical activities.



## IMPACT OF RADICALISATION ON THE ECONOMY OF THE MALDIVES

Tourism, the most essential source of revenue generation for the Maldives, emerged as an organised economic activity in 1972.<sup>45</sup> The radical groups, however, are targeting the tourism industry for un-Islamic practices. The Islamists are urging the government to introduce Islamic tourism. Until the 2007 Sultan Park bomb blast, Maldives was considered as one of the safest tourist destinations. From the mid-80s until early 2000s, tourism has contributed over 30% to the GDP of the Maldives. The percentage contribution nearly dropped by 10% after the 2004 tsunami but started recovering in 2006. In 2007, tourism contribution stood at 27.9%, and in 2008 it showed a slight decline (-0.7%). Since 2009, the share of tourism contribution to the GDP had been below 30%. According to the Ministry of Tourism Annual Report, the decline in 2008 was due to the world economic recession.<sup>46</sup> It is also possible that the bomb blast in 2007 or attacks on the Western tourists resulted in this decline. However, the following table shows the number of tourist arrivals over the years since 2009 has increased despite the political unrest in the country.

Tourism Contribution to GDP 2009–2013 (Million Rufiyaa, at 2003 Constant Prices)

Year	GDP	GDP Growth %	Tourism Contribution	% of Share of Tourism Contribution	No. of Tourists arrived
2009	17,853	-3.65	4,608.00	25.8	655,852
2010	19,113	7.1	5,335.00	27.9	791,917
2011	20,461	7.1	5,822.00	28.5	931,333
2012	21,160	3.4	5,862.00	27.7	958,027
2013	22,075	4.3	6,159.00	27.9	1,125,202

Source: Ministry of Tourism, Republic of Maldives. <<http://www.tourism.gov.mv/downloads/2014dec/tourism%20year%20book%202014.pdf>>.

The following table, on the other hand, indicates that government expenditure made on tourism has declined considerably. In 2013, government expenditure on tourism was 29.88 million rufiyaa, which was a 43% decline compared with the 52.52 million spent on tourism in 2012.

Year	Government Expenditure	Tourism Expenditure	Share of Tourism Expenditure
2009	11,104.30	78.45	0.7%
2010	10,996.40	46.86	0.4%
2011	12,663.70	33.75	0.3%
2012	13,200.23	52.52	0.4%
2013	13,511.95	29.88	0.2%

Source: Ministry of Tourism, Republic of Maldives.

It is difficult to explain whether the government's decision to reduce its expenditure on tourism was taken under Islamists' influence. But in the past, it was observed that the government has been resistant to Islamists' call for the shutdown of the luxury tourism as this is the most important source of revenue for the country.

### **RADICAL INFLUENCE ON FOREIGN POLICY**

With the increasing influence of the radical parties on the government, Maldivian foreign policy is tilting towards Islamic countries like the Middle East and Pakistan. Maldives' relations with the West and India have declined over the years. One of the foreign policy goals of the current foreign policy of the Maldives, launched by President Yameen in January 2014, is to protect the Islamic identity of the Maldives and help to promote the values of Islam internationally. To achieve this goal, the Maldivian government focuses on three strategies: extend outreach to and consolidate relations with the Islamic world, encourage and facilitate international efforts aimed at promoting the true Islamic values of respect and tolerance and increase the Maldives' active participation in promoting causes important to the Islamic world.<sup>47</sup> This has facilitated the strengthening of the Maldives' relations with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

However, it has been alleged that by taking opportunity of the emerging foreign policy of the country, the influential foreign sponsors are endorsing a more radical version of Islam through charitable work in the Maldives. Saudi- and Pakistani-funded schools, mosques and university are exposing the

Maldivians to the radical interpretations of religious texts.<sup>48</sup> In fact, former presidents like Maumoon Abdul Gayoom and Mohamed Nasheed criticised Pakistan and Saudi Arabia for instigating extremism in the Maldives. After the 2007 bomb blast, Maumoon Gayoom made a Pakistan-sponsored madrassa responsible for the blast. Similarly, Nasheed blamed the influx of Saudi funds responsible for radicalisation in the Maldives.<sup>49</sup>

## SECURITY SITUATION IN THE COUNTRY

A bomb blast at the entrance to the popular Sultan Park in Male in September 2007 was the first recorded Islamist militant attack in the Maldives.<sup>50</sup> After 2007, no incident of terrorist attacks has been reported in the Maldives, even though media reports suggest that several Maldivians are being recruited by global jihadi groups. So far, these Maldivian jihadists are fighting in foreign countries. But the country may face severe security challenges once these jihadis are back in the Maldives.

Growing religious intolerance has made the island unsafe for liberal-minded people, including journalists and civil society members. In November 2009, the 'Islamic Foundation' called on the Maldives government to deport the editor of the Minivan News website, Maryam Omidi, for publishing a reader-submitted letter which talked about legalising homosexuality in the Maldives.<sup>51</sup> Liberal scholars and civil society organisations are being targeted for expressing their liberal views on religion and gender issues. Dr. Afrasheem Ali, a renowned liberal religious scholar and lawmaker, was assassinated in early October 2012,<sup>52</sup> and there were attempted assassinations on two writers and social activists: Aishath Velezinee in January 2011<sup>53</sup> and Hilath Rasheed in June 2012.<sup>54</sup> The Communications Authority of Maldives closed the blog of Ismail Hilath Rasheed, a leading journalist and blogger, for his views on religious freedom and tolerance in Maldives. His views were considered anti-Islamic. Later, he was arrested because of his involvement in a 'silent protest' for more religious tolerance and for his adherence to Sufism.<sup>55</sup>

The Islamist influence on the judiciary and the administrative system in the Maldives has had a negative impact on the human rights of the Maldivian citizens. Under the influence of radical non-governmental religious groups and political parties, Maldivian judiciary and several ministries are taking radical

steps. For example, public flogging as punishment for adultery has become common practice. Muslim courts in the country had sentenced almost 150 women to public flogging for adultery.<sup>56</sup> For adultery, 67 women were served the flogging sentence in 2010. In 2011, out of the 129 fornication cases that were filed, 104 were sentenced, of which 93 were female.<sup>57</sup> A young girl who was sexually assaulted by her stepfather was convicted of premarital sex at a juvenile court and sentenced to 100 lashes and eight months of house arrest in February 2013.<sup>58</sup> Arbitrary arrests, disappearances, societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation and belief have become common practice in the Maldives.

### **IMPACT ON THE REGION**

The developments in the Maldives will have a negative impact in the region. There is evidence of Maldivians fighting for foreign militant groups in foreign lands. As mentioned above, Maldivians are being recruited by Pakistan-based organisations to hit India. In the context of growing radicalisation and the deteriorating relations between India and the Maldives, it would not be wrong to assume that the Maldives can be used as a launch pad to target neighbouring countries if the government does not take any serious action to curtail the ongoing process of radicalisation and recruitment of the Maldivians to join foreign militant organisations.

### **CONCLUSION**

The overview of the developments within the Maldives mentioned above suggests that the Maldivian society has become more fanatical towards alternative views, cultures and ways of life. Little effort has been made to address the issue of religious intolerance for narrow political interests. Political parties across the ideology took the support of radical elements to come into power. However, it is difficult for the comparatively liberal ruling parties to maintain the coalition with the radical parties once they are in power. Though radical parties like the AP do not have a large number of seats in the parliament, they can pose a challenge to the government by mobilising popular support against the government in the name of Islam. Therefore, in an attempt to give the

impression that the government is not un-Islamic, the government refuses to take strong action against radicalism, extremism and religious intolerance. The government's inaction on radical activities and poor economic conditions has allowed foreign state and non-state actors to recruit Maldivian youths to undertake militant activities in foreign lands. If immediate actions are not taken, the Maldives, already struck by political instability, will face severe security challenges in the long run.

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