The formation (and dissolution?) of a democratic politics in the Maldives

As an American Fulbright scholar affiliated with the Faculty of Shari'ah and Law at the only public institution of higher education in the Maldives – the Maldives College of Higher Education, on the capital island Male' – I taught constitutional law and witnessed a society poised on the edge of an electoral revolution and the ouster of a thirty year (1978-2008) developmental autocracy. This article recounts observations, informal interviews (conducted during the 2007-2008 academic year) and local press accounts of events and political factors culminating in a bloodless regime change in 2008.

Abbreviated history of the Maldives and the ancien regime

The Republic of the Maldives consists of just under 200 inhabited and 1000 uninhabited islands, distributed across 19 coral atolls in the Indian Ocean, southwest of India and Socotra. Based on the most recent census, in 2006, the population is under 300,000, with approximately one third of the population is under 300,000 with approximately one-third of the population being under the age of 15. The population is under 300,000 with approximately one-third of the population being under the age of 15. The population is under 300,000 with approximately one-third of the population being under the age of 15.

In the 13th century, the Maldives were ruled by a sultanate, and the population is under 300,000 with approximately one-third of the population being under the age of 15.

The first modest experiment with liberalization and elections came in 1993, when the government released a number of political prisoners, including the secret MDP, whose main mission had been to criticize the Gayoom regime. The government released a number of political prisoners, including the secret MDP, whose main mission had been to criticize the Gayoom regime. The government released a number of political prisoners, including the secret MDP, whose main mission had been to criticize the Gayoom regime.

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The Gayoom administration did not grant the MDP any opportunity to release such a campaign or indeed for any form of electoral contestation until August 2007, when the government proposed a referendum on the political system of the Maldives, with a choice offered between the existing presidential form, or conversion to a parliamentary electoral system. The referendum did not expressly admit candidates or political parties. President Gayoom called for this referendum as an item in his own ‘roadmap to reform,’ which he touted as a path that would guide the Maldives to liberal democracy. Arguably, he also advanced the referendum as an attempt to weaken the opposition and dampen dissent that had emerged in the relative turbulence of the preceding three years. An additional component of this reform package was a Special Majlis to consider revisions to the constitution and ultimately to amend it in its entirety, with the current constitution the result. To this observer, the intent of both constitutional revision and the referendum was to buttress the status quo, and to demoralize or mitigate the popular support for the MDP, as President Gayoom could reasonably have calculated that the electorate would opt for the familiarity of the presidential system.

It was evident from observations at the time that the subtleties of parliaments or presidential systems were confusing to, if not lost altogether, on most Maldivians, even in Male'. The pro-Presidential camp consisted, unsurprisingly, of the DRP and the President's Office, although the literature they distributed on the streets was couched as non-partisan and informed only, without any explicit party affiliation. By contrast the only active opposition party, forced into the parliamentary camp (as the only alternative to the President), more openly expressed a party identity, complete with a campaign color (yellow) and insignia in evidence (a thumbs-up sign with the words “barulamanee” – denoting the Parliamentary option – in caption). During the run up to the referendum, the MDP developed an elaborate block to block organization within Male', and began to diffuse among outer islands using traditional Maldivian boats (dhone) refashioned into campaign/party boats. President Gayoom's calculations were correct in that the presidential system prevailed, an apparent vote for status quo and for President Gayoom personally. Although this was a setback for the MDP, as the model of many in Male' expressed disappointment and frustration, the process was in retrospect a valuable rehearsal that allowed the party personnel and volunteers to gain organizational skills and develop greater contact with the electorate at large, albeit over a compressed time-frame.
With the opposition losing its effort to exclude, on constitutional grounds, President Gayoom, and the office that he had occupied for nearly three decades, the incumbent mounted his own attempts to rehabilitate himself, complete with the creation of a new campaign symbol: a hand, with palm facing outward. The meaning of this symbol was highly contested and ridiculed; was it the hand of Fatima, or a hand stopping change? President Gayoom made visits to many islands, adopted a theme song, and held rallies with live music and light shows. On voting day, 28 October 2008, there were some reports of fraud, although international observers were present. The turn-out was a remarkable 85% (with over 209,000 eligible voters). Six parties competed in the first round, only two, with the highest number of votes, would be allowed to proceed to the second round. The results were:

- Maldives Democratic Party (MDP) incumbent (40%)
- Maldive Rayyithunge Party (DRP)  incumbent (40%)
- New Maldives Hassan Saeed (16%)
- Republican Party Kasim Ibrahim (15%)
- Islamic Democratic Party (IDP) Umar Naser (15%)
- Social Liberal Party (SLP) Ibrahim Ismail (<1%)

The second round thus involved the DRP and the MDP, it took place early the following month. The MDP entered into an alliance with the SLF, the New Maldives, and the Republican Party, the IDP refused to support any other party and withdrew from the presidential race. The results were a significant victory for the MDP led by Mohammad Nasheed (54%), he and his running mate, Mohammad Waheed, were sworn in on 11 November 2008.

However, at time of press, President Nasheed resigned the Presidency, or was forced out in a coup executed by the police force, which had been rumored for months that President Gayoom was unusually and publicly criticized for supporting the legality of music, and allowing alcohol to be served on resort islands.

Unsurprisingly, following his electoral loss, President Gayoom never explained the motives behind his “roadmap to reform” or the peace诺 modified resignation to his downfall, beyond asserting the desirability of a style of “guided” democracy for the Maldives. Was external influence or pressure on the regime a contributing factor? The Maldivian government and the MDP each maintained ties with British MPs, playing host to them during visits; the MDP and the larger democracy movement, of which it was a part, became a subject of discussion in the British Parliament, but the actual impact on the domestic political outcome of this most influential among international players, Britain, appears to have been limited. The U.S. made no public statements against the Gayoom regime and did not publicly promote democracy, nor did it encourage or aid the political outcome of this most influential among international players, Britain, appears to have been limited. The U.S. made no public statements against the Gayoom regime and did not publicly promote democracy, nor did it encourage or aid the

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However, at time of press, President Nasheed resigned the Presidency, or was forced out in a coup executed by the police and NSP. The former Vice President Mohammad Waheed replaced him. It is impossible to say whether this development means the thorough dissolution of a democratic politics in the Maldives, or a temporary reversion.

Explanations of the electoral revolution

The traditional indicator of two alternations of power to constitute a change in regime as a transition to democracy was not met in the Maldives. Nevertheless, what does this little known case of electoral revolution add to political science literature? What hypotheses does it generate and what theories may help to explain it? Setting aside issues of scale and locality, which limit the ability to generalize from this single rather unique case, the initial electoral revolution in the Maldives tests several explanatory factors advanced by democratization theorists.

Islamic parties and identity did not play a significant causal role in the revolution, the one explicitly Islam-identified party (the IDP), has at no time been an important political player, as its electoral results reflected. While a constitutionally Islamic state (both before and after the initial change in regime), as the Maldives or its discourse or identity possess any explanatory power with reference to the Maldives’ modern political history, it is an explanation for the durability of the Gayoom regime. Himself an ‘alim, educated at al-Azhar in Cairo, and taking his first teaching position in Kano, Nigeria, President Gayoom made frequent pronouncements on Islamic ethics and theology. He also regulated activities and speech in mosques through a governmental Ministry of Islamic Affairs. Whether this Islamic dressing aided and sustained his regime is an unknowable counterfactual. However, the regime’s eventual defeat and the forms of resistance that it met reveal the oft-noted double-edged character of a religion-based state ideology. For example, President Gayoom was unusually and publicly criticized for supporting the legality of music, and allowing alcohol to be served on resort islands.

The peaceful conduct of the campaign and the transfer of power in the Maldives is almost certainly that the MDP made a private or tacit bargain with Maumoon Gayoom, allowing him to remain in the Maldives, and to continue his leadership of the DRP in opposition. It is difficult to decipher what Gayoom’s own position and intentions were from his public statements. For his part, Nasheed consistently struck a forgiving and conciliatory tone, stating (against the wishes of many Maldivians) that Maumoon Gayoom would stay in the Maldives, and that his treatment was a test of the nascent Maldivian democracy, and that Gayoom could continue to be active in politics. However, the terms of the bargain between the MDP and then President Gayoom are not clear.

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1 Island and population statistics taken from the Maldives Department of Planning: http://tinyurl.com/Tx67v7 and http://tinyurl.com/xyV3 (accessed 15 September 2011)
3 According to Ben Battatullah, who lived in the Maldives 1332-1334 and wrote about the institutionalization of Islam in his Bihh.
6 Public meeting on US-Maldives relations, in October 2007, at Hotel Nasandhura in Male‘.