

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.

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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 Sri Lanka. According to the most recent census, in 2006, the population is under 300,000 with approximately one-third living on the capital island Male'.¹ Probably Buddhist prior to the introduction of Islam by Arab traders,² and the official establishment of Islam in the mid-twelfth century,³ the Maldives was a hereditary sultanate (headed by sultans and at least one sultana) continuously – across interludes of Portuguese, Dutch, and finally British (1887-1965) colonial interventions – until the first Republic was established, governed by President Amin Didi (1953-1954). The 94th and last sultan (Fareed Didi) resumed rule (1954-1967), finally giving way in 1968 to the existing Republic of the Maldives.

The original and all subsequent constitutions of the Republic, including the most recent in 2008,⁴ make the acceptance of Sunni Islam a citizenship requirement (chapter 1 article 9 of current constitution), no law inconsistent with 'any tenet of Islam' may be enacted (chapter 1 article 10a), and Islam is one basis among several for Maldivian law (chapter 1 article 10b). The legislative power resides in a unicameral People's Majlis. However, constitutional and political restraints on the power of the President were weak or non-existent during the single party state of the Dhivehi Nationalist (*Dhivehi Rayyithunge*) Party (the DRP); *Dhivehi* refers to the language and self-ascribed ethnicity of Maldivians. From the coup that brought him to power in 1978, Maumoon Gayoom led the DRP and held the Presidency until 2008.

Geography and a rentier economy helped preserve a pluralized autocratic regime under the single-party state. Foreign tourists were restricted to resort islands (uninhabited by Maldivians, unless they worked there), minimizing their contact with Maldivians, and ensuring a stream of revenue through island leases and a bed tax on tourist accommodation. The Maldives under President Gayoom typified a neo-patrimonial state,⁵ one in which informal patron-client relationships were incorporated into formal political institutions, such as parties, parliament, ministries, the civil service and departments of the state. President Gayoom used such strategies to expand and preserve his patron-client relationships, depending on personal and family networks, treating high offices as rewards for supporters, and shuffling cabinet and ministerial posts to prevent the accumulation of significant power in the hands of any one potential rival. Outside of Male', he constructed a network of clientelism and patronage encompassing atoll chiefs and local island headmen (*khatib*).

The first modest experiment with liberalization and electoralism under President Gayoom occurred in 1988, with an uncontested referendum on his presidency, resulting in a total of four more five-year terms. No opposition candidate ran in the subsequent plebiscites of 1993, 1998, and 2003.

Maldives' democratic revolution

In November 2008, in the first competitive presidential election since 1978, the electorate voted out President Gayoom, and relegated the DRP to the opposition. The triumphant party was the first opposition party formed during the Gayoom era, in 2004: the Maldives Democratic Party (MDP). How did a largely

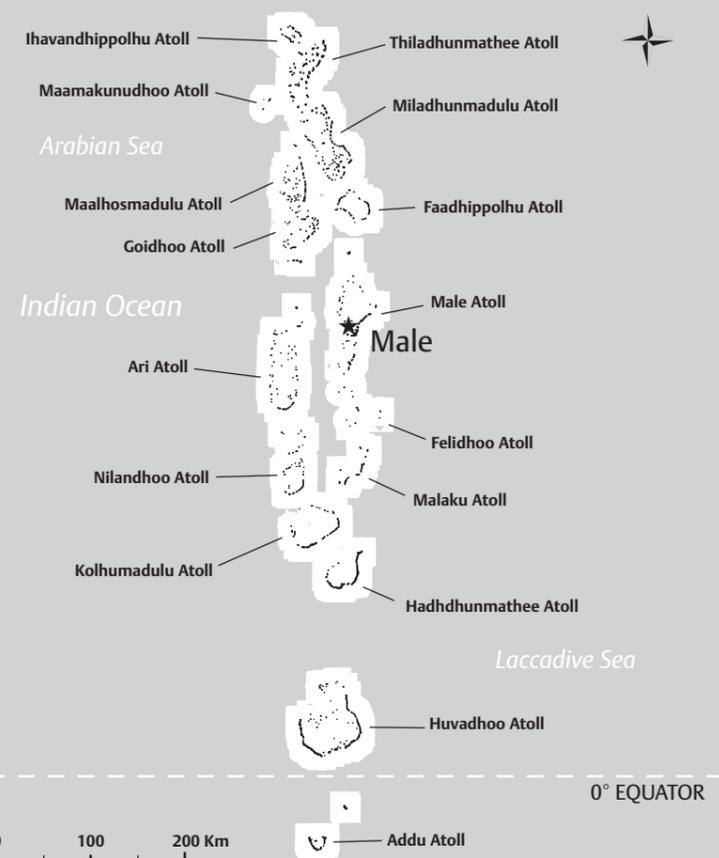
quiescent and apolitical populace produce an opposition movement culminating in a protest party able to wrest power from a highly entrenched regime, the head of which controlled the press and media, presiding over a system of law and security favorable to economic development, without meaningful political reform over several decades?

Although the small-scale and scattered resistance, dealt with by repressive measures, did not begin with the beating to death of Evan Naseem, democratic activists cite this event as a tipping point at which popular acquiescence to autocratic politics diminished, and was swept away by outrage against police abuse and the excessive (and unusually fatal) use of force by the state. Naseem was killed by officers of the National Security Services (the NSS) in Maafushi prison in September 2003; the killing caused a prison riot, which was forcefully suppressed. In August 2004, a large public gathering commemorating Evan Naseem took place in Republic Square, the central plaza on the north side of Male' that is bordered by the police headquarters, the formidable NSS compound, and the National Mosque, and which is in close proximity to the President's Office on the coastal road, *Thakurufaanu Magu*. President Gayoom ordered the police to disperse the crowd. Two hundred demonstrators were arrested and subjected to various forms of mistreatment, including assault, food deprivation and in some cases sexual abuse, while detained. The incident became known as 'Black Friday.'

In December of the same year, the tsunami triggered by a submarine earthquake off the coast of Indonesia, flooded some of the Maldivian islands, including Male', inflicting property damage and a number of deaths. The inability of the government to protect its citizens from the flooding, and the resulting self-reliance – including the theft of sandbags from construction sites by normally law-abiding citizens – purportedly helped to motivate resistance and political opposition.

Six months later, in June 2005, the Gayoom administration lifted the ban on political opposition parties. Mohammad Nasheed (also known as 'Anni') promptly publicly declared the secret MDP, whose main mission had been to criticize and undermine President Gayoom and his regime, from the safety of exile in Salisbury, England, where Nasheed and his colleagues based themselves and established an anti-regime newspaper, *The Dhivehi Observer*. Nasheed revisited Republic Square on the first anniversary of Black Friday, in August 2005; he was arrested and imprisoned, not to be released until a year later in the summer of 2006. The public received him as a hero, and he began to enjoy a career as a populist leader – one who clearly knows how to work a crowd.

Support for the MDP grew, although it remained concentrated in the urban center of Male'. The geography of the Maldives poses a severe test for political organizers, especially for a party with a short history, unlike the decades and resources the DRP had at its disposal. Of the small proportion of islands that are populated, they are sparsely so, and widely dispersed; costly and limited air travel and extremely slow travel by sea between the atolls increases the challenge. And yet the MDP had to penetrate the outer islands, which had been controlled by President Gayoom due to his ability to appoint *khatibs* and atoll chiefs, as Male' constituted at most a third of the national population,



The Gayoom regime was the victim of its own success; high literacy and economic development helped build a growing middle class that displayed a greater interest in politics.

which was obviously not enough to win an election against the incumbent with his historic control over the poorer and less educated populations in the outer atolls.

The Gayoom administration did not grant the MDP any opportunity to rehearse for 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 popularity of 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 the parliamentary 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 informational 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 (dhoni) refashioned into campaign/party boats. President Gayoom's calculations were correct in that the presidential system prevailed; an apparent vote for stasis and for President Gayoom personally. Although this was a setback for the MDP, and 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.