

# India-Maldives Relations Post-2023 Presidential Elections: A Comprehensive Analysis

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## Introduction

The victory of Mohamed Muizzu in the 2023 Presidential elections of Maldives with more than 53% of the votes raised concerns about the future of India-Maldives relations.<sup>[1]</sup> The Progressive Alliance, a coalition of the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) and the People's National Congress (PNC) elected Mohamed Muizzu as a presidential candidate for their party. Various Global media outlets like the BBC, Washington Post and Al Jazeera indicated Muizzu's victory as a major victory for China and a major loss for India.<sup>[2]</sup> However, political parties and media often employ rhetoric that oversimplifies complex issues, presenting them as binary choices with clear-cut answers. It's important to recognise that these political issues are rarely straightforward. By looking at the history of politics in the Maldives, this article would argue that India should not perceive the victory of Muizzu as an outright loss but rather as a suboptimal scenario. Moreover, the paper will also look at the reasons why the victory of Muizzu will not have a significant shift or result in a freefall in the India-Maldives relations.

## India-Maldives Cooperation

Both India and the Maldives have an extended association of cooperation and involvement in various regional and international organisations. These include the Colombo Security Conclave, the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), which are crucial in focusing on the Maldives' non-traditional security contests. When states actively contribute to multilateral organisations, it enables maintaining strong bilateral relations, irrespective of which political party is in power. Participating in these global forums fosters an environment for sustained cooperation between nations.

India has been dynamically involved in supporting substantial infrastructural projects in the Maldives. Its contribution to the Maldives extends to numerous High-impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs) that directly help the Maldivians. According to the Ministry of External Affairs of India, India had over 27 HICDPs under implementation in January 2023.<sup>[3]</sup> India also stands as the Maldives' one of the largest trading partners. In 2021, Maldives was the third largest trading partner of India.<sup>[4]</sup> The fragile Maldivian economy and its vulnerability to climate-induced natural disasters have made India a crucial ally in crisis response. India's swift response during times of crisis, exemplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, by providing \$250 million in financial aid and COVID-19 vaccines to the Maldives, highlights its importance to the Maldives<sup>[5]</sup>. In 2020, India sent 30,000 vaccines for measles to prevent an outbreak.<sup>[6]</sup> Tourism plays a vital role in the Maldivian economy, with the largest number of tourists coming from India, halfway through 2023, contributing 11.7% of the market share.<sup>[7]</sup> The air travel bubble agreement with India significantly supported the Maldivian economy during the pandemic. Overall, India-Maldives cooperation is multi-dimensional and multi-level such as helping at the people-level, government level and engagement in multi-lateral organisations.

## Understanding Mohamed Muizzu

Muizzu's anti-India rhetoric is seen as a political move to support his election campaign. Historically, in Maldives, there has been a gap between campaign rhetoric and actual governance. It would be a Herculean task for the Maldives to replace India due to the above-mentioned reasons. Moreover, it would be an economic blunder as well. As said by Shekhar Gupta, his upper-class background and capitalist perspective align more with economic considerations rather than ideological ones.<sup>[8]</sup> Moreover, he was not the main mouthpiece of the 'India-Out' campaign in his party. Therefore, contrary to initial concerns about Muizzu's 'India Out' campaign, he must be considered a competent leader who values economic intricacies.

Historically, there has been a gap in Maldives regarding 'what leaders say during Political campaigns' and 'what they do after winning elections.' Muizzu is a leader who is likely to prioritise non-traditional security cooperation with India due to India's proximity to Maldives and India being the first responder during a crisis. It is similar to the approach taken by his predecessor, so-called 'anti-India' Abdullah Yameen when the Maldives signed a defence action plan with India in 2016.<sup>[9]</sup> Therefore, there is likely to be continued cooperation with the Maldives during Muizzu's tenure and an increase in Maldives' engagement with China due to the Progressive Party of Maldives' (PPM) close relationship with China.<sup>[10]</sup>

While there are concerns about the potential withdrawal of Indian troops from the Maldives, PM Modi tweeted after the victory of Muizzu, that India remains committed to diplomatic engagement and dialogue.<sup>[11]</sup> The issue arose as the withdrawal of foreign (Indian) troops became one of the important agenda of Muizzu's political campaign. This is why, to gain the public trust, Muizzu will likely continue pushing for Indian troops' withdrawal from Maldives. He requested for Indian troops' withdrawal to the visiting Minister of Earth Sciences Kiren Rijiju who represented India at the swearing-in ceremony on the first day as a President.<sup>[12]</sup> It is unlikely India would take aggressive counter-action for this response. Therefore, India aims to address the issue diplomatically.

## Reasons for Anti-India Sentiments

The success of the 'India-Out' campaign cannot be denied as it has gained significant public support. Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) accused Dhiyares, one of the leading Maldivian news agencies, as well as its co-founder and writer Ahmed Azaan, of regularly propagating anti-India sentiments.<sup>[13]</sup> According to the MDP, this effort appears to be well-funded, well-coordinated, and pre-planned, with the sole goal of creating hatred towards India.<sup>[14]</sup> This public support for the anti-India campaign was attributed to domestic political grievances as a result of Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's actions and the success of the PPM and PNC party in advocating Solih's mistakes in his governance. These actions include Solih's failure to seek parliamentary approval before establishing a defence agreement with India which is mandatory as per the Maldivian constitution, and not disclosing documents and meetings with Indian officials and citing them as national security reasons for confidentiality.<sup>[15]</sup> The Progressive Alliance was successful in leaking the documents which showed an agreement between India and Maldives stating that the Indian military would be staying in Maldives for decades and would have exclusive rights

over utilising the Uthuru Thila Falhu area for building a naval harbour for conducting hydrographic surveys.<sup>[16]</sup> The Maldivian populace expressed discontent with this military presence in their nation. Indian and Solih's Government alleged that forged/false documents also circulated in the name of Solih's saying Government sought a loan of MVR 3 billion from the Indian Government.<sup>[17]</sup> The opposition promoted the incident as harming Maldivian sovereignty and security interests.<sup>[18]</sup>

During Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's Government tenure, the Maldivian Government acknowledged the anti-India campaign on Maldivian social media. Reports have shown that the Pakistan Army's information warfare wing Inter-Services Public Relations, has conducted information warfare against India by promoting anti-India social media campaigns in countries like Maldives, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Bangladesh.<sup>[19]</sup> These were the vital steps for the success of the 'India-Out' campaign.

### Way Forward

India needs to continue its diplomatic engagement with the new Maldivian government without exerting coercive pressure. Moreover, India's approach of investing in HICDPs which directly benefits the Maldivians must be continued to counter the anti-India narrative in Maldives. It, therefore, becomes important for India to counter disinformation and anti-India narratives on social media. It would create political opportunities for Maldivian leaders to cooperate with India if India successfully tackles anti-India sentiments. Therefore, it is crucial to formulate an efficient propaganda and disinformation management system, as well as develop expert tools and platforms to identify and counter disinformation effectively. China being a debt-trap promoter should also be actively advocated among the Maldivians. Additionally, strengthening of multilateral structures and organisations like IORA, IONS and the Colombo Security Conclave must be the priority of India to keep bilateral relations robust.

### Conclusion

Muizzu's victory is seen as a diplomatic loss for India and a victory for China. There are various options and leverages that India still has for improving its relations with the Maldives. India must understand improving relations is a continuous and never-ending process. It is vital to focus on and prioritise the littorals of the Indian Ocean for the national security of India.

### Endnotes

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