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# **The Crisis in the Maldives: In Perspective**

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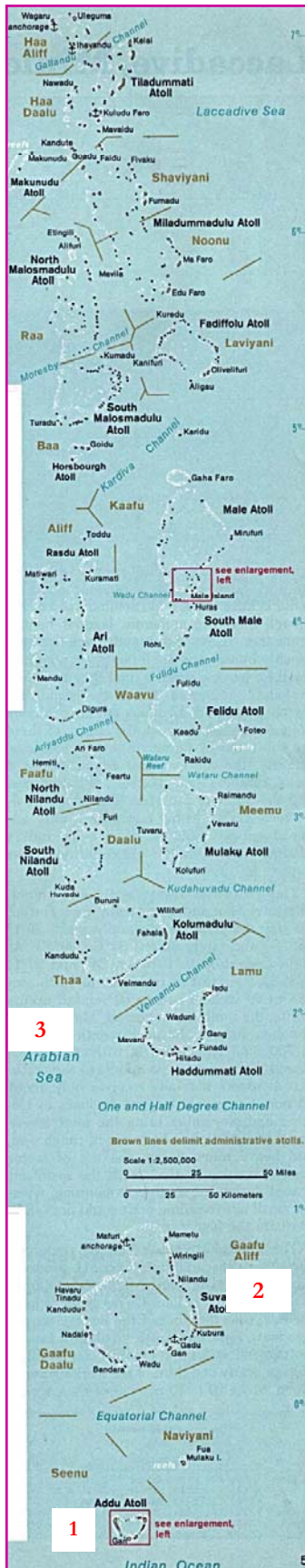
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Source: University of Texas, Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection

On Tuesday, November 7, 2006, a group of people left Addu atoll (1) in the Maldives in a dhoni intending to participating in the Maldivian Democratic Party's rally in Malé on November 10. The dhoni was allowed to leave Addu, but intercepted as it approached Huvadhu Atoll. The Coast Guard circled the boat, rocking it to the extent that food and water supplies fell aboard. The boat sought to refuel at Kolamaafushi harbour (2) but was prevented from doing so. It anchored overnight, without food and water, in a nearby lagoon. As word spread about the plight of the dhoni's passengers, the vessel was allowed to travel. The harassment resumed on the open sea, and the dhoni was raided near Thaa Atoll (3). Those on board were arrested and taken away on the Huravee (till recently, INS Tillachang of the Indian Navy) to an unknown destination about which there has been some speculation. Given the Gayoom regime's reputation for torture in custody, it is highly probable that this is not a voyage with a happy ending—at least in the immediate term.

This incident serves to highlight four important, and classic, issues for observers of politics and international relations:

- (1) Is our concern about human rights and democracy mediated by borders, contiguity and cultural affinity?
- (2) What are the adverse consequences of state media control, limits of freedom of information and expression and censorship?
- (3) What are the limits to the rule of the Westphalian international system that states should not interfere in each others' internal affairs?
- (4) What considerations should inform the decision to buy, sell and gift defence and other equipment to other states, and in the case of the recipient facing internal turmoil, should 'dual use' potential matter?



**(1) Is our concern about human rights and democracy mediated by borders, contiguity and cultural affinity?**

Either Alberuni is still right and we South Asians are incorrigible navel-gazers or we have completely internalized the Westphalian system's idea of political societies as sealed airtight containers whose contents have no business peeking outside their confines.

In the week that a major opposition rally was scheduled in Malé, no South Asian newspaper appears to have had a correspondent who is visiting, leave alone stationed there. As the "boat crisis" unfolded, there has been virtually no reportage of the crisis outside the Maldives. Even when they are commonplace in a region, illegal detention, large political rallies and a government on the defensive should still be news. Rather than setting the political agenda and expanding the political vision of a society, the media seems largely to stay within narrowly defined ideas of what is of interest and importance. Equally, the large number of human rights organizations seem to take little interest in events outside their borders. If they do, it is unclear how one can get information to them and learn about their follow-up action.

The lack of interest is part of a vicious circle—there is no interest, there is no media coverage; there is no media coverage, there is no public awareness, including on the part of the political classes; there is no awareness, there is no concern; there is no concern, there is no coverage. The Indian Express took twenty-four hours to write a very general report on the Maldives and The Hindu took forty-eight hours to write a general and outdated report. These are the media that the Indian political elite read. Google searches revealed even less coverage in other parts of the region. The lack of interest in the Maldives is not unique; interest in Bangladeshi affairs outside Kolkata, Nepal outside Delhi, Sri Lanka outside Chennai is low. On the other side of the Indian border, there is a similar situation. To Sri Lankans, India is an extension of Tamil Nadu, to Pakistanis, of Punjab and to Bangladeshis of Bengal and Assam. The challenge in South Asia is to make real to people across the region not just an idea of South Asia, but also of other places and peoples within. That which we barely know of and cannot imagine, cannot be of concern to us.

**(2) What are the adverse consequences for regimes of state media control, limits of freedom of information and expression and censorship?**

When governments control the print and electronic media to the extent that they do not even cover important events prejudicial to the reputation of the government, they erode the credibility of the press. People do not believe what is published or broadcast, and so government

spin is a waste of effort. Over time, alternate news sources do come up; they end up taking a polar position in opposition to the government media. They have some credibility, but only up to a point. When there is no common ground in the coverage and no mutual engagement, it becomes increasingly difficult to establish what is actually happening. It is not just the public and the opposition that lose when information is not freely available; those who seek to control the flow of information lose the most.

This last week in the Maldives bears this out. As the “boat crisis” unfolded, there were updates in the Dhivehi Observer and Minivan News. The former is completely identified with the dissidents, having been their first public platform against Gayoom’s regime. The latter is considered independent, but in a situation where the other news sources are the establishment newspaper, Haveeru, and TV Maldives, it is inevitable that the news that Minivan News covers favours the dissidents. Haveeru’s reports came late in the day. Had they broken the news at the same time as the ‘dissident’ press, they may have contributed something to the framing of the incident. Coming late, and taking a defensive tone, Haveeru’s coverage serves little purpose at the end of the day. Because the government appears to control what appears in the establishment press, the dissident or independent press is able to set the political agenda—the very purpose that government control seeks to serve. The regime loses the political initiative to the opposition simply by seeking to control it too much.

In a larger sense, this also applies to its response to the November 10 rally proposal. This is not the first large protest in the Maldives and it will not be the last, especially if a democratic change takes place. The government’s attempts to prevent the rally from taking place actually made the rally a success before it even took place. After all, the objective of such events is to call attention to a particular platform and to make a show of strength. The arrests, the government statements and finally, the boat crisis all accomplished those goals even before the rally took place. Having demonstrated that it is in fact as repressive as the protestors wanted to say it was, the government really scored a self-goal.

### **(3) What are the limits to the rule of the Westphalian international system that states should not interfere in each others’ internal affairs?**

One agency report appearing towards the end of the last week reported a reassurance from the Maldivian authorities to the government of India that they had the situation under control. The report said that the Indian government was concerned about the spread of instability through the region. There are many ways in which one might contest this reported Indian concern; for one, regional instability is less likely to spread from this small atoll-state’s

troubles than it is from the much larger problems of much larger regional states. But let us grant accuracy in reportage and admit the concern as reasonable, and we still have to contend with the limits of the Westphalian system of states as sealed, air-tight political communities that agree to ignore events outside their confines.

Governments take a standard official position on events that take place outside their boundaries that they do not concern themselves with the internal affairs of other states. This does not prevent them from covertly taking sides and it does not preclude open diplomatic initiatives. However, they are also signatories to international conventions that set up certain norms of behaviour both between states and increasingly within states. Those who write that we live not in an anarchical system of states but in an international society with a growing consensus around certain norms and values, open the door to revisit the “mutual non-interference” convention that states agree to observe. The line between non-interfering and uncaring is a thin one, and as powerful states have shown in recent years, one that can be crossed at will.

There is also a line between non-interference and being in denial, just as there is a line between supporting a neighbouring state and supporting a neighbouring regime. India, as the largest state in South Asia, has to walk this fine line often enough in Sri Lanka and Nepal. But in the case of the Maldives, there seems to be a blind spot. The noises it makes about democracy in Nepal are not heard when it comes to the Maldives. The delicate balancing act in Sri Lanka does not carry over either. Either the Indian foreign ministry is in denial over the nature of the regime and the bases of opposition to it, or there is some strategic purpose that it considers served by supporting Gayoom. To have gifted the Maldivian regime naval vessels and to have agreed to enhance defence ties at a critical juncture as this is in Maldivian politics, points a finger to realpolitik concerns that have nothing to do with international law. They have to do with China’s increasing engagement in South Asia. India is the most striking example, but in this instance, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are also silent, and in the case of the last, this is in spite of Colombo having been the effective operational base of Maldivian dissidents in exile.

At this point, it is instructive to look at the US’ various initiatives across the world to bring about regime change, nation-building or democracy, as they are variously labelled. True, there is almost always a happy coincidence between their strategic interests and their ideological activism. But what it points to is a willingness to go out on a limb and put American lives and money where your platitudes are. Somewhere between American activism and South Asian denial must lie the appropriate way to respond to a groundswell of support for political change in a neighbouring state.

**(4) What considerations should inform the decision to buy, sell and gift defence and other equipment to other states, and in the case of the recipient facing internal turmoil, should 'dual use' potential matter?**

It is easy to advocate such a middle ground but harder to define it in concrete terms. However, the sale or gift of arms and other defence equipment may be a good place to start that process. Situations like the one in the Maldives last week when an Indian naval vessel gifted to the Maldives allowed the Maldivian Coast Guard to harass dissidents coming to Male for a rally, prompt us to debate the conditions under which it is acceptable for our governments to supply certain materials to foreign governments. These include any items that, beyond their stated use, can be used against citizens where a conflict is already underway. Such supply effectively undermines any policy of non-interference and there should be clarity as to whether a government wants to be non-interfering and scrupulous in supplying these items or is clear that their supply is tantamount to taking sides.

Under what circumstances is it acceptable to supply arms and other 'dual use potential' materials to other states? In the conflict-ridden context of South Asia, it is about time this question was debated. There are two arguments for this. First, there is a moral argument that has to do with the ends served by the materials. In this variation of the means-ends dilemma, the question is whether the gift-giver or seller is not in some way culpable when the gift is used for dubious ends. The second argument is an old-fashioned national interest one, illustrated by the Maldives example. While India's gift of the naval vessel may have had to do with its reading of an expanding Chinese interest in South Asia, the use of that gift against Maldivian dissidents raises questions about whether India is committed to a friendship with the Maldivian regime or the Maldivian people. It is also noteworthy that the same foreign ministries that appear to be unconcerned about the consequences of their gifts have also been consistently critical of other governments' decisions to sell or gift arms to regimes of dubious legitimacy or regimes under pressure to democratize.