

THE MALDIVES:

On the cusp of change?

Great transformations start with small events.
Or so Maldivians might hope

By Swarna Rajagopalan

ON THE AUTUMNAL equinox weekend of 20-21 September 2003, a prison scuffle in which a fractious inmate struck an intervening policeman resulted in four prisoners' deaths and two rounds of rioting in Malé. The government responded as most governments under attack do—defensively and repressively. It tightened prison security, transferred prisoners to interrogation centres, attempted a secret burial, announced an inquiry and arrested security staff, while teargas shelling and arbitrary arrests followed in the city itself. Young people burnt government buildings, carried knives and iron rods and attacked government offices.

'Young People's Saturday', as a reader described it on a dissenting website that has been banned inside the republic, highlighted the dubious human rights record of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's 26-year-old presidency. Under Gayoom's leadership, the Maldives has followed a path akin to Singapore's, placing economic growth ahead of liberal democracy. Between 1978 and 2004, the Maldives has emerged as a premier upmarket tourist

destination. Shortly after the riots, Gayoom's (sole) candidacy was endorsed by 90 per cent of the voters in a presidential referendum.

That percentage obscures the existence of dissenting voices in the Maldivian populace, some underground, many abroad and a few in exile. Some of these are expatriate Maldivians; some are political activists in exile in England and Sri Lanka. A small part of the momentum for dissent also comes from Christian evangelical groups that have not been able to operate freely in the islands. The Internet is their main instrument for mobilization and propagation of their viewpoints.

The political critique begins with structural factors like the way the President is 'elected' and his powers. The President comes to power through a complex process that has been simplified in reality. The Commissioner of Elections identifies the eligible from among those who apply and passes on their names to the Speaker of the Majlis. The Speaker convenes the meeting at which the Majlis selects one candidate from the list of eligibles. That selection is ratified by a popular



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Maldives President Gayoom (right) with Pakistani Prime Minister Jamali at the SAARC summit in 2004

referendum. President Gayoom has won unopposed since 1978. Thus 'elected,' the Maldivian president combines within himself the major offices of state, is the final court of appeal and takes responsibility for the propagation of Islam. He enjoys legal immunity for life. He appoints eight members out of 50 in the People's Majlis and the Special Majlis convened for constitutional amendments, Atoll Chiefs, judges and the Auditor-General.

The operating style of the regime is also criticised. It is accused of corruption and nepotism. An article in the online newspaper, *Dhivehi Observer*, charts the omnipresence of President Gayoom's family and friends in the upper echelons of government.

An extensive charter of rights has not guaranteed freedom to Maldivians. The right to form associations has not extended to political parties in practice. The

Maldivian Democratic Party was first formed in 2001, but was unable to formally register itself. It now has 15 members in the Majlis although it operates in exile from Colombo. In February 2004, members were arrested for holding a rally in Malé. Claiming to have found subversive materials in the course of midnight raids, arrests were made of opposition activists. The MDP website, among others, has been banned in the Maldives. The right to freedom of expression has stopped short of dissenting views.

THE GOVERNMENT controls the media in the Maldives and the flow of news is strictly censored. For instance, the online edition of the *Evening Weekly* in the two weeks that followed last September's rioting, barely reported what had occurred. The first issue to appear thereafter reported that the public had

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heeded the appeal for calm, that the injured had received medical care and that the Cabinet had been briefed on security measures taken. The opinion page had articles on tourism, higher education and handicrafts. The BBC's message boards, however, had people writing in saying they had never seen protests like this before. The truth lies somewhere in between, as always, and remains elusive.

It is hard to gauge the support enjoyed by those who lobby for democratization and a change of government. Dissenting voices have found outlets in websites that are hosted abroad. But the Internet is a double-edged political tool; it allows anyone to propagate a view while remaining essentially anonymous. Without prejudice to the bona fides of those who have created and maintain sites like the proscribed Maldives Culture site (www.maldivesculture.com) and the independent online newspaper, the *Dhivehi Observer* (www.e-maldives.com), the fact remains that a browser cannot judge exactly how parochial or widely held the views they express are.

THE *DHIVEHI OBSERVER* claims it has been trying, in the face of grave risks, to conduct a survey on this very question. In May, an editorial reported that 87 per cent of people polled in Malé and the resort islands wanted a change in government. Most people are aware that a reformist movement exists and that political parties have been formed, although they are not allowed to function in the country. In open discussion boards, suggestions were solicited and received on different aspects of governance in need of reform. These findings remain claims because at the end of the day, we know this is what the

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editors of this paper would like us to believe.

More telling and a better indicator of the magnitude of discontent then, is the government response to recent developments. Beyond knee-jerk repression and the stock denials of Amnesty International's allegations, Gayoom's government has been slowly initiating change. Taking office for the sixth time in October 2003, the President promised reform, including the establishment of a human rights commission. On 9



Belying calm: All's not well in Paradise

June 2004, the President made the dramatic announcement that he was initiating a debate on constitutional reform. He outlined a few of his ideas and invited more from the people, promising to forward them without censorship. His ideas include election and term limits for the presidency, a possible adoption of the Parliamentary or French presidential model, proportional representation for the atolls and facilitating the registration of political parties. Reports suggest that this process will be considered in more quotidian con-

texts of governance as well. In the weeks following Gayoom's announcement last month, the Attorney-General announced that press regulations and police search procedures would be amended. Further, the Human Rights Commission of Maldives initiated deliberations to include human rights education in the curriculum. The government is unlikely to have responded to the cries of a scattered handful. Their response alone substantiates the idea that there is a groundswell of sup-



port, however subdued or tacit, for democratic reform in the Maldives.

For Maldivians, the most pressing question is: is this real or is this a honeying of the trap? For a people grown accustomed to self-censorship and compliance, it is hard to trust that things will be different. History has not favoured rebellion, and yet, this time may be different. Furthermore, will the commitment to reform yield a substantive enough structural transformation as to prevent future leaders from going down the same political path? Whether they will test the waters with ever-greater resolve or whether they will assume that their government is holding out the bait of reform to smoke out dissent once and for all, depends to a great extent on how strong within them is the imperative for change.



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You cannot always win: Gayoom with Vajpayee


For the rest of us who can look at this academically from a safe distance, what is happening takes us back to some longstanding political discussions.

THE DEMOCRACY debate in the Maldives contains echoes of the early 1990s debate between those championing universal human rights and those using cultural relativist arguments in opposition. Is the idea that democracy is a good thing for everybody a symptom of the global hegemony of Western ideas? Or,

is democracy in its broadest, noblest sense, truly a universal good? If, however, the universal acceptance of democracy is contingent upon a broad definition, then we step into the cesspool of definitional debate. At some point on the road to a broadly defined democracy, a society is in danger of not being democratic at all.

The Maldives' debate also revisits the argument that states must choose economic growth or political liberalism at a certain stage in their development. All over crowded, beleaguered South Asia, a strain of Singapore envy surfaces in after-dinner conversations. Those who argue that Gayoom's regime has done a good job because it has vaulted the Maldives to recognition as a dream holiday destination and brought in a great deal of tourism money, merely recapitulate this view. Democracy is messy, and in fact, impossible to generate in a poor country, it holds. Indians should have some interest in this issue, given that with all its imperfections, India's democracy does defy this view. The idea that maybe Maldivians are not suited to or ready for democracy is also mentioned by a couple of people writing in to online discussion boards. Whether cultural suitability or development state affect readiness for democracy is also a well-rehearsed and somewhat discredited discussion.

Finally, what is happening in the Maldives is reminiscent of the unpopular (but not inaccurate) argument by Samuel P. Huntington that at a certain point in economic development, in order to avoid revolutionary pressures, political institutions must open up and accommodate the newly empowered and mobilized social classes. Young Maldivians, who feature in most eyewitness accounts of last year's riots and who are, if anything, the products of the Gayoom regime, seem to epitomize this. Their needs met at some level, they now want access to more power, economic and political.

In sum, Maldivians find themselves at a moment that at once holds great promise and great threat. The promise lies in the articulation of a commitment to democratizing change; the threat lies in the fluidity of the situation. For South Asians in general, this is a moment in Maldivian history to which they must bear witness. 



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