

Maldives on the Brink of Revolution as the Hunger for Democracy Proves Insatiable

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For most of the 40,000 tourists who visit the Maldives - an Indian Ocean archipelago off the south-western coast of Sri Lanka - each month, the return home is accompanied with tales of idyllic tropical islands ringed by turquoise waters and soft white sands. For the 300,000 inhabitants however, paradise is accompanied by the hell of tyranny. According to Amnesty International, the government of President Maumoon Gayoom is characterised by the widespread use of torture, routine detention of political opponents and a grossly unfair legal system.

President Gayoom has ruled the Maldives with an iron fist for over 25 years. Recently, though, his grip appears to be slipping in the face of growing demands for democracy by an increasingly restless populous. As this article goes to press, a state of emergency has been introduced after a 5,000-strong anti-government demonstration in the capital, Male', was broken up by police baton-charges, tear gas and rubber bullets.

A year ago, the headline of this article would have sounded absurd. For 24 years Gayoom had managed to rule the Maldives with relatively little open dissent, internally at least. His leadership had been as strong as his methods were ruthless.

The Maldives is, to all intents and purposes, run along the lines of a police state, led by a near-omnipotent President. There are no political parties, there is no independent press and the police force, the office of the Attorney General, the Ministry of Justice and the Parliament are, in effect, run by the President. The unsurprising result is that although enshrined as fundamental rights under the constitution, civil liberties such as freedom of expression, association, the right not to be held arbitrarily, to a fair trial and to be free from torture are denied to Maldivian citizens. Gayoom's police and National Security Service (NSS),

accompanied by unofficial hired thugs, terrorise the people, crushing all dissent.

Gayoom makes no secret of his preferred style of governance. In his official biography, *A Man for all Islands*, published in 1998, there is musing of his first meeting with Saddam Hussein: "After dinner, Saddam took Maumoon [Gayoom] aside and told him that to govern a country he needed to have an organisation...it was only through a one-party system that he was able to govern effectively. Following that visit, Maumoon developed a close friendship with Saddam Hussein." A few pages on, Gayoom describes Fidel Castro as: "the revolutionary...whose name has become synonymous with freedom, justice and human dignity." Gayoom has always been Ba'athist in his political thinking but of particular concern is the way the international community has tolerated him for so long. Even today the Maldives is still a full member of the Commonwealth despite frequently breaking the Harare Principles with apparent impunity.

However, things started to go seriously wrong for Gayoom in September 2003. An unprecedented anti-government riot erupted in the Maldives after prison guards opened fire on unarmed inmates in the Maafushi Jail, located just outside the capital. When news of killings reached Male', spontaneous riots ensued, leaving the Electoral Commission and other government buildings in flames. Amnesty International described these riots as a political protest in response to the increasingly oppressive and brutal way Gayoom is ruling the island state. It appeared that the people had had enough.

Equally worrying for Gayoom has been the establishment of an organised opposition movement. The Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) was established in late 2003, in exile in Sri Lanka, with the

goal of bringing democracy and respect for the rule of law to the Maldives. However, as spokesperson for the party, Mohamed Latheef, comments, this goal will never be realised with Gayoom in power: "Gayoom is a dictator who sees himself as a heroic zaem who knows what is best for his supplicants/subjects. The concept of participatory, liberal democracy is completely alien to this Ba'athist Dictator...Look how much he spends on his military. As a proportion of GDP, the Maldives is one of the top ten defence spenders in the world and this in a small, peaceful island country that shares one religion, one ethnicity and one language."

Events of the last 12 months have also put the Maldives firmly on the international media radar screen. The BBC has reported from Male' frequently over the past year and dozens of newspapers have run stories on the Maldives, universal in their criticism of Gayoom. The only voice in support of the President is that of Hill & Knowlton, an international public relations firm, who have allegedly been paid \$2million by the Maldivian government to sing the praises of the President.

Along with recent pressure from international governments, notably from the British, Gayoom now appears more constrained than at any other point in his leadership. With an economy dependent on international aid and - mainly European - tourism he cannot afford to ignore the views of the international community who repeatedly demand democratic reform. Yet, by initiating a process of political liberalisation Gayoom risks his very position as leader. It is becoming glaringly obvious that his premiership is not, shall we say, based on the will of the people. Gayoom has instead tried to find a middle way, talking about reforms whilst attempting to prevent real change taking place.

Proposals for reforms were initiated in June 2004, including a pledge to rewrite the constitution. What perhaps Gayoom didn't bank on was the MDP taking a literal interpretation of his words. Within a week of the President's talk of freedom of speech and association, the MDP held numerous public meetings discussing how democracy could be introduced in the islands. The meetings were attended by over 1000 people - in a country where six months ago voicing 'views contrary to the government' risked a lengthy period in one of the Maldives' notorious prisons. The

regime attempted to counter the opposition movement with a campaign of dirty tricks, refusing to grant halls where meetings could take place and intimidating organisers. The opposition responded by holding 'picnics' on the beaches and 'birthday parties' in which the topic of debate for the thousands who attended was democracy, human rights and the desirability of Gayoom's resignation.

The scale of the protests on the evening of August 12, however, where 5,000 people gathered outside the NSS headquarters in central Male' calling for democratic reform and the release of political prisoners, seems to have seriously shocked the regime. It also appears to have caused a split in Gayoom's inner circle. During an emergency cabinet meeting, hardliners - headed by police chief Adam Zahir - seem to have won the argument. Soon after the meeting ended, thugs recognised as loyal to the regime were seen entering the crowd of peaceful protesters. They started to throw bottles at the police who, given a pretext, responded with baton-charges, tear gas and rubber bullets against the crowd. Dozens of people have reportedly been injured and waves of arrests of reformists have taken place. The capital remains under a tense curfew and armoured personnel carriers prowl the streets.

For Gayoom there are now two options: continue the crackdown, ignore the inevitable outrage of the international community and risk sanctions which would wreck the Maldivian economy, not to mention the 68 year-old President's place in history; or introduce genuine democratic reform and accept that bowing out gracefully is the best option for everyone, even if it means Gayoom and his cronies become part of Maldivian history quicker than they would like.

As the tear gas begins to lift on the streets of the capital, the next few weeks will be crucial for the future of the country and the stability of the wider region. Gayoom's policy of fudging reform is in tatters. There is now little centre ground between the poles of liberal democracy and Zimbabwe-fication in the Maldives.

Friends of Maldives is an organisation devoted to improving awareness around the world of the Maldives and the Maldivian People. See: www.friendsofmaldives.co.uk ■