



Evolving Democracy in Maldives: Experience and Expectations

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ABSTRACT

Maldives being the archipelagic South Asian Islamic nation of the Indian Ocean enjoys crucial geostrategic location as it is situated in the crucial Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) which connects Suez Canal and the Straits of Hormuz to India, Southeast Asia and East Asia. It is perceived that since Maldives is situated in such high point location of the Indian Ocean, any development in Male will either have a direct or an indirect effect not only in the region but also to the entire globe under the umbrella of globalization although it is a small nation. These factors have caused great interest among scholars and the world community in studying the political development and emerging democracy of Maldives. This research paper throws light on the entire process of the evolving democracy from colonial period to the present time in Maldives. In this endeavor the paper chalks out the salient assumptions of democracy and their interplay in the South Asian Islamic nation- Maldives which has long history of Sultanate system and colonialism. An attempt is prepared to analyse step by step evolution of Maldivian democracy through highlighting its Constitutional development. The article concludes with a brief description of achievements of the toddler democracy along with the major challenges it is confronting in the course of its action in the Maldivian society.

Introduction

Maldives is an archipelagic Islamic nation of South Asia with a population of 418,000 people. This is small nation but its geostrategic location in the Indian Ocean spanning the crucial Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) which connects Suez Canal and the Straits of Hormuz to India, Southeast Asia and East Asia draws a lot of attention from the entire International Community¹. Therefore on the nation's political development each ambitious state has an eye. Maldives is continuously struggling to have a stable and secure democracy which could assure peace, development and security for each Maldivian people. The nation saw more than 800 years' of Sultanate System followed by colonial rule and finally got independence in 1965 from British suzerainty². It witnessed thirty years' of autocratic rule of Gayoom from 1987 to 2008 which subsequently ended with the adoption of a constitution providing multi-party democracy. Since then the evolution of democracy started taking place in the nation which has monarchical and autocratic political history and culture³. The democracy provides many opportunities in the form of rights, liberties, popular government, elections and so on through which the people could assure their development and contentment. However there are so many challenges confronted by the democracy which hinder the people's aspirations to be fulfilled such as weak democratic institutions like judiciary, Election Commission, Islamic fundamentalism, extremism, terrorism, corruption, political motivated violence, elitism, favoritism, patronage politics as well as poverty, gender discrimination etc. Hence the transition caused so many implications and confusion in the political culture of the nation which has potential research gap for scholars. The democracy has been supported by its necessary political superstructure consisting legislature, executive, judiciary, periodical elections, democratic constitution however from socio-economic base it could not get the needed full-fledged reinforcement. It is because of the nation's distinct social, political and economic culture. The consolidation of democracy in the society of South Asian poor Islamic nation which has monarchical, colonial and autocratic history is the major challenge not only for the political leaders and people who want democracy.

This research paper will discuss the whole process of development along with the implications it draws in the nation. How far democracy succeeded to establish itself in the South Asian country and what kind of challenges it is facing in the Islamic close society will also be deliberated.

Democracy, South Asia and Maldives

As an ancient theory democracy went through a long evolutionary process and in 20th century got accepted as principle of governance universally⁴. Francis Fukuyama through his seminal text ‘The End of History and the Last Man’ seemed proclaiming the final victory of liberal democracy while countering its core enemies such as Fascism, Nazi and communism or in other words the USSR⁵. As it is a contested concept⁶ on the basis of distinct arguments it could be classified into so many types such as Procedural v/s Substantive Democracy, Direct v/s Indirect Democracy, Liberal v/s Socialist Democracy, Deliberative Democracy and so on⁷. Generally in theory democracy upholds principles like popular politics, government by the people, majority rule, representation, liberties, rights and equality⁸ However in practice such holy doctrines appear as mere abstraction due to the great dominance of elite class. In reality the ordinary people feel cheated in the name of rights and liberties guaranteed by democracy where except during elections they don’t have any crucial role to play⁹. In this research paper the evolution and condition of democracy in Maldives will be understood.

South Asia is a region where to understand democracy comprehensively scholars have to consider so many complex phenomenon and their relations with each other such as socio-economic as well as politico-historical background, and influence of globalization. Historically these societies are feudal, conservative and patriarchal in nature however democracy with almost contradictory principles like equality, liberty and social justice emerged in these societies as resulted from the European decolonization waves¹⁰. While considering its traditional political culture it has been observed that politics and religion enjoy close and considerable relationship with each other under the umbrella of monarchy. However under the 300 years of colonial rules a new form of government – democracy which is exclusively influenced by modernization and globalization started taking its shape in this region. Transition started occurring and its feudalist monarchical system evolved to a democratic one where it is assumed that liberty, equality and social justice will be assured. Notably for South Asian countries it has not been that easy to shed old skin and to have new one, and in doing so they have to confront unrest and struggle¹¹. Prof S D Muni while throwing light on the connections between democracy, development and discontent in South Asia

highlights that South Asia is a region which is needed to be explored comprehensively with proper consideration of political superstructure and socio-economic base. Generally while studying democracy in South Asia its political superstructures are focused where the institutions and process guaranteeing democracy are considered such as Executive, Legislature, judiciary, political parties, electoral machinery, Electoral procedures and so on, however its socio-economic base consisting religion, culture, tradition, socio-economic system and their relations with the democracy should have to be critically included¹².

A transformation from an autocratic state to a democratic one as happened in Maldives is satisfactory to observe but painful to process for the society. Unlike any exceptions Maldives as a south Asian poor state, is struggling with its fragile democracy which seems inefficient as per the expectations to provide stability, peace and most significantly development to the subjects. Under the 2008 constitutions a multi-party democratic government had been established in Maldives resulted from mass movement and great struggle. Such fight for democracy had been overly appreciated and supported by the international community. However in terms of reinforcement of the democratic bodies and process for the assurance of liberty, equality, socio-economic justice, freedom of expression and rule of law in the archipelagic Islamic nation has not been an easy task¹³.

Historical Background

Sultanate system prevailed in the archipelagic nation for more than 800 years (1153AD-1965). The political system more often operated like a constitutional monarchy where the *Sultan* (King) generally took decisions as per the advice of its administrative council.

Arrival of the European Colonial Powers: Portuguese, Dutch & Britain

Like any other South Asian Countries the island nation witnessed significant transition under the influence of the alien rulers. Since the regime of Sultan Ali Vi (1557 AD- 1558 AD) Maldives was invaded by Portuguese and lost its independence. Since then Male saw 15 years of Portuguese rule. After Portuguese it was controlled by Dutch and Britain. In 1887 Maldives became the Protectorate state of the British government, since than its external matters were handled by the alien ruler while internal administration was governed by the Sultan. Britain and

Maldives signed five agreements to formulize their relations from 1887 to 1965, through the very last pact, and British right over Addu Atoll diminished from 100 to 30 years due to the praiseworthy efforts and dynamic leadership of Ershad. Finally due to the strong determination and vibrant leadership of Ershad Maldives won its independence in 1965¹⁴.

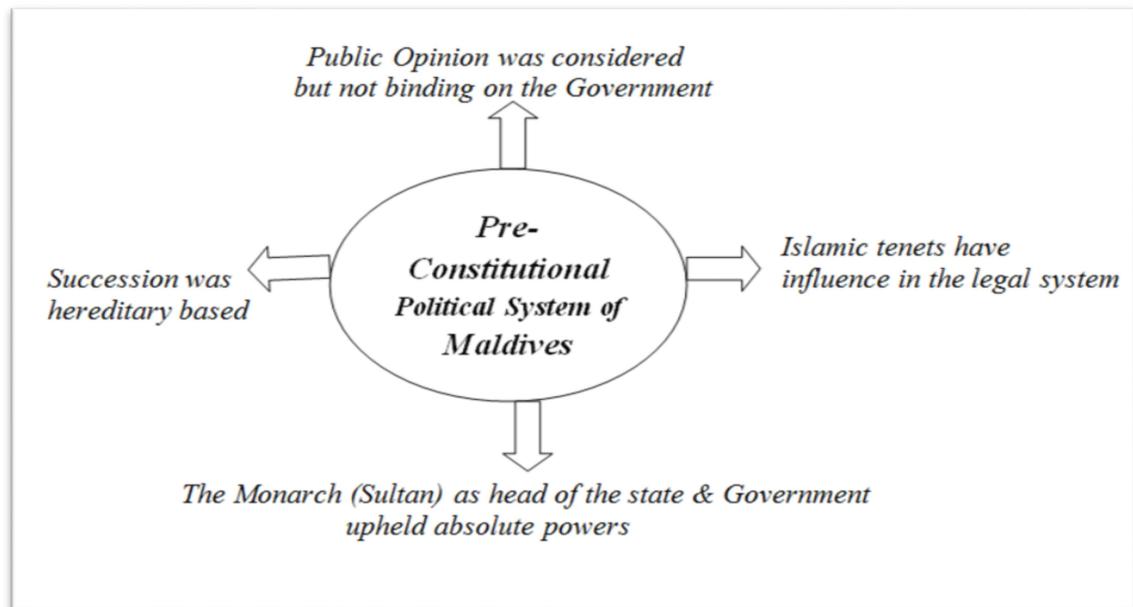


Figure 1.

Note: This figure shows the salient characteristics of pre-constitutional (before 1932) political system of Maldives.

Source: The author made this figure with the information available in ¹⁵ Behera (2011)

CONSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Sultanate system was traditionally existed in Maldives which started transforming into democratic one under the influence of colonial rule of Britain. When Maldives was a British dominion, constitutional development was initiated by the then Sultan- Sultan ShamsudeenIskandar III (1903-1934)¹⁶

In the process the state witnessed total six constitutions, the final one is the 2008 constitution which assures multi-party democracy in Male.

Table 1

<u>Constitutional Development of Maldives</u>
I Constitution assuring the very first representative government (1932)
II Constitution – this forced Male back to the monarchy (1942)
III Constitution – It assured a transition to the first republican government. (1953)
IV Constitution- It provided almost an unfortunate return back to Sultanate system. (1954)
V Constitution – Under the constitution male got its second republican government. Notable the constitution declared Maldives as an Independent state rather than a British dominion.
VI Constitution of Maldives- It is the latest constitution of the nation which assures multi-party democracy. (2008)

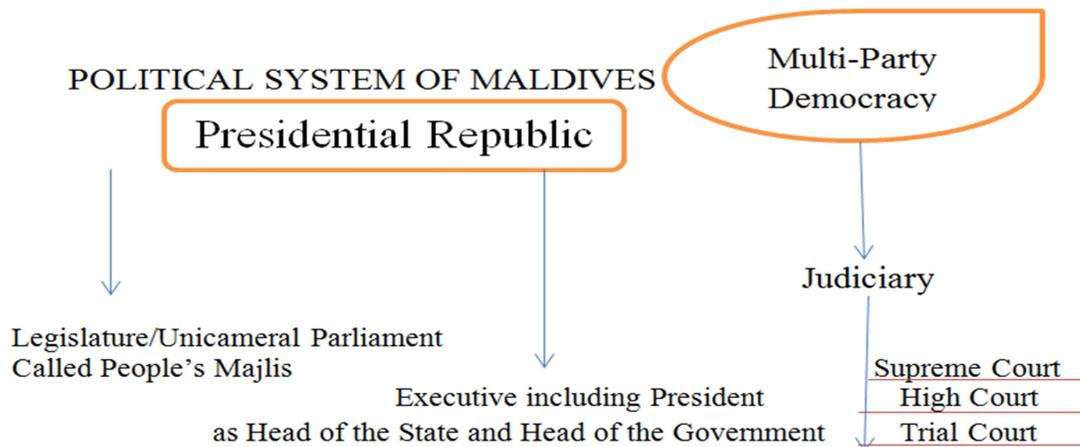
Note: This Table shows the Constitutional Development of Maldives from 1932-2008

Source: The author made this figure with the information available in ^{17 18} Behera (2011), Kumar, (2016)

The latest constitution provided a multi-party democracy and a fresh set of democratic rights, separation of powers and numerous provisions to guarantee accountability and transparency. A presidential form of government is established where the executive powers are vested in the hands of Maldivian Presidents. By Universal Suffrage the Parliament called People’s Majlis and the President are directly elected, and an Independent Judiciary is provided to safeguard the constitution as well as to protect the Fundamental Rights including freedom of the media, assembly and association. Further the constitution laid provisions to establish various crucial independent commissions for guaranteeing judicial independence, organizing elections, preventing and countering corruption, protecting human rights and providing efficient public services¹⁹. Islamic laws enjoy significant influence over the legal system of Maldives and any law which violates Islam is not permitted under the Maldivian Constitution^{20 21}

Figure 2.

Political System of Maldives



Note:

In this figure the political system of Maldives has been shown.

Source: The figure is prepared by the author with the information drawn from ^{22 23} The government and political system in Maldives, retrieved on Nov 3, 2022 from <https://www.studycountry.com/guide/MV-government.htm>, Maldives, Encyclopedia Britannica, retrieved on Nov 3, 2022 from <https://www.britannica.com/place/Maldives#ref4500> The government and political system in Maldives

Evolution of democracy

To understand the evolution of Democracy in Maldives consideration of political development of Maldives Particularly since Gayoom reign is necessary. Although with the Constitutional Development (1932) democracy started taking its shape in the soil of the nation however it is under Gayoom Regime it has taken its full-fledged form and came out in 2008 with the latest multi-party democratic constitution and government which was absolutely distinct then the old long existing monarchical government.

The Thirty Years of Autocratic Rule (1978-2008) - Maldives witnessed thirty years of virtual dictatorship of Gayoom where all the power of states was absolutely enjoyed by him²⁴. Gayoom played significant role in the political development of Maldives for a long time period since 1978 to present. His government was credited to increase Maldives' average income from US\$ 377 to US\$ 3,654 ²⁵. However under his virtual dictatorship corruption, political persecution, rise of fundamentalism, patronage politics, and so many problems have also

increased²⁶. The long regime witnessed pro-democratic movement led by the leader of Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) – Nasheed since 2000 which later resulted in adoption of the new Constitution of Maldives in 2008. The latest constitution laid the foundation of democratic multi-party system in the nation²⁷. The transition from autocracy to democracy had not been so smooth. Gayoom tried his level best to suppress the demands for democracy. Many MDP's leaders and more than 250 protesters were jailed in the anti-government demonstrations held in August 12-13 2004. On October 11, 2004 state of emergency was imposed by Gayoom, nevertheless under the internal as well as external pressure of International Community consisting the UN, the EU, the UK, the US and the Commonwealth particularly he had to ratify a fresh public constitution to provide multiparty democracy as he had understood the fact if he did not accept the popular demand through the strong backlash wave will lose his political power as well as his reputation among the Maldivian subjects^{28 29}. In the presidential Elections of 2008, Nasheed got victory and became the very first president of multiparty democracy of Male however he failed to get majority in 2009 parliamentary elections and established a coalition government with Adhaalath Party (AP). Unfortunately due to lack of political experience & capability, he failed to sustain the system, manage his position in the coalition government and fulfill the challenging aspirations of his subjects and resigned. He resigned with his other leaders in the hope to win majority in the next elections however his opponents led by one of the most experienced and efficient politician Gayoom did not give him the chance to win in the upcoming elections until 2018³⁰.

Democracy in Maldives after Nasheed - After Nasheed's resignation the then Vice President of Maldives- Dr. Mohamed Waheed Manik became the next provisional President by chance, unfortunately he was not interested in the democratic development and after winning the power started pleasing those with unjust political favors in return who supported him to be the president. Further he misused his powers in best possible way to secure his position. He delayed the upcoming general elections too however again under the International pressure and internal demands the second multiparty presidential and parliamentary elections were organized and in 2013 Abdulla Yameen the half-brother of Gayoom with his alliance won and became the president. During Yameen's period Male witnessed rise of religious fundamentalism, terrorism, extremism, corruption, and political violence.

Further he sponsored unlawful detention and manipulation of democratic institutions like judiciary, Election Commission, Police etc. for his political interests^{31 32}.

Nasheed nudged international community to secure the fragile democracy and subsequently with the support of united opposition who were fed up of Yameen's dictatorial style of ruling MDP'S candidate Solih won the presidential elections against Yameen and became the president of Male in 2018³³.

In the elections the alliance comprised the MDP, AP, JP, and MRM collectively secured 58.4 percent of the total popular votes, left Yameen with 41.6 percent votes and after the transition Maldivian democracy is seemed restored again³⁴.

Condition of Maldivian Democracy

Democracy is a contested concept³⁵ which has so many interpretations in the forms of different theories of democracy as we have already discussed nevertheless generally when we talk about democracy we are referring to the liberal democracy which got recognized and widely accepted in all over the world since the post-cold war period³⁶. Thus to analyse Maldivian Democracy the salient features of liberal theory of democracy have been preferred which are as follows: republican constitutional government, majority rule, multi-party, rights and liberties for every subject, periodical elections, and universal adult franchise³⁷. As already discussed Maldivian political system fulfills all these parameters and justifies its claim of having a democratic government. It has a republican constitution and government since 2008 where every citizen has the entire political rights, right to cast vote under universal adult franchise as well as to be a part of the government and its head through fighting in the periodical elections. As per the 2008 constitution Maldives has multi-parties who compete with each other to get the power and govern the nation such as Maldives Adhaalath (Justice) Party (AP), Maldivian Development Alliance (MDA), Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM), and Republican (Jumhooree) Party (JP)³⁸. In the elections those candidates who won majority enjoy the political power and work as the representatives of the people.

Kelson provides autonomy as the key feature of democracy in which laws are decided by those only on whom they are going to apply, and considering this one could say that Male has democratic political system as each

citizen enjoys autonomy to determine the law and order through their representatives. Schumpeter and Dahl focus on 'competition and contestation' as the key characteristic of democracy. In the nation to govern one has to compete and win the elections too. Here the notable point is that the term contestation upholds mainly three assumptions: First the chief executive of the state as President in the case of Maldives must be elected, second the legislature which is called the People's Majlis in the nation must be elected and finally there must be more than single political party as under the 2008 Constitution of Male multi-party system is provided resulted in many political parties who compete and win in the elections to govern³⁹. Nevertheless there are some loop holes in the Maldivian democracy which are as follows: absence of special provisions to protect civil and political rights and liberties of the minorities as the latest constitution recognizes Islam as the state's religion⁴⁰. Although there are provisions to provide autonomous bodies to secure democracy and the constitution like Judiciary, Election Commission, and so on but often they appear weak in their functioning and being manipulated by influential political leaders and bureaucrats for their political ambitions⁴¹. These are one of the major challenges before its democracy. Other challenges are Islamic fundamentalism, extremism, terrorism, corruption, political motivated violence, elitism, favoritism, patronage politics as well as poverty, gender discrimination etc.^{42 43}.

Conclusion

Emerging democracy in Maldives has been going through so many ups and downs as it faced various reversals during its course of origin through Constitutional development. It is easy to discuss the setbacks democracy is facing in the nation but notable for scholars to observe its political history where it witnessed almost 800 years of the Sultanate System, Colonialism, thirty years' autocratic rule of Gayoom along with its distinct political culture especially which is unsuitable for democracy. However after a long struggle for democracy under the leadership of Nasheed under the first constitution assuring multi-party democracy in 2008 the democracy started establishing itself in Maldivian political System. Since 2008 to present the nation got four Presidents – Nasheed, Waheed, Yameen and Solih who managed the toddler democracy as per their capacities and whims. The multiparty democracy offers not only so many rights, freedoms and opportunities but also the hope for a nation where peace, security and development could be guaranteed to the subjects. Nevertheless in the course of its action it is

confronting so many challenges such as weak autonomous bodies to secure democracy and the constitution like Judiciary, Election Commission, lack of efficient democratic leaders to manage democracy in all odd situations, immature and undemocratic party politics to gain power, struggle between radical Islam and liberal Islam, Islamic fundamentalism, extremism, terrorism, corruption, political motivated violence, elitism, favoritism, patronage politics as well as poverty, gender discrimination and so on. These short stories reveal the experiences of the society directly caused by the evolving democracy as well as the basic expectations like peace, security and development under the umbrella of an inclusive Maldivian democracy; the people could have from the new system for which they have struggled a lot for a long period of time.

The article makes the following recommendations in relation to Emerging democracy of Maldives:

- In the current context of multiparty democratic governments of Maldives democracy has been found struggling with so many loop holes as we have already discussed such problems faced by democracy could be minimized if the government, political parties and citizens together started demanding, promoting and practicing Good Governance where political and bureaucratic accountability, Regular Elections, Rule of law, inclusive participation, independence of Judiciary, freedom of information, transparency, effective and efficient administration, and System Cooperation between the civil society and government could be guaranteed.
- Political leaders and political parties of Maldives need to be more matured democratically and liberal version of Islam should be adopted by them at least while conducting their public sphere. They are the wheels of democracy if they truly try to harvest a supportive platform for democracy not only through public policies but also through promoting democratic political culture than nothing could stop Male from having a stable and develop democracy.

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