

The formation (and dissolution?) of a democratic politics in the Maldives

As an American Fulbright scholar affiliated with the Faculty of Shari'ah and Law at the only public institution of higher education in the Maldives – the Maldives College of Higher Education, on the capital island Male' – I taught constitutional law and witnessed a society poised on the edge of an electoral revolution and the ouster of a thirty year (1978-2008) developmental autocracy. This article recounts observations, informal interviews (conducted during the 2007-2008 academic year) and local press accounts of events and political factors culminating in a bloodless regime change in 2008.

Scott Morrison

Abbreviated history of the Maldives and the *ancien regime*

The Republic of the Maldives consists of just under 200 inhabited and 1000 uninhabited islands, distributed across 19 coral atolls in the Indian Ocean, southwest of India and Sri Lanka. According to the most recent census, in 2006, the population is under 300,000 with approximately one-third living on the capital island Male'.¹ Probably Buddhist prior to the introduction of Islam by Arab traders,² and the official establishment of Islam in the mid-twelfth century,³ the Maldives was a hereditary sultanate (headed by sultans and at least one sultana) continuously – across interludes of Portuguese, Dutch, and finally British (1887-1965) colonial interventions – until the first Republic was established, governed by President Amin Didi (1953-1954). The 94th and last sultan (Fareed Didi) resumed rule (1954-1967), finally giving way in 1968 to the existing Republic of the Maldives.

The original and all subsequent constitutions of the Republic, including the most recent in 2008,⁴ make the acceptance of Sunni Islam a citizenship requirement (chapter 1 article 9 of current constitution), no law inconsistent with 'any tenet of Islam' may be enacted (chapter 1 article 10a), and Islam is one basis among several for Maldivian law (chapter 1 article 10b). The legislative power resides in a unicameral People's Majlis. However, constitutional and political restraints on the power of the President were weak or non-existent during the single party state of the Dhivehi Nationalist (*Dhivehi Rayyithunge*) Party (the DRP); *Dhivehi* refers to the language and self-ascribed ethnicity of Maldivians. From the coup that brought him to power in 1978, Maumoon Gayoom led the DRP and held the Presidency until 2008.

Geography and a rentier economy helped preserve a pluralized autocratic regime under the single-party state. Foreign tourists were restricted to resort islands (uninhabited by Maldivians, unless they worked there), minimizing their contact with Maldivians, and ensuring a stream of revenue through island leases and a bed tax on tourist accommodation. The Maldives under President Gayoom typified a neo-patrimonial state,⁵ one in which informal patron-client relationships were incorporated into formal political institutions, such as parties, parliament, ministries, the civil service and departments of the state. President Gayoom used such strategies to expand and preserve his patron-client relationships, depending on personal and family networks, treating high offices as rewards for supporters, and shuffling cabinet and ministerial posts to prevent the accumulation of significant power in the hands of any one potential rival. Outside of Male', he constructed a network of clientelism and patronage encompassing atoll chiefs and local island headmen (*khatib*).

The first modest experiment with liberalization and electoralism under President Gayoom occurred in 1988, with an uncontested referendum on his presidency, resulting in a total of four more five-year terms. No opposition candidate ran in the subsequent plebiscites of 1993, 1998, and 2003.

Maldives' democratic revolution

In November 2008, in the first competitive presidential election since 1978, the electorate voted out President Gayoom, and relegated the DRP to the opposition. The triumphant party was the first opposition party formed during the Gayoom era, in 2004: the Maldives Democratic Party (MDP). How did a largely

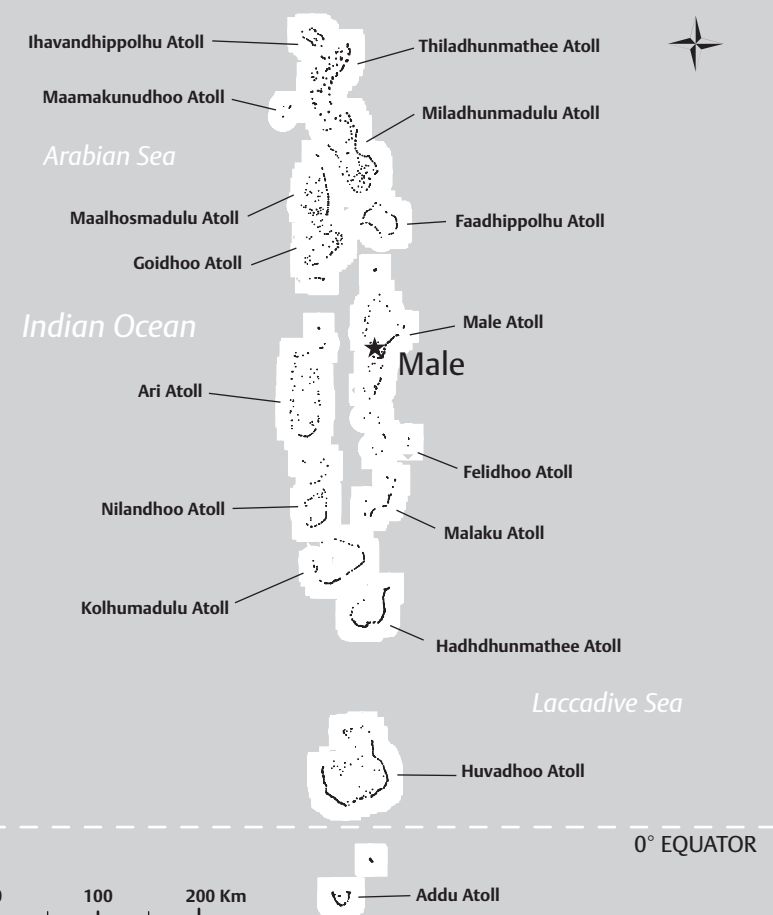
quiescent and apolitical populace produce an opposition movement culminating in a protest party able to wrest power from a highly entrenched regime, the head of which controlled the press and media, presiding over a system of law and security favorable to economic development, without meaningful political reform over several decades?

Although the small-scale and scattered resistance, dealt with by repressive measures, did not begin with the beating to death of Evan Naseem, democratic activists cite this event as a tipping point at which popular acquiescence to autocratic politics diminished, and was swept away by outrage against police abuse and the excessive (and unusually fatal) use of force by the state. Naseem was killed by officers of the National Security Services (the NSS) in Maafushi prison in September 2003; the killing caused a prison riot, which was forcefully suppressed. In August 2004, a large public gathering commemorating Evan Naseem took place in Republic Square, the central plaza on the north side of Male' that is bordered by the police headquarters, the formidable NSS compound, and the National Mosque, and which is in close proximity to the President's Office on the coastal road, *Thakurufaanu Magu*. President Gayoom ordered the police to disperse the crowd. Two hundred demonstrators were arrested and subjected to various forms of mistreatment, including assault, food deprivation and in some cases sexual abuse, while detained. The incident became known as 'Black Friday.'

In December of the same year, the tsunami triggered by a submarine earthquake off the coast of Indonesia, flooded some of the Maldivian islands, including Male', inflicting property damage and a number of deaths. The inability of the government to protect its citizens from the flooding, and the resulting self-reliance – including the theft of sandbags from construction sites by normally law-abiding citizens – purportedly helped to motivate resistance and political opposition.

Six months later, in June 2005, the Gayoom administration lifted the ban on political opposition parties. Mohammad Nasheed (also known as 'Anni') promptly publicly declared the secret MDP, whose main mission had been to criticize and undermine President Gayoom and his regime, from the safety of exile in Salisbury, England, where Nasheed and his colleagues based themselves and established an anti-regime newspaper, *The Dhivehi Observer*. Nasheed revisited Republic Square on the first anniversary of Black Friday, in August 2005; he was arrested and imprisoned, not to be released until a year later in the summer of 2006. The public received him as a hero, and he began to enjoy a career as a populist leader – one who clearly knows how to work a crowd.

Support for the MDP grew, although it remained concentrated in the urban center of Male'. The geography of the Maldives poses a severe test for political organizers, especially for a party with a short history, unlike the decades and resources the DRP had at its disposal. Of the small proportion of islands that are populated, they are sparsely so, and widely dispersed; costly and limited air travel and extremely slow travel by sea between the atolls increases the challenge. And yet the MDP had to penetrate the outer islands, which had been controlled by President Gayoom due to his ability to appoint *khatibs* and atoll chiefs, as Male' constituted at most a third of the national population,



The Gayoom regime was the victim of its own success; high literacy and economic development helped build a growing middle class that displayed a greater interest in politics.

which was obviously not enough to win an election against the incumbent with his historic control over the poorer and less educated populations in the outer atolls.

The Gayoom administration did not grant the MDP any opportunity to rehearse for a campaign or indeed for any form of electoral contestation until August 2007, when the government proposed a referendum on the political system of the Maldives, with a choice offered between the existing presidential form, or conversion to a parliamentary electoral system. The referendum did not expressly admit candidates or political parties. President Gayoom called for this referendum as an item in his own 'roadmap to reform,' which he touted as a path that would guide the Maldives to liberal democracy. Arguably, he also advanced the referendum as an attempt to weaken the opposition and dampen dissent that had emerged in the relative turbulence of the preceding three years. An additional component of this reform package was a Special Majlis to consider revisions to the constitution and ultimately to amend it in its entirety, with the current constitution the result. To this observer, the intent of both constitutional revision and the referendum was to buttress the status quo, and to demoralize or mitigate the popularity of the MDP, as President Gayoom could reasonably have calculated that the electorate would opt for the familiarity of the presidential system.

It was evident from observations at the time that the subtleties of the parliamentary or presidential systems were confusing to, if not lost altogether on, most Maldivians, even in Male'. The pro-Presidential camp consisted, unsurprisingly, of the DRP and the President's Office, although the literature they distributed on the streets was couched as non-partisan and informational only, without any explicit party affiliation. By contrast the only active opposition party, forced into the parliamentary camp (as the only alternative to the President), more openly expressed a party identity, complete with a campaign color (yellow) and insignia in evidence (a thumbs-up sign with the words "barulamanee" – denoting the Parliamentary option – in caption). During the run up to the referendum, the MDP developed an elaborate block to block organization within Male', and began to diffuse among outer islands using traditional Maldivian boats (dhoni) refashioned into campaign/party boats. President Gayoom's calculations were correct in that the presidential system prevailed; an apparent vote for stasis and for President Gayoom personally. Although this was a setback for the MDP, and many in Male' expressed disappointment and frustration, the process was in retrospect a valuable rehearsal that allowed the party personnel and volunteers to gain organizational skills and develop greater contact with the electorate at large, albeit over a compressed time-frame.



Above: The capital of the Maldives, Male'.
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With the opposition losing its effort to exclude, on constitutional grounds, President Gayoom, and the office that he had occupied for nearly three decades, the incumbent mounted his own attempts to rehabilitate himself, complete with the creation of a new campaign symbol: a hand, with palm facing outwards. The meaning of this symbol was highly contested and ridiculed; was it the hand of Fatima, or a hand stopping change? President Gayoom made visits to many islands, adopted a theme song, and held rallies with live music and light shows. On voting day, 28 October 2008, there were some reports of fraud, although international observers were present. The turn-out was a remarkable 85% (with over 209,000 eligible voters). Six parties competed in the first round; only two, with the highest number of votes, would be allowed to proceed to the second round. The results were:

Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (DRP)	incumbent (40%)
Maldives Democratic Party (MDP)	Mohammad Nasheed (25%)
New Maldives	Hassan Saeed (16%)
Republican Party	Gasim Ibrahim (15%)
Islamic Democratic Party (IDP)	Umar Naseer (1.5%)
Social Liberal Party (SLP)	Ibrahim Ismail (< 1%)

The second round thus involved the DRP and the MDP; it took place early the following month. The MDP entered into an alliance with the SLP, the New Maldives, and the Republican Party; the IDP refused to support any other party and withdrew from the presidential race. The results were a significant victory for the MDP led by Mohammad Nasheed (54%); he and his running mate, Mohammad Waheed, were sworn in on 11 November 2008.

However, at time of press, President Nasheed resigned the Presidency, or was forced out in a coup executed by the police and NSS. The former Vice President Mohammad Waheed replaced him. It is impossible to say whether this development means the thorough dissolution of a democratic politics in the Maldives, or a temporary reversion.

Explanations of the electoral revolution

The traditional indicator of two alternations of power to constitute a change in regime as a transition to democracy was not met in the Maldives. Nevertheless, what does this little known case of electoral revolution add to political science literature? What hypotheses does it generate and what theories may help to explain it? Setting aside issues of scale and locality, which limit the ability to generalize from this single rather unique case, the initial electoral revolution in the Maldives tests several explanatory factors advanced by democratization theorists.

Islamic parties and identity did not play a significant causal role in the revolution; the one explicitly Islam-identified party (the IDP) has at no time been an important political player, as its electoral results reflected. While a constitutionally Islamic state (both before and after the initial change in regime), insofar as Islamic discourse or identity possess any explanatory power with reference to the Maldives' modern political history, it is as an explanation for the durability of the Gayoom regime. Himself an *'alim*, educated at al-Azhar in Cairo, and taking his first teaching position in Kano, Nigeria, President Gayoom made frequent pronouncements on Islamic ethics and theology. He also regulated activities and speech in mosques through a governmental Ministry of Islamic

Affairs. Whether this Islamic dressing aided and sustained his regime is an unknowable counter-factual. However, the regime's eventual defeat and the forms of resistance that it met reveal the oft-noted double-edged character of a religion-based state ideology. For example, President Gayoom was unusually and publicly criticized for supporting the legality of music, and allowing alcohol to be served on resort islands.

Unsurprisingly, following his electoral loss, President Gayoom never explained the motives behind his 'roadmap to reform' or the political liberalization that led to his downfall, beyond asserting the desirability of a style of 'guided' democracy for the Maldives. Was external influence or pressure on the regime a contributing factor? The Maldivian government and the MDP each maintained ties with British MPs, playing host to them during visits; the MDP and the larger democracy movement, of which it was a part, became a subject of discussion in the British Parliament, but the actual impact on the domestic political outcome of this most influential among international players, Britain, appears to have been limited. The U.S. made no public statements against the Gayoom regime and did not publicly promote democracy, nor did it encourage or aid the MDP; U.S. Ambassador Robert Blake stated that he met with both the government and opposition groups in 2007, although he did not publicly lend support to the democracy movement in the Maldives, seeking instead to maintain friendly ties with the current regime. Even though NGO's (e.g., the Open Society Institute, various human rights organizations, the U.N., the Red Cross) maintained a presence in Male' in the run up to the election, they made little impact and generally cooperated with the regime.⁶ President Gayoom did suffer some international pressure and criticism, mainly from foreign media (memorably, the BBC), for his human rights record and his apparent reluctance to hold elections earlier, or to allow spirited opposition and dissent. Whether or not such censure reduced his willingness to continue in government cannot be determined.

One central causal factor explaining the transfer of power in the Maldives is almost certainly that the MDP made a private or tacit bargain with Maumoon Gayoom, allowing him to remain in the Maldives, and to continue his leadership of the DRP in opposition. It is difficult to decipher what Gayoom's own position and intentions were from his public statements. For his part, Nasheed consistently struck a forgiving and conciliatory tone, stating (against the wishes of many Maldivians) that Maumoon Gayoom would stay in the Maldives, and that his treatment was a test of the nascent Maldivian democracy, and that Gayoom could continue to be active in politics. However, the terms of the bargain between the MDP and then President Gayoom are not clear.

The peaceful conduct of the campaign and the transfer of power is consistent with the recent history of the Republic of the Maldives, where the populace has almost without exception avoided resorting to violence, despite suffering a frankly oppressive political and legal order. Although gang and drug-related violence and other low-level street crime is a perennial issue in the press, violence is rare and when it does occur it seldom involves weapons, and almost never firearms. A very rare exception was a bombing in Sultan's Park in September 2007, which injured several foreign tourists. In addition, in December 2007, Gayoom was the

target of an assassination attempt while campaigning at a DRP rally on Hoarafushi; the would-be assassin, concealing a knife under a Maldivian flag, lunged at the President only to be stopped, not by his security detail but by a Boy Scout who was standing nearby and who was subsequently celebrated as a minor celebrity and national hero.

The theorized correlation between a substantial, growing middle class and democracy is a plausible component in the transition's explanation. Relative to the rest of South Asia, the Maldives is comparatively wealthy, although the wealth is not evenly distributed and the prominence of resorts and high-end tourism preserves this status quo – with substantial revenue flowing directly to government rents and foreign companies, but paying low wages to Maldivians and foreign workers. The Gayoom regime was the victim of its own success; high literacy and economic development helped build a growing middle class that displayed a greater interest in politics and a capacity to organize than had been evident in the earlier decades of President Gayoom's administration. For instance, the political organizers of the MDP were disproportionately college educated, i.e., more educated than the average Maldivian, and their educational credentials implied that they were from relatively more prosperous families or beneficiaries of a government or other grant, which had allowed them to study abroad.

The Maldives, a rather obscure country due to its location and geography, is nevertheless known to the outside world, most likely for its tropical beaches and exclusive resorts, and perhaps also for its extreme exposure to rising sea levels and world climatic transformations. However, the politics of the country, while idiosyncratic and evolving with some detachment from the rest of the South Asian region and larger global context are, as the events of the last few years (and days) demonstrate, dynamic, unpredictable, and of not insignificant interest to the study of socio-political and democratic change.

Scott Morrison is an independent scholar, with a focus on Islamic studies/Middle Eastern (Arab and Turkish political) studies in the modern era; Maldives; Muslim political thought. (smsmorrison@gmail.com)

Notes

- 1 Island and population statistics taken from the Maldives Department of Planning; <http://tinyurl.com/7efq57e> and <http://tinyurl.com/6ryyze> (accessed 15 September 2011).
- 2 Didier, Brian, and Edward Simpson. Fall 2005. 'Islam Along the South Asian Littoral'. *Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World Review*. 16, p. 43.
- 3 According to Ibn Battutah, who lived in the Maldives 1332-1334 and wrote about the institutionalization of Islam in his *Rihlah*.
- 4 Dheena Hussain, transl., *Functional Translation of the Constitution of the Republic of the Maldives: 2008*. Downloaded from the Ministry of Legal Reform, Information, and Arts: <http://tinyurl.com/7wvsuf8> (accessed on 25 September 2009)
- 5 cf. Bratton, Michael, and Nicolas Van de Walle, July 2004. 'Neopatrimonial Regimes and Political Transitions in Africa' *World Politics*. 46: 4, p. 459.
- 6 Public meeting on US-Maldives relations, in October 2007, at Hotel Nasandhura in Male'.