



MALDIVES IS NO LONGER A ‘PARADISE’

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ABSTRACT

Maldives, a small nation in the Indian Ocean, is best known for its picturesque tourist attractions, and the travellers who popularly consider it to be a ‘paradise’. The state, with an approximate population of 394,000 people, is comprised of 1,192 small islands, grouped in 26 atolls. With the influx of about 600,000 tourists every year, tourism activity has remained the main source of the country’s income, which also accounts for 30 percent of its GDP. While these statistics highlight the bright side of this tiny nation, there is a developing trend which has become a major concern, not only for the country but for the region. There is a mounting fear that Maldives will no longer be a revellers’ destination, but may transform into a safe haven for jihadists who are aspiring to fight not only in war-torn Syria and Iraq, but who would want to establish strict Sharia law inside the country. It appears that the tentacles of the Islamic State (IS) have reached Maldives, and that its regional neighbours have a major challenge before them to tackle this rising phenomenon.

* The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).

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Introduction

Maldives, a small nation in the Indian Ocean, is best known for its picturesque tourist attractions, and the travellers who popularly consider it to be a ‘paradise’. The state, with an approximate population of 394,000 people, is comprised of 1,192 small islands, grouped in 26 atolls. With the influx of about 600,000 tourists every year, tourism activity has remained the main source of the country’s income, which also accounts for 30 percent of its GDP. While these statistics highlight the bright side of this tiny nation, there is a developing trend which has become a major concern, not only for the country but for the region. There is a mounting fear that Maldives will no longer be a revellers’ destination, but may transform into a safe haven for jihadists who are aspiring to fight not only in war-torn Syria and Iraq, but who would want to establish strict Sharia law inside the country. It appears that the tentacles of the Islamic State (IS) have reached Maldives, and that its regional neighbors have a major challenge before them to tackle this rising phenomenon.

Religious Extremism

The rise in religious extremism in the Maldives can be traced back to the thirty-year rule of the Egyptian-trained religious leader Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. Being a graduate of the Al-Azhar University of Cairo, most of his politics, faith and his outlook were largely influenced by what he had witnessed and learned during his stay in the Middle East.¹ He appears to have transformed Maldivian society into a more conservative one by pursuing

¹ Azra Naseem and Mushfique Mohamed, “The Long Road from Islam to Islamism”, *Dhivehee Sitee*, 30 May 2014, <http://www.dhivehesitee.com/religion/islamism-maldives/>

certain policies that have made the “Maldivians vulnerable to religious radicalism.”² One of the earliest steps he took while radicalising the society was the introduction of a stricter version of Islamic textbooks for school children. Many of Maldivian students went on to take study in various universities, not only in West Asian countries such as Saudi Arabia, but also in countries such as Pakistan. They were educated in more rigid forms of Islamic teachings, which was totally different from the form of Islam which was widely followed in the Maldives. This had led to the indoctrination of the youths.

Then, in 1994 the Protection of Religious Unity Act was passed by Gayoom, which promoted Islam by restricting any other forms of religion in the country. In 1996, Gayoom established the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs and in 2008; this was changed to the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. It should also be noted that the Maldivian Constitution of 1968 “stipulated Islam as the state religion”, but in 1997, Gayoom enacted a new constitution with which he entrusted the power to himself to be “the ultimate authority to impart the tenets of Islam.”³ However, his attempts to keep power under his absolute control drew backlashes from his opponents who were mainly the Islamic revivalist scholars.⁴ As a result, this tussle engendered the formation of the Adhaalath Party. Despite these challenges, more rigid rules were imposed, and these included bans on popular culture, such as night clubs and other forms of entertainment. Gayoom continued to crackdown on his rivals, but his rule was brought to an end after Mohamed Nasheed became the president in 2008, after forming a coalition with the Adhaalath party. However, this transformation from a dictatorship to a democracy, paved the way for multi-party politics in the Maldives, and this favoured the interests of the

²Sudha Ramachandran, “Maldives faces up to extremism”, *Asia Times*, 11 November 2009, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/KK11Df02.html

³Naseem and Mohamed, “The Long Road from Islam to Islamism”.

⁴Ibid.

Islamists in the country. As a result, Nasheed's endeavours to bring in liberal or moderate forms of Islam to the island were cut short as he was toppled in February 2012.

The Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) under Nasheed began to face severe protests and criticisms from opposition parties. Nasheed's adoption of a pragmatic approach to boost revenue through promotion of the tourism industry was construed as promotion of anti-Islamic ideals by hardline Salafists. Likewise, Nasheed's attempts to crackdown on corruption without taking bureaucracy and other political parties into confidence created unease within the older political circuits. Former dictator Gayoom timely seized the opportunity by propelling his supporter and Vice-President Mohamed Waheed to usurp the power in a political coup, which throttled the march towards modernity of this nascent democracy.

The rise of religious extremism or conservatives has also been fanned by the rising number of Maldivian people who are getting education from madrasas. These are the younger generation who are increasingly inclined towards Salafist ideologies. An expert on the subject has mentioned that "the offer of free education in madrasas in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia is widely acknowledged as a core means of radicalising Maldivians locally, with well-meaning parents sending their children off on scholarships to study Islam."⁵ It is the return of these indoctrinated students to Maldives that is becoming a major concern, howsoever insignificant the numbers might be.

The role played by external players, namely, Saudi Arabia, is another important dimension that needs to be considered. This support has come mainly in the form of funds provided by this oil-rich country for the construction of mosques and for other purposes in Maldives. Saudi Arabia's involvement in Maldives picked up from 2012 onwards, and it intensified after Abdullah Yameen was elected as the president in

⁵ Animesh Roul, "The Threat from Rising Extremism in the Maldives", *CTC Sentinel*, 27 March 2013.

November 2013. For instance, in March 2013, Riyadh granted US \$1.7 million for the construction of mosques in Maldives, and Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, the then Crown Prince pledged to build 10 world-class mosques in Maldives, and he donated US \$1 million to the Maldivian Ministry of Islamic Affairs for various projects. Today, these two countries are believed to be cooperating on “Islamic affairs”, religion and education.

Nasheed had viewed the Saudi funding from a different angle as he realised the adverse effect it had on Maldivian society. During an interview in September 2014, he said, “[Maldivian] society had become much more conservative because of the influx of Saudi money – paying for Wahhabi imams and mosques, and spreading a deeply conservative view of Islam at odds with the islands’ traditions.”⁶ This takes one to a related issue, that is, the alleged role of affluent Saudi citizens in channeling funds to terror groups operating in Syria, including the IS. Although the Saudi government considers the IS as a threat, it is believed that individual or private Saudi donors transferred a huge sum of money to such organisation often through Kuwait, a country “long considered one of the most permissive terrorism financing environments in the Persian Gulf.”⁷ As Maldivian society is gradually being transformed into a more conservative one, there should be close monitoring of further Saudi financial assistance to the country.

Islamic State and Maldives

The increasing reports about Maldivian youths travelling to Syria from late 2013 onwards to wage jihad is a very concerning development. They were believed to have joined Jabhat al-Nusra or Al-Nusra Front. A source estimated that, by the end of 2014,

⁶ Oliver Wright, “Islamic State: The Maldives - a recruiting paradise for jihadists”, *The Independent*, 14 September 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/islamic-state-the-maldives--a-recruiting-paradise-for-jihadists-9731574.html>

⁷ Lori Plotkin Boghardt, “Saudi Funding of ISIS”, *Policy Watch*, No. 2275, 23 June 2014, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-funding-of-isis>

approximately 100 Maldivians reportedly joined the Syrian conflict⁸ but the Commissioner of Police Hussain Waheed, in February 2015, mentioned a lower number of about 50 Maldivian fighters who are fighting with foreign rebels.

An online social media forum, Bilad al-Sham Media (BASM), plays an important role in spreading the influence of the IS. BASM is run by a group of Maldivians residing in Syria and its objective is to “publicise the activities of Maldivian jihadists and their perceived heroics on the battlefield.”⁹ BASM has also written about the arrival of a large number of radicalised students in Syria from different places. In November 2014, three Maldivian youths, including a woman, were arrested in Sri Lanka while they tried to travel to Syria through Turkey, and four men were detained in Malaysia and they were brought back to Maldives in January 2015. A worrying trend is the rising tendency of these fighters to take along with them their wives and children to the conflict zones, and such cases had already happened in 2014. To date, the BASM has claimed that at least five Maldivians have died in the ongoing crisis in West Asia.

The earliest incident that signaled the presence of IS supporters inside Maldives was the raising of its flag in Male in July 2014, which also coincided with the formation of a group called Islamic State of Maldives (ISM). This demonstrates the penetration of IS’ influence into the Indian subcontinent, and it is likely to boost the morale of the radicalised people inside the country. During early-September 2014, some 200 odd people, including, women and children, marched in Male, by waiving IS flags, and called for the implementation of Islamic Shariah in Maldives.

⁸ Animesh Roul, “The Maldives-Syria Connection: Jihad in Paradise”, *Terrorism Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, Vol. 12, Issue. 22, 21 November 2014,

http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43117#.VQpdt9LLdoo

⁹ Roul, “The Maldives-Syria Connection: Jihad in Paradise”, *Terrorism Monitor*.

The messages sent out by these people through their slogans were loud enough to suggest the gradual vanishing of peace and tranquility from that tolerant Maldivian society which used to exist till some years ago. Emphasis on words like ‘secularism’ and ‘democracy’, which were visible on the placards displayed during the protests, has hinted at the rising intolerance level of radicalised Maldivian citizens towards outsiders and Western countries. Now, there is a fear about the impact of extremism on Maldives’ tourism industry, which alone accounts for 30 percent of its GDP. This lucrative industry is facing attacks as the prohibition on the sale of alcohol is getting extended towards various resorts (although situated afar from the natives). Any drop in the number of visitors would cripple the economy of the country drastically.

Tourists had been exposed to terrorist attacks during the 2007-bomb blast. And in mid-2014, Israeli citizens were warned about visiting Maldives, following the Gaza crisis. A few Maldivian males even urged the government to impose ban on Israeli tourists, but no concrete steps have been taken. So far, an adverse effect on the overall tourism has not been perceptible and the reason behind this is best-described by Nasheed:

They [extremists] don’t want to hit the tourism industry because they are getting such good ‘milk’ out of it. They are able to launder their money through it. They are able to recruit people. The government wants the money out of tourism. Everybody wants the money out of that. How the tourists behave on their uninhabited islands is nothing to do with us apparently. They are not worried about the hypocrisy of it. Not all worried – they think it’s very clever, and it is. They have two tracks going. You have your money on one track and then you have religion on another track. They think that they have found an excellent model.¹⁰

¹⁰ Wright, “Islamic State: The Maldives - a recruiting paradise for jihadists”, *The Independent*.

Nasheed, who was arrested in February 2015, said that “Radical Islam is getting very, very strong in the Maldives” and “Their strength in the military and in the police is very significant. They have people in strategic positions within both.”¹¹ Many of the Maldivian fighters, according to Nasheed, are the former officers of the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF). This claim caused a backlash from the Ministry of Defence and the National Security of Maldives, and it was considered as an intentional attempt to disparage the military or security apparatuses. The MDP categorically targeted the Islamic Affairs minister Dr Mohamed Shaheem Ali Saeed, and he was also blamed for the rise of extremism in the country. His condemnation of IS’ ideology and activities was considered as “duplicitous” and “insincere”, by his opponents and so were the views of the Maldivian Foreign Affairs Minister Dunya’s on the IS. The continuous blame-game has exposed nothing but the deeply entrenched differences that exist between these political parties in Maldives. This has added to the political turmoil in the country, and has only given more space to the extremist elements to further their desired goals.

Why India should be concerned?

There are no reasons as to why India would not be concerned with the developments in the Maldives. New Delhi has been watching very cautiously the ongoing political turmoil inside this island nation. This was perhaps one of the causes for the cancellation of the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi’s, visit to Male. Another speculated reason was that India did not want to meddle or be “involved in domestic issues of the Maldives”.¹² Otherwise, the Maldives was supposed to be Modi’s last stop in his four-nation tour of Seychelles, Mauritius and Sri Lanka, which he concluded very recently. This was an important visit as Modi wants to bolster India’s cooperation with its regional neighbours, particularly, considering China’s increasingly strategic footprints in the Indian Ocean

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Suhasini Haidar, “PM drops Maldives from Indian Ocean tour”, *The Hindu*, 9 March 2015.

region. But today, the issue of terrorism is going to be another important incentive for building up robust cooperation with the Maldives.

The presence of IS supporters inside Maldives is a matter of grave concern. There is a possibility of a spill-over effect into the Indian territories, mainly considering the influx of Maldivians to south Indian states. In the past, there were infiltration of a large numbers of Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) cadres into Maldives, and it increased after this organisation was banned in India. From Maldives, they were sent to either Pakistan or Afghanistan from where they were radicalised and received training for battle. The nexus between the Maldives-based groups and that of Pakistan and Afghanistan, which are also hotbeds of terrorism, concerned India. Various incidents have suggested the growth in these linkages. The arrest of nine Maldives-based jihadists from Pakistan's Waziristan province in 2009 is a good evidence of this disturbing trend. This renewed the concerns regarding the utilisation of the Indian Ocean as a launching-pad for attacks against India's western coast.¹³

The investigation into the 2007-Male bombing uncovered the connection between a Maldives-based terror group and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) operatives in India. The Indian state of Kerala has often been used as a pad to plan terror activities by a few Maldivians. For example, Moosa Inas, a resident of Laamu atoll (in the Maldives), who triggered the explosive device in 2007, had travelled to Thiruvananthapuram in December 2005, via Sri Lanka. From there, he travelled towards Pakistan and met with his contacts in Faisalabad.¹⁴ Similarly, in the case regarding Asif Ibrahim, who was arrested in April 2005 in Kerala. He revealed the plan of setting up of Jamaat-ul-Muslimeen (which was unsuccessful), a new Maldives-based terror group that was supposed to bomb Male. Such connections with Kerala is a serious issue as support for the IS was witnessed during

¹³ Praveen Swami, "Nine Maldives jihadists held in Pakistan", *The Hindu*, 9 April 2004.

¹⁴ Praveen Swami, "India links emerge in Maldives terror probe", *The Hindu*, 14 November 2007.

2014 in parts of this Indian coastal state, as well as in Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Jammu and Kashmir. The penetration of the influence of this Sunni terror outfit into India has already caused the Indian security agencies alarm.

The aforementioned evidence is a strong indication that terrorist outfits, including the IS, have tremendous potential to grow in Maldives. As a result, India needs to be worried about this frightening trend. New Delhi would not like to see the IS, or other terrorist organisations, spreading their wings right in its backyard. Nasheed's and MDP's concerns that "Maldives may be a new recruiting haven for Islamic State" make logical sense, and India has to act accordingly.

Conclusion

It is undeniable that the rise of extremism in Maldives has become a worrisome development. The Maldivian government and its security establishment have the enormous challenge of preventing further expansion of this trend. The time has come for Male to realise the severity of the problem of religious radicalism inside the country. Further, political and military officials should be cognisant of the fact that the IS has encouraged an ideology that would be difficult to tackle if it gets deeply rooted into the Maldivian society. Further penetration of IS ideology would only fuel the fervor of extremely radicalised youths. As a result, there is a need for a strong political will to combat this menace. Alongside this, certain stringent terrorism laws should be introduced in the country. As mentioned earlier, the influx of funds from external sources, such as Saudi Arabia, needs to be monitored vigilantly, and Saudi Arabia's dubious roles in religious and educational affairs of the Maldives should be kept under close watch.

Lastly, an effective way of combating terrorism in and around the Maldives is to have strong regional cooperation. As countries such as India and Sri Lanka are also facing similar problems, there should be robust intelligence and information sharing networks between their security agencies. Keeping a close watch on the movements of people

among these countries and for what purposes should be given the utmost priority. For such efforts, alertness of civilian society could also add to measures taken up by the concerned authorities. A lackadaisical approach would only usher in more freedom to these anti-state elements to maneuver openly in the Indian Ocean region. Therefore, without further delays, Maldives and the previously mentioned countries need to execute immediate actions as the Islamist forces have already reached their shores.