Political Stability In South Asia: Solih-Led Opposition Brings Democratic Transition To Maldives – OpEd

By Srimal Fernando and Mizly Nizar*

The 2018 Maldivian Presidential Election and the run up to it was closely watched not only by the neighbouring South Asian nations, but also the international community. The overwhelming victory of opposition presidential candidate Ibrahim Mohamed Solih a close aide of former President Mohamed Nasheed defeating the incumbent President Yameen Abdul Gayoom will alter the political direction of the Indian Ocean archipelago.

Solih’s victory gaining 134,616 votes with 58.33 % of total votes cast appears to bring new hopes to the island nation ending the authoritarian regime of Yameen who obtained 96,132 votes or 41.7 % of total votes. A few hours after the historic election victory Solih announced on television “I call on Yameen to respect the will of the people and bring about a peaceful, smooth transfer of power”.

Over the past years the discontent in Yameen’s Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) aided in the emergence of several splinter parties. The opposition parties came together in a coalition when there appeared to be no other solution in sight to bring back democratic processes to an ailing nation. In this context Ibrahim Solih of Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) was nominated as the Joint opposition Presidential candidate for the 2018 Presidential election.

Some of the factors that led to the formation of the opposition coalition are the arrest of former President Maumoon Gayoom and top court judges in February this year. The international community had requested the release of all political prisoners and those in exile including Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, Mohamed Nasheed and Qasim Ibrahim.

Furthermore, during the turbulent tenure of Yameen, the Indian Ocean island nation saw journalists routinely facing harassment and intimidation while the regime practiced a high degree of censorship on privately run media channels. State run media monopolized on election propaganda favouring the incumbent Yameen. Maldivian based public interest groups, civil society, journalist and activists played a key role under trying circumstances risking their own lives for the protection and promotion of civil liberties of this nation.
The policies of the west and India’s foreign policy towards Maldives during this period had been one of constructive engagement and noninterference towards the Island nation. Once Maldives had declared the dates for the election, it was back on the international agenda with renewed hopes of facilitating the island nation to transition back to democratic processes.

Closer to the elections, the role played by the Qasim Ibrahim of the Jumhooree Party, Nasreena Ibrahim wife of jailed former President Maumoon Gayoom and Dunya Maumoon former Minister of Foreign Affairs were significant in the current election victory of the MDP.

The electoral behavior of the 26 Atolls had changed considerably between the 2013 and 2018 Presidential elections. In the recently concluded election the Maldivian voters were more divided than they had been in 2013 with reduced dominance of the ruling PPM. A large proportion of voters of the PPM’s Gayoom faction had transferred their votes to the Joint Opposition candidate. In addition supporters of Qasim Ibrahim’s Jumhooree Party (JP) and the Adhaalath Party voters had shifted their electoral support to the MDP. This pattern was particularly noticeable in Male’, Hulumale islands and especially the Addu Atoll. However, the ruling PPM tended to be strong in some Atolls outside Male’.

Compared to other South Asian nations, political modernization came late to Maldives. It was not until 2008, that Maldives held its first democratic elections with a multiparty system. The 90% voter turnout and the election victory of the recently concluded Maldivian election sends a clear message that there is still hope to rekindle democratic process while ending monopolized schemes of autocratic rule. There is great confidence that constructive democratic reforms will take place in the coming months with the victory of Ibrahim Solih refashioning the previous multi party democratic system while steering the Indian Ocean Island nation in the right direction for progress in the future.

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