The Making of Modern Maldives: A Look at Maumoon Gayoom
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Former Maldivian President Maumoon Gayoom occupies an important place in Maldivian political history largely because he guided this equatorial island nation to unprecedented levels of economic growth and also through tough times when democracy was challenged. Gayoom has a national as well as international reputation that made his name familiar to the rest of the South Asian countries. It was after his return from Nigeria’s Ahmadu Bello University as a lecturer, Gayoom commenced his political journey as a close aid of prime minister Ahmed Zaki in mid-70’s and later as a cabinet minister under Ibrahim Nasir. Gayoom’s leadership embarked on a more reformist approach in the first two terms during his presidency. He was able to take credit for the rise of the tourism sector and an increase in the fish productivity. In Male, as well as in the rest of the Maldivian islands, building of small fisheries harbors were accelerated under the rapid development programs initiated under his presidency. When one looks at the Maldivian foreign policy, Maumoon was credited as one of the key founders of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985. Hence, he raised global awareness on climate change on the international arena. In this context, especially the awareness on small island nations facing rise in sea water levels which affects the livelihood of the islanders was a key theme which brought international attention. On the development side, the Hulhulemale reclamation project and the upgrading of roads and other infrastructure initiatives that he implemented are highly credited for by the Maldivians. In fact, the people’s president who visits the islands regularly was named as “A Man for All Islands” by the famous author in his book about Gayoom’s biography.

Early in his administration, former president introduced socio-economic experiments in reawakening the islands. His administration accelerated the economic growth in the twenty Atolls from Northern Haa Atoll to Southern Seenu Atoll instilling a degree of optimism and enthusiasm among the Maldivians. Yet another economic achievement in the tourism sector was the increase of luxury resorts from two in 1978 to hundred by 2008. Gayoom’s career is most relevant due to his performance and for changing the country’s political system to a multi-party democratic system where the power is vested on the citizens.
Another milestone during his tenure was to expand the average income of Maldivians from US$ 377 in 1978 to US$3,654 in 2008. However, towards the end of his presidency, the first signs of irreconcilable difficulties with the Maldivian opposition led by Mohamed Nasheed, the leader of Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) started emerging in 2000. The Maldivian pro-democracy movement started in Male in 2003 and then moved to other Islands. As a result, Maldives adopted a multi-party political system and in 2008. In the same year the presidential campaign came to a climax where in the second phase of the presidential elections, the confident president had felt a constant sense of uncertainty since most of the opposition presidential candidates supported Mohamed Nasheed, the leader of the Maldivian Democratic Party. Gayoom lost the election and Nasheed the opposition leader assumed presidency. The courageous former president Gayoom transferred the presidential powers to the newly elected president smoothly.

In fact, the reformist former president Gayoom formed the Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party and later, he was one of the key founders of the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) where his half-brother, Yameen Abdul Gayoom shared powers within the party. Hence, Qasim Ibrahim, a former finance minister under Nasheed’s government and also close confidant of president Gayoom led the Jamhooree Party (JP) which combined with PPM in 2013 presidential elections.

Unfortunately, in 2012 the overthrow of president Nasheed one of New Delhi’s closest allies in South Asia shocked the diplomatic circles on both sides of Asia as well as in the west. It took more than five years for Gayoom’s PPM party under the presidency of Yameen to return to power. However, due to widespread corruption and authoritative rules under Yameen’s presidency, many of the opposition party members such as former Maldivian president Nasheed, Jumhooree Party leader Qasim Ibrahim and many other political leaders who opposed the undemocratic rule were prisoned through unlawful means.

During the darkest period of the Maldivian politics from 2017 to September 2018, the lone voice of the public opposition belonged to a few opposition leaders such as, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih cannot be forgotten. In the same period, former president Gayoom, Nasheed and several opposition members created a united opposition to unseat president Yameen and his majority party rule through democratic non-violent means. One of the major reasons for this change by Gayoom in Yameen’s leadership was the widespread corruption and the authoritative rule. Finally, president Yameen prisoned former president Gayoom and his son, Faris Maumoon. This was one of the main reasons where large number of Gayoom supporters broke away from PPM led by president Yameen. This reason influenced the 23rd September 2018 presidential elections where opposition common candidate Ibrahim Solih saw a massive victory margin against president Yameen.
One could argue that, Gayoom, the president who guided Maldives to economic prosperity was the same charismatic leader who guided the South Asian Island nation towards democratic maturity. Maumoon Gayoom has been the most unpredictable political influencer in the modern political making of Maldives.

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