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## **Maldives' Challenges to Indian Diplomacy**

**M**ohamed Muizzu, candidate of People's National Congress (PNC)-Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) won in a run-off to the Presidential elections in Maldives held on September 30, 2023, with 54% of the total votes polled. Earlier he had received 46% of the total votes against 39% of the incumbent President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), held on September 9, 2023. Muizzu is scheduled to take oath of office in November 2023. Abdullah Yameen president from 2013 to 2018 is serving a prison term for money laundering and corruption, which facilitated Muizzu, an engineer and housing minister for seven years to emerge as a fallback candidate. Cracks within the ruling party between Solih and former President Mohamed Nasheed may have facilitated Muizzu to excel.

Maldives strategic location across the maritime zone of Indo-Pacific makes it an important player in regional affairs. Muizzu's pro-Chinese leanings have been a major source of concerns for India since the day he was scheduled to run for presidential elections. It is now being revealed in his verbal attacks and demands being raised from India. He wants that every Indian military personnel be removed from Maldives before his oath taking ceremony. Muizzu's argument was that presence of Indian troops could put the Maldives at risk in the event of any tensions between India and China, and that Maldives is too small to get entangled with this global power struggle.

"India Out" was the flagship electoral campaign of Muizzu who has been alleging that under the outgoing predecessor Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's administration, Maldives sovereignty was threatened by the Indian military personnel on the island. Presently, any authentic figure regarding the total number of Indian troops in Maldives is not available; however, the Maldivian defence force has claimed presence of around 75 Indian military personnel in the country to operate and maintain the Indian aircraft.

India has provided about \$2 billion in development assistance to Solih's Maldives and donated two helicopters to assist in the rescue of people stranded or faced with calamities at sea. It was this gifting of helicopters that fuelled in Maldives the "India Out" campaign. Indo-Maldives bilateral economic engagement grew substantially during Solih's regime. Reportedly, the newly elected President also told to BBC that he would review every agreement that the Maldives has signed with India.

Muizzu's party PNC received significant loans from China when it was in power during the previous government, under Yameen's PPM. These loans have led to closer economic ties between the Maldives and China, including infrastructure projects and investments in the country. This attitude of Muizzu may have raised concerns within Indian diplomatic enclave with new challenges in the neighbourhood.

Elevation of Muizzu to Presidential post have serious implications for India amidst escalating rivalry in the Indo-Pacific region; as he has chosen to draw his foreign policy lessons from his predecessor Yameen. It would be worth observing in coming future the way, and to the extent Muizzu would be able to de-link from Solih's pro-Indian foreign policy. However, winning of Muizzu, for now has created euphoria among experts and within mass media as blow to India's influence in the Maldives, which is too premature an assessment in view of geopolitical and geo-economic dynamics of South Asia, which is largely determined by ever-going competitive contest and rivalry between China and India for loyalty of smaller nation-states as well as expansion of their sphere of influence within the region. Indian diplomacy has grown smarter over the years to cultivate different shades of political hues within the neighbourhood, learning lessons from Nepal. It is Maldives turn to learn lessons from China's debt-trap diplomacy in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

— BK



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