

INTERVIEW | ABDULLA SHAHID

‘India-Maldives relations have never been better’

The Maldivian Foreign Minister on the folly in playing India and China against each other

MEERA SRINIVASAN

For Maldivians, the election of President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih in September 2018 meant a possible opening up of democratic space in the country, after former President Abdulla Yameen’s term, which was marked by an authoritarian slant. It also meant reconnecting with many countries with which Male’s relationship had turned rather tense in those years, particularly India. In an interview in Male, Maldivian Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid talks about how Maldives sees its role in the region, and its relationship with the world. Excerpts:

Since your government came to power, India-Maldives ties have undergone a dramatic change, marked by renewed cooperation, close dialogue and multiple high-level visits from both sides. How do you view the changing dynamic?

■ Since the new government came in, we have had very high-level visits. Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended President Solih’s swearing-in ceremony. I was in New Delhi a week after taking office, preparing for the visit of President Solih, who was in Delhi a month after being sworn in. The recent visit by External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj cemented many aspects of the cooperation agenda we have been drawing up. The level of cooperation between the two countries has never been better. We are continuously in contact, we speak to each other at the highest levels whenever there seems to be any difficulty, which is very rare. That is because the leaders have shown where they would like the [relationship between the] two countries to go. And for us Ministers and staff of the ministries in both countries, it is a question of delivering. We have to deliver. The generous development assistance provided by the Indian government is deeply appreciated by the people of the Maldives. It is going into people-oriented projects like providing fresh water, sanitation, sewerage. Building roads and moving the Male commercial harbour to Thilafushi [island west of Male] are huge projects that are going to be major symbols of cooperation between the two countries.



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Between 2013 and 2018, then-President Yameen’s administration was seen as tilting heavily towards China amid growing tensions with India. Given that China has also been an important partner for the Maldives and the latter’s strategic location in the Indian Ocean, how does the geopolitical tussle between the two big powers affect the Maldives?

■ The mistake President Yameen made was to play India against China and China against India. That is a childish way of dealing with international relations; it will blow up in your own face. And that is what happened. No one trusted him. For us it is very clear. India and the Maldives might be very different, but the respect we have for each other is the main factor behind the friendship. Look at people-to-people contact. You have so many Maldivians living in India. We have so many Indians living in the Maldives. At times of need, we have always seen India as the first respondent. And that is something that the people of the Maldives really appreciate. On November 3, 1988, when mercenaries attacked the Maldives, India was the first to respond. In 2004, when the tsunami hit us, Indian naval ships were despatched to assist us. During the last government’s term, we had the Male water crisis. Within four hours we had Indian Navy and Air Force vessels deliver water. Of course, China has been a good friend, it has helped in many of the development projects in the Mal-

Power comes from the people and once people in large numbers start saying no to ultra-nationalism and hate politics, then we will be able to move forward.

dives. China is also going to be one of the largest economies in the world. We can’t say that we will not have any relations with China because we have to appreciate what countries do for the people. If we have to choose between friends, or if we are forced to choose between friends, then we can’t see our relationship go very far. Because of the geopolitical location of the Maldives, the government has a huge responsibility, which is to provide freedom of maritime trade in the Indian Ocean. The Eight Degree Channel is one of the major maritime lanes of the world. We need stability, maturity and democratic systems to function in the Maldives so that peace and security can be maintained in the Indian Ocean.

The issue of India-gifted helicopters in the Maldives has remained politically sensitive, especially since the Yameen government asked New Delhi to withdraw them. Among the people, is there a sense that a big neighbour might be trying to wield influence here?

■ I think there are a few people who are trying to spread hatred. All I have seen these two helicopters do is humanitarian work. They transport children, or elderly people, or some-

one who has suffered a stroke for immediate medical attention. Our islands are many and very widespread. We need this kind of assistance. I would ask the hate-mongers to go and speak to the families, who are very grateful. The helicopters are under the control of the Maldivian security services and much of what the hate-mongers say are lies.

What about the physical presence of the Indian military personnel? Is that a reason for discomfort for some?

■ For these hate-mongers it is. But it is not the first time we are having technical people on the ground from different countries. These are not military personnel stationed in barracks. There is no military presence of any foreign force in the Maldives.

Earlier, you pointed to renewed dynamism in Male-New Delhi relations. More broadly, what is your vision for the Maldives’s relationship with the rest of the world?

■ The Maldives has been alienated in the past five years. The foreign policy of the [then] government was so one-sided that the credibility of the country was eroded. During the last three months, President Solih visited India and the UAE. Since I was appointed Foreign Minister, I have met Foreign Ministers, Ambassadors, Presidents, Prime Ministers and Vice-Prime Ministers of 50 countries so far. I utilise my travels to conferences, to the UN and other meetings to connect with other countries so that they will understand that the Maldives is back.

How do you see the political landscape in the region changing?

■ We are a government that came to office promising reform and people-oriented development, both social and economic. Once we start implementing these reforms, they will realise that democracy functions. And in a democracy, we would have room for dissent, but you don’t have to go to the extreme. You don’t have to buy into hatred in order to attain power. Power comes from the people and once people in large numbers start saying no to ultra-nationalism and hate politics, then we will be able to move forward.

Locking horns with the wrong party in Wayanad

The Congress has failed to realise the meaning and scope of the great struggle to save India



BINOY VISWAM

In 2008, the Left parties withdrew support to the first United Progressive Alliance government (UPA-I). The Left parties insisted on implementing the Common Minimum Programme. UPA-I formulated policies for the common people solely because the Left took a stance. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the Forest Rights Act, and the Right to Information Act, among others, found a place in its agenda because of the Left. The Congress had thought up none of these laws. UPA-II was under no such duress. A government that did not have the burden of a Common Minimum Programme or Left support soon found itself in a cesspool of corruption – seen in the coal scam, 2G spectrum scam and other scams – and anti-people policies. It was UPA-II that surrendered the right to fix the prices of petrol and diesel to oil companies. There were political and policy-level differences between UPA-I and UPA-II. The differences at the policy level emerged over priorities about whose interests had to be protected.

Defining the enemy In every decisive battle, a political party has to define its enemy. The Left has absolutely no doubt in this regard. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is being led by the fascist ideology of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), is its principal enemy. To uproot the BJP from power is the Left’s paramount duty. The Left aims to increase its presence at the Centre and bring in a secular democratic government to rule the country. The complex situation at present guarantees that 2014 shall not be repeated. The BJP will not get a simple majority, nor will the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) secure such a brutal majority. There are many reasons to expect that India will see a hung Parliament. At such a critical juncture, the Left staunchly maintains its prime position in the array of forces fighting the BJP. The Congress should have played a significant role in this fight. But how many of its leaders are able to understand this crucial political scenario? Many Congress leaders are moving to the BJP. If

we get a hung Parliament after this election, how many of the Congress’s MPs will withstand the temptation to move to the BJP? Nobody has an answer. The Congress has been struggling to find its way in the political arena. It is unable to see the truth on the ground and take a stand. The same Congress that lashed out against the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi has chosen to field its president against a Left party candidate in Wayanad, Kerala. It is not aware of the actual stage of contest that we are in against the BJP. Instead of fighting its arch enemy, the Congress has come to Wayanad to lock horns with the Left. The BJP does not have a candidate in Wayanad; Thushar Vellappally from the Bharat Dharma Jana Sena is contesting against Congress president Rahul Gandhi. The BJP does not have a prominent presence in Kerala. Then why should Mr. Gandhi contest from Wayanad against the Left Democratic Front candidate P.P. Suneer instead of contesting against Mr. Modi? It is in this context that UPA-I and UPA-II are being brought back into focus. UPA-I could be formed only because of the unflinching anti-BJP stance taken by the Left. The UPA-I experiment came to a close because the Left opposed the India-U.S. civil nuclear deal. The monumental failures of UPA-II and its flawed policies paved the way for the NDA to come to power.

The meaning of this election During the Modi government’s tenure, most of the time the Congress could not even be an effective Opposition party. When the general election was announced, the party made feeble efforts to talk about poverty and the troubles of the common people. It sparingly mentioned the need for a union of secular democratic forces. The Congress is failing to realise the meaning, seriousness and scope of the great struggle that has been launched for saving the nation. It is distancing itself from its Nehru-Gandhi legacy. This is rendering it myopic to the extent of not even recognising the predominant enemy. The Nehruvian vision has never justified blind hostility to the Left. It is an approach that makes happy only those forces which do not want the Left to gain strength in Indian politics. Mr. Gandhi’s arrival in Wayanad, where the BJP has no candidate, leaves a deep scar on the Nehruvian spirit. The party will have to pay heavily for it. Binoy Viswam is a Rajya Sabha member representing the Communist Party of India

SINGLE FILE

Crorepatis in Parliament

A rich people’s club is governing a largely poor country

SATYA NAAGESH AYYAGARY



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK PHOTO

It is an interesting facet of a changing India: there are ever greater numbers of crorepatis in the Lok Sabha, as well as among those who aspire to become MPs. According to the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), 430 out of the 521 sitting MPs in the Lok Sabha have assets worth more than ₹1 crore. In other words, 83% of our lawmakers are crorepatis. That makes them a rich people’s club governing a largely poor country.

There was a time when members of most legacy business and industrial houses of the country stuck to their business of doing business and left politics to politicians. During the License Raj, politicians were content accepting donations from businessmen or seeking jobs for their kin. But business and politics never intersected with each other. However, there were exploratory undercurrents across the dividing line. Come 1991, that changed. Liberalisation altered India’s economic present and future. There was a permanent severance from the country’s socialist economic past. The nouveau riche saw politics and political power as a means to first secure and then expand their business interests. It is a truism that business and politics share a symbiotic relationship. Today, they have almost become one, necessitating a new definition of businessman-politician or politician-businessman. The hyphenation is not semantic or syntactical, but reflects the emergence of a new class. Some examples Konda Vishweshwar Reddy, an engineer-turned-businessman-turned-politician and former Telagana Rashtira Samithi (TRS) MP, is now the Congress candidate from Chevella, near Hyderabad. His declared family assets are over ₹895 crore (the major share of which belongs to his wife). Nama Nageswar Rao, the TRS candidate from Khammam Lok Sabha seat who is a former Telugu Desam Party (TDP) MP, is the founder of Madhucon Projects. He was among the richest Lok Sabha candidates in the 2014 elections with declared assets worth ₹338 crore. In Andhra Pradesh, Jaydev Galla of the TDP is the managing director of Amara Raja Batteries and has declared assets worth over ₹600 crore. These are just a few crossover examples. There are of course plenty of examples from other States too. As Walter Annenberg, American businessman and diplomat, posited, “The greatest power is not money power but political power.” It suffices to say that the heady mix of economic and political power is even more intoxicating than either of its stand-alone constituents.

The writer is Editorial Consultant, The Hindu, and is based in Hyderabad



DATA POINT

| Voter turnout patterns | |
|---|--|
| A region-wise analysis of voter turnouts in the last 10 Lok Sabha polls reveals significant variations. Many seats in West Bengal consistently saw higher turnouts, while J&K was on the other side of the spectrum. By Vignesh Radhakrishnan | |
| The table segregates Lok Sabha seats into various voter turnout ranges. For instance, in the last 10 Lok Sabha polls clubbed together, 39% seats in Bihar saw a turnout between 50% and 55%, 23% seats saw a turnout between 55% and 60%, and so on | |
| TURNOUT % | |
| State | 0 to <5 5 to <10 10 to <15 15 to <20 20 to <25 25 to <30 30 to <35 35 to <40 40 to <45 45 to <50 50 to <55 55 to <60 60 to <65 65 to <70 70 to <75 75 to <80 80 to <85 85 to <90 |
| NORTH | J&K 5 2 5 5 0 17 0 14 10 12 10 0 2 12 2 5 0 0 |
| | Punjab 0 1 3 1 3 1 0 2 1 3 31 21 18 14 3 0 0 0 |
| | Himachal 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 50 34 9 6 0 0 0 0 |
| | Haryana 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 10 29 35 20 6 0 0 0 |
| | Uttarakhand 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 7 33 40 7 7 7 0 0 0 |
| | Delhi 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 9 36 38 7 11 0 0 0 0 |
| | Uttar Pradesh 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 5 15 27 42 7 2 1 0 0 0 0 |
| | Rajasthan 0 0 0 0 0 0 1 7 13 23 37 14 6 1 0 0 0 0 |
| | Gujarat 0 0 0 0 0 1 6 13 14 23 27 9 4 2 0 0 0 0 |
| | Goa 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 6 19 6 31 19 0 6 13 0 0 0 |
| EAST | Maharashtra 0 0 0 0 0 0 1 3 7 16 41 19 9 3 0 0 0 0 |
| | Jharkhand 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 5 12 48 21 10 5 0 0 0 0 |
| | Bihar 0 0 0 0 0 0 1 2 6 9 39 23 12 6 2 0 0 0 |
| | Odisha 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 2 2 10 33 18 20 10 6 1 0 0 |
| | West Bengal 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 1 2 6 16 28 36 11 0 |
| | Madhya Pradesh 0 0 0 0 0 0 2 5 10 16 45 13 5 2 0 0 0 0 |
| | Chhattisgarh 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 6 18 33 12 12 12 6 0 0 0 |
| | Assam 0 0 0 0 0 0 1 1 1 1 4 11 20 29 21 10 2 0 |
| | Meghalaya 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 13 31 25 13 13 6 0 0 0 |
| | Mizoram 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 38 38 13 13 0 0 0 0 |
| SOUTH | Sikkim 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 13 0 25 0 25 38 0 0 |
| | Manipur 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 6 19 19 13 19 19 0 0 0 |
| | Nagaland 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 13 0 0 0 13 25 0 38 13 |
| | Tripura 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 6 31 0 19 31 13 0 |
| | Arunachal Pradesh 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 6 50 6 13 13 6 6 0 0 |
| | Undivided A.P. 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 1 15 18 27 18 14 6 0 0 |
| | Karnataka 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 1 2 7 26 17 27 19 1 0 0 0 |
| | Kerala 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 5 25 38 24 8 0 0 0 |
| | Tamil Nadu 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 3 25 27 21 12 10 2 0 0 |
| Several seats in J&K saw turnouts in the lower ranges and most of these constituencies were in the Valley. In the 1989 polls, the Srinagar, Anantnag and Baramulla seats saw less than 6% turnout | |
| Many seats in Punjab saw low turnouts in 1992, following a poll boycott called by various Akali Dal factions. But in the later years, the State saw good turnouts | |

SOURCE: TRIVEDI CENTRE FOR POLITICAL DATA

FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 9, 1969

Artillery duel across Suez

The precarious West Asia peace was threatened on two fronts to-day [April 8] by rocket and air attacks on civilian targets and a furious artillery and tank battle. Arab irregulars, the Israel is said, unleashed a salvo of 25-30 Katyusha rockets from the Jordanian port of Aqaba on the Israeli resort of Eilat on the Red Sea. Shortly afterwards a full-scale battle erupted between entrenched Israeli and the United Arab Republic forces raged along the Suez Canal. The fighting lasted for more than three hours before U.N observers arranged a truce. Thirteen Israelis were wounded in the rocket onslaught. Defence Minister, Mr. Moshe Dayan, surveying the damage, charged that the Al Fatah guerrilla organisation launched the attack but that the Jordanian Government bore the responsibility.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 9, 1919.

Wastage of Foodstuffs.

A message from some of the merchants of the Rajahamundry says: Referring to our previous communication regarding the detention of goods here, we regret to once again inform that only two-thirds of goods complained of in our previous communication were cleared and the remaining one-third of the quantity, about forty wagons of foodstuffs, Chollam, Toor, Chillies, etc., have been still lying mostly on open platform, exposed to sun, rain, thieves and white-ants. When last time we complained of these, our grievances were not fully made understood to the higher authorities. The G.T.M. may be pleased to ascertain these facts by sending one from his staff. Though this is a great business centre, we regret there is no goods shed. In the absence of a proper goods shed, the Railway authorities may have the kindness to pay special attention to avoid unaccountable loss to merchants.

POLL CALL Party symbol

Every political party in India has a symbol, which enables voters to easily identify the party on the ballot. For example, the BJP’s symbol is the lotus and the Congress’s symbol is the hand. Party symbols are especially important to aid voters who cannot read. But candidates also go to great lengths to be identified with their election symbols. The Election Commission stipulates that no symbol should represent a religion or a caste. A party can submit a symbol of its choice to the EC for consideration. Else, the EC allots a symbol to the party. Though the elephant is the symbol of the BSP and the lion is the symbol of the Forward Bloc, the EC in 1991 stopped allowing parties to use animals as symbols after complaints from animal rights activists.

MORE ON THE WEB

Video: In conversation with Tamizhachi Thangapandian

http://bit.ly/TamizhachiInterview