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Maldives: Islam being used as a political tool in the Presidential Elections?

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It is very unfortunate that almost all the political parties except the MDP are using religion as a political tool to keep former president Nasheed from winning the presidential elections this September. Their main thrust in the election campaign is that all the parties are out to save Islam from Nasheed and his MDP!

It may be recalled that in the famous February 7 coup of 2012, the Islamists along with other recalcitrant elements spearheaded the move to oust a lawfully elected government of Nasheed.

Former president Nasheed who intends to contest the elections has not realised that he is being isolated in making calls for a "Liberal Islam" where no such thing exists. His recent statements in Copenhagen, Denmark gives the impression that either he is too confident of his victory or he has not realised that his country is still not ready for the kind of Islam he envisages.

Even former President Gayoom who is now canvassing intensely for the party PPM- he created by splitting his old party DRP, is seen to be indulging in such acts.

Gayoom, I had maintained for whatever other faults he may have, had in his thirty years of absolute rule managed to keep the Islamists at bay during his regime.

In one of his recent statements he claimed that Maldives is now dominated by people belonging to Islamic ideology and those belonging to anti Islamic ideology. By implication he is referring to those in the MDP as the one belonging to anti Islamic Ideology.

Gasim Ibrahim, the head of the Jumhoree party, one of the richest and a serious contender for president in the elections said on 23rd April that he is looking for a coalition of political parties in defence of Islam and the Maldivian nation to make the religion of Allah victorious!

In his campaign speech on 12th April at Naalaaafushi he declared that Maldives is in need of a leader (no doubt pushing his case) who will not disregard the building and expansion of mosques and who will not build temples, churches and synagogues in Maldives. If it just a rhetoric for the sake of election, one can understand but it does not appear to be so.

His deputy Dr. Hussein declared on 25th of April and I quote- “Every Nation has its own unique characteristics and in that regard the most special characteristics of Maldives is the Islamic Unity of the people . . . and not allowing any religion other than Islam in the Maldives.”

President Waheed whose party GIP has no representation in the Majlis and it is not clear yet whether his party has the required minimum membership of 10,000 is having a coalition agreement with the conservative religious outfit Adhaalath and that of DQP.

Dr. Jameel the running mate of PPM nominee Abdulla Yameen was the one who released a controversial pamphlet in June 2012 accusing Nasheed’s government working under the influence of “Jews. Christian priests to weaken Islam in Maldives.” Nasheed’s administration had then described the pamphlet as one filled with “extremist, bigoted and hate filled rhetoric.” In the pamphlet Jameel had accused Nasheed of working ceaselessly to weaken the Islamic faith of Maldivians, make irreligious and sinful behaviour common and allow space for other religions. This is the kind of person who will be running for Vice Presidentship of one of the other serious contender (PPM) in the coming presidential elections!

Nasheed on the other hand is pitching for a “liberal Islam.” Last month on the 28th, he said that what is worrying is that “radical Islam” and “Wahabism” is spreading throughout the Middle East and East Asia and that this is not the Islam but more “hijaz or Saudi thinking, and their culture”. He said that it more an idea to impose that (Saudi) culture on all Islamic societies.

Nasheed added that people have not stood up and given an alternative narrative. It is so important now to come up with an alternative narrative, a liberal version of Islam or actual version” of Islam.” I have no doubt that this kind of statements would affect adversely his chances in the coming elections.

Nasheed is thus not only taking on other political parties but also the mighty Saudi Arabia in his electioneering campaign! He has also criticised the Islamic scholars who according to him “were using religion as a tool to attain their individual political aspirations.”

In the coming elections according to the Election Commission there will be 240,302 voters of whom 31,000 will be the addition from the previous elections. These 31,000 are the younger ones and one is not sure as yet as to whom they would vote for.

The line up in terms of their strength would be the MDP of Nasheed, PPM of Abdulla Yameen the step brother of former president Gayoom, the powerful Jumhoree party of Gasim Ibrahim (He is said to have bought the Miadhu News recently), a coalition of GIP the president's party with DRP (original party of Gayoom), DQP of Hassan Saeed, Adhaalath (religious conservative) and Umar Naseer the breakaway faction of PPM which came out after Yameen was selected as a presidential candidate for PPM. A new group led by a rich businessman-the Maldivian Development Alliance may join the coalition.

As it stands it is likely that only the two major parties- the MDP and the PPM may go it alone in the first round.

Former president Nasheed is confident of getting over 50 percent of the votes in the first round itself. In fact he is predicting a number of 125,000 which is beyond the fifty percent. One cannot be certain whether the MDP alone can garner this impressive number. In the second round in spite of all their personal animosities, others may gang up against Nasheed just to prevent him from winning.

It is still not certain whether Nasheed will be allowed to contest at all in the first round itself with the case against him hanging in the Hulhulmale court!

The EU reiterated once again ten days ago that they would like to see a "peaceful, credible, transparent and an inclusive one.

The rally organised by the MDP in Male to welcome the entry of speaker Abdulla Shahid on 17th April was perhaps one of the biggest political rallies seen in Male in recent times. The rally was so impressive that some of the other political leaders have started feeling that Nasheed could be defeated only by a coalition and not by any party going it all alone.

The UN Asst. Secretary General has said that Maldives is at a critical juncture of democratic transition. There is no doubt about that.

A study made by the Counter terrorism Center of West Point made a few valid points on the ground realities in Maldives and it is worth repeating. It said

* Growing religious extremism and political uncertainty could result in more violence.

* The trend is that extremist incidents may arise with violence targeted against the country's more liberal citizens.

Five Key factors that would contribute to growing extremism and violence were identified as

1. Encouragement of more hardline Islamic elements in the country.
2. Political uncertainty.
3. An increasing number of people seeking education in foreign madrassas.
4. Radicalised grass roots in the civil society and political parties.
5. Escalating extremist incidents of violence and involvement with jihadi groups.

The crucial point that should be of interest is whether Nasheed will be allowed to contest the next presidential elections. His growing popularity may provoke the extremist elements to do away with him. His personal security is of utmost importance now. It is for India and other international players to ensure a free, fair, violence free and an inclusive election.

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