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**NAVAL  
POSTGRADUATE  
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**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

**THESIS**

**ISLAMISM AND RADICALISM IN THE MALDIVES**

by

Hassan Amir

December 2011

Thesis Advisor:

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Second Reader:

Anshu Chatterjee

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**ISLAMISM AND RADICALISM IN THE MALDIVES**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

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COMBATING TERRORISM, STRATEGY, AND POLICY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis aims to explore the rise of Islamism and Islamic radicalism in the Republic of Maldives. It analyzes the causes and grievances which have fueled the rise of political Islam, as well as its radical elements, and the main groups operating in both the political and social space (as well as on the fringes), including an analysis of their main ideological drivers and their social and political outlook.

The closed and conspiratorial nature of the Maldivian political environment, as well as the use of repression to quell political dissent and the manipulation of Islamic religious ideals to cement political position was one factor that led to the rise of Islamism and Islamic radicalism. Another was the rapid modernization that introduced alien concepts and values into Maldivian society. These militated against the traditional norms and cultures and wrought havoc on the social structures, causing intense alienation and social dislocation. All these changes were taking place in a context where Maldives was being infiltrated by radical elements, both local and foreign. They made ample use of the social conditions to craft and narrative that was conducive to their recruitment and radicalization efforts.



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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

AP	Adaalath Party
DRP	Maldives Peoples' Party
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
IDP	Islamic Democratic Party
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IKK	Idara Khidmat-e-Khalq
IMF	Islamic Foundation of Maldives
JI	Jamaat-i-Islam
JP	Republican Party
JS	Jamiyathul-Salaf
JUI	Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Islam
LET	Lashkar-e-Taiba
MDP	Maldives Democratic Party
NU	Nahdhatul Ulama
PAS	Parti Islam se-Malaysia

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I dedicate this work to my wife Archun and my daughter Ayra. Their love, support and inspiration mean the world to me.

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# **I. INTRODUCTION**

## **A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION**

This thesis aims to explore the rise of Islamism and Islamic radicalism in the Republic of Maldives. It analyzes the causes and grievances which have fueled the rise of political Islam, as well as its radical elements, and the main groups operating in both the political and social space (as well as on the fringes), including an analysis of their main ideological drivers and their social and political outlook.

This paper also analyzes the atmospheres and conditions that prevail in Maldives and those that provide recruitment opportunities for regional and global terrorist organizations. A significant part of the Islamic radical element in Maldives has been the recruitment of Maldivian youth to take part in jihadi operations in conflict areas in the region. This thesis will delve deeper into the ties between socioeconomic and political conditions within Maldives and how they facilitate recruitment.

## **B. IMPORTANCE**

Maldives is a society that has been undergoing rapid transformation since the 1970s. The advent of tourism in the 1970s was seen by many as the harbinger of economic prosperity and affluence to the small island nation. Advancements in health care led to population increases. Primary and secondary education was introduced and enrollment in the government education system was made mandatory. This resulted in an increase in the number of people graduating from school, who then flooded the job market or who pursued higher education abroad.

Tourism, though mainly restricted to highly exclusive resorts, also brought in a culture of Westernization. This was accompanied by a massive wave of internal migration to the capital Male' from the outlying island, as people moved in search of better education and employment opportunities. Male', an island of only 2 square kilometers, was forced to accommodate almost 1/3 of the nation's population. This created socioeconomic issues such as overcrowding, congestion, and increases in domestic crime rates, as well as widespread drug abuse.



Meanwhile, from the economic and political sides, the prospects looked bleak. Maldivian law, until 2005, did not allow for the operation of political parties. Lawful political dissension was dealt with harshly. Compounding the problem was the fact that religion was manipulated by the regime in order to ensure civil order and maintain internal security. The state pushed forward a “moderate and modern” interpretation of Islam, and held tight control over the Islamic ulema and clerics. The lines between religious opposition and political opposition were often blurred with the help of the government-controlled media, and the masses were kept under tight control.

With the promulgation of political parties in 2005, Islamic political activism was introduced. Religious organizations focusing on social issues were also formed. All these developments were accompanied by growing Islamic conservatism and the adoption of Islamic practices and norms that stood in sharp contrast to the more liberal norms of the past. Islamic ulema and clerics, who had attended Islamic education facilities in places like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan and returned back to the country, contributed greatly to this tide, as did the presence of several regional Islamic social organizations. The President of Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed, in an interview given to CNN-IBN in 2009, expressed grave concerns about the presence of Islamic extremist and radical elements in Maldives. He also stressed the dangers of regional terrorist organizations, which had successfully conducted recruitment among the Maldivian youth, possibly numbering in the thousands. These youth, according to President Nasheed, attended madrassas dispensing radical education or participated in terrorist operations within Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup>

While the numbers may be a slight exaggeration, the phenomenon is very real and poses serious security, as well as economic, threats to Maldives. Maldives has an economy which is almost exclusively dependent on tourism, and the presence of such radical elements, with their anti-western sentiments and proven latency to strike against Western targets, can greatly undermine the fragile economy of Maldives. In addition, Maldives is also gaining international infamy as a breeding ground for Islamic

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<sup>1</sup>“Radicals in Pak recruiting our youth: Maldives,” Mohamed Nasheed (President of Maldives), in an interview given to CNN-IBN, October 25, 2009.

radicalism. Indian intelligence sources indicate that Maldives has become an administrative space for regional terrorist groups, especially groups based in and operating out of Pakistan. Such happenings can greatly tarnish the image of Maldives and strain its relationship with regional neighbors.

Given such dangerous developments and the fragility of the situation, it is imperative that Maldivian authorities implement effective measures to stem the tide of radicalism, as well as to halt the recruitment of its youth. Ascertaining the nature of the threat and establishing a baseline is one of the first steps in such an endeavor. Key players, their motivations, their modus operandi, as well as their ideology, need to be identified and analyzed in-depth to frame effective counter strategies. Additionally, the conditions, processes, and specific issues that act as sources of radicalism need to be identified and addressed. Only then can the tide of radicalism be turned.

In addition to the above issues, there has been less academic attention devoted to studying the phenomenon of Islamism and Islamic radicalism in niche Islamic communities like Maldives. Though the nature of Islamism differs from country to country, the present study of Islamism and Islamic radicalism in Maldives may help support the existing explanation for the rise of Islam in other Muslim communities across the world, or, at the very least, it can offer different explanations that may have relevance even outside of Maldives.

### **C. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Scholars writing about the phenomenon of political Islam (or Islamism) have defined it in various ways. According to Fuller, political Islam posits that “Islam as a body of faith has something important to say about how politics and society should be ordered in the contemporary Muslim world and implemented in some fashion.”<sup>2</sup> Barton suggests that the term covers a wide array of activities conducted by groups with different goals. Some groups may want Islam to be accorded a greater place and recognition within the political system and society, while the more radical groups may wish to transform the existing Islamic social and political structure to resemble a more theocratic

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<sup>2</sup> Graham Fuller, *The Future of Political Islam* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), xi.

configuration.<sup>3</sup> Roy suggests that political Islam starts with the view that "...Islam is a global and synthesizing system of thought."<sup>4</sup> According to Roy, the term "Islamism" suggests the differentiation that is made between being Muslim and being Islamic, because the Islamists' focus is on establishing an Islamic foundation as well as structures. Along a similar line, Hafez suggests that the term "Islamist" can be used to refer to any "individual, group, organization and parties that see in Islam a guiding political doctrine that justifies and motivates collective action on behalf of that doctrine."<sup>5</sup> Islamists, therefore, are those who are actively engaged in social and political activism, for a multitude of reasons. By this logic, according to Piscatori, Islam is both a "righteous program of principle and activity" as well as the "raison d'être" of politics and hence, "must be politicized."<sup>6</sup>

As defined by many scholars, Islamism encompasses a wide array of actors and motives, ranging from the revolutionaries who view the project of "Islamicizing" society as a project best tackled through the state's power apparatus, to the more reformist camp, who see social transformation at grass-root levels preceding the advent of an Islamic state.<sup>7</sup> The spectrum of Islamic political activism has also been addressed in detail in a study conducted by RAND, in which Islamic movements were mapped out according to their approach and tendencies towards democracy, use of terrorism and violence, and ideology used to justify violence. Their study identified six broad categories of Islamic political activism in the Muslim world, ranging from radical fundamentalists, such as the Salafist organization, to the secular authoritarians, such as the Ba'ath Party.<sup>8</sup>

Scholars have also made a distinction between the various Islamic movements and groups based on the methods they adopt to forward their political and social goals

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<sup>3</sup> Greg Barton, *Jemaah Islamiyah: Radical Islamism in Indonesia* (Singapore: Ridge Books, 2005), 28.

<sup>4</sup> Oliver Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, trans. Carol Volk (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 36.

<sup>5</sup> Mohammed M. Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Muslim World* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> James P. Piscatori, *Islam in the Political Process* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, 24.

<sup>8</sup> Angel M. Rabasa et al., *The Muslim World after 9/11* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2004), 5-14.

and based on their readiness or willingness to accept and participate in the political structures of the state. Often, the distinction between “Moderates” and their “Radical” counterparts is based on the acceptance or rejection of the political regime of the state, willingness or unwillingness to participate in the political process, and their outlook towards working with state institutions to effect political change (in the case of the moderates) rather than to bring about violent revolutions and embark on mass mobilization (as is preferred by the radicals).<sup>9</sup> Ayoob points out that many Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Jamaat-i-Islam (JI) and the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Islam (JUI) in Pakistan, the Nahdhatul Ulama (NU) in Indonesia, and the Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS) have all participated in the mainstream political and social processes of the state, while the more radical (and fringe) movements, such as al-Qaeda, have adopted an uncompromising stance and have resorted to violence.<sup>10</sup>

Though the rise of political Islam and radicalism has been attributed to a number of seemingly intractable and overlapping causes and grievances that are present in the Muslim world, these explanations can be generally classified under four main camps. The first set of explanations suggests that Islamic radicalism is a response to severe political repression and corruption as well as the presence of autocratic and authoritarian rulers. Anderson, in her exploration of the Islamist movements in the Middle East and North Africa, suggests that Islamic radicalism occurs when a transparent system of political opposition does not exist and it is a result of government harassment and repression of lawful opposition. The regimes, in most cases, were unwilling to compromise and institute democratic reforms, and the opposition was treated as an “illegal” movement.<sup>11</sup> Hafez, focusing primarily on Islamic rebellion in Egypt and Algeria, suggests that “an ill-fated combination of institutional exclusion on the one hand, and on the other, reactive and indiscriminate repression that threatens the organizational resource and personal lives

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<sup>9</sup> Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Mohamed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 17.

<sup>11</sup> Lisa Anderson, “Fulfilling Prophecies: State Policy and Islamist Radicalism,” in *Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism or Reform*, ed. John L. Esposito (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publications, 1997), 17–29.

of Islamists...” causes them to rebel, and that, under such circumstances, Islamists “...undergo a near universal process of radicalization...”<sup>12</sup> This has also been suggested by Fuller, who states that government repression and crackdowns force Islamists, who otherwise might have participated in the lawful political process, to adopt a more conspiratorial and sinister stance.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, some other authors have sought to explain the rise of Islamic radicalism as a response to the presence of poverty and deprivation that is prevalent in the Muslim world, as well as to the failure of economic models that have been inspired by the West and implemented by pro-Western elite. As stated by Lewis, the “failure of modernization” is held by many in the Muslim world, to be the root cause of conditions of poverty and lack of economic opportunities.<sup>14</sup> The rapid onslaught of modernity resulted in an increase in population and expansion in education, creating a large educated middle class with unbridled ambitions and aspirations, resulting in a growing gap between economic realities and personal aspirations.<sup>15</sup> Economic failure created exponentially higher unemployment rates, as well as an abject hatred towards government authorities. As argued by Richards, poverty and unemployment increases the likelihood of youth joining the ranks of violent opposition movements,<sup>16</sup> which are, in many cases, Islamic radical entities. Gerges also makes a similar argument, linking the presence of jihadi sentiments to structural problems present in the Arab world.<sup>17</sup>

Closely tied with economic issues are the numerous transformations which arose due to rapid urbanization, congestion, and the introduction of predominantly Western ideas and influences, which challenged the traditional values. Displacement, as well as

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<sup>12</sup> Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel*, 21–22.

<sup>13</sup> Graham E. Fuller, “The Future of Political Islam,” *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 2 (2002): 51–52.

<sup>14</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: Random House Inc., 2003), 113–119.

<sup>15</sup> Shireen T. Hunter, *The Future of Islam and the West: Clash of Civilizations or Peaceful Coexistence?* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 99.

<sup>16</sup> Alan Richards, “Socio-economic Roots of Radicalism: Towards Explaining the Appeal of Islamic Radicals,” Strategic Studies Institute Monograph Series, US Army War College, 2003, 16–17.

<sup>17</sup> Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 286.

rapid social transformations that dismantled old societal norms and traditional support structures, created a sense of alienation.<sup>18</sup> Modernization and its accompanying malaises were seen to create “valueless” and secular societies, resulting in moral degradation, societal decay, and spiritual vacuity. Given this displacement, alienation, and the barrage of alien values, many sought an “...anchor in religion” and “Islam offered a sense of identity, fraternity and cultural values....”<sup>19</sup>

Feeding off of the malaises present in the Muslim world and supported by vested interests in states like Saudi Arabia, a new brand of radical Islam, modeled on Salafi/Jihadi ideologies, is also held accountable as a source of Islamic radicalism. Key ideological components of this ideology include the concept of takfir (excommunication or declaring a Muslim as an apostate), and the veneration of jihad as an obligation on all Muslims, especially during the Afghan war against the Soviets. This brand of Islam shuns all compromise with political authorities and draws a more political reading of the Quran. In addition, this more radical brand adopts a Manichean world view between the “dar el harb” (house of war) and the forces of Islam.<sup>20</sup> Sparked off by the failure of Arab nationalism as well as the rise of Shia Khomeini as a champion of the Muslims, the Saudis began funneling in funds and resources to establish a vast network of like-minded Wahhabists. This movement funded charities, built mosques, and supported Islamic education in many developing countries in the Muslim world.<sup>21</sup>

#### **D. METHODS AND SOURCES**

This study will employ the single case study method to analyze the rise of Islamism and radicalism in Maldives. The single case study method is preferred, first, because the phenomenon of Islamism in Maldives has not yet been studied, and therefore,

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<sup>18</sup> Hrair R. Dekmejian, *Islam in Revolution: Fundamentalism in the Arab World* (Syracuse, NY.: Syracuse University Press, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 12–14.

<sup>20</sup> Assaf Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008), 94–126. See also Jarret M. Brachman, *Global Jihadism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 22–51.

<sup>21</sup> Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (New York: I.B. Taurus & Co. Ltd., 2004), 56–62.

making any kind of generalization would be difficult. Second, the nature and trajectory of Islamism and the rise of Islamic radicalism differs from country to country, and by adopting the single case methodology, this study aims to analyze the phenomenon in the Maldivian context to either support or refute existing explanations.

This study will primarily use secondary sources of information, including, but not limited to, journal articles, government policy papers, government databases, reports and other publications (from Maldives as well as from relevant foreign countries), and mass media sources such as print media and television reports. In addition, extensive use will be made of online sources, such as government websites and websites of other governmental and non-governmental organizations, as well as propaganda material used by the radical and extremist elements.

## **E. THESIS OVERVIEW**

The thesis will include six chapters overall, including the introductory chapter. Chapter II will elaborate briefly, on the history and politics of Islam in Maldives and its transformation over time. It also aims to identify the major Islamic political actors, their organizational structures, motivations, ideologies, their modus operandi and geographical dispersions.

Chapter III will test the first hypothesis that the rise of Islamic radicalism in Maldives was facilitated by the exclusive political system that denied expressions of lawful dissent and political repression aimed against political opponents. This chapter also explores the relation between the state power apparatus and religion, how Islam was molded to suit the political expediency, and how it resulted in a political, as well as a religious, backlash. This chapter also explores the rise and trajectory of political Islam following the democratic reforms.

Chapter IV will explore the second and third hypotheses forwarded in this study, namely that economic deprivation caused by economic failures, as well as social alienation and marginalization caused by modernization and excessive Westernization, resulted in an Islamic backlash and caused the rise of Islamic radicalism in Maldives. Socioeconomic issues go hand-in-hand with these economic failures and, for this reason,

this chapter addresses both these issues together. This chapter will explore factors such as the economic performance of Maldives, in addition to social indicators like crime and drug abuse rates that may have contributed to the rise of Islamic radicalism. This thesis will also address the disparity between the capital island Male' and the outlying islands, as well as the impact of Western influences and social transformations.

Chapter V will address the wave of ideology brought into Maldives by foreign-educated Islamic ulema, as well as foreign terrorist recruiters operating in Maldives and their connection to the rise of Islamic radicalism in Maldives. This chapter will explore the ideological differences between the new brand of radical Islam and the traditional practices of Islam in Maldives, and how the newer ideologies are effecting social and religious change. This chapter also explores the activities of the foreign terrorist organizations and their recruiting agents, and how they are able to conduct their recruitment among the Maldivian youth. Finally, Chapter VI will conclude the study and present the overall assessment as well as possible policy recommendations, which may be helpful for the Maldivian authorities to implement in the fight against Islamic radicalism and terrorism.



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## II. RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS OF THE MALDIVES

### A. PRE-ISLAMIC TRADITIONS

The origins of the Maldivian people are shrouded in mystery, but it is strongly believed that the inhabitation of Maldives started around the same time as that of neighboring Sri Lanka.<sup>22</sup> The Indian Ocean area, in which Maldives is located, was the center of much maritime traffic in ancient times. Numerous commercial vessels sailed these waters on their journeys to the Far East, as well as fishermen from the coastal areas of the Indian Ocean region; and, it is believed that, commercial interest or mere chance might have forced some of these seafarers to halt in Maldives. Ragupathy suggests that “Post-Indus maritime migrations, Iron Age in South India and Sri Lanka, Greco-Roman maritime trade—all contributed to the navigational activities of the first millennium B.C.” He goes on further to state that the “availability of cowries, turtle shells, ambergris etc. which were valuable commodities in the Asian trade, the possibility of providing services to the navigators, and shipwrecks might have made people settle in the Maldives.”<sup>23</sup>

References to Maldives are found in the earliest canonical works of Sri Lanka, such as the *Dipavamsa* and the *Mahavamsa*, as well in such works of the Indian subcontinent. Similar accounts of Maldives have also been found in Greek and Chinese historical records, suggesting that Maldives has been populated for several millennia.<sup>24</sup>

Archeological discoveries made in some islands of Maldives suggest that the intrepid explorers known as the *Redin*, a civilization centered on sun-worship, might have settled in Maldives as early as 1500 B.C.<sup>25</sup> The *Redin*, who might have had some

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<sup>22</sup> H.C.P. Bell, *The Maldivian Island - An Account of the Physical Features, Climate, History, Inhabitants, Production and Trade* (Ceylon: Acting Government Printer, 1882), 21.

<sup>23</sup> Ponnampalam Ragupathy, *The South Asian Heritage of Early Maldives*, (Male', Maldives: Science Education Center, 1993), 1.

<sup>24</sup> Clarence Maloney, “Where did the Maldives People Come From?” International Institute for Asian Studies, <http://www.iias.nl/iiasn/iiasn5/insouasi/maloney.html> (accessed July 20, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> “Maldives,” Chicago Public Schools, Office of Language and Cultural Education, <http://www.olce.org/pdfs/South%20Asia/Maldives.pdf> (accessed July 20, 2011).

affiliations with the foundational races of ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia and Indus, revered the sun. They claimed to be descendants of the sun and considered it their chief deity. Statues with elongated ears, known to be the *Redin's* creations, have been found in Maldives, suggesting that they might have pre-dated the Hindu and the Buddhist civilizations.<sup>26</sup>

The Indian subcontinent and, more importantly, Gujrat are also cited as possible points of origin for those who would later populate Sri Lanka and Maldives. The foundational myths of Sri Lanka and the earliest canonical works of Buddhism contain references to Maldives. According to Maloney, Jataka No. 213, the Bharu Jataka, mentions an episode in which some people were exiled from the port city of Bharukaccha (modern Bharuch). These political exiles "...found standing room upon a thousand islands which are yet to be seen today about the island of Najikara." Maloney asserts that the thousand islands referred to in the Jataka could only be Maldives, suggesting that Maldives might have been populated by political exiles from the established civilizations around it.<sup>27</sup>

Around the same time that the Indo-Aryan people were migrating from the western parts of India, a parallel colonization by the Dravidian people from the southern part of India was also taking place in Sri Lanka. These Dravidians, particularly those from the Malabar Coast (the western coast of the subcontinent), were engaged in fishing and maritime navigation, and it is very likely that they settled in small island communities in Maldives.<sup>28</sup> Due to the geography of Maldives and the relative isolation of individual islands, such settlements could have existed in ignorance of one another.

Archeological evidence unearthed in Maldives suggests that the nation might have been subject to three different religious orders prior to the arrival of Islam. Though scant, evidence remains of the legendary seafarers known as the *Redin* and their religious order

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<sup>26</sup> Thor Heyerdahl, *The Maldives Mystery* (Bethesda, Maryland: Adler & Adler Publishers, Inc., 1986), 305–307. It should be noted that only a few scholars, such as the author strongly suggest such linkages.

<sup>27</sup> Clarence Maloney, *The People of the Maldivian Islands*, (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1980), 38.

<sup>28</sup> Naseema Mohamed, "The First Dhivehin," *Dhivehi Observer*, 21 August 2006, [http://www.dhivehiobserver.com/history/papers/First\\_Dhivehin\\_1708200612.htm](http://www.dhivehiobserver.com/history/papers/First_Dhivehin_1708200612.htm) (accessed July 20, 2011).

of sun-worship. The duodecimal counting system traditionally used in the Maldives (with twelve as the base number), a few archeological findings, and local folklore are all that remains of this religion.<sup>29</sup>

The other two religious orders that prevailed in Maldives were Hinduism and Buddhism. Hinduism may have predated Buddhism in Maldives, as it did on the subcontinent and elsewhere, or it might have been introduced at a later time. As for Buddhism, archeological remains of temples, stupas, statues of Buddha, and other such items indicate that Maldives may have adhered to the *Mahayana* sect.<sup>30</sup>

The remnants of these religious traditions are also reflected in the presence of the pseudo-religious magical practices locally known as *fandita* (probably derived from the term *Pandit*). This is a distillation of old religious practices and beliefs that exist parallel to the Islamic faith and, in many cases, have developed close affiliations with Islam.<sup>31</sup> Evidence of this is provided by the many local folklore and tales which effortlessly weave together stories of demons and evil spirits and brave and pious learned men who used the power of Islamic incantations and supplications to subdue the malicious forces. The local mythical folklore and demonology also reflect ideas which have been transmitted via the old religious traditions. For example, there are close parallels with Mother Goddess worship and there is a prevalence of folklore about beautiful, predatory female spirits known as *Handi*.<sup>32</sup>

There are also local folktales reminiscent of the tale of the Hindu epic, Ramayana, as well as references to some Hindu Brahmins and Sages, such as Vashishta, who is locally known as *Oditan Kaleygefaanu*.

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<sup>29</sup> Thor Heyerdahl, *The Maldives Mystery*, 307.

<sup>30</sup> B. A. Ariyatilaka, "The Maldives: A Forgotten Buddhist Past," Sri Lanka National Buddhist Authority, [http://www.nbasrilanka.itgo.com/blank\\_6.html](http://www.nbasrilanka.itgo.com/blank_6.html) (accessed July 20, 2011).

<sup>31</sup> Maloney, *The People of the Maldivian Islands*, 243.

<sup>32</sup> Xavier Romero-Frias, *The Maldivian Islanders: A Study of the Popular Culture of an Ancient Ocean Kingdom* (Barcelona: Nova Ethnographica Indica, 1999). This is an excellent source of such folklore and local tales, and the author's incisive analysis is equally thought-provoking.

Additionally, pagan or Hindu rites such as self-mutilation, which were conducted at religious ceremonies as shows of devotion to their deities, were exhibited for the entertainment of visiting dignitaries. Given an Islamic twist, such shows had been hosted as recently as 1835, almost 500 years after conversion to Islam.<sup>33</sup>

## **B. CONVERSION TO ISLAM**

There are contending accounts about the arrival of Islam in Maldives. Some suggest that Islam was brought to Maldives in AD 1153 by a saint named Abul-Barakat al Barbari from Maghreb (though some claim that he actually came from the Sri Lankan port of Beruwala, which is often mispronounced as Barbarin), while other theories contend that it was a Persian saint named Yusuf Shamsuddin.<sup>34</sup> And yet other theories, in a mix of the above two theories, suggest that Islam was introduced to Maldives in AD 1338 by a saint named Abul-Barakat Yusuf al-Tabrezi.<sup>35</sup>

There are also equally puzzling accounts of how and why Maldives converted to Islam. Some theories romanticize the account, wherein his faith in Islam enabled the saint in question to defeat a spiritual specter that had been haunting Maldives. So grateful was the Sultan that he readily converted to Islam and issued royal edicts calling all Maldivians to embrace the new religion. More likely, the conversion might have been fuelled by the more pragmatic politico-economic intention of tapping into the growing influence of Arab traders in the region,<sup>36</sup> as well as designs by the Maldives ruler to minimize growing power of the Buddhist priesthood and, thus, the power of the nearby Buddhist kingdom of Sri Lanka.<sup>37</sup> It is interesting to note that several accounts of the conversion tale exist within Maldivian society, some painting it as a parody of the elites who wanted

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<sup>33</sup> I. A. Young and W. Christopher, "Memoir on the Inhabitants of the Maldive Islands," in *Transactions of the Bombay Geographical Society from 1836 to 1838*, 54–86.

<sup>34</sup> There is much confusion about the precise year of conversion. Royal edicts written on copper plates (known as *Loamaafaanu*) indicate the year of conversion to be AD 1194, but the Maldivian historical chronicles give the date as AD 1153.

<sup>35</sup> Rizwan A. Ahmed, "The State and National Foundation in the Maldives," *Cultural Dynamics* 13 (2001): 296-297.

<sup>36</sup> Maloney, *The People of the Maldive Islands*, 101.

<sup>37</sup> Roseline NgCheong-Lum, *Cultures of the World: Maldives* (New York: Marshall Cavendish Corp., 2000), 20.

to ingratiate themselves to the new power in the region and the more popular rendition which is based on royal predation.<sup>38</sup>

The conversion to Islam is the single most important event in Maldivian history. The period prior to the conversion is derisively referred to as *jahiliyya* (period of ignorance), and the conversion is hailed as the Spiritual Revolution. That being said, though everyone was compelled to convert to Islam by royal decree, some islands held on to the religion of their forefathers and refused to destroy the temples and other places of Buddhist worship. Many saw this as a transient fad imposed by Arab traders who had beguiled the king, thus many islanders covered the temples, idols and other objects of worship under mounds of earth with the intention of resurrecting them later.<sup>39</sup> As a result, in many parts of Maldives, open rebellion against the new faith broke out, prompting the king to dispatch forces from the capital to force the conversion.

Islam in Maldives survived and thrived, especially during the turbulent period of early conversion, because it continued to receive royal patronage from the Sultans who were the official and ultimate guarantors of the faith. Following conversion, the Sultan ordered for mosques and madrassas to be built across the country, in order to instruct and guide people to the new faith. Additionally, Islamic law, *Sharia*, was made the basis for the legal system of Maldives, and Islam impacted the social norms, customs and traditions of the nation.<sup>40</sup>

Despite these measures, Islam in Maldives underwent tremendous modification over the years due to the lingering presence of other religions and the highly matriarchal social order that was prevalent throughout the Lakshadweep archipelago.<sup>41</sup> This resulted

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<sup>38</sup> Ahmed, "The State and National Foundation in the Maldives," 296–297.

<sup>39</sup> On some islands, temples were remodeled as mosques. Even today, there are mosques whose physical orientation towards the 'Qiblah' is disputed because they originally conformed to the orientation of Buddhist temples.

<sup>40</sup> "World Almanac of Islamism: Maldives," American Foreign Policy Council, <http://almanac.afpc.org/maldives>, (accessed June 3, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> The last remnants of this social order were observed among the Giraavaru people of Maldives, who accorded chief position to the local medicine woman and midwife called 'Foolhumaa Dhaita.' On the Minicoy Islands (India), which share many social and cultural ties with Maldives (and which may have been part of Maldives at one point in history), matriarchal social order is still observed.

in wide acceptance for un-Islamic practices, many of which were recorded by the famed traveler and Islamic scholar Ibn-Batuta, who resided in Maldives for a period of time and was made a ‘*Qadi*’ (Islamic Judge). According to his accounts, Maldivian women were highly liberal and went about in public without the traditional Islamic veil (*burqah*) and instead wearing only a piece of cloth wrapped around their lower bodies.<sup>42</sup> Also, many women, after having being divorced, remained in the home of their former husbands until remarriage. Ibn-Batuta’s arrival also coincided with the reign of Queen Khadijah (*Rehendi Khadeejah*), who reigned despite Islamic norms, which forbade women from assuming public office.<sup>43</sup>

Other recorded instances of un-Islamic practices includes that of the Chief Islamic Cleric (as well as the Chief Justice) at the royal court sending out annual missives to the islanders to educate them on religious matters, mostly pertaining to correct performance of ablutions or observance of basic religious tenets.<sup>44</sup> This was also recorded by Clarence Maloney, one of the first (and lamentably few) foreign social scientists to do research on Maldives. He gives the account of a conversation with a local cleric who told him that Islam, for most Maldivians, was a matter of ablution, fasting, and mumbling incomprehensible Arabic supplications.<sup>45</sup>

Isolation from Islamic centers and the rich cultural history of Maldives that predated the arrival of Islam had tremendous impact on the way that Islam was perceived and practiced and Islam, at best, remained a sub-stratum of culture.<sup>46</sup> This has been observed in other cultures which have dealt with waves of Islamization, where the

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<sup>42</sup> This has also been chronicled in the writings of Chinese explorer Cheng-Ho (1433) who observed similar behavior, especially among the higher castes in places like Cochin, Ceylon, and Quilon. This also supports the notion that pre-Islamic Maldives may have practiced Hinduism as well. Phillip B. Wagoner, “Sultan Among Hindu Kings: Dress, Titles and Islamicization of Hindu Culture at Vijayanagar,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 55, no. 4 (1996): 851–880.

<sup>43</sup> Mahdi Hussain, *The Rehla of Ibn Battuta - India, Maldiv Islands and Ceylon - translation and commentary* (Baroda, India: Oriental Institute, 1976), 1344–1346.

<sup>44</sup> “How Steadfast are Maldivians in Islam,” April 22, 2005, [http://www.maldivesroyalfamily.com/editorial\\_maldives\\_islamic\\_steadfastness.shtml](http://www.maldivesroyalfamily.com/editorial_maldives_islamic_steadfastness.shtml) (accessed July 20, 2011).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Maloney, “Where did the Maldives People Come From?”

process of transmogrification and modification of the religion to accommodate social practices has occurred. This supports the earlier theory that Islamization and participation in the more 'universal' culture of Islam was a political policy adopted by the elite.



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### III. POLITICS AND ISLAM IN THE MALDIVES

#### A. POLITICAL SYSTEM OF MALDIVE PRIOR TO 1968

The political landscape of Maldives has undergone tremendous change with the initiation of the democratic reform process, which started (in earnest) in 2003. Since 2003, there has been considerable attention and effort devoted to creating political structures and institutions that are more suited to the ideals and image of democracy to which Maldives aspires. Examples of these changes include the creation and operation of political parties and the effective delineation of power between the different branches of the government. There have also been efforts to create greater political and socioeconomic decentralization by establishing and empowering local governing authorities such as city councils.

Maldives arrived at this juncture with a rich and varied political history that was uniquely Maldivian. It was not modeled on the political systems prevalent in the region or the political system found in any other Islamic state. According to Maloney, “The landscape of the Maldives is so unusual that the political system which glues the pieces together and channels social control is also unusual.”<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, he also asserts that, “the form of government is Maldivian, with two millennia of adaptation to the peculiar requirements of the fragmented landscape and culture history of the country.”<sup>48</sup>

Up until 1968, Maldives had been a Sultanate (except for the brief period of the first republic). Throughout Maldives’ history, beginning with the seminal event of Islamic conversion, there have been 89 Sultans and 3 Sultanas who reigned over Maldives. Though Sultanic law was based on hereditary right to the throne, political succession was often decided through messy squabbles, coups, and violent upheavals.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Clarence Maloney, *People of the Maldives Islands*, 175.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Phadnis and Luithui, *Maldives: Winds of Change in an Atoll State*, (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1985), 10. See also Francois Pyrard de Laval, *The Voyage of Francois Pyrard of Laval to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas and Brazil*, trans. Albert Gray (New York: Burt Franklin), [http://www.maldivesculture.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=184&Itemid=61](http://www.maldivesculture.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=184&Itemid=61), accessed October 18, 2011.

The constant coups and counter-coups, which were characteristic of the Sultanistic era, set the tone of “distrust and political fear, of furtive whispering, (which was) especially prevalent in Male’.”<sup>50</sup> That being said, the Sultans of Maldives were mostly benign autocrats, who ruled benevolently.<sup>51</sup> They were, according to Phadnis and Luithui, benevolent, oligarchic rulers.<sup>52</sup> In fact, amongst Maldives’ Sultans, there was a tradition of official acquiescence to public pressure, which often saw powerful persons being removed from political office.<sup>53</sup>

Traditionally, the Sultanate had functioned through a hold on the political and economic systems of the society. According to Phadnis and Luithui, little changed in the political system following the Islamic conversion, except that Islam was added to the organizational dimensions of the political system, and also imbued Maldives’ politics with a religious fervor.<sup>54</sup> Following the conversion, the Sultans derived their political authority from the Islamic Sharia base, and they exercised religious control over the population through the chief Islamic cleric, the *Qazi (Fan’diyaru* in the local language), and other religious officials.<sup>55</sup>

Centralized ruling power came from the Sultan, who was based in the capital, Male’, and was translated into political control at the atoll and island levels by island chiefs (*Katheebu*) and atoll chiefs (*Atholhu Verin*) who were selected by the administration in Male’. Most, if not all, islands also had *Qadis*, who, along with the island chiefs, exercised political and judicial control over the islands.

The ecclesiastical order and the political order were arranged in a rather complicated manner. The Sultan, despite deriving his power from the tenets of Islamic Sharia law, acted as a secular ruler. The religious order was subordinate to the secular

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<sup>50</sup> Maloney, *People of the Maldives Islands*, 190–196.

<sup>51</sup> V. H. Coelho, “Constitutional and Political Development in the Maldives,” in Verinder Grover, ed. *Maldives: Government and Politics* (New Delhi: Deep & Deep Publication Pvt. Ltd., 2000), 51.

<sup>52</sup> Urmila Phadnis and Ela D. Luithui, “The Maldives Enters World Politics,” *Asian Affairs* 8, no. 3 (1981), 169.

<sup>53</sup> Maloney, *People of the Maldives Islands*, 19.

<sup>54</sup> Phadnis and Luithui, *Maldives: Winds of Change in an Atoll State*, 10.

<sup>55</sup> Maloney, *People of the Maldives Islands*, 199–200.

ruling order, and this arrangement was largely maintained, though there were a few instances when the *Qazi* would assume the throne as a Sultan.<sup>56</sup> The unique position of the Sultan as the protector of the Islamic faith and the tenets of Sharia had been handed down from generation to generation and formed part of the political structure of the state.

## **B. MALDIVES UNDER COLONIZATION**

Waning Arab power in the Indian Ocean region coincided with the arrival of European colonial powers into the region. During this time, Maldives was able to remain independent, except for a brief spell during the 17th century when it was colonized by the Portuguese. The Portuguese occupation of Maldives was facilitated by the Sultan, Hassan the IX (known as Dom Manoel after baptism), who adopted Christianity and soon after migrated to Goa and remained under Portuguese protection. The Portuguese established themselves in the capital, Male', and dispatched their representatives all over Maldives. They ruled over Maldives from 1558 to 1573 and were finally ousted after 17 years of occupation by a local hero named Mohamed Thakurufaanu and his band of followers, who waged a campaign of insurgency against the foreign invaders. After their expulsion, Mohamed Thakurufaanu was declared as the Sultan. Following his accession to the throne, he instituted several measures to curb the Christian practices that had started to creep into the life of Islamic Maldives. In some instances, he dispatched military force from the capital to force people back to the Islamic faith.<sup>57</sup>

Furthermore, the Sultans also enlisted the help of Sheikh Muhammad Jamaluddin, a learned Islamic scholar, who had recently returned from studies abroad in Hadramut, Yemen, and made him the Chief Qadi of the realm. Under the advice of the new Qadi, the Shafi code of Sunni Islam was made the official religious code in Maldives,<sup>58</sup> and the message was preached that Maldives had succumbed to Portuguese occupation due to its

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<sup>56</sup> Phadnis and Luithui, *Maldives: Winds of Change in an Atoll State*, 10–11.

<sup>57</sup> N. T Hassan Didi, *Kureege Huvadhoo Atoll* (Male': Novelty Press, 2005). This book outlined one such incident in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, carried out by Sultan Mohamed Thakurufaanu, when he dispatched the militia to Thinadhoo (an island in South Maldives) to force the people to reconvert to Islam. Additionally, he instituted a tax, which the people of this island had to pay every year to the militia. This tax was finally abolished in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>58</sup> Maloney, *People of the Maldivian Islands*, 219. According to other accounts, Jamaluddin was responsible for the establishment of a Sufi order in the Maldives. See Mohamed Nasheed, *A Historical Overview of Traditional Dhivehi Polity, 1800 – 1900* (Sri Lanka: Karunaratna & Sons, 2003).

failure to observe and adhere to the tenets of Islam. It can be argued that this was the first Islamic revivalism experienced in Maldives. It is a common phenomenon in many Islamic societies to turn towards Islam in times of such crises and adopt much more stringent laws and legal codes. This helps coalesce the population and allows people an illusion of control over their external environments.

Maldives was subject to several such waves of colonization and occupation, mostly originating from the Malabar Coast of India. Such forays rarely managed to establish a foothold and had little impact on the Maldivian society and its Islamic character. Portuguese colonial power in the Indian Ocean region slowly gave way to the Dutch and finally to the British, who were the next European power to hold sway over Maldives.

In 1887, Maldives signed a treaty agreement with the British Empire and Maldives was declared a British Protectorate. The British were content to direct the foreign affairs of Maldives, and did not interfere with its internal administration, which was left to the local Sultan. They were not interested in establishing missionary outposts or entangling themselves in the internal squabbles of the islanders. It was only when Japan began its series of invasions during World War II that the British seriously considered making use of Maldives as an airbase.<sup>59</sup> But, even this interest was short-lived, and in the military retrenchment and decolonization process, Maldives was granted independence and the British relinquished control over their airbase in 1967.

### **C. TRANSFORMATION FROM A SULTANATE TO A REPUBLIC**

Local political intrigue, internecine squabbling, and rivalry for power among the leading political figures set the tone that led up to the change in Maldives' political system. Even prior to the political reform, the power of the Sultan had been slowly eroding. In 1932, under the behest of the British government in Ceylon, political reform was undertaken, resulting in the first written constitution of the Maldives. Under the new constitution, framed on December 22, 1932, the position of the Sultan no longer remained hereditary, but was to be decided on the basis of an election. A Citizens' Majlis

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<sup>59</sup> Maloney, *People of the Maldivian Islands*, 129.

(Parliament) was convened under the Sultan and the Majlis, along with the Sultan, the Chief Minister, and the *qadis*, comprised the political power in Maldives.

Maldives became a republic under a highly Anglicized elite, led by the first President, Mohammed Amin Didi, who had served in various capacities under the administration of the Sultan and who was related to the royal family. Leading up to the political transformation, Amin began assuming increasing power in local political affairs, due, in large part, to the fact that the incumbent monarch, Hassan Fareed, left Amin in charge of running the state while Fareed resided in Ceylon. Left largely unchecked, Amin had free rein in crafting policies for Maldives. Some of his policies, such as education for girls, promotion of local cultivation, and the introduction of several modern innovations, were well received. On the other hand, some other policies, such as the centralization of trade in dried fish, the ban on tobacco, and the strict implementation of the Islamic Sharia law, were seen by many to be too radical and avant-garde for the times. Despite being a 100% Islamic state, the application of the strictest tenets of the Sharia, such as stoning adulterers and cutting the hands of thieves, were not been implemented in Maldives. In addition to these new policies, Amin instituted several controversial projects across Maldives, most notable being the clearing of vast tracts of scarce cultivable land to build wide avenues on all of the islands. He forced local islanders to work on these projects, which interfered with jobs that provided their daily livelihoods and increased their economic plight.<sup>60</sup>

During the period from 1943 to 1953, Maldives was ruled by a regency council within the Majlis, which was convened when Sultan Hassan Nooraddeen abdicated the throne. The power structure of the Sultanate had crumbled, and though there were numerous contenders for the throne, many wanted Abdul Majeed, the previous Chief Minister under Sultan Shamsuddeen, to assume the throne. Despite this, Majeed resided in Egypt, returning infrequently to Maldives, and refused repeated pleas to ascend the throne. Nevertheless, he exercised considerable power in local affairs, and was instrumental in the political direction of Maldives during these turbulent times. The

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<sup>60</sup> Maloney, *People of the Maldives Islands*, 200–201.

intensity and nature of the political friction during the time leading up to the political transformation of Maldives from a Sultanate to a Republic state can be understood when considering the fact that Maldives adopted and discarded six constitutions before finally settling on the seventh one that instituted political change.

In April 1952, a general referendum was held among the people of the Maldives to decide the political future of the country, and the majority decision was for Maldives to become a republic. This move was due in part to the death of Abdul Majeed, the prior Sultan-designate, who had died earlier in the year. Once a republic, Mohammed Amin Didi was elected as Maldives' first president, with almost 96% of the votes. The seventh constitution of Maldives, enacted under Amin, included many progressive elements such as the enfranchisement of women, but failed to include important elements of basic civil liberties and other rights, which had been part of earlier constitutions.<sup>61</sup>

Ultimately, this first republic experiment ended with a coup and a violent uprising. The general public had become increasingly frustrated with the failure of the government to alleviate their economic conditions. Furthermore, many were of the view that Amin's administration was excessively corrupt and that he diverted the scant resources the state had towards maintaining his numerous lovers and female friends. So, while Amin was traveling abroad for medical reasons, the general public met with the Vice President, Muhammad Ibrahim Didi, and encouraged him to take over the government. Upon his return from Ceylon, Amin was apprised of the change in power and he was retained on an island nearby the capital for his safety. While remaining there, he enlisted the help of a few loyalists and engineered a counter-coup, which ultimately failed. During the counter-coup, Amin had gone to Male'; intent on re-taking power from the usurper, but a mob attacked him and injured him severely. A trial was held and the chief instigators were exiled for life, and Amin remained under exile until his death in 1954. In the end, Maldives reverted back to being a Sultanate, and Mohamed Fareed assumed the throne.

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<sup>61</sup> Maloney, *People of the Maldives Islands*, 201.

In retrospect, the reason for the first republic's failure may be attributed to the many changes that Amin instituted, particularly his programs for the emancipation of women and his socioeconomic designs, appeared to be too radical for the general population at the time,<sup>62</sup> especially for the more conservative elements within the society.

The period between 1954 and 1965 was marked with increased internal political tension, resulting from the presence of the British on some of Maldives' atolls and also due to the adverse economic conditions under which Maldivians had been forced to live for a long time. Fissiparous tendencies had developed in some parts of Maldives, especially in the southern atolls, which greatly benefited from having British airbases established there. Having developed economic ties with a global power, the southern atolls were not content with the centralized system of trade which was conducted through Male', especially in the aftermath of the economic crises that befell Maldives following the drop in the export value of dried fish. These atolls rose in revolt and declared the Republic of Suvadive Islands, but these revolutionary activities were brutally quashed under the direction of the Prime Minister of the time, Ibrahim Nasir.<sup>63</sup> In July 1965, Maldives gained full independence from the British, though the British continue to remain in the southern-most atolls as per the terms of the treaty they had negotiated during the reign of Sultan Mohamed Fareed, which has allowed them to establish and operate an airbase in Maldives.

Following Maldives independence from Britain, a second referendum was held to decide the political future of the country. The Maldivian population was, again, in favor of a republic. In November 1968, Ibrahim Nasir was sworn in as the first president of the second republic of the Maldives, and the Sultanate was decidedly expunged. But, despite Maldives' change from a Sultanate to a republic state, there was not much change in the nature and mode of governance because many of the institutions which ushered in democratic norms, independent legislative, and judiciary branches were not allowed to

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<sup>62</sup> Urmila Phadnis, "Maldives," in Verinder Grover, ed. *Maldives: Government and Politics* (New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications Pvt. Ltd., 2000), 107. See also, V.H. Coelho, "Constitutional and Political Development in the Maldives," in Verinder Grover, ed. *Maldives: Government and Politics* (New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications Pvt. Ltd., 2000).

<sup>63</sup> Maloney, *The People of the Maldive Island*, 175–210.



operate due to the overwhelming power that was centralized in the hands of the President. Additionally, the second republic did not allow the existence of political parties. The constitutional scheme, which was introduced in 1967, dictated that the Majlis nominate one candidate for the post of the president. The candidate, thus vetted and passed by the Majlis, then had to secure more than 51% of public approval through a general ballot.

Constitutional amendments undertaken in 1970, 1972, and 1975 gave almost unlimited power to the President. According to the constitution, the president was also the supreme authority entrusted with propagating and protecting the Islamic faith of the country. The administration of justice and the implementation of Sharia were to be handled by a body nominated by the President.<sup>64</sup>

Political consolidation, regime protection, and maintaining sovereign integrity in the face of separatist tendencies played a big role during the formative years of Maldivian statehood. These elements contributed heavily to the closed and exclusive political system and, in some ways, they were as influential as the legacy of the Sultanistic era and culture. As stated by Maloney, “strong individual leadership” often characterized by the assumption of almost-dictatorial powers and a single-minded drive towards entrenchment of one’s own position “...is acceptable in the light of the traditional Maldivian polity...”<sup>65</sup> In a system riven with internal squabbling and conspiratorial rivalry, the position of the Sultan (or later, that of the President) has to be secured through undermining political opposition and meeting any challenges to one’s authority with absolute repression. President Nasir, for example, had to contend with several perceived and real challenges to his authority; most notable was the challenge from his Prime Minister, Ahmed Zaki. President Nasir reacted to the incident by dismantling several ministries and exiling Zaki and several other top officials who he believed had conspired against him and who had pushed for a ‘no-confidence’ motion within the Majlis.<sup>66</sup> Nasir was also quick to implement safeguards against any further challenges to his supreme power. To this end, he directed further constitutional amendments by abolishing the post of the Prime

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<sup>64</sup> Maloney, *The People of the Maldives Islands*, 202.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Maloney, *The People of the Maldives Islands*, 206–208.

Minister and, in lieu, instituted the posts of four Vice Presidents who held executive power.<sup>67</sup>

In 1978, after having served two terms as president, Nasir indicated that, for various reasons, he did not wish to run for a third time, despite there being no constitutional limit on the number of terms a person could hold the office of the presidency. Before this decision was announced, the position of the alternate candidate was filled by Maumoon Abdul Qayoom, who was serving as the Minister for Transport in Nasir's regime. In the same conspiratorial traditions which owe their origins to the times of the Sultanate, there had been furtive power-brokering within the Majlis as well as the elite cliques in determining this alternate candidate. In the second round of nominations, after having being apprised of Nasir's desire not to contend for election, the majority of the votes in the Majlis went to Qayoom. And, following the tenuous period that was fraught with fears of a reprisal by President Nasir, the nomination of the Majlis was put to the ultimate test of a public referendum, which Qayoom won with over 90% of the votes. On November 11, 1978, Qayoom was sworn in as the second President of Maldives.

Qayoom had been educated in Islamic sharia at Al Azhar University in Egypt in the 1950s. After having filled some instructional posts in Nigeria, Qayoom returned to Maldives in 1971 and began to serve as a lecturer in a government-run school. He was a strong critic of the government, especially on the issue of tourism and the sale of alcohol, which he maintained was against the tenets of Islam. Because of this criticism, Qayoom was placed under house arrest and then banished from Maldives in 1973. Eventually, he was brought back to Maldives to work under the administration of President Nasir as an Under Secretary at the Telecommunications Department in 1974.<sup>68</sup> He was then made the Deputy Ambassador of Maldives in Sri Lanka and later became Maldives'.<sup>69</sup> His political career and his relationship with President Nasir's administration underwent dramatic ups

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<sup>67</sup> Phadnis and Luithui, *Maldives: Winds of Change in an Atoll State*, 40–43.

<sup>68</sup> Royston Ellis, *A Man for all Island: A Biography of Maumoon Abdul Qayoom, President of the Maldives* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1998), 82–89.

<sup>69</sup> Ellis, *A Man for all Island*, 100.

and downs until he became the Minister of Transport, a post which he held until he became the President in 1978.

As mentioned previously, under the Maldivian Constitution, the President is considered the ‘supreme authority’ and is charged with protecting and promoting the tenets of Islam.<sup>70</sup> In this respect, Qayoom initiated several policies during his 30-year rule that would move Islam into the mainstream social and political discourse of the country. One of these initiatives includes the creation of *Mauhadu-al Dhiraasaathul Islamiyya*, an educational institute dedicated solely to Islamic studies, which was established in 1980. In 1984, with assistance from Islamic states such as Pakistan, Brunei, and the states of the Persian Gulf, the Islamic Center of Maldives was constructed in Male’. This building houses a grand mosque and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs (formerly known as the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs). During the initial years of his rule, diplomatic ties with many of the Islamic states of the Persian Gulf were established, and Maldives started to play a more prominent role in the Organization of the Islamic Countries. All these developments enabled Maldives to garner increased assistance from these states, especially in fields like education. It was at this time that significant numbers of Maldivian youth began attending various Islamic education institutes in places such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and India. These youth later became the vanguard of the Islamic revivalist movement in Maldives.<sup>71</sup>

Additionally, Qayoom utilized his religious personae by appearing and lecturing at many of the important religious functions in Maldives.<sup>72</sup> Noteworthy in this respect is the annual religious program conducted during the Islamic month of fasting (Ramadan), in which Qayoom was a permanent fixture. He also frequently delivered the Friday sermons at various mosques in Maldives, led the nation in prayer, and appeared on

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<sup>70</sup> “The Executive, Ch 3: 38: The Constitution of the Republic Maldives,” Attorney General’s Office, <http://agoffice.gov.mv/pdf/ga/oldGA.pdf>, accessed March 3, 2011. See also, “Maldives: International Religious Freedom Report 2006,” Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, US Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2006/71441.htm>, accessed March 3, 2011.

<sup>71</sup> R. Upadhyay, “Islamic Radicalization of Maldives,” South Asia Analysis Group, (March 7, 2008), <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers27/paper2610.html>, accessed March 3, 2011.

<sup>72</sup> Coincidentally, Qayoom’s first act as President of Maldives was to lead the nation in prayer, commemorating the occasion of Eid-al-Alha’a, which fell on November 11, 1978. See Ellis, *A Man for all Island*, 116.

religious programs aired by the national television and radio stations. Even during his years of banishment, Qayoom took up preaching and leading the prayer congregation as an ‘imam.’<sup>73</sup>

All these initiatives served to create and help nurture the image of Qayoom as the supreme authority of religion in Maldives. Evidence suggests that this was a position that he jealously guarded; and he brooked no opposition on religious matters, even from among his religious clique, which consisted of persons more highly educated than Qayoom. There were numerous instances when Islamic scholars were asked to retract their statements if it opposed something that Qayoom had said and whole shows were even cancelled because they had aired controversial themes, thus inviting Qayoom’s ire.<sup>74</sup>

Another important aspect of the religious changes in Maldives was that Qayoom’s regime adopted and propagated an almost exclusive strand of Islam which was dubbed as ‘moderate and tolerant.’ This was played out to two audiences: the larger international community, in order to attract greater aid and investments for Maldives, and, more importantly, to the local community, to eradicate religious extremism and ‘deviant’ practices. Numerous religious clerics and scholars were subject to government oppression, torture, and banishment for failing to side with the government and for airing religious views contrary to what was being advocated by the government.<sup>75</sup>

The additional economic rationale for this strategy was that by promoting moderate Islam, Qayoom was able to project Maldives as a safe haven for the nascent tourism industry. This allowed the government to attract greater foreign investments and assured local investors, who were a majority of those backing the regime. This also served foreign policy goals, because Maldives, under Qayoom’s flag of Islamic statehood, was able to tap into the vast funds of the oil-rich Gulf States; numerous

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<sup>73</sup> Ellis, *A Man for all Island*, 89.

<sup>74</sup> “Islamic Affairs Minister Dumbfounded by Maumoon’s words,” *Miadhru Daily*, 11 January 2010, <http://www.miadhru.com/2010/01/local-news/islamic-affairs-minister-dumbfounded-by-maumoon%E2%80%99s-words/>, accessed March 3, 2011.

<sup>75</sup> “Qayoom’s forces tortured and terrorized me says Sheikh Fareed,” *Dhivehi Observer*, December 21, 2006, <http://www.dhivehiobserver.com/reports/Fareed-experience-200920052.htm>, accessed March 15, 2011.

development projects were sponsored in the Maldives and it facilitated borrowing on easier terms. It also enabled Maldives to play an increasingly prolific role at the international level, particularly as a leader on climate issues and as a champion of the cause for small states.

Though he initiated religious and social reformation and is responsible for many of the modern developments instituted in Maldives, Qayoom's use of repressive measures had ultimate outcomes that were beyond his control. First, it helped galvanize a religious movement that was more insidious, latent, and covert, evidenced by the rapid slew that Maldivian society took towards religious conservatism towards the end of his 30-year rule. Any person or group that opposed Qayoom were automatically deemed heretics, deviants, or, at best, 'enemies of Islam.'<sup>76</sup> Yet, while this adoption and promotion of a single strand of Islam enabled Qayoom to establish himself as the leading religious authority in Maldives, it also allowed the government to employ its repressive instruments against radical and extremist pockets that were spread across the country. Second, by using repression equally against expressions of religious and political dissent, he forced the development of an alliance between the political and the religious who opposed Qayoom's policies. The fruition of this was evident during the run-up to the first ever multiparty elections when public opinion was swayed as much by the political momentum of the opposition as it was by the nightly prayer session held by Islamic clerics within the opposition who were denouncing Qayoom's regime and "praying for deliverance."

In essence, Qayoom's use of religion to cement his political position was borne out of the false notion that Islam makes no distinction between religious authority and temporary political power. It is this false notion that allows leaders in Islamic states to tighten their grip on power, practice widespread nepotism, corruption, and other deviant practices without fear of opposition. Islamic teachings used in these contexts stress on the

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<sup>76</sup> This stance was most evident during the run-up to the first ever multi-party political election in Maldives in 2008, when Qayoom insinuated that the majority opposition party, MDP (Maldives Democratic Party), was seeking to dislodge Islam from its central position in the Maldivian state and institute a secular state. See "Maumoon: Elections would decide whether Maldives would remain an Islamic Country," *Haveeru Daily*, September 21, 2008, <http://www.haveeru.com.mv/english/?page=details&id=24494>, accessed March 3, 2011.

importance of paying allegiance and loyalty to the leader, and staying away from *fitna* (subversion) as long as the leader ensures security of the realm and does not force irreligious practices upon the people.<sup>77</sup> Under Qayoom's rule, Islam began to take a more central place in the social sphere as well, evidenced by the growing conservatism, which was much aided by the return of Islamic clerics who had attended Islamic institutes abroad. The consequences of Qayoom's religious policies enabled Islam to gain a political persona and potency. Forging a national identity based on religion is natural, and might have been critical for the survival of Qayoom's regime,<sup>78</sup> but as Ayoob points out, it invites religion to make broader and deeper forays into the society until it finally becomes entrenched as a viable political platform.<sup>79</sup>

#### D. DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION IN MALDIVES

A watershed in Maldives politics took place in 2005 when, for the first time, political parties were allowed to operate in Maldives. Following this landmark change, the political scene of Maldives was radically transformed. Major political parties, such as the Maldives Democratic Party (MDP—former opposing party) and the Maldives Peoples' Party (DRP—locally known as *Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party* founded by former president Qayoom), were quick to entrench themselves, and smaller political parties, such as the Republican Party (*Jumhooree Party*—JP) and the Social Liberal Party, also emerged soon thereafter. Within a short span of time, political parties began to occupy center stage in the national discourse of Maldives.<sup>80</sup>

Today, the politico-religious discourse in Maldives falls along two main lines: one discourse is used by all political parties against the others to brand them as heretics and anti-Islamic. This type of discourse is primarily used by DRP to target the MDP, which DRP claims is pro-secularism and supported by a global Christian network as part of their

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<sup>77</sup> Mohamed Ayoob, "Political Islam: Image and Reality," *World Policy Journal*, 21, no. 3 (2004): 1–14.

<sup>78</sup> V. Suryanarayan, "Islam, Political Evolution and National Identity in Maldives," in *Religion, Politics and Society in South and Southeast Asia*, ed. (New Delhi: Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1998), 114–115.

<sup>79</sup> Ayoob, "Political Islam: Image and Reality," 3.

<sup>80</sup> Jacob A. Bonofer, "The Challenges of Democracy in the Maldives," *International Journal of South Asian Studies*, 3, no. 2 (2010): 444.

proselytizing efforts and grand strategy to weaken Islamic states everywhere.<sup>81</sup> The other discourse is centered on the rise of Islamic radicalism and extremism in the Maldives, and discusses how DRP and, more aptly, the former regime supported the rise of Islamic militancy and even nurtured it, thus creating the menace of Islamic extremism.

Against these two discourses, there is a newly emergent discourse that places Islam in the center of politics. Islamic political parties, namely the now defunct Islamic Democratic Party (IDP) and the Adaalath Party–AP (Justice Party), were established in the first wave of political parties, but since then they have been contending for political space with the more established political parties. IDP was present in the first multi-party presidential elections and gained an insignificant 1.39% (less than 2,500 votes), and since then, its leader, Umar Naseer has joined with DRP. In the 2008 presidential election, AP backed the Jumhooree Party (JP) candidate in the first round and managed to get 15% of the votes, and in the runoff elections, the opposition formed a coalition, led by MDP to oust Qayoom and elect Mohamed Nasheed, the incumbent President.<sup>82</sup>

Ideologically, the AP is dedicated to preserving and propagating Islamic faith in Maldives and establishing the rule of Sharia. They are part of the Islamic revivalist movement in Maldives and many of their leaders are Islamic clerics who had been educated in places like Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Malaysia. These foreign educated clerics, upon their return to Maldives, had been largely sidelined or oppressed under Qayoom's regime for their refusal to accept his ideology of 'moderate Islam.' So, when a political opening presented itself, they were quick to capitalize on it, thus paving the way for Islamic revivalism to enter the political discourse in Maldives. The AP has been openly critical of the Islamic policies that were instituted by Qayoom. They claim that the Islamic nature of the policies was manipulated to suit the political strategies of the

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<sup>81</sup> Aiminath Shauna, "MDP must prove it is not Christian, says DRP," *Minivan Daily*, October 12, 2008. See also, S. Chandrasekharan, "Maldives: Runoff to Presidential Elections Turning Dirty," October 23, 2008, South Asia Analysis Group, <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/%5Cpapers29%5Cpaper2891.html>, accessed March 15, 2011.

<sup>82</sup> Report on 2008 Presidential Elections, Elections Commission of Maldives, November 27, 2008.

government and their efforts are aimed at establishing the unblemished religious truths and practices in Maldives. Ideally, they aim to encourage religious practices as they were during the earlier days of Islam.

Coalition politics was not well-suited for the AP, which, since the 2008 election, has become the sole political representative of Islam in the local political scene.<sup>83</sup> While they were given the mandate of running the Islamic ministry and overseeing the conduct of religious activities, and had control over religious institutions in the country, there were tensions apparent within the coalition even from the outset. The AP has been critical of several of the government's policies, most notable being the relaxation of Maldives' attitude towards Israel and the possibility of forging diplomatic ties with the "Zionist" state. As a result of this policy, the AP was among the chief instigators that conducted rallies in the capital against the government's decision to grant permission to a team of Israeli doctors who intended to visit and treat patients in Maldives.<sup>84</sup> The AP also opposed the government's policies regarding reinstating co-education in Maldives,<sup>85</sup> and they were openly critical, to the point of leading the public in rallies, when the government attempted to relocate the only school dedicated to teaching Arabic in Maldives. This was a particularly significant issue for the AP as attending the school is an important stepping stone for Maldivians wishing to pursue Islamic education abroad.<sup>86</sup>

Other contentious issues between the AP and the coalition government included recent moves to legalize the sale of alcohol and pork in hotels located on inhabited islands;<sup>87</sup> this is a policy that the government claimed would attract a greater number of visitors and would better support local island economies. The AP claimed that the sale of

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<sup>83</sup> "MDP destroying sanctity of Adaalath, claims religious party," *Minivan News*, January 27, 2011.

<sup>84</sup> "Anti-Israel Protestors vow to continue protest against Visiting Israeli Doctors," *Haveeru Daily*, December 13, 2010.

<sup>85</sup> "Co-education Inconsistent with the Culture of Islam says AP," *Minivan News*, October 10, 2010. Ironically, '*Edhuruge*,' the traditional educational institutions in Maldives which were almost synonymous with religious education and Koranic studies, were co-ed.

<sup>86</sup> "Adaalath to Defend Arabiyya School, Islamic School," *Miadhru Daily*, April 12, 2010.

<sup>87</sup> In Maldives, tourist resorts and hotels are exclusively established on individual uninhabited islands. Additionally, local staff are not actively engaged in preparation of pork dishes or they are not used behind the bars in these resorts.



alcohol and pork is *haram* (forbidden according to the tenets of Islam) and the group resorted to public rallies (yet again) to force the government to retract the regulation.<sup>88</sup>

Political parties that have taken on the mantle of religious ideologies are hard-pressed when demanded to play coalition politics, especially when they form part of a disparate coalition that was formed for political expediency, as it happened in Maldives. The AP's repeated poor electoral performances in Maldives (even at the parliamentary and local council levels) suggests that its support base is increasingly frustrated with its compromises as part of the coalition, especially since policies like co-education and diplomatic ties with Israel have not been thwarted.

In addition to its involvement in a disparate coalition, the AP has also been stymied in its political aspirations due to its lack of a coherent policy for governance, especially on the economic front. While many Maldivians see a possible AP government ushering in relief for social issues with a ban on drug abuse and policies to fight the increasing gang violence in Maldives, the AP's failure to articulate a sound economic policy and its negative outlook on the tourism industry and diplomatic ties with the West are concerns that make Maldivians wary of the political party.

The rise of political Islam in Maldives, as evident from the events discussed previously, is due to a combination of factors; namely, the use of Islam to legitimize the regime and gain political ascendancy in a highly exclusive political system, and the use of repression to curb political opposition. Qayoom's tendency to use Islam to undergird his regime and sustain his rule served to move Islam into the political consciousness of the country. From this, Islam became a viable political platform.

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<sup>88</sup> "Government to allow sale of alcohol on inhabited island," *Minivan News*, November 9, 2009.

## IV. MODERNIZATION AND ISLAM IN MALDIVES

### A. TRADITIONAL SOCIETY AND ETHOS

Maldives has long been at the cultural and economic crossroads of the Indian Ocean region. With a rich history as a nation of fishermen and seafarers, and as an important port of call for the busy ocean-going traffic, Maldives was influenced by great civilizations, both near and far. Thus, Maldivian culture was a mosaic of different traditions, customs, and norms borrowed from the many travelers who visited its shores.

Yet, despite all of its contact with foreign travelers, Maldivian society was one bound by traditions and customs that had been formed over a long period of time, and which provided social lubrication to ease the friction of living in small communities and under harsh conditions. Large extended families tended to live together and acted as a security net for the younger generations. Island society was characterized by families who were connected to one another through intermarriages or kinship ties. As such, these were very close-knit communities. People came to one another's aid, especially in carrying out tasks such as building and repairing boats, the sowing and harvesting of crops, and they also supported one another during major events such as festivals and celebrations.

Maloney describes the Maldivian society as one bound by deep-seeded traditions that gave Maldivians a sense of profound pragmatism. Islam, according to Maloney, also gave Maldivians a very strong and rigid sense of control over their personal behavior and social activities. According to Maloney, "*Dhivehis* are encultured from an early age to suppress emotions, for emotions could easily become threatening to small population groups on small islands."<sup>89</sup> The stoicism demanded by harsh island life and rigid Islamic orthopraxy enabled Maldivians to reject those worldviews that were contrary to the comfortable frames of reference which they already had. That being said, Maldivians, Maloney goes on to say, also had a sense of their cultural marginality.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Maloney, *People of the Maldivian Islands*, 239.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

Maldives adopted Islam in order to tap into the flow of Arabian commerce that was crisscrossing the Indian Ocean,<sup>91</sup> but even after conversion, it remained a tiny state that was surrounded by larger powers that were either Hindu or Buddhist. Maldives had been subject to waves of invasion and colonization by these powers and conversion to Islam was one way of breaking the religious ties with its surrounding states; thus, this prevented Maldives from ultimately being subsumed under their hold. The Maldivians saw that those states in the Islamic seat of power were too distant to present a danger of this nature and, thus, Maldives became an Islamic state to prevent the Hindu's and Buddhist's increasingly belligerent and hegemonic overtures.

The conversion to Islam meant that Maldives was different in terms of religion from its neighbors. In addition, the cultural marginality of Maldivians was further reinforced by the small population of Maldives. This small population was the ultimate guardian of the sovereign territory, a unique language, a distinctly Maldivian culture and tradition, a rich history, and its Islamic faith, which were constantly under attack from those around it. Under such circumstances, adherence to traditions and cultural norms were critical. They provided the Maldivians with the inner strength to reject and abstain from elements which might weaken the institutions of Maldivian nationhood and that of its society. Conversion to Islam also provided a break from the ancient cultural influences that had shaped the social and religious system of Maldives prior to the advent of Islam.

Islam took root in the Maldives through a slow process which had many ups and downs. Patronage by the Sultan and the use of the coercive instruments of the state meant that Islam gained in strength over time. The growing strength of Islam was accompanied by a parallel weakening of the traditional Dravidian kinship system, as well as the older religious and social traditions. The older traditions, as stated above, did not get expunged completely, but were incorporated into the new religious and social system, to produce a modified system that was decidedly Islamic.

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<sup>91</sup> Maloney, *People of the Maldivian Islands*, 238.

## **B. ADVENT OF MODERNIZATION IN MALDIVES**

Similar to the majority of other tradition-bound societies, Maldives is also undergoing dramatic socioeconomic changes brought in by the effects of modernization and Westernization. Among these changes have been an increase in numerous socioeconomic problems such as over-crowding (especially in Male' and some regional capitals), increasing crime rates, gang-related violence, and a widespread culture of drug abuse among the youth. There is also a growing middle class population, youth unemployment, and a disparity between the capital and the atolls in terms of living conditions, provision of basic amenities, and public services.

Of course, modernization has not been all bad for Maldives. The introduction of modern healthcare and the dissemination of knowledge, especially in areas like infant care, general hygiene, and the importance of nutritious diets, greatly helped to reduce infant and child mortality rates in Maldives, especially after the 1970s. Between 1970 and 2000, the population of Maldives had increased by more than two-fold (from 114,469 in 1970 to 270,101 in 2000).<sup>92</sup> This demographic shift means that there is a larger population of working age now than ever before in Maldives.<sup>93</sup>

Though the economy has expanded, especially in important sectors like tourism and other tertiary services, this expansion has not been felt equally across all of Maldives. A very significant portion of the governmental development projects were focused on creating more infrastructures and services in and around the capital island, Male'. Noteworthy in this respect is the first international airport built in the Maldives during the presidency of Nasir. The airport was built on an island only about a mile from Male'. As this was the only viable option for tourists to come in and go out of the country, the first tourist resorts were also developed in close proximity to Male'. Additionally, Male' was the commercial center of Maldives. All imports and the few local exports had to pass through customs which was based in Male'. This meant that the atolls had to rely solely on Male' to receive everything from dietary staples, such as rice and flour, to

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<sup>92</sup> Department of National Planning. "Census Population Information by Sex and Sex-Ratio, and Inter-Censal Variation of Population, 1911–2006," *Statistical Year Book: Maldives 2011*.

<sup>93</sup> Department of National Planning. "Population by Age and Sex, Census 1995, 2000 and 2006," *Statistical Year Book: Maldives 2011*.

construction material and other miscellaneous items, such as books, toys, and clothing. Additionally, important economic and commercial functions such as banking, currency exchange, and insurance were also centralized in Male'.

Male', apart from being the economic hub of the country, is also the seat of the government. There was only nominal representation of the government ministries and departments in the atolls; all the functions and services of the government were centralized in Male'. Male' also had a monopoly on healthcare, quality education, and other basic facilities, such as 24-hour electricity. For example, even up until 2000, Male' had the only higher secondary school (teaching grades 11 and 12). The numerous schools established in the atolls were inadequately staffed, poorly administered, and very often under-equipped. In most cases, island schools only taught children up until grades 5 or 7, after which those children who wished to pursue higher education were forced to move to another island, which had a Atoll Education Centers, or to Male', to seek admission in several of the privately-run schools.

This disparity was even evident in Maldives' healthcare system. Most islands had community health workers who ran the medical outposts. These outposts only provided basic medical care. Serious medical conditions were referred to the atoll health centers or, where they were available, to the regional hospitals. Medical procedures such as infant delivery and neonatal care were predominantly overseen by local midwives (*foolhuma*). The local health centers and hospitals were staffed and managed by a mix of expatriate and local doctors and nurses and the facilities lacked modern diagnostic and surgical equipment. Even minor things such as x-rays required a trip to the government-run hospital in Male', in part because the regional hospitals rarely had resident specialists. This marked disparity in the quality and availability of medical treatment still remains today, and is evident in the dispersal of doctors and nursing staff across the country. Male' has over 219 doctors and over 660 nursing staff, while the rest of the Maldives, combined, has only 306 doctors and 1,208 nursing staff.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Department of National Planning. "Distribution of Medical Staff in Male' and Atolls – 2010," *Statistical Year Book: Maldives 2011*.

The resultant centripetal force created by such developmental disparity created a massive influx of migration from the atolls to Male' as people flocked to the capital in order to obtain better education, healthcare, and employment. Male', an island which size is barely two square Miles, now houses more than 14,000 households, with the mean number of persons per household at 7.4. This means that more than a third of the population of Maldives is living in Male'.<sup>95</sup> The influx of such a large migrant population, in addition to the expatriate labor force engaged in various social, economic, and commercial activities in Male', has led to excessive land prices. Many households are forced to live in cramped conditions, many with the parents and children all living, cooking, eating, and studying in a single room. The households themselves are often comprised of two or three nuclear families living together, which allows the families to pool their resources. It is common for those migrating from the atolls to leave the elders on their island, most often because the elder folk detested the idea of being uprooted from familiar surroundings. In other cases, it was a straightforward economic choice; one more family member meant being forced to find a larger living space and, thus, having to spend more money.

Apart from massive internal migration, there are other dynamics that come into play and which are equally important in understanding the context in which modernization has taken place in Maldives. Several factors account for the changes, but chief among them is the introduction of English medium schools and widespread education, along with the advent of tourism in the 1970s; these can be regarded as the biggest drivers of social change in Maldives and the face of modernity, which is most visible to those living in Maldives.

The traditional system of education in Maldives had been rudimentary, at best, and was confined to learning how to read the Quran and how to perform the basic rituals of Islamic worship. The children, from an early age, were taught the basics of Arabic to prepare them for these studies. Armed with wooden boards and charcoal or trays filled with sand, the children flocked around the elders in the household or in the neighborhood

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<sup>95</sup> Department of National Planning. "Population by Island Census, 2000, 2006," *Statistical Year Book: Maldives 2011*.

to learn these lessons by rote. The time between the dusk prayers and the night prayers was especially important because the children were made to sit and recite chapters from the Quran, such as “al-Mulk” and “al-Yasin.”

Well before reaching puberty, young children of about seven or eight years accompanied their parents and elder family members to the mosques to participate in prayers. Learning the litanies and supplications used in prayer were given great importance and young children often sat for hours on end reading from a small book containing such prayers. These prayers were to be committed to heart, and the young children were often quizzed by their elders to ensure that they were memorizing their prayers. It didn't matter that very few people, if none any, understood the meaning behind these Arabic supplications; what mattered was learning memorizing them and mumbling them in prayers. Children were also encouraged to fast during Ramadan in order to prepare them for the time when this act would become obligatory.

Except for the required Islamic education, the other skills and training that children were required to learn centered around completing daily household chores and tasks associated with traditional occupations like fishing, toddy tapping, blacksmithing, practicing traditional medicine, boating, or the sundry other such occupations whose education requirements consisted of on-the-job training. Children started practicing the skills they would need one day from a very young age, most often through play and watching the adults at work. There were no castes or classes associated with a particular occupation, and young children and teenagers, especially boys, learned a range of skills necessary to prepare them for almost any eventuality. Apart from these basic skill sets, some children trained in subjects such as astronomy, navigation, and basic mathematics, which was necessary to prepare them for life as ocean-going traders and travelers.<sup>96</sup> The girls, apart from getting trained in all the domestic tasks, also learned skills such as weaving, coir-rope making, and how to harvest the reef for cowries and other shells. They also got training in specialized occupations such as midwifery.

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<sup>96</sup> Local folklore, such as *Dhonhiyala Aaai Alifulhu*, *Dhonmohonaaa Miyaru*, and stories about various Sultans, most notably, Sultan Mohamed Thakurufaaanu, provide insights into how the traditional education system was managed, what was taught, and what skills were imparted to the youngsters.

Young boys and girls alike got the opportunity to learn skills such as medicine, and even the more sinister *fandita*. The skills children learned and to what degree were determined not by a rigid system, but instead, these decisions were based on the interests of the children and the availability of credible instructors, especially those practicing refined skills such as jewelry making, lacquer work, traditional medicine, boat building, and *fandita*.

Apart from the basic education and training imparted upon the youngsters from within the community, a small number of government-sponsored schools were also engaged in teaching subjects like Dhivehi, Arabic, and arithmetic. Additionally, individuals from well-to-do families traveled to places like Lucknow, Hyderabad, and Cairo to learn Urdu, Arabic, and Islamic studies. That being said, such individuals, and instances, were very rare and the majority of Maldivians had to make do with what was available to them at their island or atoll level. The traditional education system in Maldives served two main purposes: First, as stated by Maloney, it "...served to transmit the Great Tradition of Islam and to integrate the island into the Islamic civilizational system."<sup>97</sup> Second, it was intended to instill, develop and hone the practical skills that were crucial to ensuring survival on the island.

But it was the onset of modernity, with the introduction of English medium education and the advent of tourism, that challenged this traditional system of education and also created insurmountable problems for the age-old customs and traditions which had been the mainstay of Maldivian society since the beginning. In the 1960s, the government introduced English medium education in the Maldives, most notably in Male'. Staffed mostly by Sri Lankan teachers, these new schools taught subjects like economics, mathematics, English literature, geography, and other subjects that one might find in British curriculums.<sup>98</sup> The government also established Montessori schools where Maldivian children were taught more many of the same subjects apart from nursery rhymes, folktales, and other such decidedly 'Western' lessons.

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<sup>97</sup> Maloney, *People of the Maldivian Islands*, 237.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*



At present, there are more than 375 primary, secondary, and senior secondary schools in Maldives with a student population of over 87,600 students, all of which teach in the English medium.<sup>99</sup> The curriculums at these schools are a mix of local and British models. Dhivehi, the local language, and Islamic studies (including study of the Quran up until grade 5) are mandatory subjects. Students take local general exams at the end of tenth grade, but all other examinations, both at the higher secondary level (grade 12) and senior secondary levels (grade 10) follow the Cambridge examinations.

The introduction and development of modern, western-oriented education, which had insignificant and inadequate focus on the customs and traditions of the society, meant a steady erosion of Maldivian social institutions and customs. Education and upbringing, which had hitherto been a multifaceted process producing young individuals who were totally indoctrinated into the social system and who had the necessary skills to prosper in Maldivian life, was replaced by a system which was faulty at best and which allowed a greater level of delinquency. This is also due in part to the fact that many of the government-run schools have huge student populations and are inadequately staffed and poorly managed, especially in the atolls. Additionally, the current mode of education overemphasizes rote learning and spends less time focusing on moral and civil values and character building.<sup>100</sup>

Additionally, employment and higher education prospects, under the new education system, are decided by students' performance on general exams taken at the end of their schooling (after completing grade 10). Those who pass with good results can join higher education institutions or pursue education abroad, while those whose performance was mediocre, of which there is a huge number, have little favorable prospects.<sup>101</sup> Youth unemployment and economic inactivity is a serious concern in

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<sup>99</sup> Department of National Planning. "Student Enrolment and Schools in Male' and Atolls by Type of Educational Institution 2010," *Statistical Year Book: Maldives 2011*.

<sup>100</sup> "Country Health System Profile: Trends in Socioeconomic Development," World Health Organization, [http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section313/Section1521\\_10898.htm](http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section313/Section1521_10898.htm), accessed November 18, 2011.

<sup>101</sup> For example, the percentage of students who passed the GCE O'Level Exams for 2008–2010 ranges between 27% and 35%. Data was taken from Department of National Planning. "Number of students sat and passed in the O'level examination by Atolls, 2008–2010," *Statistical Year Book: Maldives 2011*.

Maldives, especially in Male'. The unemployment rate for the census age groups 20–24, 25–29, and 30–34 are 34.1, 27.1 and 23.3, respectively.<sup>102</sup>

Such high unemployment rates occur due to the unavailability of suitable jobs, especially for those who have had some form of formal education. They are reluctant to join the workforce as low-paid labor because the wages are set too low due to the presence of a large expatriate labor force that are willing to work for far less than the locals. The legal expatriate workforce, mostly consisting of individuals from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India, and, lately, Nepal, are employed in areas such as construction, agriculture, and as domestic help all across Maldives. The legally registered expatriate workforce has more than quadrupled in the past 16 years, rising dramatically from 13,834 in 1994 to 33,765 in 2003 and 73,840 in 2010.<sup>103</sup>

One of the positive aspects of nationwide modern education is that Maldivian students are now able to pursue higher studies, at the undergraduate and graduate levels at regional and international universities. Between 2000 and 2010, Maldivian students obtained more than 600 undergraduate degrees, 150 masters' degrees, and 15 PhD degrees from various international universities.<sup>104</sup> The negative aspect of this increased foreign education is that it exacerbates the clash between Maldivian traditional norms and new Western ideals and lifestyles.<sup>105</sup> The foreign educated youth tend to be more liberal, open, and outspoken when compared to the more conservative and stoic elder generations.

Tourism, which is the other major driving force of modernization and the spread of Western ideals in Maldives, equally challenges traditional norms and customs. Tourism was introduced in Maldives in the 1970s with the establishment of the first

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<sup>102</sup>Department of National Planning. "Population 15 Years and Over by Type of Activity, Cross-Classified by Region, HIES, 2009, 2010," *Statistical Year Book: Maldives 2011*.

<sup>103</sup> "Expatriate Employment 1994–2003," Ministry of Planning and National Development, <http://www.planning.gov.mv/publications/25yearsstats/graphs/3.htm>, accessed November 18, 2011, and Department of National Planning. "Expatriate Employment by Industry and Nationality, 2010," *Statistical Year Book: Maldives 2011*.

<sup>104</sup> Department of National Planning "Students Who Received Scholarships During 2000–2010," *Statistical Year Book: Maldives 2011*.

<sup>105</sup> Parmanand, "Winds of Change: Fresh Stirrings in the Maldives," in Verinder Grover, Ed. *Maldives: Government and Politics* (New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications Pvt. Ltd., 2000), 130.

tourist resorts and, while the initial days included many misguided policies such as allowing nudism on some islands and unfettered access to the local population, the government has largely managed to institute effective control measures in such a way that it fosters the nascent industry while minimizing the negative effects it can have on the local society. Many Maldivians, including former President Qayoom and conservative groups within the society, had certain reservations about the adverse results which might come about due to the unsupervised and unguided introduction of tourism<sup>106</sup> and, thus, policies were put in place to protect the Maldivian locals.

The unique geography of Maldives allowed investors to set up resorts on small islands that were removed from inhabited islands. This gave tourists the high-end exclusivity, freedom, and independence for which Maldives is renowned, without local customs getting in their way. This also allowed the government and hoteliers to get around local laws such as prohibiting the sale of alcohol and pork on inhabited islands. If the tourists wished to see local sights and sounds, they could visit the inhabited islands and the capital island by taking ferries owned by the state, or they could stay in the guest houses on Male'. They also could travel around Maldives in safari cruises which stopped at various local islands. These policies allowed the local population to tap into the economic opportunities created by the new industry while preventing local customs and traditions from getting totally subsumed under the wave of new cultural influences.

Such policies were crucial to preserving the fragile balance between developing the tourism industry and protecting local customs and traditions, especially during the initial period of time when tourism first came to Maldives. Nevertheless, with the expansion and diversification of the industry, the fragile balance was greatly disturbed. As the industry expanded, it required an ever-increasing local workforce to fill posts ranging from room-boys to jobs at the top management level. The workforce was usually recruited from nearby islands and, very often, the workers resided on the resort islands (in quarters away from those of the patrons of the resort). The predominantly male workforce, thus, became unavailable for their traditional occupations in their local communities because the resorts offered more lucrative reward packages. They were also

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<sup>106</sup> Ellis, *A Man for All Island*, 137.

absent from their families for a longer time, which meant that the old system of training, educating, and grooming, under which young adults were gradually led to maturity, was replaced by an inadequate system. The overall expansion of the tourism industry created avenues for those aspiring for careers in areas such as management, culinary arts, hospitality, front office management, operation of travel agencies, and other such areas, which attracted female and male workers alike.

Such drastic changes in the demographic pattern and lifestyle within Maldivian society tore apart the age-old family and community systems. Families and close-knit communities had always provided a social safety net for one another, and communities had provided for their own on the island, which very often contained extended families related to each other through blood and marriage. When people began to migrate off the islands in search of better employment and education, the system began to fall apart. While they managed to obtain relatively better education and public services, the quality of life suffered badly. As a result, these families have had to face several social malaises due to the squalid living conditions, including issues like drug abuse, gang violence, and warfare which have become common in the Maldives. Such problems, which are very often the by-products of a society that has become disjointed, are issues that all Maldivians are grappling with.

Drug abuse is one of the most pressing concerns in the Maldivian society, and is reported to have increased more than 40-fold between 1977 and 1995.<sup>107</sup> The typical abuser is very often a male dropout between the ages of 16 and 25, often unemployed, and either living with his parents or with someone within the extended family.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> “Country Health System Profile: Trends in Socioeconomic Development,” World Health Organization, [http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section313/Section1521\\_10898.htm](http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section313/Section1521_10898.htm), accessed November 18, 2011.

<sup>108</sup> “Maldives Drug Control Master Plan 2006–2010,” National Narcotics Control Bureau, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2006, <http://www.health.gov.mv/PDF/HIV/Drug%20Master%20Plan%202006%20-%202010%20Maldives.pdf>, accessed November 18, 2011.

Unfortunately, drug abuse and gang violence often go hand-in-hand. Gang warfare in Maldives often reaches a crisis situation in Male, with turf wars and inter-gang rivalries sometimes leading to deaths by stabbing.<sup>109</sup>

Adverse economic conditions, increasingly powerful and unabated waves of Western ideals, and dramatic increases in social issues have all converged to create an environment which facilitates feelings of marginalization and alienation. Not only has the social system been torn apart, but the new and foreign influences have challenged the very core of national identity and national consciousness. This uneasiness was felt even at the very top political level and it was decided that the Maldivian identity had to be resurrected and given a primary position in the culture. Top officials realized that the cultural and religious unity of Maldives had to be preserved and strengthened if Maldives was to withstand the vicissitudes that were coming their way due to increased international exposure.<sup>110</sup> In this context, Islam was an integral part of the Maldivian national identity and national ethos and officials noted that Islam needed to be strengthened and revived for it to become the most formidable bulwark of the Maldivian national identity.

The presidency of Qayoom, as outlined in Chapter III, saw a period of Islamic rejuvenation sweeping across Maldives. Romero-Frias, who conducted an anthropological survey of Maldives during the 1990s, was critical of the extent of ‘Arabization’ that was involved with the policies of Islamic revivalism and the adverse effects it had on the local traditions and customs, which had previously been more open and tolerant. The increasing number of veiled women and bearded men, the growing disdain for indigenous forms of dress and autochthonous culture and language, and the more conservative and less tolerant slant of the society, were all troubling aspects of this trend for Romero-Frias. He predicted that non-conformist youth who had no inkling of

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<sup>109</sup> “President Forms a Committee to Control Gang Violence in Maldives,” *Minivan News*, March 29, 2011.

<sup>110</sup> Ellis, *A Man for All Island*, 136.

their country's rich culture and traditions would fight against the constant push for the adoption of the Arab norms.<sup>111</sup>

### C. RISE OF ISLAMIC CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS

The resulting friction between the competing value systems, increasingly pro-Western on one hand and increasingly conservative on the other, heightened the feeling of alienation for many Maldivians. This situation in Maldives is similar to numerous other Islamic states and societies. High unemployment, inadequate and unbalanced economic development, an influx of Western ideals and norms which militate against traditional norms and taboos, and social ills such as drug abuse are all present within the Maldivian society.

Under these conditions, Islamic social and civic organizations have been able to greatly infiltrate and establish their roots. In 2009, Jamiat-ul-Salaf and the Islamic Foundation of Maldives (IFM) were established. Both of these groups are non-violent and mainstream social movements that push their agenda of social reformation through Islam.<sup>112</sup>

Until very recently, Maldives had a dearth of learned Islamic scholars, but the transmission of religious messages, missives, and other such communication was greatly hindered by the geography of the island. The various religious functionaries who had operated at the island level, including the *Qazis*, island headmen, and the Imams (*mudhimu*) of the mosques had very limited knowledge about religious matters, especially those relating to spiritual, philosophical, and social aspects of Islam. There was limited knowledge about other religious sects, or about the vastness of the Islamist thought. Instead, these local religious leaders focused more on the orthopraxy of religion and the transmission of the various litanies and rituals.<sup>113</sup>

Organized religious groups, of which there had been very few, had been an oddity in Maldives. One reason for this might be that in the highly-charged political atmosphere

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<sup>111</sup> Romero-Frias, "Epilogue," in *The Maldive Islanders: A Study of the Popular Culture of an Ancient Ocean Kingdom*.

<sup>112</sup> Foreign Policy Council, *World Almanac on Islamism: Maldives*, April 29, 2011.

<sup>113</sup> Maloney, *People of the Maldive Islands* 220.

of pre-democratic Maldives, any organization that had an organizational structure and followers would be viewed as a potential threat to the regime in power. That is not to say that Maldives did not tap into the various Islamic movements that were sweeping across the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent during the 1920s and 1930s, but the presence and ideology of these movements might have been restricted to some remote islands. During the presidency of Qayoom, international, non-governmental organizations and religious institutions, such as *Raabitah al-Alam Islami*, operated in the Maldives.

Quran classes (madrassas), which took over the traditional role that was previously filled by the *Edhuruge*, also played an important part in the socio-religious sphere of the country. These institutions, of which there were many, can rightly be said to be the precursors to the modern day Islamic social organizations such as Jamiyatul Salaf and IFM. These Quran classes often employed young teachers and scholars, as well as senior students from the two Arabic education institutions. The lessons included Quran recitation practice, lessons in prayer, and observance of religious practices. The various Quran classes, like *Masjid al-Falaah* and *Noorul-Quran*, organized Quran recitation competitions and prepared students for the national Quran competitions. More importantly, they provided a venue and an organization under which people could come together and forward the cause of Islam and, as such, they were one of the most enduring entities within the Maldivian society

Contrasting that with the present situation presents a starkly different image. Religious scholars who have been trained in various places such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan, and Malaysia are numerous in the Maldives. More importantly, they face little restrictions in propagating their message and lecturing to the general public, as opposed to during Qayoom's rule. Their mission to reach those at the grass-root levels has been further aided by the availability of cable TV, radio stations, and the Internet.

Both IFM and Jamiyathul Salaf are comprised of learned scholars as well as grass-roots activists. Both these organizations follow the Wahhabi slant in ideology and the scholars of these organizations portray a decidedly Arabic persona, with the adoption of Arabic forms of names (containing terms such as *bin* and *abu*, followed by the name of

the male parent or progeny, respectively) and a quixotic mix of Arabian/Pakistani and Afghani dress, which stands in sharp contrast to the normal naming practices and dress styles in Maldives.

These organizations, most notably, Salaf, have started various social outreach programs, such as religious lectures by renowned scholars, youth religious education camps (modeled after the Prophetic ‘hijra’),<sup>114</sup> and prayer and Quran sessions for men and women. These organizations hold special lectures, host TV shows, and publish their own periodicals and websites to further their message about issues ranging from how to pray properly to the role of women in Islam. These organizations also invite prominent Islamic scholars such as Dr. Bilal Philips to lecture to an ever-increasing audience about social issues and how to better abide by Islamic dictums. Additionally, IFM has started reaching out to the significant Maldivian emigrant and student communities living in Sri Lanka and India, as well as Malaysia.<sup>115</sup> These organizations are operating in an environment that is ripe for their infiltration. In the messy milieu of Maldivian society, these organizations have found very loyal supporters. Events such as lectures and talk shows are filled to capacity. These organizations also use the Internet and mass media to forward their messages. Each organization maintains an online presence. The lecture series and other religious sermons are readily available for sale and they introduce Maldivians to new Islamic thought and worldviews.

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<sup>114</sup> “Participants take Part in Salaf ‘Hijra’ Camp,” *Minivan News*, November 22, 2010.

<sup>115</sup> “Dawah Islamiyyah@ Colombo 2011,” Islamic Foundation of Maldives Official Website, <http://www.islamicfoundationofthemaldives.org/>, accessed May 30, 2011.



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## V. REGIONAL RADICAL ISLAMIC GROUPS AND MALDIVES

### A. LINKAGES BETWEEN MALDIVES AND REGIONAL RADICAL ENTITIES

Maldivian ties with regional terrorist organizations first came under international scrutiny when a Maldivian, Ibrahim Fauzee, was arrested in Pakistan by U.S. forces for his alleged ties with al-Qaeda. In the Summary of Evidence memo that was drawn against Fauzee, it was stated that he was arrested while residing at a suspected al-Qaeda hideout in Pakistan. The memo also stated that Fauzee's point of contact telephone number was found in the possession of other terrorist detainees and that his telephone number was associated with that of a Sudanese teacher who was engaged in assisting Arabs with travel to terrorist training camps in Afghanistan.<sup>116</sup> But, following his Combatant Status Review, Fauzee was cleared of all terrorist ties and was declared as a "No Longer Enemy Combatant" in 2004. He was released in 2005. While Fauzee was released and cleared of all allegations,<sup>117</sup> the ties between regional terrorist organizations and Maldives still seemed very credible.

Maldivians have been seeking ideological and operational inspiration from regional radical entities as far back as the 1990s. More than a dozen youth, who had attended an educational institution in Pakistan operated by Jamiyah al-Salafiyya, had been indoctrinated against the government of Qayoom. They entertained and expressed sentiments of anti-government coups and the desire to institute a theocratic sharia-based state in Maldives. The discovery of such anti-government feelings among Maldivian students studying in Pakistan prompted the government to dispatch the former Chief Justice, al-Ustad Mohamed Rasheed Ibrahim, an Egyptian trained cleric and scholar, to inquire about the grievances of the students and also to caution the Pakistani institution about the dangerous path some of their students were treading. Yet, despite these

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<sup>116</sup> United States Department of Defense. Office for the Administrative Review of the Detention of Enemy Combatants. *Summary of Evidence for Combatant Status Review Tribunal – Ibrahim Fauzee*, December 13, 2004, 95.

<sup>117</sup> Incidentally, Ibrahim Fauzee now heads the Islamic Foundation of Maldives, a NGO that is heavily involved in social and religious activities.

measures, upon their return, some of the students were arrested and banished to remote islands, where they continued to preach their messages.<sup>118</sup>

The Maldivian youth who attended Islamic educational institutions in Pakistan were not only engaged in getting an Islamic education. The late 1980s was the heyday of the Afghani war against the Soviets and many Maldivian youth who were studying in seminaries across Pakistan traveled to various jihadi training camps in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area.<sup>119</sup>

## **B. RECRUITMENT ACTIVITIES**

The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami proved to be a great blessing for the regional terrorist organizations that were seeking to gain footholds in Maldives. Like most countries in the Indian Ocean region, Maldives suffered great devastations, with almost entire islands being submerged and swept away. In the aftermath of the tsunami, charity organization that were fronts for regional terrorist groups arrived and began dispensing humanitarian aid and financial assistance among the affected populations. Ideological guidance through publications and other sources was also part of what these groups were providing for the disaster-struck populace. In some instances, these charities assisted in enrolling youth in religious seminaries (madrassas) in Pakistan, while in other cases, the youth were recruited for a more sinister purpose.

One of the hardest hit regions in Maldives was the Laamu atoll (towards the Southern tip of Maldives). There, the entire population of two islands, Kalhaidoo and Mundoo, were relocated to temporary housing and shelters in decommissioned garment factories in the industrial area of the largest island in the atoll, Gan. The population of Kalhaidhoo had experienced a religious awakening in the 1980s under the tutelage of Sheikh Mohamed Ibrahim (who is referred to as the ‘Big Sheikh’ in a jihadi propaganda video released following the encounter between security forces and radicals in AA. Himandhoo).

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<sup>118</sup> “Religious Extremism in L. Gan,” *Haveeru Online Videos*, October 26, 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ah4OKVtYXNU&feature=related>, accessed October 18, 2011.

<sup>119</sup> Praveen Swami, “Uneasy in Paradise,” *Frontline*, 24, no. 24 (December 2007), 8–21.

Sheikh Mohamed Ibrahim obtained his Islamic education from Pakistan and, upon his return to Maldives, he began to protest against the religious views propagated by Qayoom's regime. He was banished to L. Kalhaidoo, where he continued to preach about Islam and press for greater modesty in dressing, in accordance with the Islamic teachings. His religious teachings also took on a more anti-government slant, especially when he began to declare that the government had built the mosques from earnings that were "haraam" and thus, it was not permissible to pray in them. Segregated prayer groups began to crop up as people shunned the government-built mosques.<sup>120</sup>

Following the tsunami and ensuing relocation, a group of four men from Male' visited the temporary housing camps. They claimed to be representing a UK-based person of Asian origins known only as "Abu Issa," who was believed to be a financier for various terrorist outfits operating in parts of Pakistan.<sup>121</sup> Among those distributing the aid on behalf of this mysterious financier was Moosa Inas, who would later be one of the perpetrators of the Sultan Park bomb incident of 2007, which injured more than twelve foreign tourists. Inas, along with his accomplices, made it clear to the unfortunate islanders that the money they had at their disposal would only be spent on those who agreed to join them in furthering their ideology.<sup>122</sup>

In addition to this particular group, charity fronts such as *Idara Khidmat-e-Khalq* (IKK) are especially significant. The IKK has been linked with the *Ahl-e-Hadith* sects operating in the region, and they established their roots in Maldives as well. The IKK is affiliated with *Jamaat-u-Dawa* (which is engaged in *Tabligh*, i.e., active proselytizing) and the more sinister *Lashkar-e-Taiba* (LeT), the Pakistani-based terrorist groups responsible for numerous attacks in India, Pakistan, and other areas across the region.<sup>123</sup>

The links between the Islamic "charity" organizations and active proselytizing is evident in the changing Islamic rhetoric and practices that are spreading within Maldivian society. While there has been a resurgence of Islamic conservatism in Maldives, the

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<sup>120</sup> "Religious Extremism in L. Gan," *Haveeru Online Videos*, October 26, 2007.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Swami, "Uneasy in Paradise."

<sup>123</sup> Foreign Policy Council, *World Almanac on Islamism: Maldives*, October 18, 2011.

newer rhetoric, most often associated with the *Ahl-e-Hadith* (literally, followers of the Prophetic Traditions) groups and the Salafists, stands in sharp contrast to even that of the conservatives. The Salafists, mostly associated with Wahhabism, draw a political reading from the Quran and Islamic traditions. They aspire to emulate the Prophet and his righteous followers, and as such, they do not make any accommodations for groups of different views. One of the most dominant features of this ideology is the veneration of jihad and the practice of Takfirism (branding other Muslims of weaker faith as Apostates). The proponents of this ideology operating in some parts of Maldives have even issued death sentences against locals who fail to support them.<sup>124</sup>

In Maldives, this new rhetoric was adopted by numerous groups and individuals, who are dubbed locally as the “Super Salaf.” Such groups declare the government of Maldives, especially the last regime, to be *Taghut* (someone who is a Muslim only in name) and they claim that the religious scholars of Maldives, especially those heading the Adaalath Party, are “Murjia.”<sup>125</sup> They adopt what is essentially a skewed worldview of the perpetual conflict between believers and non-believers, one in which Islam is continuously waging a holy war against the “infidel forces” of the pro-Western regimes and the West itself.

Their main ideologues include the likes of Ibn-Taimiyyah, the 13th century Islamic scholar who condemned the moral corruption of the Abbasid Caliphate, and Abdulla Youssef Azzam, the leading ideologue of the Afghan Mujahedin and bin Laden’s first mentor.<sup>126</sup> These individuals refrain from praying in mosques built by the government, which according to them, have been tainted because the government is involved in un-Islamic activities such as tourism and the funds used to build the mosques

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<sup>124</sup> “Extremist Groups Issue Death Threats,” *Minivan News*, February 26, 2007.

<sup>125</sup> The Murjia were a doctrinal school in Islam, who maintained that someone who professes to be a Muslim has to be taken as one; it is for God alone to know and decide upon. This has been used as a derogatory term to refer to Islamic scholars who espouse this view. The more radical groups believe that a Muslim means righteous faith, righteous words, and righteous actions in the name of Allah, without which the person does not become a Muslim.

<sup>126</sup> Material condensed from propaganda video, “State of Muslims,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUY90dma9ho>, accessed November 18, 2011.

are derived from selling pork and alcohol, and allowing hedonistic activities that are totally inappropriate in a 100% Muslim state, and which are prohibited by Islam.<sup>127</sup>

The opening salvo of the Islamist threat in Maldives was the Sultan Park Improvised Explosive Device (IED) incident of 2007. The ensuing investigations led the government authorities to the remote island of AA. Himandhoo, where the security forces clashed with hardline Islamic radicals defending *Masjid-al-Khair*, a makeshift mosque in which the radicals conducted their prayers, which was created after they shunned the main mosque on the island.<sup>128</sup> In the aftermath of this clash, a video release was made, allegedly by al-Qaeda affiliates, calling for support for the oppressed Muslim brethren in the Maldives.<sup>129</sup>

Another aspect of the regional terrorist organizations is that, through their constant recruitment operations, they entice Maldivian youth to participate in jihadi operations to, ultimately, attain martyrdom. Since 2003, many Maldivian youth have been apprehended while trying to travel to training camps in Pakistan. After having been educated in various skills and tactics and pumped up with their ideological vitriol, these youth get shipped off to fight in jihadi operations. In an interview given to CNN-IBN in 2009, President Nasheed stated that thousands of Maldivian youth were being recruited to study at various religious madrassas or to join jihadi operations in Pakistan and that this presented a fundamental threat to the security of Maldives.<sup>130</sup>

In 2009, an al-Qaeda propaganda video included a Maldivian by the name of Ali Jaleel. The video was filmed before he participated in a martyrdom attack conducted against a security force installation in Pakistan.<sup>131</sup> Similarly, in 2010, nine armed Maldivians were arrested in the North Waziristan region of Pakistan. These individuals allegedly had ties with the first radical-Islam inspired terrorist attack in the Maldives and

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<sup>127</sup> “Islamic Ministry to Take Steps Against Congregation Holding Separate Friday Prayers,” *Haveeru Daily*, January 4, 2009.

<sup>128</sup> “World Almanac on Islamism: Maldives,” American Foreign Policy Council.

<sup>129</sup> B. Raman, “Al-Qaeda in Maldives – International Terrorism Monitor – Paper No. 308,” South Asia Analysis Group, November 19, 2007.

<sup>130</sup> “Terrorist Groups in Pak Recruiting our Youth – Maldives.” While the figure is uncertain, the presence of the linkages and its threat is very certain.

<sup>131</sup> “Maldivian Mujahedin Fighting in Pakistan on 27 May 2009,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PShdOXwj2bo>, accessed May 30, 2011.

they had fled to Pakistan, possibly to evade arrest or to gain further training. There have also been Indian intelligence reports linking Maldivians to the 2009 Mumbai attacks.<sup>132</sup>

“Returnees” from jihadi operations bring back with them their skills, ideologies, and the desire to pursue politico-religious ends through violent means. Unfortunately, this means that Maldives faces similar threats. Infused as they are with the ideology of waging jihad and equipped with the necessary skill sets, those returning to Maldives turn to violent agitation. For them, political action is secondary to jihad and they have little patience for grass-root level transformations of the society or for the polemics of the political process, especially in an environment where the only hardline Islamist party is being forced to play coalition politics.

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<sup>132</sup> “More Skeletons Tumble out of the 26/11 Closet,” *The Week*, January 16, 2011.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The rise of Islamism and Islamic radicalism in Maldives is facilitated by a malevolent mix of factors which are intricately linked together. Extreme political repression, intense clashes between traditional norms and cultural values, recently introduced western norms due to modernization, and an influx of radical ideology have all aided in the creation of an atmosphere that has led to the rise of Islamism and Islamic radicalism. And it is this new environment that has proved to be very conducive to breeding a crop of young Maldivians who yearn to participate in jihadi operations in conflict areas like Afghanistan and Pakistan.

A highly exclusive political system characterized by a small number of political players, the absence of political parties, and the use of excessively brutal repressive measures to stamp out any form of dissent has been a constant feature of Maldivian politics. Conspiratorial challenges, coups, and internal squabbles over the Maldivian throne had been endemic within the cliques of Maldivian political elites since the time of the Sultanate. Unfortunately, little had changed in the nature of governance and political administration even when Maldives became a republic. The same authoritarian structures were maintained and politics was still regarded as the domain of a highly exclusive and privileged coterie.

Additionally, the regimes that followed the Sultanate also used harsh repressive measures to keep a check on political dissent, often resorting to brutal torture and banishments. The use of religious authority during the regime of Qayoom to cement his hold on power, coupled with repression, produced a convergence of interest between the political opposition and the religiously conservative elements of the society. It also paved a way for the emergence of a political discourse that was decidedly religious and forced legitimate political and religious voices to go underground and to establish conspiratorial and secretive networks with which to further their agendas. Such manipulations of religion and the government sponsorship of a single strand of “moderate” Islam incensed the more conservative groups, who declared the regime and its ruler to be *Thaghut*. Anti-government plots and designs to overthrow the regime of Qayoom circulated amongst



foreign-educated Islamic clerics and students studying abroad, who were influenced by the conservative ideologies they were being introduced to in other countries. An example of these violent expressions of anti-government sentiments can be seen in the clashes at AA. Himandhoo.

There is a great dichotomy within Maldivian society as these increasingly conservative elements clash with the modern and western norms which have started entering the country as a result of the introduction of tourism, mass education, and the ever-increasing contact with the outside world. For most of history, the traditional Maldivian society had been essentially closed to the outside world, with life restricted to the monotony of repetitive tasks within small island communities. The cultural marginality and strong ethos of Islam enabled the traditional societies of Maldives to inoculate themselves against outside influences that would have upset the communal balance and rhythm of life. But, in recent years, Maldives has gone from a society bound in traditions and taboos to being rapidly catapulted into becoming a society that is open to unfettered influence and influx of outside norms and values.

Despite their undeniably positive aspects, the introduction of tourism, western education, and increased contact with the outside world greatly eroded the social taboos and norms, upset the social fabric, and fundamentally altered Maldivian society. This change, which took place within the short span of almost 40 years, rapidly transformed the tone and character of Maldives and introduced alien concepts, values, and norms.

The onset of modernity also created massive social and economic challenges, such as economic disparity, unemployment, and an increase in crime rates and drug abuse. All these factors converged together to create a sense of alienation and disillusionment amongst the population. The old social ties and structures, which had provided social lubrication and acted as a safety net, were torn apart.

The present Maldivian society is one caught between two extremes: on one hand, there is the increasing rise of Islamic conservatism and rigid orthodoxy, and on the other, there is an ever-increasing Western influence and a drive towards modernization. History reveals that since conversion to Islam, there have been several waves of Islamic orthodoxy and puritanical rigidity in Maldives. Some of these waves were initiated by the

Sultans, who functioned as the ultimate guardian of the faith, which was seen by locals as a pre-occupation of the elites in Male'. Other such waves were initiated by visiting Islamic clerics or locals who had traveled abroad and received education in and exposure to Islamic practices and traditions in places like India and the Arab world. In any case, such waves of enforced religious orthodoxy and rigidity slowly led to the decline of autochthonous customs and traditions of the pre-Islamic, *jahiliyya* past. With the push towards Islamic orthodoxy, these autochthonous traditions were replaced with a social structure, an order, and a social climate that was predominantly Islamic, but one in which there were still strong remnants of the old syncretic religious and cultural practices.

Recently, the syncretic religious traditions and lax attitudes towards religious practices have been changing rapidly, greatly aided by the presence of social Islamic organizations, and their use of mass media and abundant resources. The level of religiosity is increasing; old traditions and customs are being dismissed as being *bid'ah* (inventions contrary to the teachings of Islam) and certain segments of the society are growing intensely conservative. Evidence of this is given by the fact that issues such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and Islamic faith healing (*Ruqya*) are being advocated by the Islamist organizations.<sup>133</sup>

The introduction of democratic governance, the grant of freedom of speech, and the right to operate political parties and social organizations proved to be a tremendous windfall for the Islamists. While the sole Islamic political party, the Adaalath Party, have not been able to generate significant electoral support, Islamic social organizations such as Jamiyathul-Salaf (JS) and the Islamic Foundation of Maldives (IFM) are making tremendous headway in establishing groups all across the country. Entities like JS have taken on the responsibility of religious policing and have issued complaints and missives against what they deem to be un-Islamic behavior and morality. Through their use of the Internet, radio, television talk shows and religious programs, public lectures, sermons, and various workshops conducted across Maldives and, in some cases, within Maldivian

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<sup>133</sup> J. J. Robinson, "Reported Increase in practice of Female Circumcision raises alarms," *Minivan News*, October 30, 2011, <http://minivannews.com/politics/reported-increase-in-practice-of-female-circumcision-raises-alarm-27670>, accessed November 8, 2011.

communities living abroad, these Islamic organizations are creating the social conditions and climate necessary to usher in political transformation.

While such mainstream Islamic organizations are engaged in legitimate social and civic work, there also exist networks and structures that are engaged in generating more radical discourse. These networks are closely tied to regional terrorist organizations, from which they obtain material support and indoctrination. These networks greatly benefit from the mainstream conservative religious discourse because it creates a society which is more favorable to their radical propaganda and ideology. These networks capitalize on the deep-seeded disenchantment and alienation felt within Maldivian society, especially among the youth. These youth are gradually indoctrinated into the radical ideology, and recruited to join in jihadi operations. They also receive additional indoctrination, apart from the requisite trainings necessary to plan and carry-out terror attacks. Some of these youth return to Maldives, where they recruit new generations to perpetuate their terrorist organizations.

The present Maldivian society, as was outlined above, is highly schizophrenic. Maldives officially claims to be 100% Muslim, yet, in a throwback to older times, some Maldivians have begun to militate against the increasingly stifling and rigid orthodoxy and the excessive Arabian influences that are advocated by the newly-educated religious scholars and clerics. Part of this rejection stems from the lingering remnants of a syncretic religious past and part of it is due to Western influences and norms. In the messy milieu of Maldivian society, discerning the difference is almost impossible; yet, more strident than these elements are those that are pushing the society towards a more conservative and orthodox religious discourse. The social and political agendas of these groups are directed towards creating the necessary conditions to rid the society of all the evils and vices of the traditional culture, as well as the western influences, and establish an Islamic state based on *Sharia* law.

How the Maldivian government and society deal with these fundamentally antagonistic outlooks and how they combat the growing tide of religious radicalism will decide the fate of the state and its people. The turn towards democracy has provided a favorable climate to approach the issue of Islamic radicalism. Unlike the regime of his

predecessor, President Nasheed's government has managed to move religion away from politics. The Minister of Islamic Affairs is entrusted with crafting and implementing the religious policies of the state and the President, though constitutionally mandated to uphold the Islamic faith and its tenets has repeatedly stated that he will defer all issues concerning religion to those trained in such matters.

At present, it can be argued that the government has adopted a relatively lax attitude towards the radical elements. The radicalized youth that returned to Maldives after being apprehended for alleged terrorist links are put through what is best described as a "revolving door policy." Even the perpetrators of the Sultan Park bombing incident have been granted clemency and have been pardoned by the government.<sup>134</sup> The Islamic ministry is involved in de-radicalization programs in sensitive communities like AA. Himandhoo, but, by their own accounts, these programs have largely failed to have any positive impact.

A significant burden of de-radicalization has to be borne by the Islamic clerics and scholars. At present, they remain a much divided group. There is a high degree of doctrinal differences between them, and this has prevented them from putting up a unified front to deal with the radicalizing elements. Part of the split is based on the divergence of political interest and ideology, between the establishment *ulema* and the others. There is also great division among the scholars based on the institution and country from which they received their education and training. Factors such as internal squabbles, political opportunism, and doctrinal differences have largely rendered these religious leaders incapable of providing effective guidance to Maldivian society.

The level of religious conservatism has undoubtedly increased. Along with it, the culture, social norms, and traditions of Maldives are also changing. Around twenty years ago, women only past fifty years of age would wear the *burga* and Maldivians would only contemplate going on their religious pilgrimage after they had grown old. This situation is much different today when girls as young as nine are increasingly wearing the *burqa* and more and more young people are going on the pilgrimage. Differences as

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<sup>134</sup> "Two convicted Sultan Park Bombers Released," *Haveeru Daily*, August 17, 2010.

insignificant as these suggest that fundamental changes have taken place within Maldivian society.

The challenge for Maldives is to accommodate these differences while combating the more malicious transformations that have come about in the wake of these changes. Growing Islamic radicalism and expressions of militancy are a threat to the tourism industry of Maldives, which is the economic mainstay of Maldives. Incidents like the Sultan Park bombing can greatly upset the Maldivian economy and destroy global and regional confidence in Maldives as a credible player in international affairs.

Government efforts, at this juncture, have to be aimed at identifying and dismantling the structures and organizations that are engaged in spreading the radical ideology. It also has to undertake a serious reappraisal of its approach towards dealing with “potential jihadis,” as well as apprehended terrorists. These individuals should not be allowed to move freely about in society and spread their virulent message. Additionally, international and regional counter terrorism and counter radicalism efforts have to be strengthened. Radical elements operating in Maldives have significant ties to the regional terrorist groups. Such ties should be investigated in collaboration with regional intelligence agencies and followed up diligently.

Closely tied to these efforts is creating public awareness and increasing knowledge about the teachings of Islam. A large part of this endeavor is currently being fulfilled by various NGOs, such as JS and IFM. The government’s role, in such instances, has to be aimed at analyzing the message and its impact on society. Speakers of dubious standing or little credibility should not be allowed to preach either in public or in private. This is an onerous task and one that requires balancing the democratic norm of free speech with prudent policy. The negative aspect of such efforts is that the government can be accused of being excessively censorial and dictatorial in matters of religion. Therefore, this task has to be carried out in a diplomatic manner and through consensus.

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