

## Why Do Some Maldivians Want the ‘Indian Military Out’?

Fear of a permanent Indian military presence kickstarts debate over archipelago’s sovereignty.

By [Saad Hasan](#)

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*For a few weeks now, hundreds of people in the Maldives have participated in [rallies](#) calling for the expulsion of the Indian military personnel from their tiny island state spread over hundreds of atolls.*

The peaceful demonstrations, which are mostly concentrated in Male, the capital, have been organised by a coalition of opposition parties led by former **President Abdulla Yameen**, who was jailed in 2019.

Neighbouring India is a close ally of the Maldives, an archipelago of a thousand islands in the Indian Ocean that face an immediate threat from climate change.

“The government has invited this trouble to our shores. We are not against the people of India. Our people just want the Indian military to leave,” says **Mohamed Saeed**, the deputy leader of the opposition People’s National Congress (PNC).

“We are a very fragile country. We cannot afford to have any military presence of another country here,” he tells *TRT World*.

The Maldives is one of those key South Asian countries where regional rivals China and India are competing for influence — something that will bear consequences for the wider region, experts say.

The opposition accuses the government of President Ibrahim Solih of signing secret deals with New Delhi that will allow Indian troops to be permanently stationed in the Maldives.

The Maldivian government denies compromising on sovereignty and says security

arrangements with India are mostly to carry out search and rescue operations.

“India has always been the Maldives’ closest ally and trusted neighbour, extending constant and consistent support to the people of Maldives on all fronts,” the government said in a recent [statement](#).

“Support provided by India on areas such as search and rescue capabilities, casualty evacuation, coastal surveillance, and maritime reconnaissance, directly benefit the Maldivian people,” it added.

Maldivian **Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid** has [called](#) the “Indian Military Out” campaign a desperate attempt by the opposition to fulfil a political agenda.

At the centre of the debate is the matter of an India-funded dockyard for the Maldivian coast guard, which is being constructed on the [Uthuru Thila Falhu](#) (UTF) atoll, near Male.

A copy of the UTF agreement [leaked](#) earlier this year said Indian military personnel will be stationed there and Indian navy vessels will be allowed to use the dockyard for years to come.

Saeed says an important agreement like this, which can impact a country’s foreign relations, should have been debated in the parliament and the details shared with lawmakers.

A Maldives government spokesperson wasn’t immediately available for comment.

### **What are Indian troops doing in Maldives?**

The presence of Indian military personnel in the Maldives, an issue that the opposition has seized upon to criticise the government, resonates with Maldivians wary of outside interference.

New Delhi had donated two helicopters and a Donier aircraft to Maldives to help with medical evacuations and sea surveillance. Most of the 75 Indian personnel stationed in Maldives at the moment are there to maintain and operate the aircraft.

“The Indian military has been in the Maldives for a long time. There’s nothing new about it. They use the aircraft to airlift sick or injured people from isolated islands,” says David Brewster, an expert on Indo-Pacific maritime affairs at the Australian National University.

“I am sort of surprised that Yameen and his supporters think that this is a bad thing.”

Nevertheless, the persistent pressure mounted by the opposition has put the government in a tight corner. Last week, **Defence Minister Mariya Didi** had to publicly disclose that Indian troops in the country were unarmed and insist that they posed no danger to its sovereignty.

### **A tussle of two powers**

Former President Yameen, who governed between 2013 and 2018, had fostered close ties with China. He oversaw the inauguration of a 2.1 km-long, four-lane bridge connecting Male

with the island of Hulhumale.

That's the only bridge which connects islands in the archipelago where people otherwise travel on boats between different atolls. Beijing funded the \$200 million project.

For years, China had little interest in the small nation of under 500,000 people — Beijing didn't even have an embassy in Maldives until 2012.

But that changed under Yameen's government when the two countries signed a [free trade agreement](#) (FTA), eliminating tariffs on Maldivian exports of mostly fish, and opened the archipelago to Chinese goods and services.

Maldives, which derives a substantial chunk of its revenue from tourists — many of them Chinese — also became a recipient of Beijing's investment.

China loaned just over a billion dollars to build the bridge and an airport, among other projects in the Maldives.

But after Solih's government took charge, it accused Yameen of leaving the country vulnerable to a Chinese debt trap.

### **A long way to go for India**

PNC's Mohamed Saeed, who was Yameen's Minister for Economic Development, says concerns around high Chinese debt were unfounded.

“The amount we borrowed from China was more or less the amount of money we borrowed from the Middle East in syndicated loans. We made a policy of tapping every source of affordable financing.”

The scenic Maldives depends on tourism for most of its foreign revenue. But tourism sites are spread across different atolls and a lack of connectivity hampers job creation in the hospitality industry.

Saeed says China's investment in building the Sinamale bridge — also known as the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge — was meant to address that problem.

While India has tried to take China's place as the Maldives main financial benefactor, it still has a long way to go.



Protests against Indian military presence in Maldives have spread to other cities. (TRTWorld)

Last year, New Delhi pledged to extend [\\$500 million](#) to Maldives in loans and grants. But only \$17 million of that amount has so far been invested, says Saeed, citing government budget documents.

“When we were in power, the opposition MDP was accusing Yameen and our administration of selling 17 islands to China. Today, can they show even a single island that we sold to China?”

The increasing reliance on China for financial support under Yameen happened to the chagrin of India, which had historically played a role in Maldives’ internal affairs.

In 1988 India [sent its](#) paratroopers and naval ships to Maldives to aid former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who faced a coup attempt by Sri Lankan Tamil mercenaries.

It’s unlikely that India will risk damaging relations with Male by keeping armed troops in the country for any other purpose than assisting in training and rescue operations.

“Politically, diplomatically and economically — India sees Maldives as a strategic partner,” says Bharath Gopalaswamy, a senior fellow at the New Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation.

“But India is very careful and circumspect when it comes to stationing troops outside its border. At this stage it’s all speculation.”

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