

# A commitment to democracy

## INTERVIEW WITH DR MOHAMED WAHEED HASSAN

VICE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF MALDIVES



**MOHAMED WAHEED HASSAN**

is the first elected Vice President of Maldives. He joined President Nasheed as a coalition partner to serve in the current government. Dr Waheed is a leading figure in bringing about democracy in Maldives. As a member of parliament his tireless efforts to promote human rights forced him into exile in 1991. Together with President Nasheed he is leading the Maldives' efforts toward climate change adaptation and its programme for achieving carbon neutrality by 2020. Dr Waheed is a specialist in international development and holds a PhD from Stanford University.

### **You were asked to run with several of the presidential candidates, why did you choose Mohamed Nasheed?**

I believe the most important thing in life is to be able to think and act freely, and this is what I want for the people of Maldives. Mohamed Nasheed and I believe in the same things. We have both worked with the same political party over the years, so he was the logical choice. Mohamed Nasheed stands apart because of his courage and determination to bring about the kind of change I believe in. For me there was never any question of working with anybody else. It was not a difficult decision.

### **Your government has taken the decision to become the world's first carbon-free nation by 2020. What prompted you to take this bold step?**

Maldives is quite literally at the forefront of climate change. It is something that is already affecting us, and will continue to affect us. We are vulnerable. Our islands are delicate.

We do not want to see a culture that dates back 3,000 years disappear. We may be small, but we are proud. And besides, we have nowhere else to go. Ours is a unique culture in that we have never been colonised, and so have no overseas community. Because of our vulnerability to the effects of climate change, we are very aware of the need to take action. We believe that we have to set an example to other countries that it is possible to pursue sustainable development and this means adopting clean technology.

### **Are you finding it hard to work with traditional investors, or with multilateral agencies?**

Not at all. We have been offered overwhelming support internationally to help us with assessments. I am very confident that by this time next year it will be a different situation. It is possible to make progress in a year. The international community wants to help us. There is a lot of excitement that an entire country is going carbon-neutral.

There is potential for investors here. A lot of the islands lack basic utilities. At the moment they use diesel generators for electricity. This is not the way forward. We can generate power from the wind and the sun. We need to provide water and sewage treatment that has minimal environmental impact. To encourage investors we will offer a range of incentives, among them duty exemptions on imports of green technology.

### **Tourism is still the mainstay of the economy, but Maldives wants to diversify. What initiatives do you have in this regard?**

We are juggling a lot of issues. But a big priority for us is getting the population involved in creating a diversified economy. People have been disempowered for so long. We want them to get involved and become enterprising, and use their skills. The role of the government is to facilitate this process, not to be in business itself. We will help our people to get programmes going.

This is a fishing nation, but there is agricultural potential. We believe we can create an environmentally friendly agricultural sector. We are also a shipping nation and have the potential for dry docks and ship yards, as well as boat construction. We have unique boat-building skills and around 80 per cent of yachts in the harbours here are built locally. We need to build hospitals, so there is the possibility of combining health tourism with providing basic health care. We can offer rehabilitation to overseas visitors.

### **Maldives has very high literacy and good basic education, but there is still a skills shortfall in many areas. What plans do you have to develop training and education?**

School education needs to change qualitatively: we need to re-orientate toward a more holistic approach and be more aware of the real world and vocational skills. We are also encouraging the unemployed to retrain as mechanics or as boat operators for example.

The level of English is very good here, which makes it a lot easier to train people in new technology. We will encourage new technology companies to train on the job. Also, we will specialise in areas where we have a competitive advantage. We are setting up the first national university later this year, and which will emphasise areas like marine sciences and tourism. We want to encourage overseas academics to come here to teach and study.

### **Why should people invest in the Maldives?**

This is a place for investors who want to get involved in environmentally responsible, high-tech projects. We have an enabling environment for those who want to try new and creative ideas. Our clean approach extends to corruption: there has been a sea change here, and we are determined that there will be no corruption. At the same time, we are accessible to investors who want to talk to us about new ideas. We want investors to know that they are going to be part of something special. E