

A legacy of reform

INTERVIEW WITH H.E. MAUMOON ABDUL GAYOOM

FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF MALDIVES



MAUMOON ABDUL GAYOOM holds an MA in Islamic Studies from the American University of Cairo. He began his career as a university lecturer in Nigeria before returning to the Maldives, serving as an Under Secretary and later as Maldives' Permanent Representative to the United Nations. In 1978 he was first elected as President of the Maldives, being reelected for a record six terms. After stepping down from presidential office in November 2008 he formed in his own non-political not-for-profit organization – The Maumoon Foundation. He is a holder of the, Knight Grand Cross of St. Michael and St. George (GCMG) awarded by HM Queen Elizabeth II.

You were the President of the Maldives for three out of its five decades of independence, overseeing a period of both sweeping change and political stability and ushering in multiparty elections in 2008. What are the specific hallmarks of Maldivian democracy?

The birth of democracy in the Maldives goes back to 1932 when our first Constitution was proclaimed, whereby absolute monarchy was abolished and a constitutional sultanate was established. Since then our democratic system has evolved according to various constitutional changes over the years till our present system came into force in 2008.

However, unlike our neighbours, post-independence Maldives had very little in the way of infrastructure and institutional capacity to emulate or borrow from our previous colonial masters. Maldivians are a resilient people. We have, over the centuries, also proved ourselves to be a progressive society. These traits played a fundamental role in our ability to keep pace with the fast changing global village.

It was during my first term of presidential office that I sent to the Citizens' Majlis (Parliament) a raft of legislative proposals to strengthen the democratic governance framework in the country, including the introduction of pluralism. They were rejected.

Reform did not stop, however. The electoral process was adapted over time to ensure transparency and accountability. A number of oversight institutions, including an independent Auditor General's Office, Human Rights Commission and Anti-corruption Commission were also created during the time.

I prioritised democracy, human rights and governance reform, including the revision of the Constitution, for my sixth term in office. By then, I knew the country had progressed to a stage where the people would embrace these reforms. The 9th of June marked a decade since I announced my reform agenda.

Since retiring from office, how would you assess your country's progress in implementing the package of democratic reforms you unveiled back in 2008, such as a free press, an independent judiciary, an empowered parliament, a brand new penal code, a human rights commission and the drafting of a new constitution that will ensure accountable and transparent governance in the country?

Disappointing. So much was achieved during the first five years of the reform agenda. The momentum was, sadly, not sustained since I stepped down. We saw repeated attempts at undermining the judiciary, eroding the space for free press, violations of the



The Citizens' Majlis is the parliament of the Maldives

criminal justice system, curbing the right to free assembly and speech and intrusions by the Executive into the independent legislative arm of the State. Efforts are now underway to continue the reform work that was pending. This initiative was taken by President Yameen, since he assumed office in November 2013.

Concern has been expressed by some of the Maldives' oldest allies that the country is shifting toward becoming an Islamic state. How would you counter these criticisms?

Fundamentalism has always been a concern. Much work was done during my time as President to curb the rise of radicalism. As a scholar in Islam, I tried my utmost to practice and preach moderate Islam, and we were recognised globally as being among the most tolerant and moderate Islamic nations in the world. We also have legislation in place that, if implemented properly, would not allow religious extremism to take hold in our society. Terrorism in the form of Al Qaeda and now ISIS is a major challenge to true Islam, which is founded on tolerance and peace.

You have been a tireless campaigner in raising awareness about global warming and since leaving office you have continued to draw attention to the challenges facing small nations. Please outline your work in this regard.

Climate change and sea level rise are issues that I have campaigned to raise awareness about as far back as 1987. The Maldives is among the world's lowest lying countries. Being a small island developing state, the country faces many unique challenges. My campaigning on environmental issues was reinforced by the need to voice the special concerns of SIDS, including our security and economic vulnerability. My role in this area meant that I continue to be asked to lecture at international forums on these issues. I have dedicated time to continue this work, especially through my Foundation, The Maumoon Foundation.

Looking back over your presidency, what do you believe to be the greatest achievements, and looking ahead to the coming years, what are the main issues that need to be addressed?

When I assumed office in 1978, the Maldives was among the five poorest countries in the world. By the time I stepped down 30 years

thereafter, the Maldives had become only the second country in history to have graduated from the UN list of LDCs. Literacy stood at nearly 99 per cent. Life expectancy had risen from 46.5 years in 1977 to 73 years. We had already achieved most of the MDGs and were on course to achieve the rest. We had become the most affluent country in the region, by virtue of our per capita income. Every single development indicator showed improvement. Ultimately, it is the happiness, progress and prosperity of the people that determines the success of a President. With the Grace of the Almighty Allah, I was able to oversee a period of unprecedented development in the Maldives.

The challenge is to sustain momentum. Governments change. It is the responsibility of every leader to try to build on what has been achieved before him. To sustain momentum to accelerate positive change, we need political stability. After five years of turmoil and political upheaval, President Yameen is now at the helm of a strong government with a clear and bold vision for taking the country forward.

How would you assess the current state of the Commonwealth, and what do you think can be done to strengthen its role, particularly in relation to smaller states like the Maldives?

The Commonwealth needs reforming. With a global membership, the organisation must gear itself to respecting the sovereignty of every member state as well as their unique cultural norms and traditions. Attempts at imposing values of some of the larger states on smaller ones must cease. To stay relevant and useful, the Commonwealth needs to respond to the new realities on the ground. P



It is the responsibility of every leader to try and build on what has been achieved before him

Futuristic developments such as Hulhumalé would have been inconceivable 30 years ago