

# A developing democracy

## INTERVIEW WITH DUNYA MAUMOON

MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, REPUBLIC OF MALDIVES



**DUNYA MAUMOON** holds a BA (Hons) Degree from Cambridge and was a Haddon Scholar at the same University. She completed an MPhil Degree at the London School of Economics. The focus of her research was on "Gender Activism and the Islamic Revival." After beginning her professional career at the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in the Maldives she was instrumental in producing the landmark 2004 Reproductive Health Survey. She also worked on the area of drug use, a growing problem in the Maldives, and when the Asian Tsunami struck in December 2004, she played a lead role in alleviating the hardship suffered.

HE Dunya Maumoon greets HE Sushma Swaraj, Minister of External Affairs of India

**On the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of Independence of the Maldives, please comment on the landmarks in the development of the country's diplomatic relations and membership of international institutions. How do you envisage the role of the Maldives as a member of the international community on the world stage and how would you like the Maldives to be perceived?**

President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom's foreign policy seeks to make Maldivians proud by building the country's national resilience. We strive to build resilience by increasing opportunities for national progress, prosperity, and peace. The principles underpinning these strategies are mutual respect and international law. These principles have enabled the Maldives to champion multilateralism as the key instrument in managing global issues. It is for that reason that the Maldives joined the United Nations less than sixty days after it gained full independence in 1965. And it is for that reason that the Maldives continues to play a catalytic role in promoting issues ranging from climate change to sustainable development.

The Maldives employs the same principles in its bilateral relationships. We have always given a special emphasis to foster better relations with our neighbours. President Yameen has given priority to our excellent relationship with India. We believe that a stronger



partnership between the Maldives and India would help to bring stability to the Indian Ocean that will foster prosperity in the region. We believe the Indian Ocean is where the future international order will be shaped and re-shaped, and the Maldives is located exactly at the centre point between Africa and South East Asia. This geographic location has put the Maldives under increased global spotlight. For us, the type and level of interest that the international community has in the Maldives is a comparative advantage for the Maldives and we wish to fully avail that.

**In your opinion, how important and relevant is the Commonwealth to the Maldives and how would you like to see the organisation, both as an institution, and as a family of nations, evolve post the CHOGM 2015 summit in Malta?**

The Maldives has contributed to, and benefitted from, multilateral fora, such as the United Nations and the Commonwealth. The Maldives was instrumental in drawing the attention of these two organisations to the issue of climate change. President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom was the lone voice at the Vancouver CHOGM in 1987 calling for urgent action on the phenomenon of sea-level rise, and managed to include a paragraph in the Declaration, which otherwise was devoted to international trade. Just a few days after the Vancouver

Summit, President Gayoom was at the United Nations General Assembly calling on the UN to take action on climate change. It was the first time a world leader spoke of the need for global action against climate change. Now, as the world waits in anticipation for a binding agreement in Paris to curb emissions and to prevent the planet from a climate disaster, the Maldives is leading the world's small states in an effort to get binding commitments from the emitting countries.

In recent years, the Commonwealth has become well-known for its association with the Maldives, and for the wrong reasons. The Maldives

believes that the values and principles enshrined in the Commonwealth Charter are worth promoting and defending. Yet, the values in the Charter and other documents, such as the Harare Declaration, are not written for just one group of countries, it is for the entire Commonwealth. We would like to remind the Commonwealth that these principles have universal application and should not be applied selectively – such a practice clearly goes against the spirit of the Commonwealth Charter. But we do not hear the Commonwealth speaking out against electoral fraud in countries, such as Canada, for example, and indeed the mistreatment of migrants and the minorities including the cultural genocide that the Canadian Government is accused of having committed against its own people. The Commonwealth has to stand up and promote its values in these countries as well. It is only then that the Commonwealth would be seen to be able to address real issues, instead of managing sentiments. It is only then that the Commonwealth would achieve the relevance it is striving for, and become accepted as an association of values. And it's only then the Commonwealth would be seen to be a “modern Commonwealth”, which the London Declaration of 1949 envisioned. That's what I believe the Leaders at the Malta CHOGM should strive to achieve.

**In recent times, the Maldives has been in the international spotlight because of issues pertaining to democracy, human rights and Islam. Do you believe that the Maldives is properly understood internationally, particularly in western countries and what is your Ministry doing to foster better understanding?**

No country was born a democracy. Whenever there is a pluralistic governing system, political differences will emerge, parties will continue to compete for advantage, and no method is spared to gain such advantages. Drawing the attention of Western governments on local political competition has become an important instrument available for opposition political parties in emerging democracies such as the Maldives, where no Western government is present on the ground to verify the objectivity and accuracy of such information. And no country has a perfect record in human rights and democracy. Western governments criticise non-Western governments because of several reasons, the least of which could perhaps be human rights or democracy related issues. Let me tell you a few facts about the Maldives, which you do not hear in such criticisms: Maldivian laws give the same level of protection to freedom of expression that is available in many Western countries. Maldivian laws provide fundamental protection to freedom of assembly, far more than is seen a host of other nations, including in

the West. The Maldivian Constitution defines and lists inalienable rights of individuals that cannot be limited or denied even at a time of a state of emergency. Having said that, the Maldives started a multi-party system only in 2008. We are keenly aware that a democracy would not be completed just by having a written constitution or a set of laws. It requires cultivating values, building consensus, and above all, establishing institutions. Most countries in the West have taken several centuries to come to where they are now, and still you hear of police shooting and killing unarmed protestors in the West. Such matters are not unique to developing democracies. The Maldives has taken just a few years to come to where it is now, and its security forces and law enforcement agencies have never shot a single protester. The democratic right to peaceful protest is fully recognised in our constitutional framework. Therefore what is missing in discussions by Western governments about democracy in the Maldives is the context. I would ask these governments to get the context right, and use the appropriate benchmarks when commenting on the situation in emerging democracies such as the Maldives.

It is also the context that is missing when the West talks about Islam in the Maldives. The Maldives has remained a Muslim country for more than 800 years. It is part of our identity, history, culture, and way of life. Islam inspires and gives hope to our people. For some western governments, it is still difficult to reconcile concepts such as “democracy”, “human rights” and “Islam”. The Maldives is proving the stereotypes wrong, and demonstrating that the three concepts are complementary and mutually reinforcing. The Maldives is a peaceful country and Maldivians are a peace-loving people. As in many other countries including the UK, we are facing, and dealing with,

**What is missing in discussions by Western governments about democracy in the Maldives is the context**

Jumhooree maidhaan, or Republic Square in Malé



issues of extremism. Yet, it is by no means even close to the situation that is being described in some media. Nevertheless, the Maldives has its role to play in the global fight against religious extremism. To that end, the Maldives is in the process of reforming its counter-terrorism legislation and counter-terrorism institutions to be able to combat this rising phenomenon.

---

**On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of independence, how do you assess relations between the Maldives and the United Kingdom? How would you evaluate the legacy of the British colonial period in the Maldives?**

---

The Maldives was never colonised by the United Kingdom; the UK was responsible only for external affairs and defence. After the independence agreement was signed in July 1965, the Maldives pursued quite an independent foreign policy, forging closer ties with our neighbouring countries. And Britain did not show much interest in the Maldives. Unlike many other countries that became independent from Britain, the Maldives was not a large recipient of British foreign aid, we did not, and still do not, have a British diplomatic mission in the Maldives, and the Maldives waited for seventeen years before deciding to approach the Commonwealth for membership. Maldivians see the relationship with Britain less as a result of history, and more as a partnership for shaping the future.

The fifty years of independence that we celebrate this year is a testimony to our efforts in building resilience. The prosperity that you witness in the Maldives, the phenomenal growth that the country experienced in the economic and social sectors, and the perseverance we have shown in introducing new initiatives in international politics are all the result of hard work by the people of the Maldives. We of course have received the goodwill and support of our friends and partners, including the UK; but the national progress was driven by the enterprising people of the Maldives.

---

**How would you like to see relations between the two countries evolve and how can the United Kingdom be of assistance in helping the Maldives attain its economic, and societal goals?**

---

The Maldives remains as one of the most sought-after holiday destinations for British visitors. The partnership between the Maldives and the UK has enormous potential and can be mutually beneficial in countering terrorism, organised crime, and other non-traditional security threats. We believe that this partnership could be expanded and consolidated in the coming years, to include emerging issues, such as radicalisation, and countering terrorist recruitment. There is enormous scope for attracting more Britons to visit the Maldives, and maintaining Britain's position

as an important source market for Maldives tourism. I also believe UK universities offer excellent educational opportunities and a number of Maldivian students are studying in the UK. I myself recall with fondness, the years I spent at Cambridge University and at the London School of Economics and Political Science. I am sure the UK will continue to remain a popular destination for Maldivian students.

---

**Is there any other information which you would like to highlight, taking into account the high net worth and international nature of the business and government leaders who comprise FIRST's readership?**

---

Within a period of less than forty years, the Maldives has been transformed from a collection of small fishing villages into one of the most vibrant economies in South Asia, with social development indicators comparable to that of the most advanced countries in the world. President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom's economic agenda will take that development trajectory to unprecedented and historic levels. President Yameen's vision is shaped by the belief that economic prosperity will promote political stability and social harmony. Building resilience, creating jobs, empowering youth, building infrastructure, increasing wealth, and above all, building and strengthening institutions are the goals that the Maldives is achieving at the national level.

We recognise that the development of our judicial institutions is key to our national development planning. A fully independent and functional judiciary is the cornerstone of any democracy. To that end, there are ongoing initiatives to improve the functionality of the judiciary and to reform our laws to ensure our legal framework is fully in compliance with our international treaty obligations.

We believe that if the Maldives could achieve these goals, other countries could do the same. That is what we are arguing at the global debates on the post-2015 development agenda and climate change. As the Chair of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), the Maldives will lead the discussion on behalf of the world's small states and will remain a strong voice on these issues. President Gayoom said at the Vancouver CHOGM in 1987 that unless the leaders of the world take bold decisions, climate change will result in the death of several nations. We now have come to the point where citizens everywhere, young and old, children and grandparents, are placing all their hopes, not for a better tomorrow, but a normal tomorrow, on the shoulders of their leaders who meet in Paris in December. Hopes are for a climate agreement that is legally binding, inclusive, and target-oriented. Future generations will not forgive us unless we seal the deal in Paris. E

**The partnership between the Maldives and the UK has enormous potential and can be mutually beneficial**