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Book

Understanding the "India Out" campaign in Maldives

Provided in Cooperation with:

Observer Research Foundation (ORF), New Delhi

Reference: Shivamurthy, Aditya Gowdara (2022). Understanding the "India Out" campaign in Maldives. New Delhi, India : ORF, Observer Research Foundation.
https://www.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/ORF_OccasionalPaper_371_Maldives-India-Out.pdf.
<https://www.orfonline.org/research/understanding-the-india-out-campaign-in-maldives/>.

This Version is available at:
<http://hdl.handle.net/11159/652708>

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Occasional Paper



ISSUE NO. 371 OCTOBER 2022

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Understanding the 'India Out' Campaign in Maldives

Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy

Abstract

Since Ibrahim Solih's election as president of Maldives in 2018, India and Maldives have been working to revive their previously strained relations. The relationship faces an enduring threat, however, in the form of the 'India Out' campaign spearheaded by opposition parties. Although limited to certain sections of the Maldivian polity, the campaign has fuelled anti-India public sentiments, in turn becoming consequential to India-Maldives relations. This paper seeks to bridge the literature gap on the origins and nature of the campaign. It assesses the implications for India and the regional order.

Introduction

India and Maldives have shared diplomatic, defence, economic, and cultural relations for the past six decades. Located in a crucial geographical position in the Indian Ocean, Maldives is vital to India's strategy for the Indian Ocean and its neighbourhood. For its part, Maldives reaps benefits from India's economic assistance and net security provision. India has assisted Maldives in various ways since its independence in 1965, such as its pursuit of socio-economic development and modernisation, as well as maritime security. Their engagements flourished beginning in the late 1980s, when India launched 'Operation Cactus' to abort a coup in Maldives against Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's autocratic regime.¹

The cordial friendship continued even under Maldives' first democratic government, elected in 2008. However, with Abdulla Yameen coming to power in 2013, India-Maldives relations underwent a downward spiral with his crackdown on democracy, proximity towards China, and anti-India rhetoric used to muster nationalist sentiments. In 2018 a new president, Ibrahim Solih, was elected, who immediately worked to improve the relationship by initiating an 'India First' policy. The policy prioritised India for economic and defence partnerships, and showed greater sensitivity to Indian concerns emanating from Chinese investments and activities in Maldives.

Not everyone agrees with this policy, however. In October 2020, the opposition coalition—i.e., the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) and the People's National Congress (PNC)—officially launched a challenge to the bilateral relationship through what it called the 'India Out' campaign. The campaign seeks to exploit anti-India sentiments, already prevalent parallel to the democratic transition and amidst allegations of India's expansionist ambitions. 'India Out' aims to fuel more hatred by creating scepticism for India's investments in Maldives, the defence partnerships between the two, and India's net-security provisions. Both of the political parties behind the campaign are led by Yameen.

This paper traces the origins of 'India Out', its nature, and drivers, and its implications.

‘India Out’: A Brief History

Gayoom’s nomination as president of Maldives in 1978 marked the beginning of an autocratic regime that lasted till 2008. The period was characterised by a lack of space for democratic dissent. The emergence of democratic constitutional reforms in 2005, and Gayoom’s electoral defeat in 2008 opened spaces for discussion and dissent.² It is in these same spaces where emerged the occasional promotion of anti-India sentiments and the politicisation of aid in Maldives, according to the opposition’s calculations of their opportunities. Various such instances recurred even before the opposition’s India Out campaign was launched officially in October 2020.

In 2009, India gifted Maldives with a helicopter³ and the two sides signed a defence cooperation agreement for joint surveillance and patrols in the Indian Ocean. They also discussed establishing a network of 26 radars. This attracted criticism from the opposition, who said Maldives was compromising its sovereignty and making space for Indian influence and presence in the island state.⁴

A year later, in 2010, Indian corporation GMR undertook a project of upgrading and operating the Malé international airport.⁵ When the firm ended up in a legal dispute for imposing a development fee on Maldivian nationals, it got the unofficial support of President Nasheed. The opposition used the controversy to build nationalist sentiments against India and accused Nasheed of corruption and misusing democratic institutions. This issue, along with economic and religious grievances, contributed to the December 2011 protests and the subsequent resignation of Nasheed in February 2012.⁶

Afraid of being arrested after resigning from his position, Nasheed took shelter in the Indian High Commission in 2013,⁷ triggering even more anti-India rhetoric from the opposition parties and the protesting public. His successor, Mohammed Waheed, used the GMR fiasco and the High Commission standoff to further nationalist sentiments and make himself relevant in the 2013 presidential elections.

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Following Yameen’s election in 2013, Maldives increased its interactions with China and in 2014 welcomed President Xi Jinping for a visit he made to court support for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project.⁸ As Indian and international criticism of Yameen’s crackdown on domestic dissent and opposition increased,⁹ the Maldivian president further moved closer to China. Despite officially maintaining an ‘India First’ policy, Yameen leased islands and infrastructure projects to China and the two signed a Free Trade Agreement.¹⁰ There were also negotiations to establish a Joint Ocean Observation Centre, which would give China more relevance in the region.

In return, China offered Maldives mega-infrastructure projects and loans, most of them under opaque terms and conditions. By the end of Yameen’s tenure in 2018, it was estimated that Maldives had borrowed around US\$ 1.5 billion from China—of which only US\$ 600 million were the government’s borrowings, and the remaining US\$ 900 million were sovereign guarantees.¹¹ Finding China to be a sound option for economic and political survival, Yameen went on an anti-India spree to further nationalist sentiments. In 2018, his government asked India to withdraw its helicopters and operatives from the country, accusing them of espionage and violating sovereignty.^a India’s hesitancy to withdraw its helicopters within the given time escalated the anti-India rhetoric.¹² Yet, it would only be after Yameen’s electoral defeat in 2018 that the contemporary form of India Out would emerge.

As Ibrahim Solih took over the presidency in 2018, he sought to undo the political and economic damage to India-Maldives relations caused by his predecessor. Since then, a number of proposals from China, including projects under the BRI, as well as the FTA have been shelved.¹³ There was a renewed focus on the ‘India First’ policy where the two countries undertook projects to improve the island

a In 2016, India had gifted its second helicopter to the Maldives. Just like the previous helicopter, this one would be used for medical and HADR missions, and operated by Indian technicians. See: High Commission of India, Maldives, “Gifting of Second Advanced Light Helicopter To Maldives (April 27, 2016),” High Commission of India, Maldives, <https://hci.gov.in/male/?5038?003>

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state’s economic, social, and defence capabilities (See Table 1: The timeline begins in November 2018, after Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) candidate Ibrahim Solih was elected as president.)

The cooperation covers the sectors of roads and land reclamation; agriculture; sanitation and health; airport development; education; transportation; housing and community development; defence; and maritime security.¹⁴ This has helped the ruling alliance in promoting development in the country while saving it from Yameen’s irrational borrowings that would have led to a fall into China’s ‘debt-trap’.¹⁵ It is in this regard that the Sri Lankan crisis is often portrayed as a classic example of what could have happened if Yameen were in power.¹⁶

Table 1:
Key Initiatives by the Solih
Government with India’s
Assistance

Date	Event
December 2018	Solih reiterates India First Policy during his India visit; India offers the assistance of 1.4 billion USD
March 2019	India officially provides an LoC of 800 million USD to the Maldives.
June 2019	Maldives and India sign the MoU for hydrographic surveying
September 2020	India gifts a Dornier Maritime Surveillance aircraft to the Maldives. Agrees to train Maldivian pilots, observers, and engineers for the aircraft
February 2021	India agrees to develop and maintain a naval facility at UTF naval base in the Maldives.
March 2021	India agrees to open a second mission in the Maldives
July 2021	India participates in over 45 infrastructure development projects in the Maldives
August 2021	India and Maldives sign the Greater Malé Connectivity project; India will be assisting with 500 million USD
March 2022	India handed over its coastal radar system to the Maldives; ten radars were installed across the Maldives
March 2022	India assisted Maldives’ police academy inaugurated in Addu

Source: Author’s own, using various open sources.

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The development projects are targets of the India Out campaign. The opposition leads protests and fuels sections of traditional and social media to promote the narrative that the government is selling the country’s sovereignty to India. They accuse India of interfering in Maldives’ sovereign affairs, deploying the military, facilitating Yameen’s arrest, spreading COVID-19 in the country, and restricting the people’s freedoms of expression and assembly.¹⁷ Although the opposition maintains that their only objective is to ask India to withdraw its soldiers from the territory, the campaign has often taken a xenophobic turn, as will be discussed later in this paper. The ultimate objective of this campaign is to muster nationalist sentiments and win the 2023 elections.

The opposition has made their allegations based on three confidential agreements between India and Maldives, discussed in turn in the following paragraphs.

Hydrographic Survey: The two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding for hydrographic surveying in June 2019,¹⁸ with the first activities beginning in January 2021. The survey aimed at identifying the seabed and mapping the physical features of the islands, reefs, sandbanks, and lagoons of the Maldives. The government claimed that this agreement would strengthen the island nation’s capability to map out coastal waters and Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), and properly utilise their resources.¹⁹ However, the opposition and some sections of media claimed that the survey would allow India to have in-depth knowledge of Maldivian waters, ports and harbours, and thereby access seabed and critical navigational information²⁰ and challenge the country’s security. An allegedly leaked version of the confidential agreement, published by the media channel, Dhiyares, reinforced this narrative.²¹

Dornier aircraft: The Dornier aircraft was requested in 2016, under Yameen’s government, but finalised only in 2020. Under the agreement, India would deploy 25 unarmed personnel to operate the Dornier aircraft, and train seven Maldivian pilots, observers and engineers to operate the same.^{22,23} The 25 unarmed personnel will be

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commanded by the Maldivian Defence Forces. While India will cover only the logistics cost of the aircraft and the Indian military personnel, Maldives will look after the operations of the Dornier aircraft.²⁴ The Maldivian government asserted that this agreement will help better monitor the Maldives’ EEZ, improve its maritime security, and limit illegal trafficking.²⁵ The opposition argued that the government would be allowing Indian troops to be stationed in the Maldives with the aircraft, and thereby compromise its sovereignty. An allegedly leaked version of the agreement, again from the Dhiyares news channel, reinforced these conspiracy theories of India’s expansionist ambitions.²⁶

UTF agreement: The Uthuru Thilafalhu (UTF) agreement was proposed in 2016 under Yameen, but was signed only in 2021. According to the agreement, India will help develop and maintain a coastguard harbour and dockyard for Maldives and provide professional, technical and logistical support for a period of 15 years. The government stressed that the agreement would help improve maritime security by letting the Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) dock, maintain, and repair its coast guard vessels.²⁷ The opposition claimed that the government has allowed India to establish a military base in the Maldives.²⁸ Dhiyares and opposition leaders allegedly obtained a leaked version of the document and fuelled the fears. The leaked document alleged that Indian military personnel will be stationed for a period of 30-60 years and use arms and communication facilities, and Indian vessels and aircraft would have unrestricted free access to the UTF.^{29, 30}

Much of these allegations and protests continued despite the government offering subsequent clarifications and the campaign being outlawed in April 2022.³¹ However, it is only in the following months, after the violent incident during Yoga Day,^b that the campaign slowed down. In September 2022, Yameen ordered a pause to the physical protests and rallies, citing the government’s crackdown measures.³² The media houses too, have toned down their anti-India rhetoric to a certain extent. The campaign, however, is afloat on social media, and the opposition continues to release their press releases and statements bearing the stamp of ‘India Out’.

^b A mob in the Maldives attacked India’s Yoga Day celebrations organised by the Indian High Commission, accusing it of being “Unislamic”. Several Indian and foreign diplomats were present in the event too. Candidates of the opposition parties are accused of supporting the violent incident. See: “Yoga Day Violence: PPM’s Mohamed Ismail Released”, *Sun Maldives*, August 06, 2022, <https://en.sun.mv/76619>

The Key Drivers of 'India Out'

1. Political Parties

The Opposition Coalition

The opposition coalition's use of debt and sovereignty narratives to criticise the government began in mid-December 2018 when India decided to offer US\$ 1.4 billion in assistance to the Maldives.³³ The criticism was focused on the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) government. By March 2019, opposition leaders started the "Indian Soldiers leave" campaign – opposing the Solih government's decision to reverse Yameen's policy of asking India to withdraw its helicopters and operatives.³⁴ In June 2019, the opposition expressed their reservations about the Hydrography agreement.

Claims of India's increased military presence and deployment then started to gain ground, and the first protests against India began in August 2020.³⁵ The next month, protestors started directly calling out India for violating the Maldives' sovereignty, but the opposition denied its involvement in these protests.³⁶ Finally, the opposition launched its first official 'India Out' protest on 18 October 2020, on the Maldivian National Day. The protests were described as a reaction to the Maldives "becoming a slave to India" and increasing "Indian military presence in Maldivian Soil."³⁷

There were two reasons: One, it appeared to be an attempt to put pressure on the Indian government to facilitate Yameen's release. (Yameen had been arrested on corruption charges in November 2019.) The key leaders of the opposition party had met the Indian High Commissioner only days before these protests, requesting India to intervene in this regard.³⁸ The second reason is that India provided the Maldives with a Dornier aircraft in late September that year,³⁹ giving the opposition more currency to exploit anti-India sentiments and substantiate their claims of Indian military deployment.

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Requests for Yameen's release were also raised with the Indian Foreign Secretary in November 2020.⁴⁰ By January 2021, protests sprung up in symbolic spaces like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the residence of the Indian High Commissioner.⁴¹ In February 2021, the opposition leaders met the Indian Foreign minister.⁴² This was likely for three reasons: India diversifying its outreach in the Maldives as the anti-India rhetoric intensified; seeking broader consent for the UTF agreement; and the opposition trying to oust their leader from jail.⁴³ The opposition's rhetoric grew more vocal and sceptical of India with the finalisation of the UTF agreement.

By the time Yameen was released on 30 November 2021, the protests have moved to other cities beyond Malé.⁴⁴ Yameen wasted no time spicing up his anti-India rhetoric,⁴⁵ travelling to distant islands to speak about the India Out campaign. The aim was to make ground for the 2023 presidential elections.⁴⁶

The Ruling Coalition

Much of the criticisms and allegations levelled at India are directed against the Maldivian government as well, and the ruling coalition is taking the India Out campaign seriously. To be sure, some MDP leaders have dismissed the claims as a well-orchestrated political campaign to whip up hatred against Maldives' closest ally.⁴⁷ Ali Azim - a Member of the Parliament has alleged that the campaign is China-funded.⁴⁸ Others have said it was being run by criminals, gangs, drug dealers, and extremists. One thing that most critics agree on is that the campaign is mere political opportunism on Yameen's part.

As the opposition's claims started to gain more support and legitimacy, MDP provided more clarification on the three classified agreements.⁴⁹ In subsequent months, the National Security Services committee reviewed all three agreements and declared that they posed no threat to Maldivian sovereignty.⁵⁰ The government also clarified that nearly 75 unarmed Indian military personnel (mostly

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observers, technicians, and pilots) are present in the Maldives—25 assigned for the Dornier aircraft, and 25 each for two helicopters gifted by India.⁵¹ Some of the agreements were also disclosed to the Parliament and the High Court.⁵² The same committee report was passed in Parliament with a majority.⁵³

Yet, the India Out campaign continued despite these clarifications. While the Nasheed and Solih camps may differ in their approach to countering the campaign, they both view it as a threat to the MDP, to Maldives, and to the larger India-Maldives relations. The movement was banned in April 2022.

Even MDP's coalition partners—the Adhaalath Party (AP) and Jumhoore Party (JP)—condemned the India Out movement and Yameen for inciting hatred for India and hampering the bilateral relationship. Both parties call themselves 'nationalists' and say they would not support nor tolerate any activities that compromised Maldives' independence.⁵⁴ Although they reap electoral benefits by showcasing Indian development initiatives, their statements are shaped by opportunism and their political calculations. For instance, the JP has not completely dismissed the Indian military's presence. Indeed, before the official statement criticising the campaign, the JP's leader—Qasim Ibrahim, reiterated that he is not personally aware of any Indian military presence in Maldives.⁵⁵ This could be seen as JP's attempt to increase its flexibility in coalition formation and electorates, as Qasim Ibrahim looks to contest the upcoming 2023 Maldives presidential elections.⁵⁶

Other political parties

Similar sentiments are shared by non-coalition parties. Leaders from the Maldives National Party (MNP) have criticised Yameen and the India Out movement for harming bilateral relations with India.⁵⁷ At the same time, they object to criminalising the campaign, and have instead requested the government for transparency on the India projects, hinting how India's loans, assistance and projects pose a threat to the Maldives—without naming India.⁵⁸

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For its part, Ahmed Siyam's Maldives Development Alliance (MDA) has been rather silent on the India Out campaign. The party was closely knit with Yameen's alliance in 2013. Yameen had helped him secure a US\$125-million loan from China with a sovereign state guarantee.⁵⁹ After discontinuing the coalition in 2019, Siyam sought MDP's assistance for a bailout on Chinese loans. This has reinforced his silence on the highly partisan campaign; such neutrality would become more crucial as Siyam contests the next presidential elections.⁶⁰

2. Social Media

Before the street protests broke out, the narratives and mobilisation for India Out first took shape on social media. A social media analysis by this author of the hashtag #Indiaout—used by this anti-India campaign in Maldives—found that the hashtag is not an original one. It was used back in 2017 to either portray India as a coloniser in Kashmir or taunt it when it loses cricket matches.⁶¹

The first tweet on Maldives' India Out campaign appeared on 7 December 2018, from the handle @usaidzman, who identify themselves as a supporter of Yameen. The tweet criticised Solih for causing the enslavement of Maldives to India and praised Yameen's government for bringing economic progress to the island nation with the help of China.⁶² From then, one account—@arcasifh, whose cover photo was that of a cropped ISIS flag—kept the campaign alive on social media through the occasional tweets between December 2018 and July 2019. The account tweeted its first #Indiaout tweet on 22 December 2018, and at the time of writing this paper was still tweeting similar content.⁶³

In June 2019, the hydrography agreement was signed. The India Out social media campaign commenced one month later but paused shortly thereafter. From 11 and 12 July, multiple profiles began tweeting with the #Indiaout hashtag, among them @TedinMaldives,

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@MBahaaru, @AdmNaseer, and @FazylAli.⁶⁴ Ahmed Azaan (@axanner)—co-founder of Dhiyares and a social media campaigner of India Out—tweeted his first India Out tweet on 12 July 2019; he paused for some months, before resurfacing with India Out tweets in October 2020.⁶⁵

Most of the tweets criticised the MDP; accused India of discriminating against Maldivians by, for instance, replacing Maldivian labour; having a military presence in the country and rigging elections. Others criticised India's policies vis-à-vis Kashmir and blamed Indians in the Maldives for increasing the crime rate in Maldives. By June 2020, the number of tweets with the India Out hashtag had decreased.⁶⁶

The campaign resumed with a massive push in July 2020, with a large number of users using the hashtag 'India Out'. Most of these tweets appeared only on July 25 and 26, and on August 30 and 31.⁶⁷ In September the tweets were more dispersed across the days.⁶⁸ By October and November, the campaign was in full swing, with tweets and hashtags of India Out coming out nearly every day.⁶⁹

This increased tweeting in July could perhaps be seen as the opposition's attempt to create more momentum for the 'India Out' protests that began around August and officially launched in October. Another explanation could perhaps be that the opposition found more currency to intensify the campaign, as the public grew concerned over India's Dornier aircraft in the Maldives.

Once the campaign was in full swing, members and loyalists of the opposition party seized the opportunity to disseminate hatred for India and the government. This author's analysis of the #Indiaout hashtag on Twitter using Hashtagify^c supports this argument (see Table 2).^d These profiles were shortlisted based on the following variables: influence (tweet engagements, likes, retweets, user

c Hashtagify is a website that identifies top social media hashtags. It helps us track certain hashtags, its top users and influencers.

d Methodology used: The author used Hashtagify website to retrieve the data. Profiles for the search of #Indiaout are openly available on the website. The Weekly data, however, was retrieved by using a seven-day trial for a personal subscription. The data was retrieved by searching for the #Indiaout. Only tweets in English were assessed and analysed through this software. The author verified the personal details of all the relevant Twitter profiles either through their social media handles, or through members of the PPM.

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mentioned in tweets with hashtag #Indiaout); specialisation (tweets with hashtag #Indiaout, their originality, and retweets); and total followers.⁷⁰

Table 2:
**Top Profiles Affiliated with the
'India Out' Campaign**

User name	Name	Description
@MeghBulletin	Suspended account	Indian account, likely using the hashtag to criticise or counter the accusations.
@axanner	Ahmed Azaan	Co-founder of Dhiyares
@AhmadhMV	Ahmed Adnan	Council Member, PNC
@Muhmed_Ismail	Mohamed Ismail	Action Department chairman PPM; former MP; a key figure in India Out
@WIONews	World In One News	An Indian news outlet, reporting on India Out
@KevinCosna	Mohamed Junaid	PPM activist
@HeenaWaleed	Heena Waleed	Chief Spokesperson, PPM
@aliramyaz	Ali Rameez	Former singer; Activist, Jamiyyath Salaf
@Rumaalu_05	--	Likely a troll account
@em_saeed	Mohamed Saeed	Member of Parliament, Vice President of PNC
@Azhartu	Azhar Abdulla Saeed	PPM-PNC Joint Council Member
@siruarts	Mohamed Siruhan	Islamist Artist

Source: Hastagify; Author's compilation

Note: PNC – People's National Congress; PPM – Progressive Party of Maldives

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This author also conducted a seven-day Twitter analysis, still using Hashtagify.⁷¹ Between 17 June to 24 June 2022, a total of 5,800 tweets appeared with the #Indiaout hashtag of which 1,300 were original and 4,500 were retweets. The tweets recorded 7.7 million impressions,^e nearly double the Maldivian population. In the same period, an average of 824 tweets came out every day from 389 users. Most of these are affiliated with the opposition parties (see Tables 3, 4, and 5).

These numbers indicate that the India Out campaign on Twitter is organised around a few users (affiliated with the opposition) with relatively fewer original tweets that are retweeted.

Table 3:
Seven-day (17 June to 24 June, 2022)
Twitter analysis of Top Profiles
Based on Influence

User name	Name	Description
@axanner	Ahmed Azaan	Co-founder of Dhiyares
@muhmed_ismail	Mohamed Ismail	Action Department chairman PPM; former MP; a key figure in the India Out campaign
@azhartu	Azhar Abdulla Saeed	PPM-PNC Joint Council Member
@mandey77	Ahmed Mamdhoo	Former Deputy Minister of Economic Development During Yameen's tenure
@benrazaan	Razan	PPM activist
@sajournal1	South Asian Journal	A magazine that carries reports on South Asia
@ibrahimjanab	Ibrahim Janab	PPM supporter

^e Twitter Impression refers to the total number of times a Tweet has been seen.

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User name	Name	Description
@abbasriza	Abbas Adil Riza	PPM activist, active in promoting anti-India sentiments in 2012
@zein_zenin	-	Details not available
@eeninoo	Aminath Eena	PPM activist

Source: Hashtagify, author's compilation

Note: PNC – People's National Congress; PPM – Progressive Party of Maldives

Table 4:
Seven-day (17 June to 24 June, 2022)
Twitter analysis of Top Profiles
Based on Specialisation

User name	Name	Description
@azhartu	Azhar Abdulla Saeed	PPM-PNC Joint Council Member
@eeninoo	Aminath Eena	PPM activist
@AhmedAhmed4066	--	Likely a troll
@malhafathun	Malha Fathun Safeeq	Joined in April 2022; Likely a troll
@Mandey77	Ahmed Mamdhoo	Former Deputy Minister of Economic Development During Yameen's tenure
@thiladhuhmathi	--	Details not available
@AidhaHakeem	Aidha Hakeem	Journalist at Dhiyares
@riyyatey	Riyaz	PPM supporter
@tharahgegebaani	--	Details not available
@azumeel	Azumeel Ahmed	PPM supporter

Source: Hashtagify, author's compilation

Note: PNC – People's National Congress; PPM – Progressive Party of Maldives

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Table 5:
Seven-day of Top Profiles Based on Followers (17 June to 24 June 2022)

User name	Name	Description
@binaybharat	Binay Bharat	Indian author and researcher
@heenawaleed	Heena Waleed	Spokesperson, PPM
@axanner	Ahmed Azaan	Co-founder of Dhiyares
@muhmed_ismail	Mohamed Ismail	Action Department chairman PPM; former MP; a key figure in the India Out campaign
@azhartu	Azhar Abdulla Saeed	PPM-PNC Joint Council Member
@eeninoo	Aminath Eena	PPM activist
@sajournal1	South Asian Journal	A magazine that carries reports on South Asia
@nannaxeev	Shiuna	PPM supporter and spokesperson at Malé City Council
@ibrahimjanab	Ibrahim Janab	PPM supporter
@kevincosna	Mohamed Junaid	PPM activist

Source: Hashtagify, author's compilation

Note: PNC – People's National Congress; PPM – Progressive Party of Maldives

The dominance of Maldives' opposition members on the social media landscape could be linked to opportunism, especially in the run-up to the 2023 elections.⁷² Unsurprisingly, even most of the co-related hashtags of India Out (see Table 6) were related to the opposition's objective of promoting nationalist sentiments, cornering the current government, displaying Yameen as a messiah against India, and mustering support for the 2023 polls.

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Table 6:
Co-related Hashtags of #IndiaOut

Co-related Hashtag of India Out	Contextual Significance/Meaning
#DhashuNuvey	'Don't get stepped on [by India]'
#SaveMaldives	Saving Maldives from India
#Indianmilitaryout	India's military presence in Maldives, and asking for their withdrawal
#defendmaldives	Defending the Maldives against the Indian military presence
#SaveAddu	Opposing India's development projects, diplomatic efforts, and economic presence in the Addu Atoll of the Maldives
#Indiamilitaryout	India's military presence in the Maldives, and asking for their withdrawal
#HeisBack	Yameen's prison release and his potential interest in contesting the 2023 elections
#Maldives	Defending or protecting the Maldives from India
#RY2023	Translates to President Yamen 2023 – the Maldives will be heading to presidential elections in 2023
#noSOFA	A Status of Forces Agreement is an agreement that the US had proposed to sign with the Maldives in 2013. This was seen as an attempt by the US to establish a military base in the Maldives. It is rumoured that India is having a similar agreement with the Maldives.

Source: Hashtagify, Authors' own

3. Media

Local news outlets closely affiliated with the opposition—such as *Dhiyares*, its English edition *The Maldives Journal*, and the Maldives News Network (MNN), have played a vital role in the campaign.

The Key Drivers of 'India Out'

Dhiyares was licensed in July 2019, and its English outlet *Maldives Journal*, in late September 2020.⁷³ This author's analysis of the coverage of *Maldives Journal* found that negative coverage of India began only in December 2020. Both *Dhiyares* and the *Maldives Journal* are owned by Shifzan Ahmed, Ahmed Azaan Marzooq, Noorul Huda Hassan, and Ahmed Ibrahim,⁷⁴ and were formed only after Yameen and PPM were ousted from power. Ahmed Azaan—a star campaigner of the India Out movement—is a close affiliate of Yameen and his family. He was sponsored for his education in ADA University, Azerbaijan from 2015-2019 by Yameen, and the two have maintained good relations.^{75, 76} Shifzan Ahmed, meanwhile, was educated in Egypt and is mentored by Mohamed Shaheem—a member of PPM and a close affiliate of Yameen.⁷⁷

The MNN, on the other hand, was formed in 2020 by Mohamed Ikram Abdul Latheef. In May 2021, he was joined by other directors and shareholders - Hamdhan Shakeel, Ibrahim Khaleel, and Mohamed Nooraddeen.⁷⁸ It was only after this expansion (June 2021) that MNN started promoting anti-India content.⁷⁹ Two of MNN's shareholders—Abdul Latheef and Khaleel—were part of Yameen's proposed media governing board in 2015.⁸⁰ Hamdhum Shakeel, on the other hand, is the brother of Mohamed Shakeel. The latter is an active cadre of the PPM, and was its former secretary and also a state minister in Yameen's government.⁸¹

Both these news agencies have widely promoted the India Out campaign by criticising India and the MDP. They played a crucial role in raising speculations for confidential agreements, investments, security arrangements, and economic agreements.⁸² To substantiate their claims of Indian “occupation” of Maldives, they often spread disinformation and distorted facts about India's integration of Sikkim, Operation Cactus in 1989, and the 2018 Indian chopper withdrawal debacle from the Maldives.^{f, 83}

f Integration of Sikkim – In 1975, Sikkim – a protectorate state officially became a part of the Indian Union;
Operation Cactus – an operation launched by the Indian army in 1989 to pre-empt a coup from replacing Gayoom's regime;
2018 Chopper withdrawal debacle – In 2018, Yameen asked India to withdraw its gifted helicopters and personnel from the Maldives. India's hesitancy to do the same mustered some scepticism of India's intentions.

The Key Drivers of 'India Out'

Dhiyares and the *Maldives Journal* were the only news agencies to have leaked all three confidential agreements. The leaks became the source of misinformation, allegations, and counter-arguments for the opposition, media, and social media users.

Indeed, both media outlets often glorify Yameen as the only leader who could resist the so-called Indian occupation.⁸⁴ The newspapers exclusively cover Yameen's rallies and his anti-India rhetoric, and criticise the government for restricting and curbing the India Out protests, and misusing state institutions.⁸⁵ The *Maldives Journal* refers to the India Out protests as a "grassroots moment".⁸⁶

Dhiyares, for instance, has asserted that MDP and Solih are employing a lot of Indians, while Yameen had prioritised Maldivians.⁸⁷ Indians were also linked to rising crimes in the Maldives.⁸⁸ Personal details of the Indian military personnel in the Maldives were leaked, and some Indian diplomats were accused of corruption, espionage, and paedophilia.⁸⁹ MNN, on the other hand, reports on "Hindu nationalism" to create more anti-India sentiments and create more legitimacy for the India Out movement.⁹⁰

Otherwise, the coverage of India Out remains fairly balanced, or else critical, in other media outlets. The media outlet Public Service Media (PSM), for example, has been carrying out a pro-government narrative against the India Out campaign.⁹¹ Rajje, for its part—closely affiliated with the MDP—has been critical of the India Out campaign and of Yameen's role, and promotes a pro-government narrative.⁹² Other newspapers like the *Times of Addu* and the *Edition* too, have extensively covered the India Out campaign, but have remained fairly neutral in their coverage. The Sun Media Group owned by the MDA leader Ahmed Siyam has tried to cover the issue without obvious bias.⁹³

The Indirect China Factor

As Solih tried to reverse the damage caused by Yameen, various Chinese investments took a back seat. According to statements from the Indian High Commissioner to the Maldives, by mid-2021, China had only active project in the Maldives, while India had nearly 45.⁹⁴ It is in this regard that China is seen as a source of the India Out campaign. This perspective is furthered by Indian media reports as well as some MDP politicians.⁹⁵ The US's increasing interest in the Maldives, and intensifying rivalry with India post-Galwan clashes, might have also compelled China to take part in the campaign.⁹⁶

Chinese media outlets appear to be silent about India's Maldivian policy, though China is using them for the India Out campaign. Initially, *Global Times* promoted some scepticism and anti-Solih content in 2018.^{97,98} In late November 2018, the media outlet also cited *Nikkei Review* to raise speculations about India's hegemony and permanent deployment of military personnel in the country.⁹⁹ This critical content stopped in 2019. Indeed, the *Global Times* had hardly reported anything on the Maldives since Yameen was defeated. But there was some criticism of India's South Asian policy; India's Maldives policy was shown as opportunistic and geo-political.¹⁰⁰ It urged South Asian states to stay away from India's anti-China coalition attempts, criticised the US's increasing presence in the Maldives, and even portrayed itself as a benevolent power in the Maldives.^{101,102}

On the other hand, *China Daily* substantially covered and praised the positive developments and investments between China and Yameen's government.¹⁰³ Even after Yameen's defeat, Chinese investments in the country—especially the Sinamale bridge—were shown in an extensive positive light.¹⁰⁴ Although there was some criticism for the US's Maldives policy,¹⁰⁵ there was nothing specific against India's Maldives policy after Ibrahim Solih took over. Both *Global Times* and *China Daily* had no details or coverage of the UTF, India Out, India's growing influence and investments.

The Indirect China Factor

A similar trend was also seen in the reporting of *Xinhua* and *People's Daily*. They briefly covered the US's interest in the Maldives, Yameen's release, showed Chinese investments in a positive light and interviewed the Maldivian Foreign Minister – to highlight China's assistance and significance to the island state.¹⁰⁶ China has not promoted any such mis/disinformation considering India's increasing investments in the Maldives since 2019, while it has done the same with the US's investments in Nepal, and India's activities in Bhutan and Nepal.^{107,108}

Despite the absence of a paper trail, it can be argued that China is covertly supporting the India Out movement.¹⁰⁹ The MNN, the Communist Party of China (CPC), and the Chinese media outlets enjoy a good relationship with each other. It is largely believed that China covertly funds the MNN outlet.¹¹⁰ MNN continues to frequently promote Chinese propaganda from Xinhua, Global Times, CGTN, and other Chinese-affiliated media through its platform.¹¹¹ Similarly, MNN's Shakeel has also publicly defended China from global criticism about the origins of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes Covid-19.¹¹²

Finally, China's elite capture of the PPM and its affiliates has been significant. China offered loans and deals to the PPM elites—most of them opaque—along with nurturing corruption and personal incentives. The Chinese government had also engaged in public diplomacy efforts and promoted professional training for Maldivian civil servants.¹¹³ This resulted in several pro-Chinese policies under Yameen's regime, and much of this network continues to stay intact even today. In this context, Beijing would want a pro-China regime in the Maldives, while the opposition would desire China to play a larger role.

The previous sections of this paper have outlined the nature, origin, and sources of the India Out campaign. This section discusses the key observations made throughout the paper and their implications:

Domestic Politics

Democratic Maldives has a long history of the opposition stirring up anti-India sentiments for political gain. The India Out campaign is no exception. By politicising Indian investments and projects, the Progressive Alliance have tried to whip up nationalist sentiments against the government, and muster support for the 2023 elections.

Although the India Out protests and rhetoric have mellowed down in recent weeks, political parties and leaders will likely moderate their attitude and rhetoric towards the ruling government – or even India, depending on their political opportunities and calculations. For instance, partners of the ruling coalition – AP and JP—have a history of either forming or abandoning coalitions based on their political benefits and opportunities. Similar compulsions might guide the positions of the same parties like MDA and MNP.^g

The India Out campaign has also shown that the division between domestic and international politics in Maldives has blurred significantly. With China's stronghold on PPM and India's close relations with the MDP, political parties will have to make difficult partisan choices. This is crucial, especially at a time when the competition between India and China has intensified in the region.

^g The MNP will be competing in the elections, for the first time, in 2023.

China

The India Out campaign has also shown two ways of China's involvement against India and the US in the region – elite capture and covert sustained campaigns. In the case of Maldives, China has continued to sustain its elite capture tactics with the PPM. The political and financial links and incentives created by China have continued to bear advantages for China and its geopolitical ambitions. This phenomenon will continue to prevail as the US is increasing its presence in Maldives and China's competition with India is intensifying.

Similarly, covert support and funding are also an issue. Similar nature of covertly funded Chinese protests was speculated in Sri Lanka. Those protests succeeded in getting an India- Japan-Sri Lanka agreement cancelled—one that sought to develop the Eastern Container Terminal.¹¹⁴ On both fronts, it is yet to see how India or its partners will deal with this nature of Chinese influence and tactics within the Maldives and the rest of the region.

Anti-India sentiments

The prevalence and exploitation of anti-India sentiments in Maldives is not a new phenomenon. What India Out attempted to do was create and sustain a consistent hate campaign directed against India and its people. The campaign has been effective in coordinating between different sources—political parties, social media, media, and China—and intensifying the anti-India sentiments more than ever.

The campaign appears to be carefully calculated, and it was given a go after initial hesitancies. The physical protests began after two trial launches, and once the opposition found more currency to launch the campaign. The social media campaign too, paused multiple times before commencing. The *Global Times'* offensives against Solih came to an abrupt pause after 2018, and the media houses' ownership also extended gradually along with the success of anti-India rhetoric.

Overall, the campaign appeared to be well-organised and centred on pre-determined calculations of actions and interests to put India and the MDP in a difficult position. It has been successful in creating an ecosystem of stakeholders with enough skills to reach out to the population and a favourable electorate to decimate misinformation and hatred. This will provide them with the potential to complicate and exacerbate the anti-India sentiments when deemed necessary and politically favourable in the future. In this context, pausing or making India Out campaign illegal will hardly be significant. The ecosystem continues to prevail and will continue to have the potential to exploit and exacerbate these sentiments in the future.

The Future

The India Out campaign is also supported by criminals, gang leaders, drug traffickers, and religious hardliners.^{115,116} The opposition, like any other major political party in the Maldives, has sustained a relationship with these extremist and criminal entities.¹¹⁷ However, from what currently appears, the anti-India sentiments are likely to be merged and used with the religious rhetoric.¹¹⁸

As Maldives heads to elections next year, the hardliners anticipate more political power and autonomy under Yameen, and Yameen expects the hardliners to mobilise crowds and muster legitimacy. The comments against the Prophet by some BJP members^h have given them further opportunities to propagate Islamic nationalism, and defame the current government by terming it ‘infidel’ and promoting ‘un-Islamic’ activities on India’s behalf. The PPM activist Ismail had even helped the extremists with the logistics for the Yoga Day disruption in June 2022. The opposition and the hardliners have even begun to place mutual demands of releasing religious scholars and opposition workers arrested for inciting violence on Yoga Day.

^h In two different incidents, two BJP office-bearers made derogatory comments against Islam and the Prophet. These incidents created a diplomatic backlash against India from several countries – including several Maldivian political parties.

Implications

Information or misinformation about India and Indian communal tensions will likely be used to mobilise crowds at the cost of Indian influence. As the democratic history of Maldives might suggest, this could lead to more political instability and opportunities for other parties. The India Out ecosystem will only likely exacerbate this political instability.

The prevalence and exploitation of anti-India sentiments is not a new phenomenon in the Maldives, often shaped and determined by political opportunism. This is true of 'India Out'. As Ibrahim Solih took over as the third democratically elected president of the country, the opposition instigated a sustained campaign to criticise the government and create hatred for India by politicising its investments and projects in the island state. The mobilisation for the campaign began around late 2018 in the social media space. After having received a slight push in July 2019, the social media campaign only became active in mid-2020. The physical protests then began in mid-2020.

Much of this campaign has been sustained by four sources – political parties (i.e., opposition), social media, traditional media, and China. The first three factors are largely shaped by the Progressive Alliance. The fourth factor is, however, more covert and subtle in nature. However, there had been some significant cooperation and unified command. There was hesitancy and calculation before launching the India Out campaign. Once the campaign started receiving attention, the opposition launched a full-fledged campaign.

Despite the campaign being declared illegal in April 2022, the sustained ecosystem of India Out will continue to exaggerate and exacerbate simmering anti-India sentiments. Its future also depends on how the political landscape evolves in the coming months, and whether or not the interests of the extremists and the opposition align. Finally, the campaign has also left enduring suspicion about India in the Maldives. India not only has to counter the covert nature of Chinese competition but must also think about how to deal with the anti-India sentiments and the opposition in case of a change of guard in 2023. [ORF](#)

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