

## **Islamic Fundamentalism: A case study of Maldives**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Maldives is a very strategically located nation amidst the Indian ocean region. It is strategic because it is surrounded by the important sea lanes of communication that connect the Pacific to the Indian Ocean and beyond to the Persian Gulf and African shores. Therefore from the point of view of trade and security this region is extremely important and is vied by all regional and global powers. On the one hand being susceptible to foreign power influence and intervention and on the other facing a slew of internal crisis ranging from: political mishaps, failure of democracy, perils of environmental disaster etc. Maldives is thus a nation on boil. Amongst all the plethora of problems that it faces one that has recently drawn international attention and is a cause of serious concern is the rise of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism in Maldives. Religion has now begun to create disharmony and spur extremism in the tiny island nation. This paper is a study of how Islam shed its benign outlook and rose to become an intolerant and radical force over the past few decades in Maldives, and how this has further increased the gravity of the security situation in Maldives.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Fundamentalism, Islam, extremism, terrorism, jihadist, Maldives.*

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### **I. FUNDAMENTALISM**

A return to the original pristine form or the fundamentals is called as fundamentalism. This can be applied to any subject or concept. When we talk about fundamentalism in the context of religion it means a return to the basic principles of the religion with a strict conformity to the moral and religious precepts, interpreting the scriptures in a literal and inerrant fashion leaving no scope for moderate beliefs and practices.

The term fundamentalism is actually Christian in origin, although since late 20<sup>th</sup> century it has been increasingly used to refer to Islamic fundamentalism in particular. Nevertheless, the popularity of this term goes back to the time of Christian and Jewish fundamentalist movements. Though the basic roots of fundamentalist movements have common features with respect to religiosity, adherence to sacred texts, traditions and customs; yet each of it is unique when understood in its own historical and cultural background. The most important differentiation between each movement is its demand, while some movements would mainly be about preserving the sanctity of their religion others have a more political and social agenda attached with it.

Islamic fundamentalism is a reaction towards the western modernity and the ill-effects of its influence that they (fundamentalists) fear would corrode their religion. The western dominated global political and economic order is deeply resented by these fundamentalists, who perceive themselves as being exploited by the immoral and capitalist west. This has been perfectly elucidated by the former Al-Qaeda chief Osama Bin Laden, who in an open letter to the United States of America condemned them for the plight of the Islamic world. He pointed out the carnage of Palestine, the oppressiveness in Chechnya, the Somalian case and even the situation of the Muslim Kashmiris in India; laying the blame squarely on the shoulders of the capitalist west led by United States. (Worldview, 2002)

However not all of the Islamic population is fundamentalist, and further not all fundamentalists believe in resorting to violence. Firstly, a sizeable amount of the Islamic world is moderate and do not believe in practicing the exact same tenets that their Prophet had given them, rather they believe in an adapting the same codes according to modern times and as per their convenience. Secondly, of the total number of fundamentalists not all of them are pro-terror and violence for example: the Salafi ideology followers believe in practicing puritan Islam and preaching it but sans any bloodshed and only by peaceful means. Thirdly, we have those fundamentalists who believe in resorting to violence and terrorism. The most popular doctrine followed by these fundamentalists is the Wahhabi ideology proffered by Saudi Arabia, known to be a “deadly scripture”, the inspiration for the Islamic State and the main source of global terrorism.

These puritanical Islamist movements have had periodic bursts throughout history. Movements that have garnered the most attention are the Palestinian movement for freedom led by Hamas, the Iranian revolution of 1979, 9/11 terror attacks on US by Al-Qaeda and the latest Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the havoc it has created globally.

Having given an overview of what Islamic fundamentalism is and why it is a serious cause for concern, I will now shift focus on how this terrorism based version of Islamic fundamentalism is brewing serious trouble in the paradise island nation of Maldives.

## **II. MALDIVES**

Maldives, located 300 miles off the south-western coast of India is an archipelagic feature in the Indian Ocean. It consists of 1192 islands of which 199 are inhabited. This tiny island nation sits astride geo-strategically important sea lanes of communication which has contributed to the attention that major powers have bestowed on it.

The island-nation is known for its beautiful sandy beaches that paint a picture of ultra-luxe modernity and resort culture. These luxurious resorts which attract people from all over the world and feature on almost everyone's tourist destination list is the main source of Maldivian income and the engine behind its economy. The tourism industry employed over 48,000 jobs in 2014 (32.2% of total employment) which includes employment by hotels, travel agents, airlines, etc. Indirect services like restaurant and leisure industries are also supported by tourists. (Tripathi, p. 2016)

Taking account of the importance of tourism and its contribution to Maldives is necessary to this topic, because the trend of rising extremism in the country bodes ill for the tourism industry and if the industry suffers, then the growth of the already shaky economy will be in jeopardy.

## **III. ORIGIN OF ISLAM IN MALDIVES**

The religion of Islam is not native to Maldives. It is a religion adopted by the rulers of the island country in the 12th century A.D. Thus Islam does not have any roots in Maldives. Traces of Buddhism and Hinduism can be found predating the conversion to Islam.

Contact with Islam can be understood in geographical terms. Maldives lies southwest of India and Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean Region and sits astride important sea lanes of communication (SLOCs). These routes have been navigated and established since ancient seafaring times. Indian Ocean has been made famous by the trade exploits of the Europeans who wrote books on the discovery of South, Southeast and East Asian states making it seem as they shed light upon these regions and exposed them. The fact being that the Arab trading and sailing ventures existed well in advance of the Europeans. Arab navigation on the sea routes began centuries before the Christian era. Arabs have been trading with Kerala and Southeast Asia and even had colonies in Canton in the mid-eighth century. The remaining Arab traders later settled in Sindh in 711.

The impact and influence of Arab trade and settlements were very evident, particularly in the case of Maldives where this influence was quite rapid and widespread. Maldives served as a pit-stop and trading region for the seafarers wherein they established first contact with the island people. Hence it has been a cultural melting pot of sorts being at the crossroads of many civilizations and continents, the Sinhalese and Buddhist waves of influence thousands of years before the Arab wave and the long standing trade with the states on the eastern coast of Africa. Therefore this cultural osmosis has been very prevalent in Maldives. What is unique about the acceptance of Islam in Maldives is that it was a 100% conversion, a total adoption of a new faith by completely dissolving all traces of the previous faith and mode of life – religion wise. Though the conversion into Islam was total 100% it did not occur overnight, it was a gradual process beginning in the north which was where frequent contact with seafarers and traders occurred. Even so, the credit for conversion into Islam is found to be given to the King who first adopted Islam, accounts of travellers and historians acknowledge several persons to be instrumental for the conversion, Abu Barakathul-Barbari “into whose hands the King accepted Islam” is one of the persons credited by Ibn-Batuta. (Maniku, 1986)

Maldives has been a receptor of many a foreign invasions and migrations. But, there is no evidence of any great Muslim migration or Muslim conquest, why then did they adopt the Islamic faith?

The reason for this can be that being a homogenous and absorptive nation sans any codified uniform faith and religion they readily adopted the Islamic faith as an enlightened political decision. The fact that Muslims had never invaded Islam also added to the positive predisposition the Maldivians had to Islam. Another reason can also be Maldivian peculiarity of love of isolation from their neighbours and surroundings. The exact year of adoption of Islam can be pinned to 1147-48 A.D. with the Buddhist King becoming the Sultan of Maldives his name being Sultan Mohammed al-Adil.

## **IV. ISLAM OVER THE YEARS**

For hundreds of years the religious practices in the country have followed moderate Islam. The Sunni Muslims largely practiced a more liberal form of the religion.

The beginning of 1990s saw the shift in the way Islam was practiced. It started with the Neo-Salafi movement. The Salafi term comes from “aslaf” which denotes the first three generations of Muslims, including Muhammad, his family, his companions (sahaba), his successors (tabaiyun), and the immediate successors of

the successors (tabatabaiyun). The present day Salafis, that is, Neo-Salafis claim that their emulation of the aslaf has earned them this title. This philosophy calls for a return to the fundamentals and to the way of life as was represented in the Arabian Gulf during the time of the Prophet, but, they do not propagate violence. (Tripathi, 2018)

The Salafis however did not grow in isolation; several radical extremist groups have sprung alongside. As a result, the country has become increasingly religiously conservative especially since the past two decades.

## **V. INTERNAL FACTORS FOR RADICALIZATION**

The government of Maldives has also contributed to the current religious tension that is boiling the island. Successive governments have used religion as a political tool to increase their longevity and strengthen their position. What occurred is that they unwittingly ended up trapping their own citizens in this quagmire of fundamentalism and extremism.

In 1994, the Protection of Religious Unity Act was passed by the Government, which restricted the freedom to practice any other religion besides Islam. In 1996, Government constituted the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (which was renamed the Ministry of Islamic Affairs in 2008) charged with overseeing religious affairs in the country. This body of clerics pressured the government to carry out moral and cultural policing of alleged “anti-Islamic activities.” By the revision of the constitution in 2008: Article 9, Section D states that a non-Muslim may not become a citizen of the Maldives. Maldives is now one of the few nations where it is illegal for the citizens to practice any other religion except Sunni Islam.(hrwf, 2017)

The practice of wearing headscarves was not commonplace in Maldives until a few years ago, as commented by a foreign minister in 2012, is just one mild example of how the face of Islam has transformed. The 2008 election of Mohamed Nasheed as Maldives first democratically elected President and the subsequent coup in 2012 was also a result of religion impaling democracy and moderate values. Nasheed though himself a Sunni Muslim was accused of spreading Christianity in Maldives, his government faced massive protests from the public who rallied around the slogan of “Defend Islam”. The opposition including Gayoom spearheaded the coup by making Nasheed unpopular and calling him westernized and liberal. The government was forced to resign on February, 7, 2012.

These examples of political and internal sleazing by playing the religion card have unleashed this unfettered extremism in Maldives.(Tripathi, 2018)

Other major pro-extremism actors include the Adaalath party (Justice Party). This party is considered to be the biggest pro-conservatism force in Maldives. The stringent demands it has made include the strict implementation of the Shari’a and support for the Salafist ideology. It has called for ban on singing and music as it is considered to be forbidden in Islam, it demands a ban on alcohol at the luxury tourist resorts and have also started campaigning against Christians calling them as “freemasons” whose agenda it is to wipe out Islam from Maldives.(Dharmawardhane, 2015)

There are two religious non-governmental organizations known as JamiyyathuSalaf (JS) and the Islamic Foundation of Maldives (IFM). These two groups, both considered Salafist, work with the country’s political parties to further the cause of Islamism in the Maldives. These parties and organizations were all part of the “Defend Islam” protests in December 2011, which unleashed a chain of events that culminated in the fall of Nasheed’s government.(Dharmawardhane, 2015)

## **VI. HOW RADICALIZATION IS HAPPENING?**

The majority of the population of Maldives is poor, uneducated and unenlightened. This becomes the perfect recruitment ground for the extremists and religious groups. Men especially the youth who come from such background become easy recruits and readily accept their role as soldiers of jihad believing it to be their destiny.

The recruitment occurs over the internet aka online (43% of Maldivians have access to the internet and are well versed in English) this makes local social media users very susceptible to online jihadist propaganda. In fact, several extremist Maldivian online groups have thousands of supporters on Facebook. Radical Maldivian preachers generally have a presence across the social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Flickr and others.(Dharmawardhane, 2015)

Before social media had a wide reach, the most popular way of influencing and recruiting took place in madrasas and many foreign-funded mosques within Maldives which propound the Salafist-Jihadist ideology. The motivation to proliferate this brand of Islamic extremism is driven by influential external factors.

## **VII. EXTERNAL FACTORS**

The two main factors that have engendered the situation of extremism in Maldives are Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

Saudi Arabia has been strategically pumping in billions of dollars' worth of investments in Maldives. It has grand plans of erecting military bases in the archipelago akin to the plans of the Chinese. As discussed earlier the importance of the location of Maldives to world trade and the major oil shipping routes that flank its borders, is what drives major powers to ensure that their interests in the region are protected, which includes U.S.A., India, U.K., China, etc.

Saudi Arabia has an added strategic interest in having a base at Maldives; by positioning themselves in Maldives they can assume a direct offense position against their arch-rival Iran, which would then lie only a slingshot distance away from the Saudi Arabian claws. (Johansson, 2018)

All this vested interest that Saudi Arabia has conferred on Maldives has also had severe side-effects, which is encouragement and growth of conservative and extremist tendencies. The moderate political opposition clearly lays the blame on Saudi for spreading this violent form of Islam that the opportunist regime of Yameen and Gayoom espoused.

The financial aid from Saudi is believed to be used to prop up Imams in Maldives who are well versed in the Wahhabi doctrine of the Islamic faith. This has slowly eradicated all other forms of Islam previously practiced in Maldives, particularly those that are part of the South Asian culture example: Sufism. Such transformation is happening all over South Asia, where the mission begins by introduction of preachers and Imams and then slowly assume a violent and deadly face forbidding Muslims from speaking or practicing any other strand of Islam except Wahhabism.

Along with Saudi Arabia, the regional mischief maker - Pakistan is also a heavy influencing factor in aiding the growth of extremism in Maldives. Funds pour in from Pakistan that is used to build schools, mosques and give university grants to Maldivian citizens. All these instruments are directed at exposing the Maldivian youth to radical interpretations of the Islamic texts, many of the Maldivian youth also travel to Pakistan to pursue their studies in Pakistani madrasas which are obviously controlled by militant outfits and become the perfect ground for indoctrination and moulding of the youth into extremism. (Tripathi, 2018) Here onwards, they are instigated to fight in places like Afghanistan, Chechnya, Syria, Iraq, etc.

## **VIII. TRENDS AND EVENTS OF EXTREMISM IN MALDIVES**

The symptoms of an all-out fanaticism and extremism hitting the island have been established. Despite all the indications that Maldives could well become the next terror hotbed, the on the ground incidents seem to be few and not that commonplace.

Listing out the incidents in order of descending chronology that had marked signs of terror

1. The fatal stabbing and murder of journalist Yameen Rasheed in April. The outspoken blogger of "The Daily Panic" was brutally stabbed 35 times outside his apartment. Rasheed had received threats over the years and had alerted the police to no avail. (Times, 2017)
2. Ahmed Rilwan, a journalist with the Maldives independent newspaper, was kidnapped in 2014 never to be seen again. It was his friend Yameen Rasheed who led the movement seeking the truth behind Rilwan's disappearance and in the process began receiving anonymous threats himself. (Times, 2017)  
The two victims mentioned above were openly critical of the current establishment and those who sought to create a violent, fundamentalist and theocratic state out of Maldives. Their aggressive and honest stance was purported as blasphemous by the Yameen government. The police and government are believed to be complicit and compromised, with no solid investigation or arrests made.
3. The mob culture of showing outright impunity and defiance began emerging from as early as 2012. Some examples: Pro-Islamic demonstrators waving the black flag of Islamic State and marching through the capital in 2014; a mob rampage in 2012 that vandalised the National Museum and destroyed all evidence of historic Buddhist civilization of Maldives. Both these acts of insubordination and crime against destruction of invaluable artefacts went unpunished and unchecked. (Tripathi, 2018)
4. Speaking of the number of Maldivians who have travelled to Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and other countries to be a part of ISIS, Taliban, etc. an estimated number of 200 Maldivians whose demography include – indoctrinated youth, petty criminals of Maldives, hardliners and several veterans of the armed forces, religious zealots. The concern for the government at the moment should be the surveillance and re-integration of the Jihadi soldiers who are making their way back home after the fortunes of ISIS began to dwindle in the Middle East.
5. In terms of terrorist attacks, Maldives has experienced only attack perpetrated by Islamist terrorists. In 2007, a bomb was detonated in Sultan Park in Male; the explosion wounded 12 people, including British, Japanese and Chinese tourists. (Tripathi, 2018)

The cases and incidents mentioned above are the stand out examples of terror based activities in Maldives. Though the number may seem to be paltry, the repercussions of such sweeping extremism in a country of low population density have potential to easily conflagrate and consume the nation. Especially, the flight of Maldivians to Syria, reported first in 2013, the continuous trickle of jihadists is a serious cause for concern. Previously, the recruits were mostly from the poor fishing communities but off late the trend has reversed with enough and more recruits coming from the educated populace of the capital city of Male. Therefore, the composition of the people getting radicalized is a toxic mix of the elite and the poor. The reasons are a combination of radical preaching, organised crime and social evils.

### **IX. STATE RESPONSE**

Successive governments have failed to tackle the issue of open radicalization and conversion of its Muslim population into extremists; they have failed to correct the misguided flow of foreign funds and have failed to stop its citizens from travelling to countries that are Jihadi strongholds.

The few measures that the government has taken are:

1. The enactment of 2015 Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA)
2. Establishment of National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC)
3. Screening of religious preachers, clerics and lecturers. Ensuring a moderate interpretation of religious studies while preparing national curriculum(Dharmawardhane, 2015)

The effects of these measures and their productivity are contested, with some reports indicating a positive effect while on the other hand the consensus remains that the government has scored low on delivering its promises.

### **X. CURBING RADICALIZATION IN MALDIVES**

Having identified the main sources which spawn extremism and radicalism, one must then scout for optimal solutions to repress and combat it.

Online propaganda and online recruitment are the most effective tools wielded by the extremists. In order to deal with this, the government must open up a transparent cell that is dedicated to tackle with the challenges of radicalisation and cybercrime, this cell/division should be transferred enough autonomy to track the online reach of global terrorist groups and come up with counter-propaganda strategies. Spread of such hateful and distorted messages via internet has become easy for the jihadists as it is a low cost and effective medium. The terrorists world over are increasingly relying on internet to mobilise, preach, finance, recruit and train more fighters. Therefore, nipping the online mania in its bud should be the prime agenda of the government of Maldives.

The other perpetrating device that should be addressed is the ideologists and the forces that radicalise the people to join the terror groups. This would require thinking beyond conventional security forces. The approach must be to redress the entire narrative of the radicals and prepare a counter-narrative which will discourage the number of people wanting to join the terror groups in the first place itself. In order to strongly counter the radical narrative, the government must include academics, professionals, moderate religious leaders and locals from civil background to reinforce their position and create credibility among masses.

The police which have off late proven to be woefully inadequate and heavily compromised must be revamped entirely. They must be given the mantle of leading the operations against internal terror activities. They must be given incentives and charged with giving an honest hand to listen to the grievances of the people. (Herald)

### **XI. WHY DO WE HOPE THAT CHANGES CAN BE MADE POSSIBLE? – USHERING IN A NEW ERA**

With the ushering in of the newly elected government of Maldivian Democratic Party in September elections, that saw oust of Abdullah Yameen and the swearing in of Ibrahim Solih. Maldives may yet have hope for democracy. The MDP which was the first democratically elected party in the history of Maldives in 2008 with Mohamed Nasheed as the President reclaims power for the second time in 2018. This is the second time a free and fair election was conducted albeit among heavy contentions and disputes, finally saw Yameen step down and accept fair defeat paving the way for a moderate and pro-democratic party of MDP step up. It was imperative that in order for a semblance of peace to be restored in the island nation, the former President Yameen be defeated.

Radicalisation hit all new levels of high notes under Yameen, and ever since the ISIS have started facing defeat in the Middle East the number of defectors and fighters returning from Syria and Iraq have strangely been welcomed with open arms by the Yameen government and have found places for themselves amongst the local police and defence forces. The increasing radicalisation and many other follies of the previous government had rendered Maldives into facing the worst political crisis in current times.(Parashar, 2018)

Therefore, the election and win of Ibrahim Solih which has very much pleases India and her neighbours, is expected to usher in happy changes. Although, demographically things will remain the same on ground as it was, with Solih publicly committing to maintaining the 100% Islamic nature of the state. Yet, his government can be expected to be transparent and open to dialogue.

Islamic radicalisation is but one of the many concerns facing Maldives. The environmental threat, the debt-trap threat ranks higher in the government's list of concerns. Yet, it would be prudent of the government to not tackle it, especially because, unlike environmental and loan concerns radicalism is a threat that is home grown and which has stemmed internally. Therefore, it can be dealt with in a decisive manner without requirement of international consultation or dialogue.

The government must nip this issue in the bud before it threatens to subsume the island nation in waves of its own religious animosity.

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