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Hope and peril in the Maldives: Autocrat Yameen goes down to shock defeat in elections after attempts to usurp all power

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The unexpected election defeat of the authoritarian president of the Maldives, Abdulla Yameen, to a combined opposition candidate, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, is a ray of hope for the tiny Indian Ocean island nation whose transition to democracy has been rocky and volatile.

But it is too early to be overly optimistic. The severely politicised and polarised nature of state and social institutions in this unstable country means that establishing popular sovereignty is work in progress.

Citizens of the Maldives, who voted with record turnout of nearly 90%, revolted against Yameen's abusive and extreme

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concentration of authority which grew worse than what transpired during monarchical and one-party-rule of bygone times.

By persecuting, jailing and exiling not only secular liberal rivals but also followers of his half-brother and still formidable conservative former strongman, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, Yameen overplayed his hand and forfeited crucial constituencies.

In the triangular political dynamic that has emerged over the past decade, politicians who galvanise their own core voters and also get tacit endorsement of one other major side have the best chance to win elections. Yameen misread this equation and attempted to simultaneously crush both the liberal left wing represented by democracy icon Mohamed Nasheed and his aide Solih, as well as the old right wing of Maumoon.

The totalitarian strategy backfired not only in terms of the huge 17% margin of defeat for the president in the September 23 election, but also in the refusal of security forces and other institutions linked to Maumoon to rig the vote or annul the outcome so that Yameen could cling to power by hook or crook.

The tyrant is only invulnerable as long as his minions and henchmen obey his

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commands. Yameen's high-stakes game of appropriating all power in his own hands opened up splits in the establishment which proved to be his undoing.

The history of democratisation bears out that divisions within the ruling elites accompanied by people's movements are prerequisites to make the impossible – overthrow of dictatorship – possible. Yameen's downfall confirms this trend.

Democratisation is also encouraged or hindered by international intervention. Yameen's ouster is a massive setback to China just as his bloody reign was a blessing for it. The degree of control Beijing acquired over land, infrastructure and the financial system of Maldives during Yameen's five-year presidency was colossal.

China, and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia, provided the external authoritarian shield behind which Yameen unleashed his crackdowns and national emergencies. Yameen snubbed pressure from democratic nations like India, the US and EU member states thanks to Chinese largesse.

But in a deja vu of what happened to Sri Lanka's Mahinda Rajapaksa, a Yameen-like despot who leaned on China to counter pressure from India and

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concerned western nations but suffered a shock loss to a joint opposition ticket in 2015, Yameen angered so many important parties that they tacitly worked together to unseat him.

The historic election verdict in the Maldives proves that bags of money thrown around by China to buy strategic influence in developing countries cannot guarantee permanent leverage. Effective criticism of the debt trap in which China had ensnared the Maldives under Yameen resonated with proud Maldivians who feared their pristine archipelago was being parcelled away, one atoll at a time, to a neocolonial China.

Yet, as the post-Rajapaksa order in Sri Lanka shows, China does not lose all its cards when its clients bite the dust. Beijing is now implementing a policy of pumping cash into whoever comes to power in geopolitically vital developing nations. Whether president-elect Solih and the next Maldivian administration can immunise themselves from these inducements depends on alternative financing options from democratic power centres abroad.

Most vital for democracy to take root in the Maldives is reform of the judiciary, bureaucracy, election commission and security agencies. India and western partners who share a common goal of a

moderate, liberal Maldives must redouble efforts for long-term good governance there. Getting rid of Yameen is not an end in itself but the foundation for a new era.

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