

**Ring of defiance**

With the police and military forming a phalanx around Maldivian President Abdulla Yameen, any external intervention to restore democratic rule is likely to be met with resistance AP/ MOHAMED SHARUHAAN

STATES OF MATTER

Leaving Male alone

Amid escalating political unrest in the Maldives, India's reaction so far has not gone beyond boilerplate statements of concern



SUKUMAR MURALIDHARAN

Ancient Greece is believed to have made a reasonable fist of it, partly because its small and well-knit elite could easily agree on rules of inclusion and exclusion in the government councils. Democracy in modern times, though, is often a more difficult practice in small societies where elites are in bitter competition. Problems are compounded when the economic take is meagre, and rivalries in politics cross over seamlessly into the business domain.

The Maldives, a picturesque cluster of Indian Ocean atolls with a population of less than half a million, serves today as a poster child for democratic dysfunction. This was not how the idyll was supposed to unfold after the country emerged in 2008 from decades of authoritarian rule. Mohammad Nasheed, whose election as President was expected to herald a political transformation, lasted just over three years. He suffered the misfortune of having to tide through the crisis years following the global financial meltdown of 2008. Apart from the West, where his ideas of democratic transformation had a substantial constituency, he won little support among neighbours more comfortable with a slow drift towards authoritarianism.

Though Nasheed was never India's favourite statesman while president, he is now certain that no other country has the means to end the current crisis. From exile in Sri Lanka and the UK, he has spoken of the need for India to intervene, anxiously avoiding any suggestion that coercive force is the only option. Aside from the risks and questions over the legitimacy of international intervention, a greater worry is of the crisis turning into a proxy battlefield between external agents with conflicting objectives.

The precedent all have reached for is India's intervention in 1988, when a motley crew set sail from Sri Lanka to lend firepower to a coup attempt in the Maldives. India had a mandate to intervene in incumbent President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's desperate plea before he went incommunicado. Para-commandos of the Indian Army landed in the Male

airport within hours to protect Gayoom from harm. A naval taskforce, meanwhile, intercepted the mercenaries on the high seas and rescued the hostages who had been seized as they fled the misadventure.

That operation won general global endorsement simply because it was undertaken on the request of an incumbent President. The main difference now is that President Abdulla Yameen has gone rogue and done a demolition job on every other institution. He had the military lay siege to Parliament in July, with a loyal speaker carrying on proceedings under armed guard and dissident members led away to jail. When the Supreme Court ordered political prisoners released early this month, Yameen dismissed the entire bench and arrested its most influential judges. He then had the Attorney-General, a close political ally, sharing a platform with the military and police chiefs, to declare himself the country's chief judicial authority.

Coercive force may seem the only solvent for this tangle of dysfunction, but with the police and military forming a phalanx around Yameen, resistance cannot be ruled out. Unsurprisingly, India's reaction so far has not gone beyond boilerplate statements of concern.

As the crisis escalated, India's tone showed little change. When Nasheed and Gayoom, in unlikely alliance with various other parties and factions, called for international intervention, Yameen sought an insurance by calling on China – in a coded invitation to intervene – to “secure its investments in the Maldives”.

China reacted with a profession of faith in the Maldivian authorities. That was mild and anodyne, but statements were put out from other quarters in Beijing, notably from media proxies of the government, that warned India against intervention. India responded with a terse statement calling on all countries to “play a constructive role in (the) Maldives, instead of doing the opposite”.

In March 2015, Prime Minister Narendra

Modi went on a tour of the Indian Ocean, avoiding the Maldives as a signal of displeasure. The unsettled state of politics in the island republic was the stated reason, but a deeper irritant was likely the Yameen government's award of a contract for rebuilding Male airport to a Chinese firm after a deal with India's GMR Infrastructure was terminated.

That sense of growing Chinese strategic encroachment has induced a state of paralysis in the ethical component of India's foreign policy. The syndrome is evident in India's reaction to the Rohingya tragedy in Myanmar, which ranges from indifference to abetment.

On February 1, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in Myanmar reported that the killing of the Rohingya

minority in the western Rakhine state had “all the hallmarks of a genocide”. Journalists have been arrested in the region and charged with crimes against the State. An Associated Press investigation has uncovered mass graves, which could be victims of atrocities by the Myanmar armed forces.

With all the evidence mounting, the Indian government has stuck to the fig-leaf of non-intervention.

It has energetically pursued its intent, contrary to every tenet of international humanitarian law, to repatriate Rohingya refugees. On January 31, as the Supreme Court heard a petition demanding that the repatriation be placed on hold, government counsel argued that India could not be the “refugee capital of the world”.

These actions fail the test of pragmatic sense since Bangladesh is unlikely to look kindly on Indian indifference, placing in jeopardy the recent reconciliation after a long period of estrangement.

Foreign policy may ultimately be a game of ruthless realism, but ethical default could, at some point, threaten the most carefully constructed strategies and alliances.

The Indian government has stuck to the fig-leaf of non-intervention