

What Adeeb's Escape Means for India and Indian Ocean Security

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Dr. Sripathi Narayanan contextualises the recent incident where the former Vice President of the Maldives, Ahmed Adeeb, was detected as a stowaway in a tugboat off the coast of Tamil Nadu India.

Detecting the former Vice President of the Maldives, Ahmed Adeeb, as a 'stowaway' in a tugboat off the coast of Tamil Nadu not only raises a number of questions but should also be viewed in the context of Maldivian politics. This 'detection' came nearly a year after the September 2018 presidential polls—which many view as the election that restored democracy in the Maldives. But the Adeeb episode is now also a part of the 'transition residue', not all of which can be blamed on his one-time boss, former President, Abdulla Yameen.

Adeeb's detection in Indian waters *per se* is not of great significance compared to what it represents. The nearest port-of-call for any vessel, irrespective of size, setting sail from the Maldives is either Sri Lanka or India. However, it is important to note that Team Adeeb thought of India of a safe landing point, even when he was an 'unwanted' and 'unexpected' guest.

India has carefully described Adeeb's return as a 'deportation'. India's Ministry of External Affairs explained that for his return to the Maldives to be described as 'deportation', Adeeb should have entered India at a designated port. The vessel in which he travelled was detained at sea and he did not—rather, was not allowed to—set foot on Indian territory.

Post Poll Politics

Adeeb, whose term (July-November 2015) was the briefest of any Maldivian vice president till date, had been sentenced to a 15-year jail term by the courts in 2016 under the Yameen regime, on charges of plotting the president's assassination. Though the system, including the judiciary, was viewed as 'getting soft' on him after the change of government, his legal concerns were no less than they were earlier. This was despite the fact that the courts had granted him 'prison leave' for medical treatment overseas, and the Maldives Corrective Services had converted his jail-term into 'house arrest'.

Adeeb's legal team has said that he had sought asylum in India—a claim not confirmed by India. His mode of entering India was and will, in the immediate term, continue to be unacceptable to New Delhi. Unlike his one time political rivals (who are now in government), especially former President Mohammed Nasheed (currently a speaker in the Maldivian parliament), who flew out of the Maldives with the relevant documentation only to seek political asylum overseas, Adeeb is purported to have 'slipped away'. In doing so, he seems to have assumed that that India would respond in a manner favourable to him.

Maldives must ensure that that the political detractors of the incumbent Ibrahim Solih administration do not seek to internationalise its domestic politics, the same way they themselves had done under the previous Yameen administration. Internationalisation of the Maldives's domestic politics in the past was viewed as being beneficial for India in the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean. A repeat of the same now could result in diametrically opposite outcomes that would not only spell instability for the Maldives but also in the region.

India's Concerns

It is unclear as to why Adeeb chose to seek refuge in India. When the Yameen administration—whose public face he too happened to be, even if only for a short time—was in power, it was viewed as being unfriendly towards India. For India, the

Adeeb episode is not only about a jailed dissident in a 'friendly neighbouring nation' with a 'friendlier' administration than the previous one, seeking political asylum. It is also indicative of the geopolitical and security concerns nearer home. Adeeb's arrest and imprisonment involved the 'Yameen assassination case' and he was named a witness against the latter and a co-accused in the multi-million dollar corruption and money-laundering case.

Moreover, dramatic posturing by individuals in the neighbourhood to address their domestic political concerns has been the primary stumbling block in New Delhi's engagement with its neighbours. Even though Adeeb failed to kindle support in India, it was similar theatrics of the past, especially by the Maldives's former president, Mohamed 'Anni' Nasheed, overstaying as an uninvited guest of the Indian embassy in Male, which affected India's ties with her archipelago neighbour.

With regard to Adeeb's attempted escape, it is to the credit of the tugboat crew who sounded the alert that it was detected. As a so-called stowaway in an Indonesian tugboat, the Adeeb incident represents real concerns in maintaining good order at sea, despite the fact that this transgression was detected and addressed due to existing protocols in this regard. It is time for Male, Colombo and New Delhi to reinvigorate trilateral maritime security cooperation not only in the light of this incident but also keeping in mind that the northern Indian Ocean region has borne witness to a variety of maritime security concerns in recent decades. The tugboat in question may be innocent of any share in the plan and so would its ports-of-call, but it is in the interest of all the three countries to pay closer attention to maintaining good order in their shared waters of the northern Indian Ocean. It is essential that each keeps their house in order not only for security and geopolitical purposes but also to insulate each from the potential implications of a spill over of one's domestic politics on another.

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