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Under US pressure, Maldives president accepts election defeat

In a televised speech on October 17, Maldives President Abdulla Yameen accepted his defeat in the presidential elections held on September 23. After attempting to have the country's Supreme Court judges annul the election results, he was forced to retreat after US and European Union threats of punitive responses.

The outcome directly cuts across Beijing's interests in the tiny island country, strategically located 400 kilometres southwest of India and close to the world's busiest shipping lanes, from the Middle East and Africa to East Asia.

In September's election, the pro-US joint opposition candidate, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, obtained 58 percent of the declared vote while Yameen polled 42 percent. In the run-up to the poll, the US, EU and India had, for their own political purposes, intensified criticism of Yameen's anti-democratic rule. They warned of sanctions if the elections were not "free and fair" and demanded the reinstatement of ousted opposition MPs.

Yameen conceded defeat immediately after the election, but later claimed to have evidence that election results were rigged and filed a case in the Supreme Court to annul them. After the Supreme Court decided to hear Yameen's appeal, the US and EU issued another round of warnings.

On October 13, US State Department spokesman Robert Palladino said on Twitter: "The US is concerned by troubling actions that threaten to undermine the will of the Maldivian people, and will consider appropriate measures against anyone who undermines a peaceful transfer of power in Maldives."

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Amid these warnings, the judges decided not to hear Yameen's "secret witnesses" about the alleged vote rigging. Then a five-judge Supreme Court bench unanimously ruled that the president failed to prove his claim.

The country's judiciary is highly politicised. In February, Chief Justice Abdulla Saeed and another judge were jailed after ordering the release of opposition MPs convicted earlier on trumped-up charges. At that time, Yameen declared an emergency and jailed the two judges with the help of the remaining judges. Now these same judges have thrown out Yameen's case.

After the court ruling, Robert Hilt on, the chargé d'affaires at the US embassy in Sri Lanka, issued a statement saying Washington was "looking forward to working with president-elect Ibrahim Mohamed Solih after his inauguration in November." He added: "It's a new and positive era for the Maldives."

Likewise, the EU said it looked forward to "working with the future government of Maldives" and expected "the full restoration of democratic institutions."

However, the Western powers have no concern for the democratic rights of Maldivian people. Their statements underscore the intense pressure applied by the US and EU for a regime change in their geo-strategic interests.

After opening an embassy in 2012 under the previous president, Mohamed Nasheed, China became the country's main investor and currently holds 70 percent of its foreign debt. It has invested in many infrastructure projects, including a main port built at the expense of India, its regional rival and US ally. Yameen's government had pledged to become a partner in Beijing's flagship project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to link China to Europe.

Washington is determined to undercut China's influence and bring Maldives firmly into its orbit as part of its aggressive diplomatic, economic and military moves against China. The Indian capitalist elite is developing close strategic ties with the US as New Delhi also wants to stop China from challenging its regional and global great power aspirations.

In response, China is seeking to maintain its investments in Maldives. Beijing has declared it will continue its relations with the new government in Maldives.

Yameen will have to step down on November 17, according to the constitution. President-elect Solih said "the Maldivian people can finally enjoy clarity over the outcome of the election." Despite Solih's claims, the Maldivian people will not enjoy a flourishing of democratic rights.

Solih was a parliamentary leader of the opposition Maldives Democratic Party (MDP), led by Mohamed Nasheed.

Though Yameen's government jailed Nasheed, the US and UK pressured Yameen to allow him to travel to London. Abroad, he conducted a pro-US and anti-China campaign. He is operating from Colombo where a similar pro-US regime change was orchestrated in January 2015. Nasheed has declared he will return to Maldives on November 1.

The MDP and other opposition parties have begun a campaign to suppress Yameen's influence. They have held protests demanding the police stop him "escaping from the country" and are reportedly preparing to lay corruption charges against him.

Solih has quickly indicated he will distance his government from China and strengthen relations with India and the US in particular. He has publicly expressed support for US and Indian strategic interests in the Indian Ocean, which could lead to military conflicts with China.

The pro-US shift in Maldives will only intensify the political instability in the archipelago and the geopolitical tensions between China and the US.