



Political and Development Issues of Maldives

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The Maldives is a picture perfect archipelago, of outstanding beauty, and is celebrated as one of the most popular travel destinations in the world. It is also the lowest lying country in the world, and the smallest in South Asia, with 515, 696 people, half of them youth, dispersed across 185 islands. Over 30 percent of the population live in the capital city Male' making it one of the most densely populated cities of the world.

With only 80 percent of its 1,200 islands just over a meter above sea level, and 1 percent as land, our lifestyle and economy has a dynamic relation with marine and coastal environment. Over 44 percent of the settlement footprints are within 100 meters of the coastline translating to 42 percent of the population and 47 percent of all housing structures.

The advent of industrialization and the need for development are disrupting the natural equilibrium, on which our islands sustain, resulting in severe erosion of beach and shoreline, making us confront with complex issues. The geographical limitations faced by Maldives burden unit cost of service delivery and limit opportunities for education, socio-economic development, job creation and employment.

Despite the challenges, Maldives ranks 101 out of 189 countries in the Human Development Index (HDI), making it the second highest HDI rank in South Asia. The Gross National Income (GNI) per capita has increased by 132 percent. It has enjoyed impressive growth in its economy, infrastructure, countrywide connectivity, health with a life expectancy of over 78 years, education and a literacy rate approaching 100 percent, for both men and women. Nevertheless, Maldives has substantial pockets of poverty especially in the island communities.

With development many social evils emerged, among them, bitter political turmoil creating unhealthy social divides, wide use of drugs, corruption at all levels, unemployment issues, ever increasing migrant population, which is said to be the highest in South Asia with over 63,000 undocumented people. Youth unemployment is at 15.3 percent while the rate of women's participation in the workforce remains very low. Maldives is also struggling with Islamic

radicalization, pushing society towards a more conservative interpretation of Islam. Religious intolerance, incidents of violent extremism and Maldivians joining overseas jihadist groups have emerged as alarming issues in an otherwise liberal Muslim country like Maldives. These issues are negatively impacting society, especially women who are being coerced into submissive and backward state of conditions. Although President Solih has given commitment to find effective solutions to the problem of radicalization, the phenomenon remains a grave concern for many, for it might eventually push the country and its youth into chaos, which would destabilize the once peaceful island nation.

As our government struggles to find a solution to the problem, it must be noted that inability to address the issue effectively cannot be attributed to any lack of legal instrumentation, rather to the lack of proper enforcement of the instruments as well as monitoring and evaluation of the situation. Moreover, solution can only be found when Rule of Law exists with respect to democracy while Rule of Law cannot exist when it is not measured equally for the most powerful as well as the weakest.

The unprecedented shock of COVID-19 pandemic revealed our vulnerabilities – dependency on tourism as our economic mainstay being a major one. Our resilience to external shocks need to be strengthened, and yet, lack of arable land is a limitation of developing other sectors such as agriculture and fishing; and the growth of financial sector and business services is constrained by the lack of skills among local workers. Diversifying and investing in human capital, reforms to democratic institutions, judiciary, climate resilience measures and inclusive decentralization strategies would allow Maldives to withstand external shocks and build better.

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