

MALDIVES "INDIA OUT" CAMPAIGN: IMPLICATION FOR BILATERAL RELATION

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Abstract:

This research paper explores the 'India out' campaign and its implication on bilateral relations between India and the Maldives .In the Maldives, the 'India out' campaign emerged as a politically significant movement with radical implications for the bilateral relations. This research paper examines how the campaign influenced the diplomatic,political and social relations between India and Maldives. This movement, which wants the removal of Indian military troops from the Maldives,shows political unrest and nationalist sentiment in certain parts of the Maldivian society.This research tries to fill the gap in the literature by exploring the campaign's origin and its implications.

Keywords:

India and Maldives, India Out, Bilateral Relation, operation Cactus, neighborhood first policy.

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Introduction:

India and Maldives have shared political, defense, cultural and economic diplomatic ties for the last six decades. Maldives is an important country in the Indian Ocean region because of its position. India assists the Maldives in economic development. Since the Maldives gained independence in 1965, India has provided assistance in a variety of areas, including socio-economic growth and modernization, as well as Maritime security. India launched 'operation cactus' in the late 1980s to prevent a Maldives coup against Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's dictatorship. India and Maldives continued even under the first democratic elected government. In 2018 newly elected President Abraham Solih started the 'India first' policy to strengthen the relationship with India. The policy primarily focuses on economic and defense partnership with India. Some individuals in Maldives do not support the policy. In October 2020, the Maldives opposition coalition, including the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) and People's National Congress (PNC) launched a campaign named 'India Out' campaign challenging the bilateral relationship. The 'India out' campaign promotes anti-India sentiment among the people. The 'India Out' campaign specifically targeted the development project which was run by the Indian government. The Maldivian government accuses India of interfering in Maldives sovereignty and deploying the military to assist Yemen's arrest spreading COVID-19 beyond the nation, and restricting the people's right to speech and Assembly. The primary objective of the campaign is to win the election by promoting nationalist feelings.

Review of Literature:

The following literature is reviewed in the process of understanding the 'India Out' campaign and its implications on bilateral relations. Many scholars, journalists and policymakers have written about its origin and its impact on India-Maldives ties.

Dr. Laxminarayan Bussa in his book 'India Maldives Relation' Avni publication (2017) in which general overview of the relationship between India and Maldives. This book does not specifically cover the India Out campaign.

Understanding The 'India Out' Campaign In Maldives Aditya Gowdara Shivamurthy, Observer Research Foundation, 07 October, 2022, this paper analyzing the "India Out" its origin and its potential consequences for the relationship between India and Maldives.

Maldives And The #India out Campaign 13, December, 2023, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and analysis **in this article analysis on the "India out" campaign examining domestic and geopolitical drivers as well as the impact on India - Maldives relation.**

Domestic Politics And Foreign Policy Of The Maldives: Implication For India, Gulbin Sultana National Security 7(2),98-116, 2024 in this article explains about the domestic policy of the Maldives and its effect on India.

Navigating Turbulent Water: Analysis of The Current Diplomatic Rift Between India And Maldives Baskar Rawat, Brainwave a Multidisciplinary General vol,5 no 1,pp664-672,march 2024 , in this article author focuses on the historical evolution of India- Maldives relation, analyzing current development and influence of China and Turkey in the Maldives,posing threat to India .it will explore the origin, nature and implication of ‘India out’ slogan, offering insight into the challenges confronting India’s neighborhood first policy and it’s relationship with Maldives.

(Moorthy,2010) Harish K Thakur’s Paper “Contesting China In The Maldives : India’s Foreign Policy Challenges”, presents a comprehensive analysis of the evolving dynamics in India-Maldives relations amidst growing Chinese influence. This research paper examines the India-Maldives relations in the context of China’s interference in the Indian Ocean region.The author explores the Indian foreign policy challenges.This explains how Maldives is strategically important for India.

Ashok Sajjanhar summarises the deteriorated relations between India and Maldives under President Mohammad Muizzu’s direction. It is necessary to investigate the socio-economic aspects of India-Maldives relationships.

Objective of Research Paper:

1. To analyze the political,social,and historical context that led to the ‘India Out’ campaign.
2. To focus on the future of India-Maldives relations.
3. To assess the impact of the campaign on bilateral relations.

Research Question:

What are the factors behind the origin of India-Maldives relations?

How did the campaign affect the bilateral relationship?

The Factors Behind Origin Campaign:

Foreign Military Presence Concerns: A primary trigger for the campaign is the belief that Indian military personnel are stationed in the Maldives under the guise of technical and humanitarian support (e.g., helicopters and aircraft gifted by India). Critics claim this undermines national sovereignty and may lead to foreign military influence in Maldivian affairs. India maintains that its personnel are there to operate and maintain donated equipment for humanitarian and surveillance purposes, not for military occupation.

Rise of Nationalist Sentiment: There has been a surge in nationalist rhetoric within Maldivian politics, often portraying foreign influence—especially from India—as a threat to the nation’s independence. This sentiment fuels anti-India narratives, especially among opposition parties looking to mobilize public support.

Domestic Political Rivalries: The campaign has been largely driven by the political opposition, particularly by Abdulla Yameen, the former President and the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM). The “India Out” narrative is used to criticize the ruling Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), which is seen as pro-India. To weaken the government’s stance and rally nationalist voters.

Strategic Rivalry in the Indian Ocean: China and India both are interested in the Maldives because of its strategic position in the Indian ocean region. As India tries to strengthen ties with the Maldives to counter China’s growing influence (especially through the Belt and Road Initiative), some in the Maldives view this as a form of neo-colonialism. This feeds into suspicions about India’s intentions and supports anti-India campaigns.

Social Media and Misinformation: Social media has played a significant role in spreading anti-India sentiment, including unverified claims about Indian military bases. Politicians and influencers have used platforms like Twitter and Facebook to urge public opinion, sometimes using misleading information.

Cultural and Religious Sensitivities: Some conservative groups perceive India’s secular and Hindu-majority identity as conflicting with the Maldives’ Islamic identity. Engagement with India is sometimes portrayed as diluting Islamic values or aligning with a non-Islamic power, further stoking public distrust.

Incidents and Symbolism: Certain events—such as the presence of Indian military personnel in uniform or high-profile Indian visits—are used symbolically by the opposition to portray Indian dominance. Photographs or footage of Indian troops or assets are often used to reinforce the narrative of occupation.

Nationalism, strategic positioning, and public perception. While it reflects legitimate concerns for some, it has also been a potent political tool leveraged by opposition leaders for electoral gain.

The implication of India’s campaign on India-Maldives relation:

The “India Out” campaign had a significant impact on **India–Maldives relations**, especially following the election of **President Mohamed Muizzu** in 2023, who supported the movement. Here’s a clear explanation of how this campaign affected the bilateral relationship:

Strained Diplomatic Ties: The campaign soured diplomatic relations

between the two countries .After Muizzu took office, he formally requested the **withdrawal of Indian military personnel**, creating tension with India, which has long been Maldives' closest regional ally.

Shift in Defense Cooperation: India had deployed **military officers** to operate and maintain aircraft it had gifted to the Maldives (e.g., helicopters and a Dornier aircraft used for Search, rescue, and emergency medical transport).As a result of the campaign and political pressure, **India agreed to replace its military personnel with civilians**, weakening a key pillar of **strategic cooperation**.

Tilt Toward China: The campaign and Muizzu's policies indicated a **foreign policy shift toward China**, raising concerns in New Delhi. Maldives began to engage more actively with China for infrastructure and development projects, challenging India's traditional dominance in the region.

Public Sentiment and Nationalism: The campaign stirred **anti-India sentiment** among some sections of the Maldivian population. However, there remained **a large segment of the public** that appreciated India's contributions, such as medical aid, education support, and infrastructure development.

India's Diplomatic Response: India chose a **non-confrontational approach**, continuing to support Maldives with **development aid, scholarships, and economic partnerships** .It focused on maintaining long-term ties while **respecting Maldives' sovereignty**.

The Future:

Criminals, gang leaders, drug traffickers, and religious extremists all support the India Out campaign. The opposition, like any other significant political party in the Maldives, has maintained contact with these extreme and criminal organizations. However, it looks like anti-India sentiments would be combined with religious rhetoric. As the Maldives prepares for elections next year, hardliners seek more political authority and autonomy from Yameen, while Yameen expects hardliners to rally the masses and gain legitimacy Some BJP members' comments against the Prophet have given them more opportunities to spread Islamic nationalism and defame the current government by calling it a 'infidel' and promoting 'un-Islamic' activities on India's behalf. The PPM activist Ismail even assisted the extremists with the logistics for the Yoga Day disruption in June 2022. The opposition and hardliners have even begun to make common requests, such as freeing religious professors and opposition activists detained for instigating unrest on Yoga Day. Information or misinformation about India, as well as Indian communal conflicts, will most likely be utilized to rally crowds at the cost of Indian influence. As the Maldives' democratic past suggests, this may result in increased political instability

and chances for other parties. The India Out environment will most certainly deepen political unrest.

Conclusion:

The presence and exploitation of anti-India sentiments in the Maldives is not a new phenomenon that is frequently shaped and influenced by political considerations. This holds true for 'India Out'. As Ibrahim Solih entered office as the country's third democratically elected president, the opposition initiated a relentless effort to attack the government and incite enmity toward India by politicizing its investments and projects in the Island state. The campaign's mobilization began in late 2018 on social media. Following a modest push in July 2019, the social media campaign launched in mid-2020. The physical protests started in mid-2020. The campaign received backing from four sources: political parties (opposition), social media, traditional media, and China. The Progressive Alliance plays a significant role in shaping the first three variables. The fourth component, however, is more discrete and subtle. However, there was some major collaboration and unified command. Before commencing the India Out campaign, there was some hesitation and calculation. Once the campaign gained traction, the opponents launched a full-fledged effort. Despite the fact that the campaign was declared illegal in April 2022, the India Out ecosystem will continue to promote anti-India sentiment. The future depends on how the political environment changes in the next months and whether the extremists' and opposition's plans align. Finally, the campaign has instilled widespread distrust of India in the Maldives. India has to deal with both the covert rivalry with China and the possibility of anti-India sentiment in the case of a change in leadership in 2023. In essence, the 'India Out' campaign is a test of diplomatic resilience. Both nations must work together to ensure that political rhetoric does not erode the substantive gains of decades of cooperation. A stable and constructive India-Maldives relationship is not only vital for both countries but also for the broader peace and stability of the Indian Ocean region.

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