

Former Maldives President Mohamed Nasheed was in Mumbai on Friday when he met with journalists to appeal to the people of India to help restore democracy in the country. He will be in New Delhi on Monday to meet Indian leaders

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Tell us about the purpose of your visit.

I'm here to speak to the government of India to explain the situation in the Maldives and to see how they will be able to assist us to hold an early election. We want to meet Indian leaders but it is up to the different departments to decide who will be effective in this discussion.

How can India help?

If we delay holding elections in the Maldives, we may be confronted by a situation where there are no elections at all, which is exactly what happened in Burma. The more time we give, the more entrenched the dictatorship becomes. Their grip will increase, the military, the police — they can start picking up people and arresting them, they can arrest me. Then the rebels, the opposition can solidify their hold. When that happens, we fear it will be difficult to restore democracy. Radical Islam is gaining more of a hold in the Maldives. During the presidential elections, we fought against the Islamic parties — and they lost badly, during the parliamentary elections we fought against them and they did not win a single seat, but after the coup they have three seats in cabinet.

More than 80 per cent of trade that crosses the Indian Ocean passes through the Maldives. To have stability in the Indian Ocean, it is very important to have an election. In the last three years, we've been able to attract more than 873 billion dollars in investments from Indian entrepreneurs. We must safeguard these contracts. There are also more than 2.5 billion dollars worth of contracts in the pipeline. It would be in the interest of the people of the Maldives as much as the interest of the entrepreneurs to help us have an election.

Can you take us through the situation that you were put in that led to your "involuntary" resignation?

On February 6, two battalions of Special Operation Police,

'THE PEOPLE OF MALDIVES MUST BE ABLE TO DECIDE WHO GOVERNS THEM'



which is the riot police, without control and command, left the barracks, attacked Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) supporters and started calling for my resignation and that of the chief of police. At about 11.30 pm the chief of police said he would like me to see whether the military can be used to restrain them. I asked the military and they said yes but when it still hadn't been done at 5 am, I went to the headquarters and found that the building was almost deserted. I quickly sensed that there was foul play. I requested them to come out and restrain the police, but they refused. At about 7.30 am, military from other barracks came and joined the police and they stormed the headquarters with tear gas and rubber bullets. I was in an awkward situation where the military and police were storming the police headquarters while there were more than 100 soldiers who wanted to join them. I was minutes away from being mobbed, so I told them that I would go to the President's office to resign. There was military all over the place, around it, so I wrote down a resignation note. At about 8.30 pm in the evening, after a day of being under house arrest, I was able to slip out.

You were disappointed with India's reaction to these events.

I can understand the difficulty that the Indian government faces, when dealing with smaller regional neighbours. But I think for us to be stable, it is essential that India takes robust measures.

What is the ground situation in the Maldives right now?

There are demonstrations every day, police are coming out and beating people, and the cabinet and government is trying to fiddle with every single contract and tender. A majority of state funds are now spent on the military and the police, the industrialists who funded the coup have got their dividends back through extending their leases and rents and have actually gotten away with 130 million dollars. But 60 per cent of the population of Maldives is below 35 years of age. So it is going to be difficult to suppress them.

You've spent much time in arrest because of the opposition. How does this affect your personal life and family?

It is very difficult. I have two daughters, and am unable to give them enough time. I hope they understand what I'm doing and that I'm not doing it for myself. My presidency is not important. I don't have to remain in power. But there has to be an elected government. The people of Maldives must be able to decide who governs them. That is what we are fighting for and that is for the future.

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