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ABOUT US

WHITE BLACK LEGAL is an open access, peer-reviewed and refereed journal providededicated to express views on topical legal issues, thereby generating a cross current of ideas on emerging matters. This platform shall also ignite the initiative and desire of young law students to contribute in the field of law. The erudite response of legal luminaries shall be solicited to enable readers to explore challenges that lie before law makers, lawyers and the society at large, in the event of the ever changing social, economic and technological scenario.

With this thought, we hereby present to you

WHY INDIANS BOYCOTTING MALDIVES?

AUTHORED BY - ISHITA TYAGI & ANMOL DAHIYA

ABSTRACT

The largest and most powerful state in South Asia is India, while the smallest one is the Maldives. Yet, since the Maldives emerged as an independent state, its foreign relations with India have flourished as a neighboring country. Basically, the stature of the Maldives has immeasurably upsurged its geopolitical gravity. While this relationship has continued in the twenty-first century, India's whimsy and China's dominance have led to a slight decline, which is, at least, somewhat detrimental to India's security interests. In this article, attempts have been made to form a geopolitical continuum of India-Maldives relations (security, trade and culture, etc.) and its flex until the present decade.

The India – Maldives row escalated when three Maldives Deputy Ministers made derogatory post on social media against Indian prime minister Mr. Narendra Modi over the latter's Lakshadweep visit. Some in the Maldives saw it as an attempt to lure tourists away from its sandy white beaches and luxury island resorts. Maldives is facing a boycott from one of its biggest sources of tourism income after three of its officials mocked India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, sparking call from India citizens and celebrities to shun the sun-kissed getaway for domestic beaches instead. India have traditionally enjoyed strong ties with the Maldives, which depend on New Delhi for essentials for its 50,000 people, including rice, vegetables, medicines and humanitarian assistance. In 1998, India sent troops to help then President Abdul Gayoom fights a coup attempt. India has maintained a small military presence in Maldives for several years at the request of previous Maldives government. According to the latest government figures there are 88 Indian military personnel in the Maldives at present, primarily tasked with assisting in maritime security and disaster relief.

INTRODUCTION

India and the Maldives have entered into a diplomatic row after three Maldivian ministers tweeted derogatory remarks against Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in January 2024 after Mr. Modi put out pictures of him in Lakshadweep this prompted “boycott Maldives” trend on social media with many Indians including celebrities tweeting against the island country and encouraging Indians to explore Lakshadweep and other Indian tourist destination instead of the Maldives. Even though Maldivian President Mohamed Muizz’s government suspended the three ministers and distanced itself from the disparaging remarks, many Indian tourist cancelled their reservations and hotel bookings to the Maldives. This would affect the country that is heavily dependent tourism or for its economy growth.

President Muizzu’s is seen as anti-India and pro-China. He rose to power on his “India Out” electoral campaign in a reference to the presence of Indian troops on Maldivian soil. In a break from tradition, Muizzu had visited China and Turkey on his first official visit after assuming of his instead of visiting India.

India and the Maldives enjoy close, friendly, and multifaceted relations and share ancient ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious, and commercial ties. India was one of the first nations to establish diplomatic ties with the Maldives following its independence in 1965. India began operations in 1972 as a CDA and became a resident High Commissioner in 1980. One of the Maldives' four diplomatic offices overseas, the High Commission was established in New Delhi in November 2004.

Numerous bilateral visits have taken place between the Maldives and India. In August 2022, the president of the Maldives traveled to India with the intention of strengthening the geopolitical, security, and economic connections between the two South Asian neighbors who depend on each other both geographically and economically. The visit took place against the turbulent backdrop of political unrest and an economic collapse in Sri Lanka, the country's neighboring neighbor.

Major General Abdulla Shamaal, the head of the Maldives National Defence Forces, traveled to India in July 2022 with the goal of enhancing defense cooperation between the two adjacent nations.

The two nations' home ministers convened in February 2020. Cooperation between law enforcement and security was discussed.

An online war between Maldives and India

The story so far ... An online war of words set off by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's post pitching for tourism in the Lakshadweep islands had dramatically escalated into a diplomatic row between India and the Maldives, worsening the already strained relationship between the Indian ocean neighbors. On 4th January 2024 Narendra Modi on his social media handles, posted some pictures of Lakshadweep. Although there was no mention of Maldives in these pictures some politicians in the Maldives government reacted to these pictures in a way that led to years of friendship between the two countries being in danger today. In a few days the situation becomes so serious that that "Boycott Maldives started trending on social media". The three ministers of the Maldivian government, who caused the controversy are Mariyam Shiuna, Malsha Shareef and Abdullah Mahzoom Majid. Their comments on India and the Indian Prime Minister, look to be born out of insecurity.

They believed that the PM Modi motive to make Lakshadweep and Maldives compete

They believed that the PM Modi's agenda was to make Lakshadweep and Maldives compete. But these comments included some personal attacks too On twitter, Mariyam called PM Modi, "A puppet of Israel". Her colleagues said that these photo from Lakshadweep aimed at challenging the tourism industry in the Maldives and Mahzoom mazid stereotype Indians and made hateful comments against India sharing photos of open urination he said that it is the part of the Indian culture "In India, shitting openly in public spaces is part of a national culture". Abdulla mahzoom majidz while I wish success for India's tourism, targeting the Maldives so explicitly is not diplomatic. India faces significant challenges competing in beach tourism, considering our resort infrastructure exceeds their total islands. Plus this is your culture Narendra Modi.

Led to an outright conflict on social media

This led to an outright conflict on social media when the Indians started posting that they are cancelling their flights and hotel bookings, the Maldivian government understood the seriousness and Maldivian Foreign Ministry stated that the opinion expressed by the Ministers were their personal opinions and did not represent the view of Maldivian government later, the government suspended these three ministers. But the point is not about Maldives vs Lakshadweep only. Not just about this social media war. The whole controversy was driven by politics. A geopolitical agenda which led to

all of this. One thing you all would know is that Maldives is a small country. The total population of this country is about 500000, this country is made up of numerous islands. In fact, there are more than 1000 islands. But out of these 1000 islands, only above 200 are inhabited where Human lives. And out of this 200, more than 150 islands are resort islands. They have been sold to private companies and those companies have their private resort on it. Obviously, the country heavily depends on tourism. 28% of Maldives GDP depends upon tourism. And 90% of tax revenue for the government, comes from import duties and tourism related taxes and an interesting fact is that India a no.1 country based on number of tourists visiting Maldives. In 2023 more than 200000 Indian tourists went to Maldives. In total, approx. 1.75 million tourists went to Maldives this year. So you can imagine a country with a population of 500000 hosting more than 7.5 million tourists in a year. But the relationship between between India and Maldives is much deeper than that of tourism. For years, Indian and Maldives have been strategic allies and there has been military cooperation between the two too. India has played a special role in initiatives like SAGAR stands for Security And Growth For All In The Region. Around 2008, India launched its first neighborhood policy, and improved relations Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Myanmar. About 77 Indian military officers and soldiers are present on the Maldives islands Additionally, two Dhruv advanced light Helicopters were donated by Indian to the Maldives in 2010 and 2015. There are any reasons behind this military presence and Helicopter donation. Such as helping during natural calamities, conducting search and rescue operations, airlifting medical patients between islands but apart from this, India's warships patrol the exclusive economic zones of the Maldives too. This is the sea area surrounding Maldives where illegal activities prevented and basically, preventing terrorism. Maldives have requested India to do this. In 2009, when the Maldivian government, were concerned about potential terrorists attacks in their country, they has asked India for help because they did not have capabilities in terms of military assets and surveillance but this help and India's military presence has become a major issue of controversy in Maldives internal politics for the last few years. Some political parties in Maldives completely oppose this and want India to withdraw its military. In fact, Maldives current president, Mohamed Muizzum and its political parties, people national congress, used this issue during election campaign and came to power.

Issue of “India out” at Maldives internal politics

This issue of “India out” to understand this better, we have to look at Maldives internal politics. The thing is, the country was under dictatorship for 30 years. It was only under 2008 that a new

constitution was adopted and a multi-party democracy system was established in the country. The election that were conducted in 2008 was won by the Maldivian democratic party or MDP in short and their new President Mohamed Nasheed he was a successful president for the first four years of its term he spread awareness on climate change issue s, pledged to make Maldives carbon neutral and its Foreign policy was India first. During his term, India and Maldives became close allies. And as I said, in 2009, on his request, India donated military equipment to Maldives but in 2012, political crisis broke out in Maldives. And the next year, 2013, when election took place, a new party came to power The Progressive Party or PPM of Maldives. New president was Abdullah yameen AbdulGayoom. And with the in governing party, the foreign policy of the country was also changed. The new party opposed India. In 2016 the new government stated that India can take back the two helicopters that were gifted to them. After distancing themselves from India, Yameen's government got closure to China. Chinese companies were given contracts for major infrastructure project in Maldivian islands. And in the mean time, Maldives became a part of China's belt and road initiative under these initiatives, China wants to spend money on large infrastructure projects in different countries across the world by building roads, railways and ports to increase its influence in Asia, Africa and Europe. Most of the loan term of the Chinese contracts were quite unsustainable. Because of this, many countries fall into China's debt trap during this time, Maldives borrowed 1.5 billion from China. Because of this government, relation between India and Maldives got weaker and India's strategic position in this area starts weakening. After this, next election was in 2018, once again, the governing party changed and so did the foreign policy of the country. In 2018, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih from MDP became the President and the first thing he did was the Indian helicopters that Yameen wanted to send back, Solih extended the contract of those Indian helicopters. He wanted to keep those helicopters in Maldives. Once again, they adopted India First strategy. Thereafter, India helps the Maldivian government. India provides billions of dollars to Maldives so that they could repay the loan taken by the previous government. Even during the COVID pandemic, India provided vaccines in Maldives. One thing to note here is that even when Maldives was not a democracy, during the 30year dictatorship, India – Maldives relations were still strong. Like in 1995, India built Indira Gandhi memorial Hospital in Maldives. It is still the largest hospital in Maldives. Back to 2020, this new MDP government was extremely enthusiastic about the India first sentiment. Many bilateral agreements were signed between India and Maldives during this time India granted 500 million for maritime connectivity. A line of credit of 800 million was given by Import-export bank of India. Due to this India first proactive approach, and under current was spreading across the country. Sentiment

of India out.

Opposition had a negative outlook towards the alliance between India and Maldives

The politicians in the opposition had a negative outlook towards the alliance between the Indian and Maldivian government. By 2021, many journalists had written articles about it. Numerous post had been made on social media, which were openly criticizing India and in many ways, degrading India. Politicians were also giving hateful speeches to an India presence from there islands. Seeing all these, the India high commission in Maldives wrote to the ministry of foreign affairs of Maldives stating that the articles and social media post were attacking Indian dignity. They asked the ministry to do something about them. The letter was leaked to Maldives media. On 2nd July 2021 the MDP government officially apologized to India and expresses concern that some people was spreading hatred against India on Maldivian media and social media. Acknowledging it as wrong. Here, local news publication DRS was mentioned with there co-founder Ahmned Azaan. specifically, pointing out that they are the people spreading anti-India hate. Regarding India out slogans, Ahmed Azaan gave a statement that the campaign does not mean that they want to expel the Indians from Maldives. They do not want Indians to be safe in their country and that the India out movement means that they want to expel Indian military from their country. And that the people using Indian out campaign to threaten the Indians and to attacks Indians are in the wrong. He called it an issue-based movement. So the point is if this is an issue-based movement, then what are their issues? The opposition politicians claim that the agreements entered by the MDP government with India are very confidential and their details are not revealed to the public. The then Vice President of their opposition party, PPM Mohd. Shareef said that if the details of the agreement are not presented to the country, it is a violation of democracy. The government should not hide the details by citing the excuse of National security. He used the example of Harbour project on the Uthura Thila Falhu Island in Maldives. A joint defence action plan was signed between India and Maldives in february 2021. Where India's job was to develop and maintain the harbour of this coast guard. Leaked documents suggest that according to this agreement, the Indian military could stay here for decades and they would have the exclusive rights to this facility. Many Maldivian citizen were genuinely upset after hearing this. Even those who were not supporting the India Out Campaign, started supporting the opposition. And because of this, when the next election were conducted in 2023, the governing party changed again, and the PPM

party that was the opposition, came back into power. This time, this PPM party formed an alliance with PNC party to be in power. And the latest President of Maldives, Mohamed Muizzu was the candidate of this right-wing party, PNC. This happened on 30th September, 2023. This political party, which focused on the India out issue during their election campaign is in power today. It is also worth noting that had the previous MDP government been more transparent had not kept the agreement so confidential, then perhaps the India Out sentiment would not have gained so much traction. And perhaps, they would have remained in power. But now, since PPM party came into power, they took this India out issue even more seriously than last time the new President Mohamed Muizzu properly stated, four days after winning the election Indian Forces in Maldives will have to leave the country. On 17th November 2023, he became the President officially, and only a week later, on 23rd November, he met Indian Union Minister Kiren Rijiju. He repeated the same points in the meeting that India withdraw its military personnel from Maldives and it was only a month and half later that the Muizzu's Ministers openly started insulting PM Modi and India on public platforms. When this happened, the ex-presidents of Maldives and the MDP party, obviously, stood up in favor of India. Mohamed Nasheed and Ibrahim Mohamed Solih both condemned this hateful language against India. And it was never about Lakshadweep. This was entirely about Maldives internal politics. This India Out sentiment a way for some Maldivian politician to insight their citizen and to score more votes with their hateful speeches. In 2021, when the MDP government was in power and India Out slogans were raised then ne of the MDP ministers Ali Azil had said that this anti-India movement was happening because some people enjoy making hateful speeches. Today, this a great example of how hateful politics can be harmful to a country. You will find such politicians not only in Maldives but in every country in the world. They either spread hatred against the community, against the religion or against another country. What's unfortunate is that, many people get mislead by such hateful speeches and the fear they create. If we look at the foreign policy of new Maldivian government, it is once again leaning towards China. May be its just a coincidence that the entire controversy started just a day before the Maldivian president visits to China. His trip to China was from 8th to 12th January. The Chinese state-sponsored media praise this situation stating that "it demonstrates that Muizzu is treating India with a normal mindset and steering the relationship between Maldives and India to a normal state- state relationship". It is also historic that Muizzu choose China for his foreign trip. All the Maldivians Presidents before him, came to India on their first foreign trip. Just two days ago on 10th January, after this controversy began, President Muizzu extended an invitation to Chinese tourist to visit Maldives. Since Indians started by boycotting the country, is openly inviting Chinese tourist

to his country. So, the entire issue here is about Maldives internal politics. The parties in favor of China versus the parties in favor of India. This also reveals that if the governing party changes once again in Maldives in 4-5 years, the pro-India parties comes to power, then India's stance toward Maldives can change again. The boycott Maldives slogans that are trending now, can turn into go to Maldives slogans, after a few years but regardless of what happens in Maldives. We can always promote Indian tourism.

Conclusion

Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu recent anti-India's stance could impact the country fragile economy if India's long standing assistance diminishes, potentially leading to an increase in Chinese loans. India has been Maldives primary development partner for years aiding in significant infrastructure projects. However, the countries heavy reliance on Chinese loans posses a risk of debt distress, with Chinese loans accounting for 37% of Maldives exposure. The Maldives government has written to India seeking the renewable of 2019 memorandum of understanding [MOU] to train 1000 bureaucrats in India over the next 5 years. The MOU, one of the key agreement signed during Prime Minister Narendra Modi visit to Maldives in June 2019, is set to expire this month. Despite recent friction in diplomatic ties, the Maldives have requested the renewable of MOU, highlighting the successful training programs for Maldivian civil servants conducted by India. The move comes as the Maldives have leaned towards China and cold for India to withdraw its troops. India will replace its military personnel with India technical experts, asserting continuous partnership. Following meetings between officials, the transition will occur in two phases by may 10. The move comes amid evolving bilateral dynamics since President Muizzu took office. Despite tension, India reaffirms commitment as a development partner budgetry allocation for Maldives development assistance may be revised based on progress. Strategic partnership remains vital, exemplified by joint infrastructure project like the greater male connectivity projects.