

CHANGE IN THE MALDIVES: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON THE NEW LEADER, MOHAMED MUIZZU

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October 02, 2023 12:20 am | Updated 12:20 am IST

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The [Maldives has chosen a new leader](#), replacing President [Ibu Solih](#), who won by a landslide in 2018, with [Mohamed Muizzu](#), the Mayor of Male and the choice of the previous ruling party, the PPM. Mr. Muizzu won Saturday's presidential run-off that followed an inconclusive first round in which no candidate crossed 50% of the vote, winning nearly 54% to Solih's 46% in this round. Mr. Solih's electoral loss is being attributed to a heavy anti-incumbency sentiment and concerns over the post-COVID-19 economy that is dependent on tourism, the rift within Solih's party, the MDP, due to a rupture in his old friendship with former President Mohamed Nasheed, as well as concerns over "sovereignty" issues, whipped up by Mr. Muizzu's PPM that is behind an "India out" campaign to oust Indian military personnel. PPM chief and former Maldives President Abdulla Yameen, the chief architect of that campaign and serving a jail term of 11 years, was openly at odds with India during his tenure. He had paved the way for a free trade agreement with China and loans for infrastructure projects that the Opposition said had led the Maldives into a "debt trap". Mr. Solih turned the Maldives's international compass, committing publicly to an "India First" policy, as New Delhi undertook many infrastructure projects, assisted the Maldives during the pandemic, and helped it during the campaign to have Maldives Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid elected President of the UN General Assembly. As a result, the Solih-Muizzu run-off was billed as an India versus China contest by commentators, who have sought to portray the result as a "setback" for India.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi was among the first to congratulate President-elect Muizzu on social media. New Delhi must avoid the impression that it has favourites within the Maldivian polity. The ball is now in Mr. Muizzu's court to take up the promise of keeping India-Maldives ties close — he has not himself criticised India in the way his party has. Among his tasks would be shoring up the Maldivian economy as debt repayments come due, and taking lessons from events in the neighbourhood such as Sri Lanka's handling of its economic crisis. It remains to be seen whether he will ensure the release of Mr. Yameen, and what control the previous President will have over the new government. Mr. Muizzu will have to preside over an upcoming referendum vote, which Mr. Nasheed has pushed for, to decide whether the Maldives will revert to a parliamentary system rather than the presidential one. Given its location in the Indian Ocean, along key shipping routes, Mr. Muizzu will have to balance traditional, strategic interests with India, which is its closest and most powerful neighbour, while engaging China and the United States, that keenly watch developments there. It is important that neither Delhi nor Male view these interests through the prism of "zero sum" games, as that has led to tensions between

them in the past.

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