

Beijing's grip on Maldives slips as Yameen loses polls

New Govt Plans To Audit Chinese Infra Projects

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New Delhi: In a verdict that could be a game changer for Indian diplomacy and a setback to China's strategy of backing autocratic strongmen, Maldivian President Abdullah Yameen suffered a comprehensive defeat in the presi-

FULL COVERAGE: P 16 & 18

dential polls with the opposition's Ibrahim Solih winning by a margin of 16.6% votes.

Despite Yameen's efforts to muzzle democracy by imposing emergency and jailing opposition leaders and judges, the voters rejected his regime,

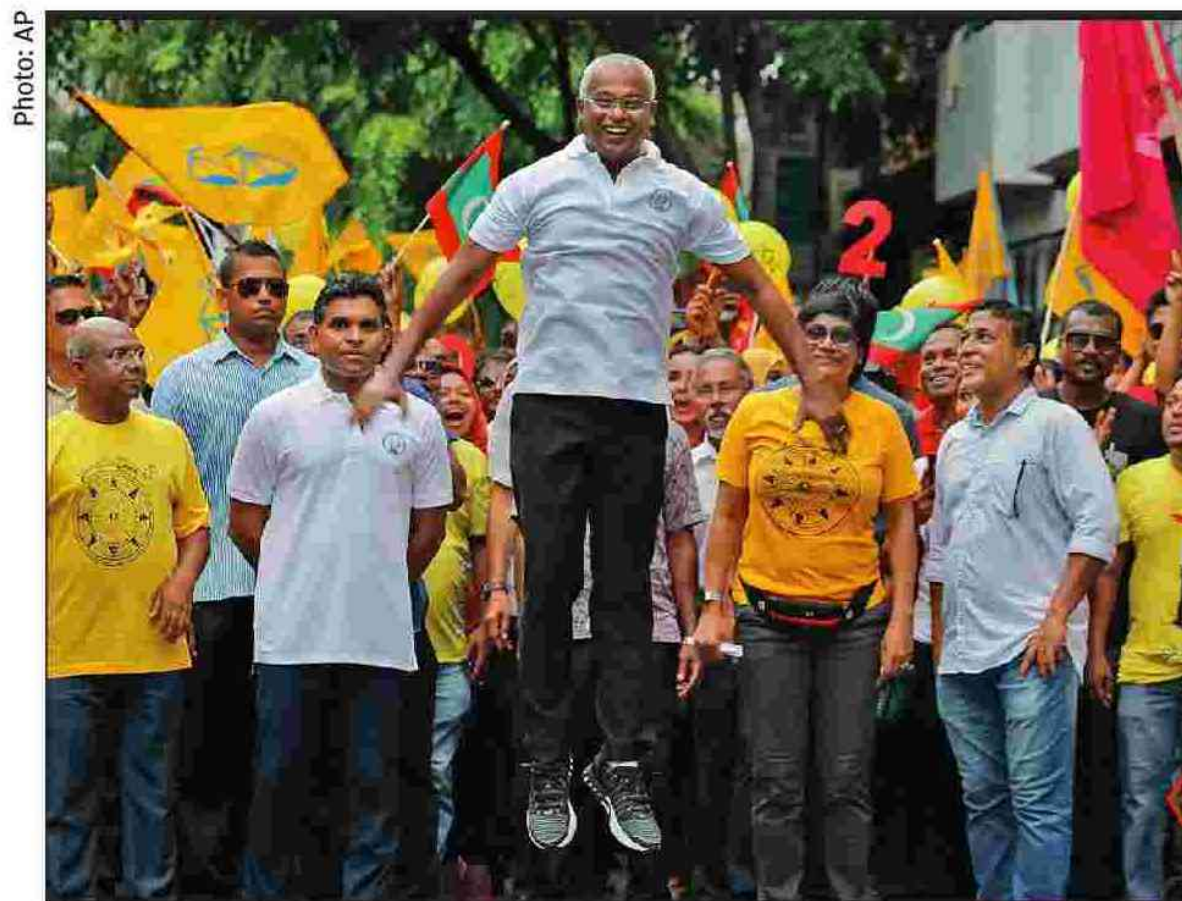


Photo: AP

ushering a change that promises to reconfigure geopolitics in the Indian Ocean. PM Narendra Modi spoke to Solih and congratulated him. The two agreed to work together to strengthen relations between the countries. Modi is likely to

visit Male before the year end. Close aides of Solih and Maldives ex-president Md Nasheed later said Modi might be invited for Solih's swearing-in.

Nasheed told **TOI** that the new government would audit infrastructure projects in the

“ I think we have to review all the agreements we had with China... and see what is due



— MOHAMED NASHEED
FORMER PRESIDENT, MALDIVES

“ This is a journey that has ended at the ballot box as the people willed it. This is a moment of hope

— IBRAHIM MOHAMED SOLIH
PRESIDENT-ELECT

Maldivian opposition presidential candidate Ibrahim Mohamed Solih jumps with joy in Male on Monday after winning the election

light of alleged “land grab” by Chinese interests. He said two Indian military choppers, which Yameen wanted to send back, would remain in the archipelago.

► **Nasheed's key role, P 18**

Nasheed expected to play a guiding role to govt

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According to the election commission, incumbent Abdulla Yameen got 41.7% of the vote to opposition candidate Ibrahim Solih's 58.3% with over 89% voters turning out, indicating that opposition unity and the incumbent's deeply unpopular regime had turned the tables on the ruling party and its backers. Yameen will remain in office till his tenure ends in November but declared that he had accepted the results.

India has waged a battle of attrition with the Yameen regime ever since the leader declared emergency in February and refused to heed advice to restore democratic functioning, banking on support he received from China which saw

an opportunity to drop anchor in India's strategic backyard. But China's strategy of betting on autocratic leaders, seeing them as "single window" power centres, came unstuck as it had in Sri Lanka where it backed Mahinda Rajapaksa or Malaysia's Mohammed Najib.

Nasheed said the ostentatious infra projects comprising "concrete and steel had failed to catch the imagination of the people". Apart from an audit, the new government is also expected to look into how much money came into Maldives in the recent past. "I am optimistic China will understand Maldives's reasons for doing (audits) given what has happened recently in countries like Sri Lanka and Malaysia," Nasheed said as he thanked India for its sup-

port to the joint opposition.

Nasheed recalled how the cost for the recently inaugurated 'China-Maldives Friendship Bridge' was estimated at around \$77 million when his government approved it but later shot up to \$300 million under Yameen. While Malaysia recently cancelled several Belt and Road Initiative projects, Sri Lanka continues to reel under the mountain of debt, having handed over Hambantota port to China on a 99-year lease.

While Yameen had ensured disqualification of Nasheed from the polls, the pro-India former president was the tallest leader of the opposition coalition and is expected to play a guiding role for the new government headed by president-elect Solih. "We will work with India for a meaningful sa-

fety and security umbrella in the Indian Ocean," Nasheed said. He added that the voters had made it clear who they were aligned with. "We would like to plug into India's development and its democratic institutions for capacity building. Connectivity is another important issue India can help us with."

Nasheed though ruled out becoming a part of the government. "I believe Solih has it in him to take everybody together and forge national unity." Nasheed's remarks on China are extremely significant keeping in mind reservations expressed by several countries in south and southeast Asia over BRI, described by many as a debt trap. In an interview to **TOI** in February, Nasheed had said China had acquired as many as 17 islands from Yameen.