

Democracy imperilled in the Maldives

The United States and much of the international community has understandably been focused on increasingly violent conflict in Syria. However, attention also needs to be given to the Muslim people of this Asian nation and their commitment to the power of nonviolent action

Well before the launch of the Arab Spring, the people of the Maldives, a Muslim nation located on a tropical archipelago in the Indian Ocean, were engaged in widespread nonviolent resistance against the 30-year reign of the corrupt and autocratic president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. The growing civil insurrection forced the dictator to finally allow for free elections in October 2008, which he lost.

This triumph for democracy is now threatened as a result of a coup last month led by allies of the former dictator and hardline Islamists.

When the democratic opposition leader and former political prisoner Mohamed Nasheed assumed the presidency slightly over three years ago, he was faced with the difficult task of repairing the country's damaged social fabric from decades of misrule. While luxury resorts had mushroomed on many of the Maldives' remote islands, most of the population suffered in poverty. Indeed, Gayoom's legacy is one of shattered communities, destitution, crime, and widespread drug abuse.

Despite their best efforts, Nasheed and his democratic allies were hampered by a court system still dominated by corrupt judges handpicked by the former dictator as well as violent protests by Islamists angered at the democratic government's moderate social policies. Meanwhile, despite struggles at home, Nasheed took global leadership in pushing for concrete international action on climate change, through which rising sea levels threaten his nation's very existence.

Nasheed's increasingly bold and popular efforts against the vestiges of the Gayoom dictatorship, however, threatened powerful interests. On February 7, police and other security forces with links to the old regime, in alliance with Vice-President Mohammed Waheed, forced President Nasheed to sign a letter of resignation. Subsequent evidence leaves little doubt that Nasheed was accurate in describing it as a coup d'état.

Much to the dismay of the pro-democracy forces, the US State Department initially recognized the sworn-in vice president as representing the legitimate government, though the Obama administration soon backed away from its recognition in the wake of a public outcry, particularly as evidence of the actual circumstances of Nasheed's departure became apparent.

Over the past month, pro-democracy demonstrators have once again taken to the streets as they had under Gayoom's rule. Once again, they are being met with brutal repression. In the face of growing protests, the junta has invited Nasheed and his party to join the new government as a junior partner in a coalition dominated by Waheed and supporters of the former dictatorship.

The United States has been pressuring the ousted president to accept the junta's offer. However, Nasheed – confident that the majority of Maldivians support democracy and will return him to office – has instead called for early elections as the only means of stabilizing the country.

The United States and much of the international community has understandably been focused on the repression and increasingly violent conflict in Syria. However, attention also needs to be given to the Muslim people of this Asian nation, whose nonviolent struggle for freedom foreshadowed the Arab Spring and whose democratic emergence is now in serious jeopardy.

Popular unarmed civil insurrections have toppled scores of dictatorships over the past three decades, from the Philippines to Poland, from Chile to Serbia, from Mali to the Maldives, and more recently in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen. These successes have demonstrated that democracy has the best chance of success if the leadership and initiative comes from within, not through 'regime change' from the outside. However, while the United States and other major powers which espouse democracy don't have the power to launch such pro-democracy revolutions, the least they can do is avoid undermining them.

Rather than push Nasheed and his democratically-elected party to serve under an illegitimate regime, the United States must take the lead in imposing tough and carefully calibrated international sanctions against the junta until they agree to hold free and fair internationally-monitored elections. Unlike in Libya and increasingly so in Syria, the Maldivians have consciously rejected the use of arms in their struggle against dictatorship and corruption, and, through Nasheed's forty months in office, demonstrated their enthusiasm for democratic values. This commitment to political rights and to the power of nonviolent action deserves the world's support.