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# The Politics of Maldives

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## Introduction

The Republic of Maldives stands as a unique and intriguing polity in the Indian Ocean region, shaped profoundly by its geography, religious heritage, and dramatic political history. Known internationally for its picture-perfect atolls and turquoise waters, the Maldives also commands attention for its rapidly evolving political system, which has experienced both momentous reform and profound challenges over recent decades. The journey from a centuries-old sultanate to a modern multiparty democracy has been neither linear nor free from contention, and the nation's politics remain dynamic—and at times, unpredictable.

This book seeks to deliver a comprehensive guide to the politics and political system of the Maldives. Readers are invited to explore the constitutional structures and practical realities that define governance in this small but significant island nation. At the heart of Maldivian politics lies the 2008 Constitution, a document that marked a watershed in the country's democratic evolution, introducing much-needed checks and balances and setting the legal framework for the republic. Yet, as this book will demonstrate, the promise of democracy is still tempered by persistent concerns about executive dominance, politicized institutions, and contested interpretations of law and fundamental freedoms.

Culture and religion play an integral role in shaping Maldivian politics. As a nation constitutionally defined by Islam, the interplay between religious and political identity impacts electoral eligibility, public policy, and civil rights. The uniqueness of the Maldivian system—where all citizens are required to be Sunni Muslims and where non-Muslims may not participate in politics—sets it apart from many other democratic nations and presents both sociopolitical cohesion and challenges, especially regarding human rights and pluralism.

The book further examines the actors, institutions, and processes that delineate Maldivian politics. The structures of the executive, legislature, and judiciary, the mechanisms of electoral competition, and the influential role of political parties—each are scrutinized to provide a nuanced understanding of their functions and frictions. The shifting alliances and political rivalries of recent years, from the peaceful transfer of power after hard-fought elections to periods of intense protest and political crisis, are detailed to illustrate the nation's ongoing struggle to consolidate its democracy.

Critical contemporary issues—ranging from human rights to climate change, from the role of money in elections to the politicization of independent commissions—are highlighted as central battlegrounds for the future of Maldivian democracy. The influence of foreign powers and the islands' vulnerability to environmental threats add

additional layers of urgency and complexity to the nation's political discourse.

Ultimately, "The Politics of Maldives: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Maldives" aspires to illuminate the layers of Maldivian political life: its history, present intricacies, and possible futures. Whether you are a student, policymaker, observer, or curious reader, this book offers a structured and accessible entry point into the dynamic, challenging, and vibrant world of Maldivian politics.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Historical Evolution of Maldivian Politics

The political history of the Maldives is a tapestry woven with threads of monarchy, protectorates, and the more recent, sometimes turbulent, embrace of democracy. For centuries, the islands were governed by a succession of sultans and sultanas, a period that established a deeply rooted tradition of centralized authority. This long era, stretching from 1153 to 1968 with a brief interruption, saw the rule of various dynasties, each contributing to the political and social fabric of the nation. The sultanate was not always absolute, and internal power struggles and the influence of powerful ministers often played a significant role in governance.

The archipelago's strategic location in the Indian Ocean inevitably drew the attention of foreign powers. From the mid-16th century onwards, European colonial ambitions began to cast a shadow over the Maldives. The Portuguese were among the first to exert their influence, even establishing a garrison in Malé and briefly overthrowing the sultanate in the mid-1500s. This period of foreign control was relatively short-lived, ending with a local revolt, but it marked the beginning of a new dynamic in Maldivian political history - external interference.

Following the Portuguese, the Dutch and then the British became significant players in the region. The Maldives eventually became a British protectorate in 1887, a status that formalized external control over the islands' foreign policy while largely leaving internal administration to the local rulers. While under British protection, the sultanate continued, but the influence of the Chief Minister grew, sometimes eclipsing that of the Sultan. This shift in power dynamics contributed to calls for reform from a younger generation of educated Maldivians.

The early 20th century saw the first concrete steps towards a more modern political system. Facing pressure for change, Sultan Mohamed Shamsuddheen III ratified the first constitution in 1932. This document aimed to establish a constitutional monarchy and introduced the concept of a legislative assembly and a people's assembly, alongside a cabinet. However, this initial attempt at constitutional rule was met with resistance and was reportedly publicly torn up, highlighting the challenges of transitioning from entrenched traditional power structures.

Despite this setback, the idea of a more representative government had taken root. The mid-20th century brought further changes, including a brief experiment with a republican form of government in 1953. Mohamed Amin Didi became the first president, and this period saw some social reforms, including advancements in

women's rights and education. However, this first republic was short-lived, and the country reverted to a sultanate less than a year later after a public referendum.

The Maldives finally gained full political independence from the British in 1965. The sultanate continued for a few more years, but the momentum for a republic was building. In 1968, a national referendum was held, and a significant majority of the public voted in favor of abolishing the monarchy and establishing a republic. This marked the end of a centuries-old sultanate and the beginning of the Second Republic, with Ibrahim Nasir as the first president.

Nasir's presidency, from 1968 to 1978, saw the Maldives navigate its early years as an independent republic. While the sultanate was gone, the political system still had a strong executive branch. Nasir was elected indirectly by the legislature and confirmed by a referendum. His tenure laid some of the groundwork for the modern Maldivian state, including the beginnings of the tourism industry, which would become a cornerstone of the economy. However, the political landscape remained relatively tightly controlled.

In 1978, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom became president, ushering in a new era that would last for three decades. Gayoom's presidency was characterized by strong centralized rule, and for much of his time in office, political parties were not permitted. He won successive elections, often with overwhelming margins, in a system that lacked significant political pluralism. Despite the authoritarian nature of his rule, Gayoom also oversaw significant development in the Maldives, particularly in expanding tourism and infrastructure.

However, towards the later part of Gayoom's rule, a pro-democracy movement began to gain traction. Fueled by a desire for greater political freedoms and accountability, this movement grew, both within the Maldives and among Maldivian exiles abroad. Events such as the unrest in 2003, following the death of a prisoner, further galvanized opposition to the government.

Facing increasing domestic and international pressure, President Gayoom initiated a process of political reform in the mid-2000s. This included the legalization of political parties in 2005, a significant step towards a multiparty system. The reform process culminated in the adoption of a new constitution in 2008. This constitution was a landmark document, designed to introduce a more democratic framework, with a clearer separation of powers and enhanced protection for civil rights.

The 2008 constitution paved the way for the country's first multiparty presidential election in the same year. This election saw the defeat of the long-serving incumbent, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, by Mohamed Nasheed, a former political prisoner and prominent figure in the pro-democracy movement. Nasheed's victory marked a historic moment, representing the peaceful transfer of power through a democratic

election and the end of three decades of a more authoritarian style of governance.

The transition to democracy, however, proved to be challenging. Nasheed's presidency faced significant hurdles, including political opposition and difficulties in implementing reforms. The political landscape remained highly polarized. Despite the initial optimism of a new democratic era, the Maldives would continue to experience political instability and shifts in power in the years that followed, demonstrating that the path to consolidating democracy is often complex and fraught with obstacles.

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