

Maldivian Democracy

An Interview with His Excellency Mohamed Nasheed, President of Maldives

EDITORS' NOTE *Mohamed Nasheed became the first democratically elected President in the history of the Maldives on October 28, 2008. Nasheed graduated from the University of Liverpool in 1989 with a Bachelor of Arts in Maritime Studies. In 1990, he helped establish political magazine Sangu that scrutinized the ruling political class. The government banned the magazine and Nasheed was arrested and jailed for the first of many times. In 1999, he was elected MP for Malé but was stripped of his seat soon afterwards and jailed once again. When Malé was rocked by political unrest in September 2003, Nasheed fled the Maldives and, in November of 2004, cofounded the country's first opposition party, the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), in exile in Sri Lanka. Nasheed returned to the Maldives in April of 2005 to establish the MDP in the Maldives, defying a government edict banning political parties. The government overturned its ban on political parties in June of 2005 and Nasheed was elected Chairperson of the MDP in December of 2005. He won the MDP primaries to become the MDP's Presidential Candidate in April of 2008. President Nasheed won the 2009 Anna Lindh Prize, in recognition of his work promoting human rights, democracy, and environmental protection.*



H.E. Mohamed Nasheed

specific industries offer the greatest opportunities?

Tourism is historically the major industry that has attracted foreign investments. But since the new administration took over in late 2008, we have opened up the economy and now there are investment opportunities in housing, fisheries, transport, aquaculture, education, and renewable energy. We are currently in the process of attracting foreign investors into our international airports and this will be very successful. Waste to energy is also a big opportunity. We

are working with the IFC – the investment arm of the World Bank – to seek investments in waste-to-energy plants that can help power the capital city, Malé, with waste and biomass.

How has the global economic crisis affected the Maldives, specifically in regard to tourism?

Tourism did take a hit in 2008 and in the first half of 2009 and arrivals dipped significantly, particularly from Western Europe. By the end of 2009, though, tourist arrivals recovered. Holidaymakers from traditional markets such as U.K., France, and Italy have started to return to the Maldives and new markets, especially the Chinese market, have grown rapidly.

How immediate is the problem of climate change and rising seas in the Maldives and how are you addressing these concerns?

The Maldives are feeling the effects of climate change today. This month, hotter water temperatures caused by El Niño and probably exacerbated by climate change have damaged up to 20 percent of corals that live in shallow waters. We rely on our coral reefs to protect our fish stocks. Coral reefs also attract tourists who enjoy diving and snorkeling, so this is a serious issue for us.

Moreover, erosion and saltwater intrusion are threatening local communities. We have over a dozen islands where communities are already being moved because we can't keep the sea out of the islands. Local residents are furious about this situation. Islands have always emerged and submerged in the Maldives – that is a natural part of living for us – but things seem to be getting worse.

Our country is an average of just 1.5 metres above the sea and if sea levels rise significantly over the next century, we will be in trouble, as will many low-lying areas of the world. For us, the bottom line is dry land. Nobody wants to leave the Maldives but we should also be mindful of

scientific predictions for sea level rise and coral reefs and we should start to save money today in case we are forced to leave the Maldives at some point in the future. For my children and grandchildren's generation, this is a serious, existential problem. As I always say to foreign leaders, what happens to us today will happen to you tomorrow. So, in a sense, we are all Maldivians now.

You have proposed that the Maldives will become the first carbon neutral country in the planet. How is this effort progressing?

We have set a target of 10 years to achieve carbon neutrality, which means the Maldives reaches a point where it is no longer a net contributor to greenhouse gas emissions. We will still produce pollution but we'll offset any pollution we continue to produce.

At the heart of the policy is a radical switch from oil to 100 percent renewable energy. This switch is in part due to environmental considerations – by moving away from fossil fuels, we hope to demonstrate to bigger countries that you can continue to grow but also cut out carbon from your energy supplies.

Security and economic considerations are also behind our low carbon plans. Like many countries, the Maldives is addicted to foreign oil and yet we have absolutely no control over the price, which leaves us extremely vulnerable to oil price shocks. Moreover, oil is very expensive, particularly in outer lying islands. Renewable energy is cost effective today and utilizes energy resources the Maldives has in abundance, namely, the sun, the sea, and the wind.

We've already signed some agreements with international companies who want to build wind farms and solar power stations in the Maldives and we are being advised by energy experts from the University of Oxford. So I am confident we can reach our 2020 target, which will improve the environment, reduce energy costs, and significantly enhance energy security.

What is the most critical message that you would like to express to world leaders about the Maldives?

The Maldives represents the dangers of climate change but also the opportunities of moving toward a new, green economy. Climate change threatens to wipe countries – possibly even humanity itself – off the map. But if we tackle this problem now, we can unleash a new era of growth and prosperity as we move towards a zero-carbon economy, which will also save the world for our children and grandchildren. ●

What challenges have you faced in ushering democracy into the Maldives and how is the democratic process progressing?

Maldivian society has been in a period of relative flux over the past couple of years, since democracy and new freedoms were ushered in. When you are learning to walk, you tend to stumble and fall a few times until you get the hang of things; the same is true of Maldivian democracy. Under the previous regime, the media was tightly gagged. Since 2008, restrictions have been removed and the media is very free, even by Western standards. The media has moved quickly to take advantage of new freedoms but some media outlets have gone a bit far by inciting violence, calling on people to topple the government, or calling each other names on TV. Some people pressure me to act against a media they feel is misusing its freedom but I am loath to do this. Over time, journalists will settle down and behave in a way that is more fitting to the new freedoms that they have.

What opportunities are there for foreign investment in the Maldives and what