

Maldives opposition candidate Mohamed Muiz wins the presidential runoff, local media say

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Online Desk: Opposition candidate Mohamed Muiz won the Maldives presidential runoff on Saturday, securing more than 53% of the vote, local media reported. The election has turned into a virtual referendum on which regional power — India or China — will have the biggest influence in the Indian Ocean archipelago nation.

Mihaaru News reported that incumbent President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih had received 46% of the vote and that Muiz had won by more than 18,000 votes. Official results were expected Sunday. “With today’s result we have got the opportunity to build the country’s future. The strength to ensure the freedom of Maldives,” Muiz said in a statement after his victory. “It’s time we put our differences aside and come together. We need to be a peaceful society.” Muiz also requested that Solih transfer former president Abdulla Yameen to house arrest from prison.

It was a surprise win for Muiz, who entered the fray as an underdog. He was named only as a fallback candidate closer to the nomination deadline after the Supreme Court prevented Yameen from running because he is serving a prison sentence for money laundering and corruption. Yameen’s supporters say he’s been jailed for political reasons. “Today’s result is a reflection of the patriotism of our people. A call on all our neighbours and bilateral partners to fully respect our independence and sovereignty,” said Mohamed Shareef, a top official of Muiz’s party. He told The Associated Press that it was also a mandate for Muiz to resurrect the economy and for Yameen’s release.

Neither Muiz nor Solih got more than 50% in the first round of voting earlier in September. Solih, who was elected president in 2018, was battling allegations by Muiz that he had allowed India an unchecked presence in the country. Muiz’s party, the People’s National Congress, is viewed as heavily pro-China.

Solih has insisted that the Indian military’s presence in the Maldives was only to build a dockyard under an agreement between the two governments and that his country’s sovereignty won’t be violated. Muiz promised that if he won the presidency, he would remove Indian troops from the Maldives and balance the country’s trade relations, which he said were heavily in India’s favor.

Ahmed Shaheed, a former foreign minister of Maldives, termed the election verdict as a public revolt against the government’s failure to meet economic and governance expectations rather than concerns over Indian influence. “I don’t think India was at all in the people’s minds,” Saheed said. An engineer, Muiz had served as the housing minister for seven years. He was mayor of Male, the capital, when he was chosen to run for president.

Solih suffered a setback closer to the election when Mohamed Nasheed, a charismatic former president, broke away from his Maldivian Democratic Party and fielded his own candidate in the first round. He decided to remain neutral in the second round. “Nasheed’s departure took the motherboard away from the MDP,” Shaheed said.

Yameen, leader of the People’s National Congress, made the Maldives a part of China’s Belt and Road initiative during his presidency from 2013 to 2018. The initiative is meant to build railroads, ports and highways to expand trade — and China’s influence — across Asia, Africa and Europe. Despite the rhetoric, Muiz is unlikely to change the foreign policy of affording an important place to India — rather, opposition to Chinese projects is likely to lessen, evening power balances out, Shaheed said.

The Maldives is made up of 1,200 coral islands in the Indian Ocean located by the main shipping route between the East and the West. “These five years have been the most peaceful and prosperous five years we’ve ever seen. We have had political peace, opposition candidates are not jailed every day,” said Abdul Muhusin, who said he voted for Solih in the runoff on Saturday.

Another voter, Saeedh Hussein, said he chose Muiz because “I want the Indian military to leave Maldives.” “I don’t believe the Maldivian military has any control. Only Muiz can change these things and make the Indian military leave Maldives,” he said. There were more than 282,000 eligible voters and turnout was 78% an hour before the polling stations closed.