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From Dictatorship to Democracy, the Peaceful Maldivian Experience

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Opening Remarks by Mr. M. Rasgotra

Your Excellency, on behalf of the Observer Research Foundation I extend to you, to the High Commissioner, to Mr. Zaki and your other companions a very warm, cordial and friendly welcome to ORF. You are not unacquainted with ORF. ORF and Maldives have a very special bond. A few months ago we had the privilege of hosting the President of the Maldives here and now it is our honour and pleasure to have you with us to talk on 'From Dictatorship to Democracy'.

Ladies and gentlemen, in Maldives transition from dictatorship to democracy, the Hon'ble Vice-President has played a very major role. Dr Mohammed Waheed Hassan started his working life as a teacher. He has many firsts to his credit. He is the first Maldivian to obtain a PhD, and from no less a place than Stanford University. He later served as Representative of UNICEF in our region: his most significant contribution in that position was in Afghanistan, where he was made responsible for setting up the Education Ministry of that country—and he accomplished the task with great success. The needs for education are pretty large in Afghanistan, as indeed they are in India, and elsewhere in this region. I hope, Your Excellency,

your advice on educational matters will remain available to all our countries.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Vice-President's political career has seen many ups and downs because he is a man of integrity who believes in clean democratic politics in a country which for 30 years was ruled by an autocrat. So, Dr. Hassan has had to leave his country now and then but, eventually, he succeeded in securing a firm position in the Maldives politics and was elected to the Parliament in the 1989 elections with the largest majority ever. That is indicative of his political standing in the country. He founded his own party, which he later merged with the party of the President, and together they swept the polls and swept away the autocratic rule of some 30 years. He is the first ever Vice President to be elected in the Maldives.

These are landmarks in the Vice-President's personal career and are also important events in the recent evolution of politics in his country. I hope this wholesome transition from autocracy to democracy will serve as a shining example for others in our region.

Your Excellency, ORF has a very extensive programme in international studies with a special focus on India's neighbours. Among our neighbours, the Maldives in many ways is the country closest to India. Your country, Sir, is the sentinel of the Indian Ocean and for geographic, cultural, historical and other reasons our two countries share many perceptions on security and on major international issues of the day, such as environment.

May I request you, Mr. Vice-President, to address us.

Dr Mohammed Waheed Hassan

Ambassador Rasgotra, President of the Observer Research Foundation, friends, ladies and gentlemen, it is a special privilege to be invited to speak at this very prestigious institution. I thank you, Mr. Rasgotra, for that very kind introduction. This is my first visit to India since becoming Vice-President of the Maldives. Our experience of the struggle for democracy is still fresh in our minds and therefore my address to you today will be from a very personal point of view.

As Ambassador Rasgotra pointed out, I have been involved in this process together with my colleagues for many years now. I believe that the role of any government is to create a peaceful society in which most people feel free, feel that their fundamental needs are met, and that there is an enabling environment for people to succeed and progress. This is true for both dictatorships and democracies. But the way these are interpreted by the two is very different.

In an autocratic system creating peace in society sometimes means establishing law and order at any cost: while in a democracy it is not acceptable to establish law and order at any cost. It is important to respect fundamental human rights and to allow dissent. In an autocratic system meeting the needs of the people is often addressed at the very basic levels. In the hierarchy of needs the majority of the people only meet the very basic levels of needs; only a few reach the level of self-fulfillment and attainment.

It is important for any government to create a compelling argument, a justification for its goal and this compelling argument is often a story about how these functions are performed by that government.

It is the basis, in short, for legitimizing the power of the State, and it is achieved, normally, through persuasion—persuasion through the media and the cultural apparatus of the State but also through instilling fear in the people.

The struggle for power, then, is often a struggle for defining this compelling argument. One might define it as the autocratic or the democratic version of the truth. In Maldives, we believed that it is important for our people to attain their fundamental human rights and we rejected the notion that people could be tortured, that those in power could steal the wealth of the people. We believe that people should be free to express their opinions. These are some of the ideals that drove us to struggle for a change in our system.

We struggled for many years; my personal story is within that struggle. I have been associated with the efforts to bring democracy in Maldives for over 20 years. As Ambassador Rasgotra alluded, I was first elected to a political post in 1989 at a very important juncture in our history. I believe major changes take place when there is crisis of legitimacy of the State, when the story that is told is undermined for some reason. The story that was told to us by the autocratic government at that time, that the State is responsible for protection and well being of our people, was undermined in late '80s with the occupation of Maldives by an invading militia. That undermined the credibility of the government and destroyed the semblance of protection that we had.

It so happened that the next parliamentary elections came a year after that. I do not believe I was particularly smart to win that election. But I think it was a historical moment in which the legitimacy of the State was in crisis. Therefore, the people voted to change the system. That was a beginning for me: that was an important beginning where the people chose to elect a number of parliamentarians with demand for constitutional reform and they began to engage themselves with the Parliament at that time to bring about change. But what did not happen was that a small group of Members of Parliament were unable to consolidate their hold on the instruments of power, especially the media; also, the right to organize. So being divided due to the lack of political rights to organize that particular effort was doomed to failure. At enormous human cost to the people the

government was successful in clamping down on that particular initiative. The government was in charge, and was in control and was in a very short time able to strengthen its hold over various state instruments of political control. Media was completely under the control of the government which prevented any political organization. And the military and the police were fully in the hands of the government. There was very little that a small group of MPs could do at that time. Many of our supporters had to suffer in prison. Some of my own supporters and relatives spent six years, eight years in prison: some of them were heavily tortured and the only way I knew to relieve the pressure was to retreat and that was when I left the Maldives for a year of freelancing and subsequently taking a position in the United Nations, where I ended up spending more time than I ever wanted to.

So, what changed between 1990 and 2005? I returned in 2005 to join the political movement at that time. It is not that nothing had happened between 1990 and 2005. I believe that there was a gradual chipping away of the foundations of dictatorship in the Maldives and the hegemonic power of the government. That was through the gradual opening up of the media and, most importantly, with the introduction of the new media—the international television and news networks, the mobile telephone and the internet. I think these are important technological innovations that really helped to break the grip on the maintenance of the legitimizing story of the autocratic regime. As a result, the government was under pressure to reform the Constitution and to hold democratic elections. The pressure built again, at a time, once again, when the government was weak in its legitimacy. That happened in 2003 when a young person in custody died and the government was severely under pressure to justify his death. We believe he was tortured and killed. This triggered a series of mass demonstrations in the Maldives, unprecedented in recent history and some of my colleagues, most notably my colleague here, Hon'ble Zaki, were arrested and put in prison.

They were in prison and under enormous international scrutiny. When the Asian tsunami hit the Maldives, it further intensified international engagement with the Maldives. That was a weak moment for the government, and the pressure from

outside was strong enough to secure release of our colleagues in prison. It was also an opportunity for friends of the Maldives, India in particular, European and other western countries, to impress upon the government that the time had come for the Maldives to follow the example of other democracies in the region.

Therefore, in August of 2008 we had a new Constitution, but before that the government was forced to allow registration of political parties. Even to this day we still don't have a Political Parties Act; but, political parties were allowed under Presidential Decree and the Maldives Democratic Party (MDP) was registered, formed first outside the country and later registered in the Maldives. Subsequently, the Head of the Government at that time, President Gayoom, formed his political party. So, these events led to the historic elections in October 2008, and the people were definitely ready for this change. The election result in our minds was a foregone conclusion, but a number of people, especially in the Government, did not believe this was possible because the grip on power was so strong of the then president.

What this change represented was, in the first place the removal of fear from the people. Months after the change I visited several islands, remote islands, and people wondered what had changed in the Maldives. What was the real benefit of democracy to the people? It was easy for people to understand that they had now cast aside the fear that they used to live with. To me, that was the most important change that came about as a result of democracy in the short run.

Of course, the transition is a difficult one but we are extremely happy that it has been smooth and peaceful. For us, we believe, this is a historical event in a country that is predominantly Muslim with a homegrown democratic movement and a transition that was absolutely peaceful. This is the first time in our history where we have had change after such a long time and the previous head of state is able to continue to live in peace in the country. Also, soon after the presidential election—only few months later—we had the parliamentary elections. In these parliamentary elections the major parties won nearly equal support from the people. That is also an indication that true democracy has begun in the Maldives.

There are many challenges in this transition. The transition first of all in the notion of justice itself. What does justice now mean to the people? It now extends beyond the basic needs of the people. For the first time, all the people in the Maldives can aspire to be free to express themselves, to organize themselves and to participate in political activity, compete for power without fear of recrimination. For the first time, we have spent one long year without a political prisoner in the country.

These for us are very important achievements. It is important that we also ensure that freedom is not only freedom from the domination of the minority elite: now we must also make sure that the freedom is from the domination of the majority, because the individual is a very important part of the democratic equation. The challenges are great but I am confident we can overcome them. Our strength lies in widespread public faith in democracy and in the fact that our democracy is a home-grown one.

We are currently in a new atmosphere of political competition. We are learning to function in this new environment. As James Madison had said, the public good is often disregarded in the conflict among parties and decisions are made not according to rules of justice but according to the interests of the majority. So, this is one of the cautions that we have to exercise as we go into democratic governance. The other aspect related to justice we need to be cautious about is that it is not enough that there is justice now; we are also under pressure to seek justice to the abuses of the past. Many people have suffered. There are only few families that have not been touched by the abuses of the past. All of us have members of our families who have been affected, who still live with the traumatic memories of spending time in prison and being tortured. There are demands for retribution. It is not easy for the Government to ignore these calls for retribution.

What we need to do then is to find a system of retributive justice, transitional justice where we seek some amount of retribution for those who have been abused but at the same time respect human rights. This to some extent is a dilemma and it poses a challenge to forging of a new kind of legitimacy for the State. It becomes particularly challenging in an environment where the Government is no longer fully controlling the media. In a democratic society it

is not important to have full control of the media but it is important for any government to have a dominant role in explaining their views through the media.

We also function in a new competitive environment where the Opposition is very strong and are able to challenge every decision of the Government in public release and in informal settings. But the challenge to establish that newly-forged legitimacy also comes from new-found freedoms in religion, within Islam that is: still the Maldives is very much a 100 per cent Muslim country. At least we say so, but within Islam there is a rising confusion in religious discourse influenced by extremism.

But I believe the greatest challenge facing us today is calibrating the right balance between autonomous institutions of the State and the State control of those institutions. I will give you an example of the Civil Service. The Civil Services Commission is an independent institution. In most countries that I know it is the extension of the government for implementation and execution of public policy. In the Maldives, we have yet to make this link smoothly. The Civil Services Commission sees itself as a completely independent institution; that is often taking the role of holding Government responsible for its decisions related to public service. This is making it complicated, especially because you have a civil service that has been imbued with values and the orientations of an autocratic regime for the last 30 years.

All these are challenges that the new Government faces in its transition. They are further complicated by the current economic situation, both in the world and in the Maldives, partly due to the global recession but largely due to irresponsible fiscal decisions within the country in the past few years. Our transition comes at a time when the Maldives has high inflation, very high public debt and a decline in revenues. I am told that since 1956 there have been about 73 transitions from dictatorship to democracy: Maldives has the worst conditions under which any government had to make this transition for the reasons that I just mentioned.

I believe that in consolidating and strengthening democracy in the Maldives, we now have to focus on establishing a working relationship with all political

parties on strengthening public role in expressing itself and explaining itself through the media, on building public confidence in public policies through easily achievable short term gains. Despite all these challenges our determination to remain patient and persistent in this transition, without making the mistake that others have made in cracking down on the Opposition or in asserting non-democratic practices, is firm and unshakable. And we hope that with the support of our friends abroad, particularly in India, we should be able to achieve smooth transition and to consolidate democracy for ever in the Maldives. I don't think this is reversible.

Thank you very much. I will be happy to take your questions.

Ambassador of Iceland: Thank you very much for sharing your personal views on this transition. The transition you mentioned coincides with the rising challenge in the environmental field and I think the change that you mentioned has immediate international dividend in having a much more responsible voice for the challenge that you face in your country and many other countries in similar circumstances. Can you perhaps comment on that? That is something I know is very interesting to the international community.

Dr Mohd. Waheed Hassan: Thank you Excellency. Clearly climate change issues are priority issues for the Maldives as my country is one of the most vulnerable ones to climate change. What this means in the short run for us is a much greater focus than would have been necessary otherwise in terms of resource allocation for adaptation to climate change. Many of our islands are threatened by coastal erosion, water levels being contaminated and the livelihoods of people on several islands also being threatened. So, this is a major issue which any government will have to address. We are taking a fairly pro-active role here, and we have decided that over the next 10 years the Maldives will become carbon-neutral. This is not because it will affect the global emission of carbon dioxide or in any way change the situation in the world, but because for us a sustainable development approach is something we believe in and something that adds to the way we make meaning for our lives in the Maldives.

We believe it is important for us to walk the talk and not just ask everybody else to take sharp cuts in emissions. Therefore, the government has decided—our President announced last year—that we will work towards the goal of carbon-neutrality over a 10-year period. We look forward to cooperation with Iceland where, we know, you are already engaged in several innovative programmes. Similarly we are also cooperating with India on several projects related to climate change and the goal towards carbon neutrality.

Mr. Alok Bansal, Executive Director, National Maritime Foundation: I have been a student of developments in the Maldives during the last two decades and there is no doubt that the country has made a significant transformation on the democratic path. The inner-party democracy that MDP practices is actually spectacular and unprecedented as far as South Asia is concerned. However, there is still one slur as far as the Maldives is concerned and that concerns religious freedom. And I think constitutionally you still entail that people should be Sunni Muslims, otherwise they will lose their citizenship rights. I have always believed that absence of democracy and pluralism actually breeds extremism, and that is what had started happening during the later part of President Gayoom's regime. You have ushered in democracy, but as long as you prevent pluralistic thoughts I think extremism will, sooner or later, take roots in the Maldives.

Dr Hassan: Thank you for your observation. Maldives remains a 100 per cent Muslim country and clearly this is what the people want through democratic process of formulating the new Constitution. There is freedom of expression in the Maldives. Clearly there is a hegemony of religious clerics in defining what constitutes Islam and what does not, but this is a conversation I believe will also be subject to democratic parameters, and we hope that in the future there would be more open discourse on religious pluralism as well.

Mr. Abhijeet Sinha, Advisor (Communications), TERI: My question relates to the one by the Ambassador of Iceland. Basically, what we are trying to project through media here is environmental security and the Maldives, I believe, has large concerns on environmental security aspects. So, in

this transition from dictatorship to democracy and for seeking justice, how do you see the situation unfolding? If there is a crisis with rising sea levels and other climate change aspects, there would be some slippage? As pressures mount in the Maldives, would there be slippages from democracy and would extremism take roots?

Dr Mohd. Waheed Hassan: It is hard to say. I think it will be difficult for anybody to predict this. But the change to democracy in Maldives has come after a very long struggle. Most of the people in Maldives, I think, truly believe in democratic values today. The population is highly literate and they are exposed to the rest of the world. I believe political awareness is there to prevent return to autocratic rule. Clearly, the pressures, as you alluded, are there, threats are there; and we have brought about this change amidst some of those pressures. Many of the islands are affected by serious erosion. And this of course has necessitated the government to go in and assist these islands.

What democracy will do for these people is to give them a bigger voice than before. The people in the remotest islands and in the smallest islands will be able to participate. We have now reconstituted our electoral system. We have moved from a 50-member Parliament to a 77-member Parliament with much smaller constituencies for allowing even the smaller islands to elect their own representatives to the Parliament. I hope this will further facilitate the voice of the people who are most in danger of climate change.

Mr Niranjana Sahu, ORF: Two questions for Your Excellency. I am quite impressed by your dossier about the transition that Maldives has undergone. I am actually keen to know more about the role of new media, which facilitated it in some sense. People went desperately for a regime-change and they wanted to express themselves freely. Does that kind of experience have, in your view, some implications for other Islamic countries, like Iran or Saudi Arabia which traditionally, still have authoritarian regimes? Whether the new media can actually act as some kind of a catalyst there. Second, the dilemma you have about retribution and reconciliation. Generally in any kind of democratic transition almost all nations go through that kind of pang. Perhaps, you can look at the South African experience, the reconciliation

commission they set up in the aftermath of the removal of the apartheid regime? They went through that process and they have quite commendably, done that without even violating the basic human rights of the people who misused power for such a long time.

Dr Mohd. Waheed Hassan: Thank you. I have no doubt in my mind that new technologies will contribute to breaking the barriers and open up closed societies. I recall an incident when I was in Sri Lanka in 1984, I was invited to the 80th birthday of Arthur C Clarke and he came to the meeting with a small suitcase in which he had some machinery and he showed pictures of the then Soviet Union. These pictures that were shown to everybody were of internal events that were happening in the Soviet Union and he said: "If I can carry this technology in a suitcase this is going to be absolutely critical in opening up the societies." I don't think in 1984 anybody predicted the breakup of the Soviet Union. That struck me and has remained in my mind as something very prophetic-what Arthur Clarke said at that time. For sure, in my country this new media has had a critical role in opening up and I believe it is happening in other societies as well. If you look at Iran, for example, today a lot of the activities and political discussion is taking place on the Internet. If you look at China, for example, the incident with Google also illustrates that there are issues related to free media. So, I really think this is a *fait accompli* and the new technologies will contribute to opening up societies everywhere.

On your second question: you are very right. We are looking at experiences of other countries, particularly South Africa, in the setting up of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and we believe that experience would be important for us. We have a situation where a lot of the people have been abused politically, physically, emotionally, and there had to be some healing and this healing will not happen just by itself: it has to be assisted and we need to learn from other countries to do that effectively.

Next speaker: Taking up from what you mentioned about the two major parties taking a big share in the parliamentary elections; that was also President Nasheed's first reaction to the election results. Considering that the Opposition DRP has got a majority in the Majlis or people's Parliament, how do you see the cohabitation working in the last so many

months and where do you think it is heading? That is one question. Second, this transition to democracy and socio-economic justice-how do you think it is working and what is the roadmap for that? I have a third question, as an educator and an educationist, what do you think is the future of higher education in particular in the Maldives and where can countries like India be of help?

Dr Mohd. Waheed Hassan: Thank you Sir. For your first question, clearly we are still very new to the experience of party politics. As for the composition of Parliament, you are right that at the beginning the DRP was the single largest party but it did not have an absolute majority in Parliament. That situation is also changing with the signing up of more Opposition MPs to the MDP. Today, we are happy to note that MDP is the single largest political party in Parliament. We believe that as the situation settles, the Government through its strengthened dialogue with the Opposition parties will be able to achieve majority support for its Bills in Parliament. There are very important Bills before Parliament now and they are not particularly partisan in nature. I think bipartisan support is possible for some of these Bills because they touch the core of the economy and politics in the country. Some of them relate to judicial reform, the establishment of a new penal code and also the economy. There are new revenue bills that are in Parliament and we believe they are essential for stabilizing the economy: and a stable economy is important not just for the MDP, it is important for the DRP and the opposition as many prominent businessmen are also in the opposition.

Your second question was about transition and social justice. There is a basic reorientation of public policy from State control to market economy. Many public enterprises are being now open to privatization and for joint ventures. We believe this will open up new opportunities and challenging entrepreneurship for young people in the country, thereby opening up opportunities for people to do well, thereby opening up the rather closed opportunities to gain wealth in the country. The biggest sector is tourism. Within the tourism sector we hope to bring about some changes soon. There were some bad decisions two years ago just before we took over, where a number of islands were given away at rather high rents, through

unrealistic agreements and this situation is being corrected now. That will again further open up participation in the tourism sector.

We believe these things will further promote social opportunity, social equity. In this transition, the Government is also extremely conscious of support to the most vulnerable. Therefore, for the first time we are setting up a social safety net to ensure that everyone has the basic minimum goods and services. We instituted an old age pension of 2000 rupaiahs for any one above the age of 65 which has brought about some security for the elderly who are often left alone when their sons go away to work on other Islands as most of the employment is in resorts. So, that gives them some security there.

Your third question was with regard to education. Yes, we have a system of colleges in the Maldives at the moment; but we have a Bill in Parliament which, hopefully, will be adopted within the next two months. This is the University Bill. And then we will be ready to establish the first national university of the Maldives, and there our policy is really not to reinvent the wheel. We will continue to provide mainstream course study in collaboration with institutions abroad, and develop new areas of study with a comparative advantage unique to the Maldives. These are the areas of marine sciences and maritime research and development, hospitality and tourism and environment and climate change. These, I think, would be the three areas of particular emphasis for research and development in our new university. I happen to be the Chairman of the Higher Education Council, and we believe that we are now ready. Once we have the legal framework in place we should be able to institute the organizational structure for the new university. We look forward to cooperation with the Indian universities and the University Grants Commission in this. I believe there is a continuing dialogue with the Indira Gandhi Open University as well on some of these issues.

Ms Sreeradha Datta, IDSA: What is the level of women's participation in your politics? What percentage of women parliamentarians have at this point of time and does the State, or the Government, have a policy for reservations in terms of giving them a particular role to play in this new transitioned

period that you are going through? Second, I want to know if, in the context of what you said about zero carbon emissions etc. and as a thoughtful leader in environmental issues, you are looking at the South Asian countries to come together to fight these environment issues which are affecting all the countries in fact. Is the Maldives taking a lead in that sphere?

Dr Mohd. Waheed Hassan: Thank you. For your first question with regard to women's role in development, traditionally the Maldives is a very liberal society with strong role for women in family and in the society. We have had in the past women Heads of State. Now in the current Parliament we have six women. You will be pleased to know that all of them are graduates. We are encouraging women to be more active in politics through the party system. Unfortunately, in the Constitution there is no reservation yet for women members of Parliament: but if the political process does not facilitate that, it is something that we will need to consider in the future.

With regard to climate change, I believe the next session of the SAARC Summit coming up in April in Bhutan will focus on climate change issues. In addition to this, there are other initiatives. We have been a supporter of the Copenhagen Accord and we want to facilitate the setting up of a climate change fund, especially something that will benefit the most vulnerable islands and land locked countries. We recently had discussions in the Maldives with the President Timor Leste, Dr José Manuel Ramos-Horta with regard to the possibility of an Asian initiative for climate change adaptation; and this is something you might hear more of in the next few weeks. The idea is to get a critical mass of Asian countries to come

together and mobilize their own resources without having to wait for developed countries to assist.

Ambassador Rasgotra: There was a question about women's empowerment in the Maldives. Ladies and Gentlemen, we have here with us Madam Hassan. Madam, we thank you for gracing this occasion. And Mr. Vice-President, I was delighted earlier this morning to welcome a bright and charming young lady diplomat, an officer in your High Commission here. I have been to the Maldives several times and I think there is an atmosphere of forward-looking freedom and dignity for women in that country. I do not think there is any bar/ disability effecting their right to education, work advancement in society. So, the ground exists for further improvement of their status in parliament and representation in local bodies.

Mr. Vice-President, a wave of freedom and democracy is sweeping the sub-continent. Regrettably, the change, in some of the countries, Nepal, for example, has come through lot of violence. The change in Bangladesh has come through a transitory military regime. Happily, in the Maldives the change has come through an open, free and fair electoral process which forebodes well for the stability, strength and progress of your Excellency's country and for a South Asia as a whole. In your address, Mr. Vice-President, you mentioned that your democracy is homegrown democracy. In that, indeed, lies your government's and your nation's strength. I think that is vitally important. For a democracy imposed from outside simply does not work. It has to grow from within, from the soil of the country, with its own characteristics. And whatever the challenge, a truly home-grown democracy cannot fail. We wish you and the Government and people of the Maldives all success in the tasks that lie ahead.



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