Significance of Maldives Elections

Why in news?

The recent Presidential election in Maldives has turned into a virtual referendum on which regional power (India or China) will have the biggest influence in the Indian Ocean archipelago nation.

What about India Maldives relationship?

- **Historical ties-** It is believed that the first real form of governance was established in Maldives by *Sri Soorudasaruna Adeettiya*, a prince from an Indian kingdom.
- **Diplomatic relations**- India was among the 1st to recognize Maldives after its independence in 1965 and to establish diplomatic relations with the country.
- **India First-** It is the policy of Maldives government, the importance of India's strategic role in the country is well-recognized with India being seen as a net security provider.
- **Maritime Boundary treaty 1976**- It was signed between two countries where Maldives has recognised *Minicoy as the integral part of India.*
- Recent projects of India include
  - **Addu development project-**Water and sanitation in 34 islands, roads and land reclamation,
  - **Connectivity projects-** Port project, 2 airport development project, *Greater Male Connectivity Project*
- **Indian aid**- India was the first to assist Maldives during the 2004 tsunami as well as the water crisis in Male in 2014.
- As per estimates between 2018 to 2022, Indian aid was over Rs 1,100 crore, more than double the previous five year-term (about Rs 500 crore).
- India's *High Impact Community Development Project (HICDP)* in Maldives fosters socio-economic development in local communities, empowering youth, and preserving culture and heritage.
- **Trade-** The trade relation between the two countries was about Rs 50 crore in 2021.
- **Defence ties**- India has trained over 1500 Maldivian defence and security personnel in the last 10 years, meeting around 70% of their defence training requirements.
- Dhruv Advanced Light Helicopters was gifted by India to Maldives in 2010 and in 2015.
- **Tourism-** In 2020, India was the largest source market for the Maldives with nearly 63,000 Indians visiting the Maldives.
- Indians are the 2nd largest expatriate community in the Maldives with an approximate strength of 27,000.

Election in Maldives

- **Parliament and Council Elections** – They run under the *first-past-the-post majority system* where voters vote for only one candidate.
- **President Elections** – It is similar to France, where the winner has to secure more than 50% of votes.
- If no one crosses the mark in the first round, in the second round, the top two candidates go head to head. *(Two Round System)*

What is the history of Presidential elections in Maldives?

- Maldives has followed a system of ***Executive Presidency*** since 1968.
- It followed a single-party system till 2008, and the President was elected for 5 years through a referendum.
- **1968 to 1978** – The 1st executive President of the Maldives was Ibrahim Naseer.
- **1978 to 2008** - Maumoon Abdul Gayoom ruled the country for 30 years, famously defeating a coup attempt with India's help in 1988.
- However, amid protests by different groups, Gayoom undertook political reforms in 2004.
- Political parties were registered in 2005 and a new Constitution adopted in 2008 that charted the path towards Presidential elections ***every 5 years*** with a ***multi-party system***.

Elections	President (Winner)	Favoured
2008 elections	Mohamed Nasheed	Favoured China
2013 elections	Abdulla Yameen	Favoured China by joining China's Belt and Road Initiative
2018 elections	Ibrahim Mohamed Solih	Favoured India
2023 elections	Mohamed Muizzu	Pro-China

What is the significance of election in Maldives?

- **Geo-political dynamics**- In the complex neighbourhood of the Maldives, geo-political dynamics north of the archipelagic nation tend to dominate discussions on foreign policy.
- **Strategic location**- The country's strategic location makes it an important player in regional affairs.
- **Corruption-**The tenure of Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom, who served as the country's leader from 2013-2018, was marked with allegations of widespread corruption and human rights violations.
- **Debt diplomacy**- There was a massive debt as a result of the leader's strong preference for Chinese investment for the construction of public infrastructure.
    - *The country is expected to reach US 1 billion dollar in debt servicing by 2026.*
- **Diplomatic dispute-** Maldives lost long standing legal battle with Mauritius over the Exclusive Economic Zone (37,000 square mile expanse of the Indian Ocean) in the Tribunal on Law of Sea.

What are the issues in India-Maldives relation?

- **India Out campaign**- It was started in 2020 as on-ground protests in Maldives and later spread widely across social media platforms.
- **Lack of transparency**- Some have called for lack of transparency, between bilateral agreements signed between India and Maldives during the Solih's government.
- **Presence of Indian expatriates-** There has been accusations of presence of Indian military troops in Maldives for military tasks.
- **2023 elections** – Mohamed Muiz, alleged to favour China has been elected as President, thus raising concerns for India.
- Mohamed Muiz has declared that if elected, he would follow the India first policy traditionally practised by governments of Maldives, but will not allow the crossing of limits.

What lies ahead for India?

- Developments over the last two decades have shown that China has steadily encroached and made gains in India's backyard.
- For India, losing goodwill in the Maldives can prove costly, especially in the light of the Chinese strategy of '*String of Pearls*'.
- Despite the anticipated challenges that India may encounter due to the evolving political landscape in the Maldives, it is crucial for India to stay committed to its priorities and continue its efforts to drive development in the archipelago nation.
- Developments in Maldives are therefore not to be taken lightly. After *Hambantota*, India can simply not afford the formation of a Chinese base.

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