



“It feels more normal for me to be in nature than sitting in air-conditioned buildings.”

President Mohamed Nasheed of The Maldives



A Political Activist Becomes President

The Maldives is a country well known as a paradise for affluent people. However, there is much more to the Maldives, which has just achieved a peaceful transition to democracy on 11th November 2008. *MillionaireAsia's* **Brian Yim** was granted an exclusive interview with President Mohamed Nasheed in Male.

Mohamed Nasheed, more popularly known as “Anni”, is among the youngest to be democratically elected to the highest office of the land at the age of 41 years old. The political activist and former journalist was a strong critic of the previous government, run with an iron fist by Maumoon Abdul Gayoom who ruled the country for 30 years.

For being outspoken, Mohamed Nasheed was jailed no less than 13 times. He was beaten so severely that he now has a permanent limp. He formed the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) while in self proclaimed exile in Sri Lanka and returned to Male in 2005 when political parties were legalised for the first time. Violent protests in 2004 and 2005 led to a series of reforms by former President Gayoom to legalise political parties and improve the democratic process.

In the October 2008 elections, Mohamed Nasheed ran against

Maumoon Gayoom and won 54% majority votes to be the first elected President in the Maldives. There was high interest in the elections with an 85% voter turnout.

“I had no intention to be the President. It is destiny. At that juncture, it was the only thing that I could have done; to seek elections and was fortunate enough to win it”, President Nasheed told *MillionaireAsia* in an exclusive interview held at his state office in Male.

The “people’s President” has been quick to stamp his mark on the presidency with a refreshing accessibility and openness. At an evening dinner I attended, President Mohamad Nasheed waited in line with guests, standing right in front of me at a buffet queue, waiving away his security detail. He has also been reported to change the former presidential office to a simpler one

occupied by the personal assistant to the former President.

The presidential yacht costing nearly US\$8 million is on the slash list and is being put up for sale on eBay. He is also in the process of opening to the public the luxurious presidential island used as a private playground by the former President and his family. The island has palatial villas, a tree house and even a private beach and cricket pitch. President Nasheed sees no need to continue with the estimated US\$150m a year to sustain the presidential lifestyle, intending to trim it down to a more modest US\$4m a year, channelling the expenses towards what he calls his “social protection programmes”.

President Nasheed has his job cut out for him. He inherits a fragile economy over dependent on tourism (comprising over 30% GDP and more than 60% of foreign exchange receipts) and beset with serious social

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problems including substance abuse among its youths, gang violence and unemployment. About 80% of its female population is unemployed. His MDP reform party however won the elections promising to transform the social and economic landscape and he is determined to deliver on his pledges.

“I like the Maldives to be a country of happy people enjoying a good life. A country where citizens can afford to own a house and say I have rights and unafraid to criticise anything openly without fear of intimidation. That I am a person who can stand on my own feet, earn a reasonable wage and will take care of my family, my children,” he enthused.

In his first five months in office, President Nasheed said that the government has put together corporate projects offering joint venture opportunities in partnership with commercial enterprises. Nineteen companies submitted their

Expressions of Interest, following the government’s call to form joint venture partnership to develop Male’s International Airport. Singapore’s Changi Airport is believed to be among those who have submitted a proposal. “We are seeking joint venture partners and we are very satisfied with the response investors are showing in the Maldives. What remains is to get the projects going. As far as the economic programme goes, we are very satisfied,” said President Nasheed.

“But on the social protection front, I am not that satisfied. We have much to do. The policies are there but the difficulty here is that these are not corporate projects. It has to come from hard government money. The corporate programme has to succeed to a certain level for us to engage in the social protection programmes.

The Maldives Government’s official foreign reserves stand at a modest US\$223 million as at the end

of February 2009, which is a mere 1.6 months of imports. Its reserves declined 25% from January 2008.

With the economic programmes’ success crucial to fund its social development projects, President Nasheed is especially keen to attract more foreign investments.

“Maldives produced better returns than anywhere else. Look at the early investors in our resorts. They got 10 to 20 fold returns. Even your Singaporean investors in the Maldives have never got a return of less than 15%. They make their money not just from selling sun, sea and sand but also utilities. Your guests are paying for electricity, drinking water and sewerage services. There is scope for private investments in utilities. You can also make good money selling duty free items. Investing in the Maldives can provide more handsome returns than elsewhere.”

The World Bank Group is providing assistance to the Maldives



President Mohamed Nasheed arriving with his entourage



President Mohamed Nasheed giving an address



A Role Model: William Pitt

from Singapore including our water plants. Many Maldivians also invest in homes in Singapore.

The smaller islands should team up to form our own grouping to carve out a voice for ourselves. In fact, I am planning a visit to Singapore soon to learn more about the Singaporean business models.

People Whom the President Admires

President Mohamed Nasheed graduated from Liverpool’s University of John Moores, with a Bachelor of Arts in maritime studies. He draws inspiration from William Pitt (1759-1806) who became the youngest prime minister of Great Britain at the age of 24 years. The younger Pitt, together with his father, is regarded by historians as “the most conspicuous English Ministers of the 18th century.” Interestingly, Pitt, the younger, was conspicuous as “an incomparable manager of men and finances; so too, as a man who would resort to harsh measures” to get things done.

“I admire William Pitt, the younger, for his ideas on the modern nation, of taxation and the modern economy. I must say that I am also an admirer of Mr Lee Kuan Yew in terms of his role in Singapore’s economic development, nation modelling and the socialist democratic society he has developed. He is excellent. Others I learnt from are political leaders like Nehru, Abraham Lincoln, George Washington and Napoleon Bonaparte although he is known to be quite ruthless as well.”

President Nasheed also looks up to Nelson Mandela, the former President of South Africa. “It is very noble for someone to have believed

government to implement its development strategy. Annual GDP growth has averaged 7% in the last 25 years and this has led to a drop in poverty rates. Measured in terms of its population headcount, poverty levels have been falling steadily from 40% in 1997 to 28% in 2004 and to a further 16% in 2005.

But the current global recession has also severely affected the Maldives and tourism, by far its main income earner, has been badly hit by declining arrivals, which were down 5% in Jan 2009 and a steep 13% in February. Maldives attracted 683,000 tourist arrivals in 2008 but for 2009, it is projecting an -11% decline. Maldives expects positive growth again in 2010 and beyond. For 2009, government projections are for a -1.3% contraction in GDP growth, the second time in its history registering negative growth. The first was in 2005, when the economy contracted by -4.6% in the aftermath of the tsunami.

President Nasheed’s key challenge is to build a sound foundation for democracy to thrive in the island state. However, as noted by Dr Ahmed Shaheed, his Minister of Foreign Affairs, who spoke to the country’s development partners recently,

“the people are impatient to see the delivery of promises made to them. They want tangible proof and they need to be convinced that democracy feeds them better than autocracy. The new government’s aim is to introduce practical and sustainable policies and programmes that would transform the social and economic landscape. We have to strengthen the foundations of a free and democratic society. Maldives which is a paradise for the affluent people in the world must also be a paradise for its own people.”

Looking Up To Singapore

President Mohamed Nasheed: “We always look up to Singapore and celebrate its success. We are keen to tap on Singapore’s expertise as much as possible and we believe there is much scope for collaboration to attract more Singapore investments into the Maldives. We already have successful stories of Singapore companies, like Hotel Properties, COMO Hotels & Resorts, Banyan Tree, Angsana Resorts and Spa and SATS doing very well in the Maldives.

On the other hand, the Maldives is one of your best buyers of potable water. We import almost everything



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that you can forgo many comforts that are outside oneself; to have courage and resilience. No, it was not so much courage but the patience to sit and wait and wait for change to happen.”

“But most of my best heroes are writers. I tend to like writers far more than politicians or even sportsmen. Writers like Salman Rushdie and Amy Tan, the Chinese-American author known for her novels *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*.”

“I like writers for their vision and fiction writing can be a very useful medium to inspire policy development. Creating your own characters, taking them into play and

let the characters live their world and see what happens at the end. Writers have greater vision that any politician can ever aspire to.”

President Mohamed Nasheed is the author of many Divehi and English books, novels and newspaper articles. He has earned diplomas in historical philosophy and journalism.

Divehi or Mahl is an Indo-Aryan language spoken by people in the Republic of Maldives and also in the island of Minicoy (Maliku) in neighbouring India, where it is known by another name, the Mahal.

“I like writing,” said President Nasheed.

On being remembered as the first elected President in the Maldives...

“I don't mind if I am not remembered. I don't really care about it at all. I just want to focus on doing the right thing. To build up our capacity and have a good team in place.”

“I like spending time with my two daughters who are aged seven and eleven. I also enjoy reading, playing tennis, exercising and watching cricket matches.”

Jobs For The Youths

“We want to identify 5,000 youths between the ages of 18 years to 35 years. Train them and give them a job.

That's our target for the first year. This is not a large number but it is a start. There are at least 25,000 youths out on the streets without a job and if we don't look after them, they could be on the verge of engaging in serious criminal activity.”

Threat Of Global Warming

Maldives has more than 80% of land area 1m below sea level. The Maldives holds the record for being the lowest country in the world, with a maximum natural ground level of only 2.3m (7½ ft) with the average being only 1.5m above sea level, though in areas where construction exists this has been increased to several metres.

Neutral Within A Decade

On 15th March 2009, President Nasheed announced plans for the Maldives to become the world's first carbon neutral country. His bold initiative has convinced other countries including, Iceland, Norway and Monaco to follow its footsteps.

A switch from oil to 100% renewable energy production lies at the heart of the Maldives' plan. “We know cutting greenhouse gas emissions is possible and the Maldives is willing to play its part. Climate change threatens us all. Countries need to pull together to de-carbonise the world economy,” President Nasheed said.

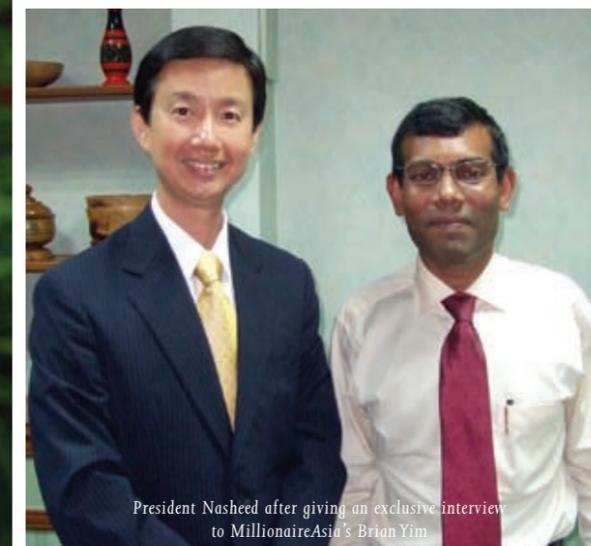
To support his plans, President Nasheed inaugurated a high-powered 16-member advisory council that will spearhead the government's efforts to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change. The Presidential Advisory Council on Climate Change will provide expert advice on how the Maldives can cut its greenhouse gas emissions and become the world's first carbon neutral country in 10 years. The advisory council will also recommend adaptation measures that the Maldives can introduce to protect the country from rising sea levels.

The 16-member advisory council, brings together the Maldives' top environment and energy experts from

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From left: MillionaireAsia's Brian Yim, Ahmed Naseem, Maldives' Minister of State for Foreign Affairs & President Mohamed Nasheed



President Nasheed after giving an exclusive interview to MillionaireAsia's Brian Yim

across government and the private sector. It is also supported by a group of international climate and energy experts.

Vice President Waheed said: “We already have a broad plan on how the Maldives can reach carbon neutrality. We know that a combination of solar, wind and biomass power generation, combined with offsetting aviation pollution, will get us most of the way there. This advisory council will set out the detailed plans and a timeline for emissions cuts and other environmental measures to be implemented over the coming decade. We also need to start preparing for the rise in sea levels we know will take place this century. This is why the advisory council will offer expert advice on adaptation measures the Maldives can introduce to defend itself from rising seas.” ■

ABOUT THE MALDIVES

The Maldives was long a sultanate, first under Dutch and then under British protection. It became a republic in 1968, three years after independence.

Located in the Indian Ocean, south-southwest of India, it is widely regarded as one of the most beautiful tropical islands. It consists of approximately 1,190 coral islands spread over 26 atolls, ring-like coral formations enclosing a lagoon. They stretch for about 820 km from north to south and 130 km at the widest point. However, the sea covers 99% of its 90,000 km² and only less than 200 islands are inhabited.

Composed of live coral reefs and sand bars, the atolls are situated atop a submarine ridge 960km long that rises abruptly from the depths of the Indian Ocean and runs from north to south. The Maldives stands as a rare success story of a country that has leveraged on its environmental assets and is well on its way to graduate to middle income status in 2011.

Maldives has a population of about 340,000 with nearly a third concentrated in Male, the capital. There are 35,000 expatriates in the Maldives, mostly employed in white collar jobs.



Photo Credit: Huwafen Fushi



Photo Credit: Sun Hotels & Resort