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Maldives Local Council Elections: A Stress Test for Executive Power?

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The 2026 Local Council Elections and national referendum marked a major turning point in Maldivian politics. Voter turnout reached a record 73.6 percent, defying expectations of apathy. Nearly 69 percent rejected President Mohamed Muizzu's proposal to align presidential and parliamentary elections, signalling widespread concern over centralisation and executive overreach. The centre-right opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) emerged strengthened, winning all city mayoral races and securing the largest share of seats nationwide. The ruling People's National Congress (PNC) suffered a significant mid-term setback, particularly in urban centres.

The results reflect deeper structural tensions in Maldivian governance: the balance between decentralisation and centralisation, the growing weight of state-driven patronage, and public frustration with governance practices. The outcome constrains the government's political room for manoeuvre while energising the opposition and reaffirming the electorate's willingness to mobilise when core constitutional issues are at stake.

1) Background

The Maldives operates under a presidential system established by the 2008 Constitution, which introduced multiparty democracy, separation of powers, and decentralised governance after decades of centralised rule under President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. Political authority is shared between the executive, the People's Majlis, and local councils. Despite these reforms, power has often remained concentrated in the presidency.

The country's geography—nearly 1,200 islands across the Indian Ocean—makes local councils essential for service delivery, development planning, and environmental management. Decentralisation was intended to reduce Malé-centric governance, but tensions between central and local authorities have persisted. Local councils were created under the 2010 Decentralisation Act after intense political debate. Their powers have shifted with political changes: weakened under President Abdulla Yameen (2013–2018), strengthened under the MDP government in 2019, and again reduced under President Mohamed Muizzu since 2023, including the abolition of atoll councils.

Against this backdrop, the 2026 Local Council Elections—held on 4 April—carried unusual political weight. Alongside the elections, President Muizzu proposed the country's first national referendum under the 2008 Constitution, seeking approval to synchronise presidential and parliamentary elections.

2) Results and Outcome

Polling for the 2026 Local Council Elections and national referendum was held on 4 April 2026, with 294,876 eligible voters registered nationwide. Voting stations operated from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., although polling was extended until 5:00 p.m. in several areas due to unexpectedly high turnout. A total of 588 ballot boxes were deployed across the country. The elections covered island councils, city councils, and Women's Development Committees, with 865 seats contested nationwide. These included 629 island council seats across 179 islands, 184 Women's Development Committee seats, and 52 seats across five city councils. Despite expectations of voter apathy and low participation, turnout surged to 73.6 percent—equivalent to 217,024 voters—marking the highest participation ever recorded in a Maldivian local council election.

The local council results represented a major setback for the ruling PNC. The MDP swept all five mayoral contests, with incumbents retaining office by substantial margins. In Malé, Mayor Adam Azim secured 45.21 percent of the vote, defeating PNC candidate Moosa Ali Jaleel, who received 30.12 percent. The MDP also secured all five Women's Development Committee presidencies in the country's cities.

Nationally, the MDP emerged as the strongest electoral force. The party secured 42.9 percent of the national vote and won a total of 246 seats, compared to 38.9 percent and 218 seats for the ruling PNC. Independent candidates also performed strongly, winning 81 seats and 13 percent of the vote, while smaller parties such as the Maldives Development Alliance (MDA), Jumhooree Party (JP), and Adhaalath Party (AP) secured limited representation. Although the PNC remained competitive in smaller island constituencies, the MDP achieved working majority in all five city councils, which together account for more than half of the country's population. The ruling party secured only six out of 52 city council seats nationwide.

Across the country, the results were mixed at the island level but remained broadly unfavorable to the government. The MDP won 70 island council presidencies, narrowly ahead of the PNC's 69, including one uncontested seat. Independent candidates secured 25 presidencies, while the Jumhooree Party retained Maamigili and smaller parties such as The Democrats and the Maldives Development Alliance recorded isolated victories.

The outcome has widely been interpreted as a significant mid-term political setback for President Muizzu and the PNC. Within the ruling party, the decision to combine the referendum with the local council elections has increasingly been viewed as a strategic miscalculation. Rather than remaining a routine local poll, the election evolved into a broader national referendum on the government's performance. The constitutional proposal appears to have mobilized a large "silent majority" of voters—including politically non-aligned citizens—whose opposition to the referendum also translated into electoral losses for the ruling party at the local level.

3) The Referendum

The referendum asked whether presidential and parliamentary elections should be held concurrently. It quickly became the central issue of the campaign. While opposition figures, constitutional experts, and civil society groups argued that synchronising elections would weaken democratic accountability by reducing how often governments face voters and diluting

parliament's independent mandate, the government said the reform would save over US\$5 million annually from 2028, increase turnout, and reduce political gridlock.

Despite expectations of low participation, 68.56 percent voted against the proposal, ensuring that elections will continue to be held separately and that the current Majlis will serve until May 2029. The scale of the defeat was striking given the extensive state resources mobilised in support of the referendum.

4) Electoral Process and Participation

The pre-election period was marked by a significant expansion of state-led hiring, contracts, and welfare benefits, reinforcing concerns over the growing role of patronage politics in the Maldives. State-owned enterprises currently employ more than 37,000 people, surpassing the country's approximately 34,000-strong civil service, prompting concerns from institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) regarding long-term fiscal sustainability. In the week preceding the election alone, the Maldives Transport and Contracting Company (MTCC) announced more than 1,000 job openings.

Traditionally, island economies in the Maldives relied on fishing, agriculture, and local tourism. However, the rapid expansion of state-owned enterprises has increasingly shifted employment patterns towards the public sector, creating large numbers of jobs with limited accountability. In many cases, these positions are widely perceived as instruments of political patronage rather than productive employment. Reports of employees receiving salaries without clearly defined responsibilities have reinforced perceptions of inefficiency and state dependency.

The exchange of jobs and state benefits for political support has become increasingly normalized across successive administrations—originating under President Abdulla Yameen, continuing under President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, and further intensifying under President Muizzu. One frequently cited example is the Housing Development Corporation (HDC), where the monthly wage bill reportedly increased from MVR 27 million to more than MVR 45 million within a relatively short period.

At the same time, the Elections Commission faced some of the strongest criticism seen in recent electoral cycles. In several cases, ballot boxes were reportedly placed on the ground, complicating the voting process—particularly for elderly voters required to cast three separate ballots. Journalist Ali Sulaiman, who has observed elections since 2003, remarked that he had never witnessed arrangements of such poor quality.

5) Pre-election spending and political strategy

The elections were preceded by a wave of government spending, particularly in the housing sector, further intensifying debate over the use of state resources during election periods. A pledged discount of MVR 200,000 on Hiyaa flats effectively allowed some tenants to avoid rent payments for up to two years, while several major housing projects were announced in the weeks leading up to the vote.

Opposition figures and critics characterised these measures as election-driven giveaways intended to consolidate political support ahead of the local elections and referendum. President Muizzu rejected these accusations, insisting that the timing of the announcements was coincidental and part of the government's broader development agenda. Nevertheless, public skepticism remained widespread. Repeated delays and shifting timelines surrounding

housing projects have contributed to growing distrust among voters, many of whom increasingly view such promises through the Dhivehi proverb “the Devil’s plan to marry”—a reference to grand declarations that ultimately fail to materialize.

Housing and land allocation remain deeply politicized issues in the Maldives, where severe land scarcity and high population density have made access to housing one of the country’s most sensitive socio-political concerns. In this context, the distribution of housing units and land plots is often perceived as being shaped as much by political alignment and patronage networks as by socioeconomic need.

6) Analysis

The 2026 local council election and referendum outcome represents a significant political development for President Mohamed Muizzu. Rather than a routine electoral setback, the result functions as a clear signal of public sentiment on governance direction and institutional balance. President Muizzu’s referendum proposal to align presidential and parliamentary elections was decisively rejected, with nearly seven in ten voters voting against the measure. The scale of the rejection extends beyond the specific constitutional proposal and reflects broader public concerns regarding centralization, perceived executive overreach, and the government’s political approach. The referendum appears to have mobilized a broad section of the electorate, including voters who may otherwise have been less engaged in the electoral process. Instead of lowering political contestation, the proposal became a focal point for participation, contributing to a high-turnout environment in which broader dissatisfaction with the administration was expressed. The outcome suggests that the government will need to reassess its political strategy and recalibrate its approach to constitutional reform and public communication.

One of the key outcomes of the election is the apparent consolidation of opposition forces within the political landscape. The Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) has emerged from the election with renewed organizational strength and visibility, reinforcing its position as the principal opposition actor. At the same time, commentary from various political actors, including former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom and other opposition-aligned figures, has previously highlighted the need for greater coordination within opposition politics. The election outcome may accelerate such tendencies toward consolidation. Historically, Maldivian politics has demonstrated the capacity of the MDP—particularly figures associated with Mohamed Nasheed—to shape opposition narratives, mobilization strategies, and coalition-building efforts. This election result reinforces that capacity with renewed electoral legitimacy. Consequently, the opposition is likely to become more coordinated, more assertive, and more confident in applying sustained political pressure on the government and state institutions.

In the Maldivian political context, incumbency does not necessarily translate into sustained political dominance. A president may remain in office while facing increasing constraints on agenda-setting capacity due to shifting public sentiment and institutional pressures. State institutions in the Maldives have, at various points, demonstrated responsiveness to political mobilization and public pressure. Security institutions, the legislature, the Elections Commission, and, in certain instances, the judiciary have shown varying degrees of flexibility in politically charged environments. This pattern suggests that institutional stability is not absolute, but contingent on broader political dynamics. If this trend continues, President Muizzu may

face an increasingly constrained governing environment, characterized by reactive governance, heightened political contestation, and reduced policy flexibility.

The institutional framework remains a key factor in shaping the post-election political trajectory. The Supreme Court of the Maldives continues to occupy a central position in unresolved constitutional and institutional matters. At different points, it has acted as a strong interpreter and enforcer of executive-aligned constitutional positions during periods of institutional contestation, while also demonstrating sensitivity to shifts in political pressure and broader questions of legitimacy. The key uncertainty going forward is therefore not solely legal in nature, but also political: the extent to which institutions can maintain their positions amid renewed opposition momentum and heightened public scrutiny. In the Maldivian political cycle, institutional behavior has often been characterized by fluctuation rather than linear continuity, with periods of assertion followed by adjustment. As political pressure builds, the durability of institutional positions may become as important as their formal authority in determining the next phase of political developments.

7) Regional and International Implications

The implications of the 2026 Maldivian local council elections extend beyond domestic politics and carry broader relevance for the wider Indo-Pacific region, as well as for European partners, including Germany.

For regional actors such as India and Sri Lanka, the outcome reinforces the Maldives as a politically fluid small island state where electoral behavior is closely tied to governance performance, patronage networks, and perceptions of centralization. The strong voter response to constitutional questions also underscores the volatility of institutional reforms in small democracies, where state capacity and political legitimacy remain tightly intertwined. For external partners, this signals that engagement with the Maldives must remain attentive not only to electoral cycles but also to underlying governance dynamics that can rapidly reshape policy direction.

For Europe, and particularly Germany as a key development and climate cooperation partner, the results highlight the continued importance of institutional resilience and decentralized governance in the Maldives' political stability. Given the country's strategic vulnerability to climate change and reliance on international financing for infrastructure and adaptation, shifts in executive-local relations can directly affect project implementation and governance outcomes. The rejection of perceived centralizing reforms may also be interpreted as a signal of public preference for stronger checks and balances, an issue closely aligned with European governance priorities in development cooperation. More broadly, the election illustrates that even in small island states, constitutional and institutional design choices are increasingly subject to politicized contestation, with implications for how external partners calibrate support for democratic consolidation and administrative reform.

8) Conclusion and Outlook

What was intended by the government as a procedural constitutional reform became, in practice, a nationwide referendum on political trust, governance direction, and institutional balance under President Mohamed Muizzu. The outcome was unambiguous. High turnout defied expectations of electoral fatigue and instead reflected strong mobilization across the electorate. The decisive rejection of the referendum proposal signaled broad resistance to the

proposed centralization of electoral cycles and concerns over executive concentration of power.

At the local level, the results reinforced this national message. While competition remained relatively balanced in aggregate seat totals between the Maldivian Democratic Party and the People's National Congress, the MDP's sweeping victories in all five cities and strong performance in council presidencies underscored its renewed organizational strength and electoral reach. The PNC's reliance on smaller island councils masked a broader weakness in urban and high-population centers, where political sentiment proved most decisive.

More broadly, the election exposed structural tensions in Maldivian governance: between decentralization and centralization, between state expansion and fiscal sustainability, and between a patronage-driven political economy and demands for accountability. The scale of state involvement in employment, housing, and electoral mobilization further intensified perceptions that the referendum was embedded within a wider strategy of political consolidation.

Ultimately, the results act as both a political constraint and a corrective signal. It reflects not only dissatisfaction with a single policy proposal but also growing scrutiny of governance style and institutional direction. For the government, the results demand recalibration. For the opposition, they offer renewed legitimacy and momentum. The broader system has shown that Maldivian voters remain capable of high-impact mobilisation when core constitutional issues are at stake.

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