

Small Island Climate Diplomacy in the Maldives and Beyond

Written by Athaulla A. Rasheed

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ATHAULLA A. RASHEED, JUN 16 2019

The world's first underwater Cabinet meeting held by the Maldives in October 2009 was not merely an eye-opening plea for climate action but also a social construction of what climate impacts mean to small and low-lying island states. The former president of the Maldives Mohamed Nasheed was quoted as stating that '... we are trying to send our message to let the world know what is happening and what will happen to the Maldives if climate change isn't checked' (Reuters 2009). One may argue that this was a public diplomacy strategy not new to the Maldives as well as to most small island developing states (SIDS) in climate politics (Corneloup and Mol 2014, 281). The timing of the Cabinet meeting was crucial to create global awareness about what it would be for island-states like the Maldives if sea level rise and climate impacts persisted. This event was selective especially in a time where climate negotiations which have succeeded the 1992 landmark United National Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) had not pursued honest global efforts to combat climate change. The voice for special consideration has already been heard; however, policy commitments to set and meet emissions reduction targets were insufficient at best (IISD 2009). The small and vulnerable states like the Maldives were greatly exposed to further challenges especially due to the lack of commitments on emissions targets.

In 2007, the 'Bali Roadmap' called to replace the weaker Kyoto document with stronger requirements for cuts in global emissions, and in 2009, the post-Kyoto process prepared for a new deal to be set at Copenhagen held in December (IISD 2009; UNFCCC 2007). The Maldives took an international front stage. As reiterated by the Maldives Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdulla Shahid at the United Nations (UN) Security Council in 2019:

... On 17 April 2007, when the Security Council held its first-ever debate on the impact of climate change on peace, security, I spoke in this very room on this very same matter. I reminded the Council on that day, that climate change is not only an everyday fact of life for the Maldivians, but an existential threat. I reminded the Council that a mean sea-level rise of two metres would suffice to virtually submerge the entire Maldives under water. That would indeed be the death of a nation.

The idea of the death of a nation created a moral language for the Maldives in international negotiations. Likewise, the October 2009 Cabinet meeting created a moral leverage for the Maldives in shaping a SIDS' climate discourse, leading up to the Copenhagen negotiations in December that year. A temperature rise limit of 1.5° C was agreed between SIDS during the September 2009 AOSIS Summit in New York (UN 2009). The media impact of the Maldives' underwater Cabinet meeting gave strategic leverage for SIDS to dominate this emissions reduction debate at Copenhagen which consider a 'temperature rise limit of 1.5° C above preindustrial levels, funding for adaptation, and a legally binding outcome' (Corneloup and Mol 2014, 281). Copenhagen did not conclude the role of SIDS; similar play was seen in the proceeding negotiations at Paris in 2015 where their claim to limit the temperature increase to 1.5° C was pursued while 'keeping a global temperature rise this century well below 2° C above pre-industrial levels' (UNFCCC 2015; Ourbak and Magnan 2017).

This practice of public diplomacy through social construction of meanings to climate impacts goes back to historical developments of SIDS' island diplomacy. The island diplomacy of SIDS so far has been effective especially through the efforts of AOSIS in promoting their common agenda in climate negotiations. The Maldives emerged as a key

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driver of this island diplomacy in the UN climate negotiations (AOSIS 2015). Using a constructivist approach, this paper discusses how the historical development of the SIDS' island diplomacy was shaped the Maldives in the mid-1980s.

Maldives and construction of island diplomacy

The 1970s and 1980s' climate science and politics provided a window of opportunity for the Maldives to engage more meaningfully in international policy-making. The 1972 Stockholm Conference on Human Environment for example established the notion of 'common but differentiated responsibilities' (CBRD) which informed the collective measures on global environmental issues. The 1972 Stockholm Conference marked a turning point of collective policy efforts against global challenges (Bodansky 2001; Stone 2004, 279). However, it was only in the mid-1980s that the ideas about unique vulnerabilities of small and low-lying islands to climate change became globally significant.

Small state politics or diplomacy was not a new phenomenon to international politics. The constructivists have found conceptual bases to explain evolutionary impact of small states on restructuring the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) during the post-Cold War (ref). However, island diplomacy has mostly been emerged around the topic of climate politics of small island states in the 1980s, and the Maldives was one of the first countries to link island diplomacy to a universally agreed island vulnerability identity of SIDS.

The Maldives experienced a devastating impact from a swell wave in 1987 which caused huge damages to its island infrastructure, amounting to about MVR9 million (equal to over US\$500,000, at current exchange rate). The experience saw 3-meter wave causing flooding across several islands including the capital city, Malé and the international airport island (Ministry of Environment and Energy 2016). This was a turning point of political approaches to climate events. Soon after the 1987 event, the Maldives called upon the international community to acknowledge the science and reality behind climate change and take swift action. The Maldives saw climate change as a global problem. However, its message was made stronger when the ideas about 'existential threat' was linked to its island diplomacy (Barnett and Campbell 2010; Sealey-Huggins, 2017, 2445; Corneloup and Mol 2013).

In the 1987 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), the then president of Maldives, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom called upon policy-makers to acknowledge climate change as a global event, recognise that SIDS were among the lowest contributors to climate change but most affected, and agree to the need for international cooperation (UNFCCC 2005).

A former Minister of Transport and Shipping of Maldives reiterated the message in Small States Conference in the Maldives in 1989 (Ibrahim 1989) that 'the world community must pool its resources, and ... take effective measures to mitigate the adverse consequences of global warming, climate change and sea level rise'. Following CHOGM, in 1989 British scientist Martin Holdgate found that 'there was special need for concern for low-lying island countries' (Barnett and Campbell 2010, 86). During the same period, former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher advocated for the impacts faced by low-lying island states from climate change (Barnett and Campbell 2010; Paterson 1996, 34). The Pacific islands that participated in CHOGM shared similar views about island vulnerability to climate impact in which they explained as inseparable connections between 'social' and 'natural' entities (Barnett and Campbell 2010, 24). Following the 1987 CHOGM, the then president of the Maldives Gayoom stated the following in his statement to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) later that year:

... Scientists all over the world now accept the fact that concentrations of atmospheric carbon dioxide and other 'greenhouse gases' will continue to increase in coming decades, mainly as a result of human and industrial activities ... Scientific findings now predict a possible mean sea level rise of about 1 metre within a century. Such a rise would have critical impacts on all coastal and island nations, and prove physically, socially, and economically disastrous [vis a critical finding for the Maldives] ... The Maldives, a mean sea level rise of 2 metres would suffice to virtually submerge the entire country of 1,190 small islands, most of which barely rise over 2 metres above mean sea level. That would be the *death of a nation* [emphasis added]. (Maldives Permanent Mission to UN 1987)

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... The period from the 10th to the 12th of April recorded the highest sea level evidenced in the country [the Maldives], during which unusual high *waves at high tide struck the islands with a ferocity* [emphasis added] that inflicted extensive and unprecedented damage throughout the country ... As such, I have brought to this Special Debate the *testimony of the people of the Maldives* [emphasis added]. The rich and developed nations clearly have the wealth and the land to defend themselves from a rise in sea level even if they wait for it to occur, yet they are already preparing.

Because small states are *more vulnerable* [emphasis added], we have to prepare sooner. But the Maldives lacks the economic, technical and technological capability to deal with the formidable prospects of a significant rise in sea level. *We did not contribute to the impending catastrophe to our nation; and alone, we cannot save ourselves* [emphasis added]. (Maldives Permanent Mission to UN 1987)

This statement declared ideas about the existential threat to SIDS which has also shaped the discourse of its island diplomacy. The statement used strong and moral language to link the notion of 'death of a nation' to unique vulnerabilities and need for international efforts to address the special circumstance of SIDS.

Shared ideas shaping island diplomacy

In a public diplomacy lens, the Maldives has strategically built and managed relationships and to 'influence opinions' at multilateral and regional negotiation platforms, by exchange one's internal ideas with others (Byrne 2012; Huijgh and Byrne 2012; Tago 2017). The island vulnerability identity was the key ideational driver for the Maldives to establish a common voice for SIDS. The socialisation of this common voice was evident from the establishment of their Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) in the early 1990s which became a key platform for their climate negotiations (Betzold, Castro, and Weiler 2012; Betzold et al. 2015). In a constructivist lens, the impact of shared ideas explains this socialisation function of public diplomacy (Byrne 2012). For instance, the shared ideas about special vulnerability and the need for international cooperation constructed the intersubjective understandings for their common agenda. And, the moral language used by the Maldives in its 1980's statements made this ideational impact, shaping CFPs of SIDS to work together in climate negotiations (Maldives Permanent Mission to UN, 1987).

The 1989 Small States Conference on Sea Level Rise in its capital city, Malé was a crucial institutional platform of island diplomacy which brought several SIDS together on the topic of sea level rise. The main purpose for the Maldives to hold this conference was to establish a united 'call for action' (Edwards 1990, 5). Fourteen small and low-lying island states, including Antigua and Barbuda, Cyprus, Fiji, Kiribati, Maldives, Malta, Mauritius, Trinidad and Tobago, Vanuatu and others from the Mediterranean and Caribbean Seas and the Indian and Pacific Oceans at the conference shared views on climate impacts. The Conference declared that 'low-lying, small, coastal and island states will face a decidedly greater predicament. Sea level rise would cause extensive damage to the land and infrastructure of those countries' (UNESCO 1989, 1). SIDS agreed that that small and low-lying states face an existential threat and must deserve international recognition (UNESCO 1989). Then Minister of Environment and National Service of Trinidad and Tobago Lincoln Myers stated that '[SIDS] must therefore act now and let our voices be heard so that our circumstances are taken into consideration and incorporation into any response strategy developed to combat environmental problems' (Myers 1989). Then Transport and Shipping Minister of the Maldives Abbas Ibrahim added that 'countries such as the small island states gathered here have become innocent victims of actions of industrialised nations' and reminded them on former president Gayoom's description of the Maldives 'as an endangered nation.' He further reminded that then president of Kiribati had expressed concern that 'in 50 or 60 years my country will not be there' (Ibrahim 1989)

With these reminders Minister Ibrahim (1989) called for a collective voice to raise 'our concern and seek the collaboration and assistance of International Agencies in developing a capability for mitigating [impacts of climate change]'. Then Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of Vanuatu Jack T. Hopa agreed that SIDS have a 'limited economic base' and hence the need for 'industrial countries to recognise these potential problems and work together with small countries in an effort to find solutions and develop a plan of action to take' (Hopa 1989). Fiji Minister of Rural Development and Rural Housing Apolosi Biuvakaloma characterised Fiji's situation 'a rise in the mean sea level by 1.5 metres today would lead to the infiltration of sea water into approximately 50,000 ha of

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agricultural land, [and] virtually destroy Fiji's tourism industry that' and expressed his government's commitment to 'any initiatives arising out of this Conference that would lead to strengthen cooperation amongst small island states' (Biuvakaloloma 1989). The declaration finally decided to 'seek assistance from the UN', for 'protecting the small states of the world which are most vulnerable to sea level rise' (UNESCO 1989, 4).

The Maldives' conference was a milestone initiative of island diplomacy. It drew the ideational framework of SIDS' leadership in climate politics which has constructed the institutional foundations for their island diplomacy today. Although public diplomacy was not expressly used in their practice of CFP, the ideational construction of their island diplomacy presented the functions to support the type of public diplomacy the SIDS including the Maldives uses today to tell their climate story.

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