

Gayoom speaks his heart out

In exclusive interview shares his vision and views on politics, reforms and socio-economic development



President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom

In a frank exchange of his views in the run up to next year's election, President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom in an exclusive interview, shared with the Hamaroalhi Daily as to why he wanted to contest, his vision for the Maldives and the people, his reaction to a possible common candidate or alliance from the main Opposition, his "no nonsense approach" towards rooting out terrorism and assessment of the Opposition.

Saying that "I want the reform agenda to be my legacy" fulfilling a promise made to people, Gayoom responded to a growing chorus for electoral reforms with an assurance that a full electoral package would be in place prior to next year's vote. President added that before any one else, it was he who proposed the reforms and expressed the need to have those in place early.

Commenting on the Opposition's role, the Asia's longest serving leader said "it has so far failed to present itself as a viable alternative to my Government."

"Their actions so far can only be described as irresponsible" with no vision whatsoever for the country presented so far," Gayoom noted.

Following is the full interview

Q: After being the President for 29 years what made you to declare yourself again as the Presidential candidate?

A: First, as you know, I was elected as Leader of the DRP last year for a four year term. The articles of association of the party place the responsibility on the shoulders of the party leader of representing the party in any presidential election that may come during his or her term of office as Leader.

Second, I firmly believe that the political reforms that I proposed in June 2004 can be implemented in full in a few years from now. I want to keep my promise to the people. I have

made it very clear on numerous occasions that I want the reform agenda to be my legacy. I want to oversee the transition to a liberal democracy.

Q: What will be your message to the masses in your Presidential campaign, what is the promise you will make?

A: It is fair to say that the people know me very well. They also know the policy framework of my Government, and the principles and values that I cherish, espouse and promote. Therefore, I do not have to make any hollow promises to the people.

The topmost priority will be the completion of my democratic reform agenda, and to attain a smooth transition from LDC to middle-income status. As outlined in the current Seventh National Development Plan, it is of the utmost importance that we widen our economic base and thereby reduce our vulnerability to external shock.

The national identity of the Maldives, which is founded on the country's Islamic faith, has to be strengthened. I will also redouble efforts to promote greater respect for our rich cultural heritage, language and history.

I believe that one of the biggest successes of my Government has been the fact that the prosperity of the country and the people has increased rapidly over the years. Today, we are at an important stage in national development, where, if managed carefully, we can achieve a remarkable increase in our income levels over the next three to five years. Also, the people can look forward to more peaceful and politically stable times ahead. I will also continue to focus on regional development and reducing the income disparity between Male' and the atolls. There are numerous important economic and social development projects and programmes in the pipeline in the coming years. My Government has a global reputation for responsible utilization of donor assistance and delivering unprecedented results in key social service programmes.

Q: Being Asia's longest serving leader, what is your assessment of the opposition parties in the Maldives?

A: Unfortunately, the opposition has so far failed to present itself as a viable alternative to my Government. Their actions so far can only be described as irresponsible.

I presented, in 2004, a political reform agenda to usher in a modern liberal democracy with greater human rights safeguards. The opposition has not proposed or presented any such agenda or vision for the betterment of the country and its people.

I sincerely hope that they will leave behind their militant past and embrace liberal democratic values and principles. That is what the people want.

Q: There is talk of a united front against you at 2008 presidential polls. How would you react to the idea of a possible common candidate from the main opposition and other supportive groups?

A: Coalitions are an integral part of democracy. As such, I see nothing wrong with one or more parties and political organizations forming coalitions in times of elections.

Education and awareness in the Maldives have increased in leaps and bounds during my Presidency. Today, the people take informed decisions on matters that affect their lives. A good example was the recent referendum. In spite of the efforts by the opposition to lead the people astray, the result was an overwhelming victory for the Presidential System. That was a defining moment in Maldives' democracy. You can rest assured that the people will make such an informed decision in next year's elections.

Q: Like any other political party, critics say that DRP too is having its own factions within the party. Do you see them as a threat?

A: Political infighting is harmful and undesirable for any political organization. I believe that all members of a political party, including its leadership and senior officials, must wholeheartedly embrace the party's articles of association. Anyone who fails to do so should not remain in the party. As leader of DRP, I have never encouraged the formation of factions or divisions within the party. The success of a party lies in the unity of its members.

Q: Do you see able leadership in the party if and when you leave office? Lot of great leaders have done succession planning and do you have any such plans?

A: Absolutely. The DRP has the strongest parliamentary group. My entire Cabinet are senior members of the party. We have the biggest youth group from among all political parties. Numerous educated professionals, talented youth and vastly experienced people are in the party. They all contribute to the party's development. The future of the DRP is therefore much brighter than any other political party or organization in the country.

I do not believe that it is my responsibility to hand-pick, identify or nurture a successor. I am trying to make the Maldives into a modern democracy. In a democracy, a leader is chosen in a popular vote by the people. It is not the responsibility of any one individual.

Q: The chorus for an independent Elections Commission is growing. Several development partners and independent international agencies have called for this. What are your views? Would you facilitate the establishment of EC well in advance of Presidential Poll?

A: Of course. Long before any development partner or independent international agency called for the establishment of an independent Elections Commission, I made it absolutely clear that a full package of electoral reform has to be implemented before conducting the country's first multiparty election in 2008. This recommendation can be seen on my initial 31-point proposal on constitutional reform. It is also on the Roadmap.

An independent Elections Commission has to be established under the new Constitution before next year's elections, if the election is to be free and fair. A comprehensive elections law has to be passed as well. Similarly, a revised regulation on public elections has to be imposed to accommodate for the participation of political parties.

All this is in the pipeline yet. However, none of these reforms can be implemented until the new Constitution is finalized. Many other such reforms have not been delivered by the date in the Roadmap, because of the delay in the completion of the work of the People's Special Majlis.

However, the Special Majlis is now making good progress. The opposition seems to have succumbed to public pressure to stop obstructing constitutional reform. Once the Constitution is completed, we can push all the pending reforms through in quick succession. That is why I have created a ministry of legal reform.

Q: How would you assess the success of reforms? In brief what do you think should the new Constitution offer to the people? How would you react if the Nov 30 deadline is not met?

A: The Reform Agenda has transformed almost every aspect of life in the country, over the past three and a half years. The criminal justice system in the country has undergone unprecedented changes, as a result of the measures being implemented as part of the Criminal Justice Action Plan. The judiciary is more independent than at any point in the country's history. We now have a free press. There is wider political participation following the introduction of the party system. International best practices are being introduced in the area of protection of human rights, including the establishment of an autonomous Human Rights Commission and other modern institutions such as the Public Complaints Bureau. The Civil Service Commission has been established following the enactment of the Civil Service Bill, and the Chairperson, Vice Chairperson and members have also been sworn in.

The job is, however, only half done with a number of reforms still to be introduced. Most of these reforms can only be introduced after the Constitution has been passed. It is noteworthy that a raft of reform legislations has been tabled in the People's Majlis in recent months, and is awaiting first reading.

My ideas and proposals for constitutional reforms were announced three years ago. I want the Maldives to be a liberal democracy with modern human rights safeguards. I want greater public participation in politics, the removal of gender bias in the political arena, a free press and an independent judiciary. I want strong institutions and democracy firmly embedded in our society.

The November 30th deadline for completing the constitution was set by the People's Special Majlis itself. When I first convened the People's Special Majlis in July 2004, I urged them to complete their work within the year. It took the Special Majlis well over a year to formulate their rules of procedure, and the debate was disrupted since then by excessive use of points of order and repeated lack of quorum. Attempts by the Government to speed up the process with direct dialogue with MDP had little effect. In fact, records will show that I called on the Special Majlis to speed up its work on at least 14 different occasions in the three years and four months since

the Special Majlis was convened. I am delighted by the progress attained by the Special Majlis in recent months. Speaker Mr. Gasim and the members must be congratulated for their efforts.

Q: The opposition which did not have an action plan to root out extremism however has been quick to criticize your action meant to clamp down terrorism. Moreover, your decision to ban the full face veil of women too has come under fire. How best do you think the Maldives should root out terrorism and extremism? How should the country's laws be changed accordingly?

A: We have been taking measures for many years now to try and keep the Maldives free of terrorism and extremist activity. In fact, we see deeply disturbing acts of terror happening almost on a daily basis in some of our neighbouring countries. Until the blast in Sultan Park, we had thankfully not had such an incident in the Maldives. That in itself is a testament to the effectiveness of the measures that were in place in the country to keep terrorism out. Terrorism and extremism are very difficult to keep out, especially in an age of globalization and easy access and travel.

However, the blast in Sultan Park and the incidents on Himandhoo have alerted us to the need to put in place even stronger measures. We are determined to ensure that events such as these do not take place in the Maldives ever again.

The opposition is largely isolated on this matter. The people want the Government to take tough measures to ensure that peace and stability in the country is maintained. It is our responsibility to make sure that the people are safe. Also, the people realize that such incidents, if repeated, would harm our tourism industry. The international community has also recognized and welcomed the Government for taking a “no nonsense” approach to root out terrorism. The opposition will find no sympathizers on this issue.

I don't think extremism can be addressed only by taking tough legal measures. We have to enlighten people to the fact that Islam calls for tolerance, peaceful co-existence and harmony. These people are being misled by some elements, and we have to do a lot of work to raise awareness on religious matters, especially in more remote communities.