

THE ABSENT VOTERS OF THE MALDIVES

Challenges and Prospects for the Enfranchisement of Migrants

Shahindha Ismail

INTRODUCTION

This case study provides an outline of migration in the Republic of Maldives, an archipelago facing unique challenges due to its dispersed geography and vulnerability to climate change, with the concentration of its population in the densely populated capital, Malé.

Maldivian migrants—not only those overseas but also those working in the tourism sector and engaged in internal circular migration—confront several challenges in exercising their voting rights. While a limited out-of-country voting (OCV) system is in place, the absence of alternative absentee voting methods not requiring personal attendance at polling stations constitutes a significant barrier to the enfranchisement of migrants.

In its conclusion, the study highlights several prospects for overcoming the limited electoral enfranchisement of Maldivian absent voters and also recommends a comprehensive debate on what solutions could be adopted, through public consultations, for a more accessible and participative form of democracy in the Maldives.

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1. MIGRATION IN THE MALDIVES: BACKGROUND AND CHARACTERISTICS

Maldivian internal and international migration is characterized by distinct typologies and patterns that were progressively shaped by a combination of historical, economic, social, political and environmental factors.

As the right to movement of Maldivians is enshrined in the country's Constitution, internal movement no longer requires the permission¹ of government authorities. While internal migration is regular, conversely, irregular migration of Maldivians travelling abroad is rare, as the majority of Maldivians who migrate internationally do so through regular channels (Plewa 2019). The primary destination of internal migrants is Malé (Speelman, Nicholls and Dyke 2017). The city of Malé maintains a migrant register known as the Malé Dhaftharu and the Malé Special Dhaftharu. These are lists of Maldivians who have moved to the capital and have no other permanent place of registration. This practice of maintaining a register of migrants is isolated to the capital and occurs despite freedom of movement and the right to migrate within the country (Muhsin 2021).

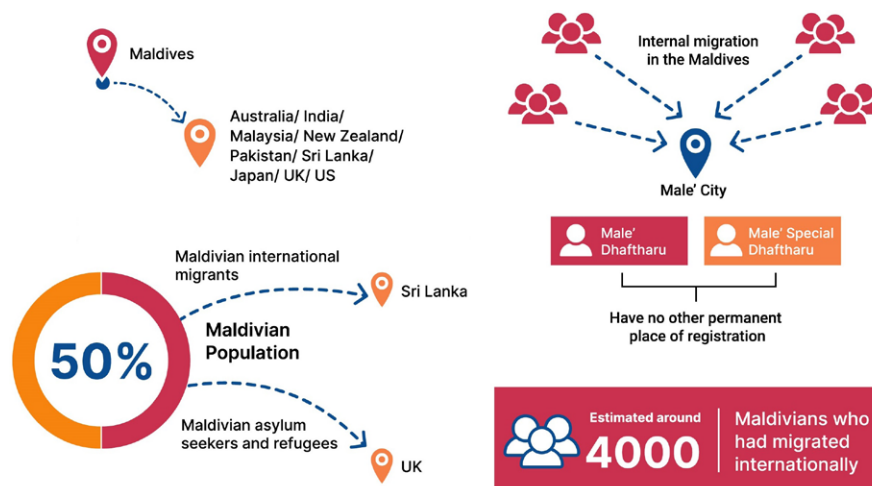
Internal migration is inevitable in a geographically dispersed country such as the Maldives, where resources and basic facilities are scarce.

Migration from one island or atoll to another can sometimes be stigmatizing for social life and even for building a family (IOM 2021). That said, internal migration is inevitable in a geographically dispersed country such as the Maldives, where resources and basic facilities are scarce.

Compared with international migration, the level of internal movement in the Maldives is significantly higher. Internal migration patterns in the Maldives are based on population figures obtained from the most recent census (MBS n.d.). Statistical data from the 2022 Population and Housing Census reported a total population of 515,132 residents in the country. Further, the 2022 Census showed that 46 per cent of the Maldivian population were relocated from their place of birth or previous residence to their current location and, hence, were classified as 'migrants' (MBS 2022). The census also highlighted that migration patterns vary across different regions. For instance, in Malé, over half of the population (54 per cent) are migrants, with a higher proportion of female migrants (56 per cent) compared to male migrants (52 per cent). In contrast, administrative islands exhibit a migrant population of 36 per cent, with no significant gender disparity (MBS 2022). These findings underscore the significant role of migration in shaping the demographic landscape of the Maldives, reflecting both internal movements within the country and international migration trends.

The international migrant population of the Maldives is small compared with that of the rest of the region (IOM 2021), but a large proportion of those living overseas are individuals who have studied abroad or people who have been forced to leave due to political persecution or threats (HRW 2021). While less prevalent than internal migration, international migratory movements of Maldivians are important. Popular migratory destinations of Maldivians include Australia, India, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the United Kingdom and the United States (Plewa 2019). In 2015 approximately 50 per cent of Maldivian international migrants were residing in Sri Lanka (Otto 2024), while most asylum seekers and refugees were residing in the UK (HRW 2021).

¹ The right to freedom of movement for Maldivian citizens is enshrined in the country's Constitution. Article 41 of the 2008 Constitution states: 'Every citizen has the freedom to enter, remain in, and leave the Maldives, and to travel within the Maldives.'

Figure 1. Migration in the Maldives: Background and characteristics

Source: By the author.

Maldivians generally have a deep-rooted sense of connection to their place of birth, especially in the atolls (Sen 2020). Most of those who migrated internationally and left the Maldives permanently still visit their home country regularly (Mueller and Kuschminder 2022). Resettlement of international migrants to the Maldives is not documented (Plewa 2019), and there are no initiatives that encourage them to return. Large-scale migration flows to India resulted in the establishment of a diplomatic mission in Thiruvananthapuram in 2005 (Plewa 2019). Others have returned to the Maldives on a permanent basis because of difficulties in finding employment in their destination country (Plewa 2019), and many more have returned to reconnect with family (MBS 2024).

Inward remittances do not have a significant impact on the economy of the Maldives, especially compared with outward remittances by immigrants. The average annual level of inward remittances between 1983 and 2016 was USD 2.5 million, which peaked at USD 8 million in 2007 (Plewa 2019).

2. DRIVERS OF MIGRATION WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE MALDIVES

Various factors push, and pull, Maldivians to migrate internally or internationally. These include the following:

- *Unavailability of schools.* Data from the National Bureau of Statistics² documented—in the period between 2016 and 2020—a steady decrease

² Statistical yearbooks from 2004 to 2021, <<http://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/yearbook/>>.

in the number of schools across the Maldives. This decrease is in sharp contrast to the rise in school enrolments from 87,788 to 90,565 in the same period. The number of schools in Malé remained constant at 38 (37 in 2018) while the number in the atolls declined from 338 in 2016 to 238 in 2020, for 56,808 students. This results in an average of 12.5 schools per atoll across the 20 atolls and 186 inhabited islands (or 12.5 schools for 291,899 residents).³ The scarcity of school facilities demonstrates that internal migration to urban areas cannot be considered entirely voluntary. Most of the students who move from their place of origin to other islands or atolls to complete their education aim to return to their homes upon completion of their studies if they can find employment when they return. A small number of these students choose to settle down in their place of migration to start a family rather than return to their place of origin. A circular pattern of internal migration has also been observed by researchers (Kelman et al. 2019). Families that can afford to migrate for the duration of their children's education often do so, mostly to India or to Malaysia (UNICEF n.d.). Many of the Maldivian students studying abroad receive scholarships with a binding contract to return to the Maldives following the completion of their studies.

- *Limited employment opportunities.* Tourism is the largest industry in the Maldives. Years of discrimination against Maldivian nationals in recruitment to work in partly foreign-owned tourism establishments led to strong advocacy for their employment. Legislation initially required that 55 per cent of the tourism sector's workforce be of Maldivian nationality. Following reports in 2012 of the lack of available local recruits (Plewa 2019), this cap was reduced to 45 per cent. It is possible that employment or the ability to establish their own business may be the strongest factor influencing permanent migration (Riyaza 2019). Several families who migrated to Malé from the southern region (mostly from Addu Atoll and Huvadhu Atoll) established a business and accumulated land before their children

³ Aggregated data on age distribution in the atolls is not available on national statistical portals.

Figure 2. Drivers of migration within and outside the Maldives



Source: By the author.

began primary school in the capital. Such families remain in Malé or sometimes leave the Maldives (Riyaza 2019). Data from national statistics is unavailable, but the common sight of abandoned homes lying in ruins around the atolls is a clear indication of permanent migration.

- *Limited healthcare services.* There is a significant pattern of movement within and from the Maldives during longer school breaks and the Eid holidays, when many families travel for medical treatment (Maldives Independent 2015). Although the availability of healthcare services in the capital has improved substantially in recent years, many families are forced to move away temporarily for certain types of medical treatment or surgery.
- *Environmental factors.* The Maldives is one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change and rising sea levels. Nearly all its islands are less than 1 metre above sea level (Asian Development Bank 2007). The Maldives was also the only country to face the impact of the 2004 Asian tsunami throughout the country. At that time 53 of the 198 inhabited islands were affected, over 100 lives lost, basic facilities and homes destroyed, and several islands left with no drinking water (Asian Development Bank 2005). At least three islands were submerged within hours.
- *Economic factors.* It is the pressures of daily life and making ends meet, however, rather than seeking safety from impending environmental disaster, that primarily inform the migratory patterns of Maldivians. In their study on migration intentions in the Maldives, Speelman, Nicholls and Dyke (2017) found that environmental factors did not influence the decision of Maldivians to migrate either internally or internationally.
- *Political instability and the spread of violent extremism.* Respondents to Kelman et al. (2019) informed the authors that they considered emigrating due to political disillusionment, religious radicalism and lack of freedom of belief in the country.

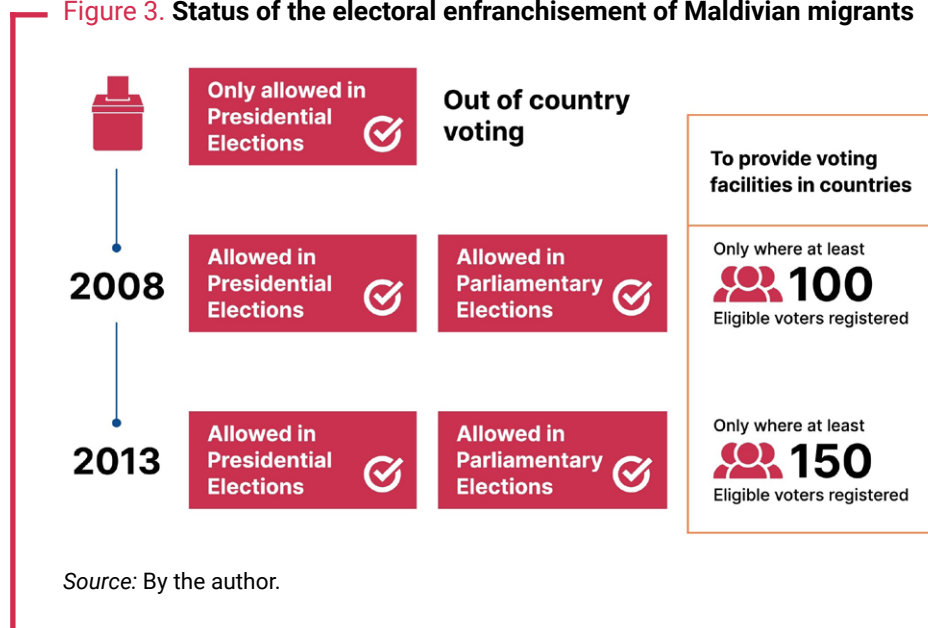
3. STATUS OF THE ELECTORAL ENFRANCHISEMENT OF MALDIVIAN MIGRANTS

Article 26 of the 2008 Constitution provides that every Maldivian from the age of 18⁴ has the right to participate in elections through the right to vote and the right to be elected. Law 11/2008, the General Elections Law, establishes that those intending to vote in a place other than their place of registration must inform the Elections Commission of the Maldives within a specified time. The Elections Commission must publish a voters' register no later than 45 days before the election date.

While all Maldivians are required by law to register to vote, they are not required to be registered in their place of usual residence. Internal migrants usually

⁴ Before 2008 the minimum voting age was 21.

Figure 3. Status of the electoral enfranchisement of Maldivian migrants



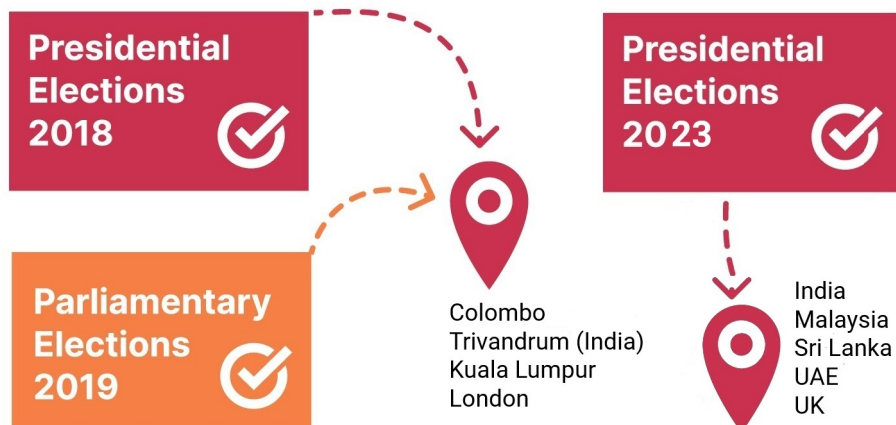
remain registered to vote at their place of birth. Most commonly, they have not lived in their place of registration at birth for over 10 years, if at all. For example, 56 per cent of the people born in Malé are also registered to vote there, while the remaining 44 per cent are registered to vote in other islands. Most of the residents in the resorts, each of which is based on a separate island, and the industrial islands are registered in Addu Atoll (MBS 2022).

Voting in a place other than that of one's original registration at birth requires re-registration before the elections. Until 2008 this process required that voters submit physical application forms and copies of their identification documents (Corporate Maldives 2023). The revised online re-registration processes required voters to place a fingerprint on the application form, which meant that it must be printed and scanned before it can be submitted (MV+ 2024). A fully online re-registration process was, however, made available for the 2023 presidential elections.

While out-of-country voting was previously allowed only for presidential elections, it was extended to parliamentary elections in 2008.

While OCV was previously allowed only for presidential elections, it was extended to parliamentary elections in 2008.⁵ Although the law does not bar any eligible voters from voting, the decision of the Elections Commission, authorized by law, was initially to facilitate voting in countries outside the Maldives only where at least 100 eligible voters were registered. This was changed in 2013 to provide voting facilities in countries where 150 voters are registered to vote (Commonwealth Secretariat 2014). While this measure enfranchises some Maldivians living abroad, many more remain with no access to a polling station. OCV was facilitated for the 2018 presidential elections and the 2019 parliamentary elections in four locations—Colombo (Sri Lanka), Kuala Lumpur and London and Thiruvananthapuram.

⁵ Information provided by a member of the Elections Commission in a personal capacity.

Figure 4. Status of the enfranchisement of Maldivian migrants

Source: By the author.

The OCV was also conducted during the 2023 presidential elections. The Elections Commission set up polling stations for Maldivian citizens abroad in five countries—India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, the United Arab Emirates and the UK—primarily in areas with significant Maldivian populations (Zalif 2023).

4. CHALLENGES FOR THE ELECTORAL ENFRANCHISEMENT OF MALDIVIAN MIGRANTS

The greatest limit to the electoral enfranchisement of Maldivian migrants is the fact that the currently employed OCV system requires personal attendance at a polling station and on a single election day. In a country where commuting for work, especially in the tourism sector, involves regular temporary and circular migration to and from the island where the tourist establishment is based, one of the largest groups affected by this limitation is employees in the tourism sector (Daily FT 2013). Although employers are obliged by law to allow time for employees to attend a polling station, they are not required to provide them with transport, which often renders the legal obligation meaningless (Maldives Independent 2018). It is common in the Maldives for voters, especially those employed in tourist establishments and industrial islands, to have to organize their own transport to attend polling stations.

Maldivians living abroad bear heavy financial costs to cast their votes. While the policy of the Elections Commission is to establish one polling station in any country or city where at least 150 eligible voters are registered to vote, this can in practice be a combination of residents living outside that city (or even in other countries) wishing to participate in the elections. It has been reported that voters have travelled from different parts of India to vote in Thiruvananthapuram, while others have travelled from the USA and European countries to London.

Figure 5. Challenges for the electoral enfranchisement of Maldives' absent voters



Source: By the author.

Political parties often organize transportation in and outside of the Maldives to facilitate the journey of voters to polling stations on election day (Transparency Maldives 2024).

The geographically dispersed population of the Maldives, internally and outside the country, combined with the complex re-registration process for voting outside one's place of origin continue to pose major challenges for absent voters wishing to exercise their voting rights.

5. PROSPECTS FOR THE ELECTORAL ENFRANCHISEMENT OF MALDIVIAN MIGRANTS

The geographically dispersed population of the Maldives, internally and outside the country, combined with the complex re-registration process for voting outside one's place of origin continue to pose major challenges for absent voters wishing to exercise their voting rights.

There has always been resistance from political parties to the topic of electronic or postal voting. The (former) Chair of the Elections Commission stated that despite being more economical than manual voting, the topic was no longer on the table due to a lack of political and public support (Avas 2021). All the absent voters in this study stated their willingness to bear the cost of postal voting if it was required.

Furthermore, as the initial process of democratization in the Maldives took place at an extremely fast pace, mainly between 2004 and 2008, citizens are not overly familiar with the democratic processes (Hamdhan 2013). Political reforms, including those that can increase voter participation of internal and international migrant populations of Maldivians must include public awareness and participation.

Figure 6. Prospects for electoral enfranchisement



Remove the need to attend a polling station personally



Consider internet-based voting, its potentially high costs together with the need for such a method to be trusted.



Consider postal voting as an equally effective but more affordable method of voting



Assess which absentee voting methods best fit the context of the Maldives



Engage people, particularly its absent voters, in the development of Maldivian democracy

Source: By the author.

Recommendations to the Elections Commission of the Maldives

- Increase efforts to include absent voting, including through recommendations to legislative changes.
- Increase public awareness of the various forms of absentee voting and its benefits in the context of the Maldives.
- Conduct a comprehensive, evidence-based assessment of the methods of absentee voting that can be applied in the context of the Maldives.
- Include the participation of absent voters in stakeholder dialogues in meaningful efforts to enable the political participation of all Maldivians living in and outside the country.

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

This case study is part of the 'Absent Voters of South Asia' project, which falls under the project of 'Migrations and Elections' that covers member states of the South Asian Council for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

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Design and layout: International IDEA

DOI: [<https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2024.102>](https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2024.102)

ISBN: 978-91-7671-855-1 (PDF)



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