



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Religious entanglements with the politics of infrastructure in the Maldives

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## Abstract

In this article, we explore the material and discursive spaces around the Sinamale' Bridge, which at the time of its construction was the sole infrastructure project financed by foreign investment in the Maldives archipelago—a distinction it held until recently with the start of the new Thilamale' Bridge project funded by India. We look at the ways in which this Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure project produces, both socially and symbolically, particular and often contradictory conceptions of religion and nation in this '100 per cent Muslim' country. Under the presidency of Yameen Abdulla (2013–2018), mega development projects were envisioned primarily as symbols and sources of economic transformation. Simultaneously, there was a targeted government effort to revive sentiments of nationalism across the country through the circulation of songs, folk stories, and national heroes. Elaborations of the concept of *Dhivehinge isthiqlaal* (Maldivian national sovereignty) conflated religiosity and nationalism in popular discourse on development. The concept is also used to frame narratives of geopolitical relations and tensions, particularly with reference to the competing regional profiles of China and India, which are often framed in the Maldives along domestic political party lines and pitted against the other as presenting a lesser or greater threat to Maldivian identity. Examining the symbolic deployment of the Bridge through the analytic lens of political theology, we argue that it affords a prominent locus of political contestation around which understandings of religion and national sovereignty come together at both the local level and on the sprawling trans-regional scale of the BRI.

**Keywords:** Infrastructure; affect; Islam; Indian Ocean; Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

## Opening a new bridge along the Belt-Road

The Sinamale' Bridge is an embodiment of the strong relations between the people of China and the people of Maldives. It is a true icon of how a mutually beneficial and truly genuine partnership between a larger country, and a smaller one could affect meaningful change in the direction of progress and prosperity... for the Maldives, wishes to be respected for our sovereignty and the supremacy

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of our Constitution. The Rule of Law of the country and its institutions cannot be compromised. The Maldives Story is...the story of One People, One Nation, One Race and One Creed, who have with the global waves of change, adjusted and raised their sails to defend the country, glorious in the pride they have for their nation. The people, who dared to fight armies multiple times mightier, believing that no fight is more glorious than the fight for Islamic faith and the flag of red, white and green. The people who had the courage to say no to the gifts and the ideologies that was thrown at their doorsteps, to stand up, for the country they so loyally serve. For we know that our independence and existence was not gifted to us but is the bounty of the absolute loyalty of our forefathers and their readiness in command to our country.<sup>1</sup>

On 30 August 2018, President Yameen addressed the nation on the occasion of the official opening of the Sinamale' Bridge. The festivities had opened with recitation of the Quran, and Yameen himself began by reciting an Islamic prayer (*du'a*) before going on to extol the Bridge as a symbol of hope and an important piece in the construction of a new national future. Putting on a display of his oratorical abilities, Yameen's speech combined elements of Dhivehi-language poetry, prayers in Arabic, and rhetorical pepperings in Chinese and English. His address touched on the dreams of the young people from the islands and their visions for a more stable and prosperous future for the nation as a whole. In particular, Yameen presented the Bridge as a 'gateway into tomorrow', spanning the waters between the old capital and the 'Youth City'<sup>2</sup> of Hulhumale'—a 'City of Hope' and a 'new Madina', referring to the 'City [of the Prophet]', where Muhammad first established a Muslim community in seventh-century Arabia. As one of the authors, a young Maldivian raised on a small island who had migrated to Male' and holding some of the same dreams herself, rewatched the televised ceremony on YouTube, she could still feel the resonances of this rhetoric of aspiration.

The inauguration of the Bridge was telecast live across the country, significantly expanding the audience well beyond the cadres of foreign diplomats, government officials, Chinese engineers, and the local urban public in Male' who had assembled in anticipation of what was billed to be the most spectacular display of fireworks in the country's history.<sup>3</sup> The official proceedings began with the national anthem of the Maldives, followed by the Chinese anthem, and a recitation from the Quran. Wang Xiaotao, representative of the government of the People's Republic of China, addressed the audience in Chinese followed by an English translation for the locals for whom Chinese is a foreign language rarely heard so publicly in the country outside of tourist resort islands. Enraptured locals took in the unfamiliar sounds and the Chinese in attendance looked on with pride as Wang spoke:

<sup>1</sup>President Abdullah Yameen Abdul Gayoom, 'Address at the inauguration of the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge', available at <https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/20254>, [accessed 12 December 2023].

<sup>2</sup>Hulhumale' is an artificial island off of Male' planned as an urban development with a focus on providing opportunities for young people.

<sup>3</sup>Ismail Abdullah, Hassan Hameed and Ahmed Shiyam (eds), *The making of the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge: A dream realized* (Male': Dhivehi Publishing Group, 2019), pp. 95–100.



Figure 1. Inauguration of the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge. Source: Thoiba Saeedh.

...this bridge represents a starting point for China-Maldives relationships...so as to achieve common prosperity...as President Xi Jinping...respect, equals, amity, win-win cooperation...respect Maldives independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity...and we firmly support the development path independently chosen by the Maldivian people in line with its condition...China will continue to carry out cooperation...our bilateral cooperation should focus on the people so that...no matter how the ship may change...<sup>4</sup>

Following the speeches, President Yameen and Wang inaugurated the Bridge with a few swipes on two tablets handed to them, which remotely lit up the words 'Sinamale' Bridge' on the ornamental entrance archway of the Bridge, in both the Chinese and Dhivehi languages (see Figure 1). With the Sinamale' Bridge officially opened to the public, a much-anticipated fireworks display began. Against the backdrop of the night sky, fireworks lit up the entire length of the Bridge (from Male' to Highway Point), casting colourful reflections on the glistening waters beneath this massive new work of infrastructure. The telecast footage zoomed out to show the massive fireworks display

<sup>4</sup>Wang Xiatao, 'Address at the inauguration of the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge', 30 August 2018.

illuminating the national capital to a soundtrack combining technomusic with the recitation of *madhaha*, a traditional form of Dhivehi poetry.

### National sovereignty and infrastructure development projects

Under Yameen's presidency, the geopolitical orientation of the country shifted significantly, with the Maldives embracing China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) while pivoting away from its established relationship with India. Chinese investment in infrastructure development projects in the Maldives increased dramatically following the 2014 visit of Xi Jinping to the Maldives, the first Chinese president to do so. Mega development projects—and the Sinamale' Bridge in particular—symbolized an agenda of economic transition for the Maldives. As the country's most iconic and largest infrastructure project, and one that facilitated movement and connectivity for a population of 214,502 people in the Greater Male' Region,<sup>5</sup> the Sinamale' Bridge very quickly became an embodiment of *tharaqqee* (development). As such, it also came to serve as a prominent point of reference in state-directed discourses on *Dhivehinge isthiqlaal* (Maldivian national sovereignty). Simultaneously, Yameen's government also promoted the revival of nationalist sentiments across the country through the circulation of jingoistic songs, folk stories, and images of national heroes. These discursive deployments were made to promote officially sanctioned understandings of *Dhivehinge isthiqlaal* in relation to tropes of 'sovereignty', the 'struggle for the Islamic faith', and development as the unifying platform promoted by Yameen's Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) and the People's National Congress (PNC) coalition (hereafter PPM-PNC coalition).<sup>6</sup>

The Sinamale' Bridge offered an energized space for debate over understandings of *Dhivehinge isthiqlaal* in relation to nationalist narratives of geopolitical relations and tensions. Even before the construction of the Bridge, elaborations of the concept of *Dhivehinge isthiqlaal* conflated religion and nationalism and were deployed in state discourses on development.<sup>7</sup> It was also used to frame narratives on the Maldives' international relations and its position within geopolitical tensions between India and China, in which relative degrees of engagement with one or the other of those Asian powers played out along party lines in Maldivian domestic electoral politics. Indeed, a commemorative volume published in Male' on the construction of the Bridge emphasizes Maldivian national sovereignty on the first page—even as later chapters

<sup>5</sup> Maldives Bureau of Statistics, 'Population distribution and migration, household income and expenditure survey', published online in 2019, available at: <https://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/nbs/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/HIES2019-PopulationDistributionMigration.pdf>, [accessed 12 December 2023]

<sup>6</sup> The PPM is the minority leadership in the current parliament, and the second largest political party in the Maldives. It was formed by Maumoon Abdul Gayoom in 2011 after he resigned from his first party, the Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (DRP), citing a clash of views after new leadership. Following a leadership dispute between former President Abdulla Yameen and Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, and subsequent fears of loss of leadership, the party split into two separate parties: the new People's National Congress (PNC) and the PPM. They formed an opposition alliance known as the Progressive Congress Coalition.

<sup>7</sup> Thoiba Saeedh, 'Embodied place(s): Emotional landscapes and senses of self in the Maldives archipelago', Master's thesis, The University of Edinburgh 2018; Boris Wille, 'Defending Islam in an Islamic state: Islamic nationalist discourse, democratic reform, and the religious commitment of the state in the Maldives', *Asian Ethnology*, vol. 80, no. 1, 2021, pp. 199–225.

assert that ‘No Maldivian labor was used in this project’ and relate views from its engineers that the Bridge is seen by them as ‘a Chinese icon’ and ‘a testament of Chinese engineering, speed, work management, Chinese robust economy, and their great self-reliance’.<sup>8</sup> In this connection it is perhaps also significant to note that this bilingual commemorative volume is published in English and Chinese, but not in the national language of the Maldives, despite the fact that it was released by the ‘Dhivehi Publishing Group’.

Elaborations of the concept of *Dhivehinge isthiqlaal* in public rhetoric surrounding the Bridge conflated religiosity and nationalism, with references to state sovereignty, physical infrastructure, and economic development. The Sinamale’ Bridge nonetheless remains a contested symbol in some quarters, drawing vocal critiques from both the opposition and the public on the prospect of a debt-trap and the future risks of a payment default, at times referencing the example of neighbouring Sri Lanka, which was forced to lease their Hambantota Port to China for 99 years.<sup>9</sup> The then opposition also voiced concerns about the actual utility of such a massive piece of road infrastructure for an archipelagic nation.

### Geopolitical imaginaries and material infrastructure

As points of intersection in the geopolitical power struggles between these two Asian superpowers, images of Islamic identity and national sovereignty are reimagined in the Maldives with reference to material sites of physical infrastructure. In political debates over financing for the Bridge, Sino-Indian geopolitical relations have become locally imagined in the Maldives along largely domestic political party lines, with the two sides pitting China and India respectively against each other as presenting a lesser or greater threat to Maldivian identity. Yameen’s government was pro-Chinese, and the then opposition—including his successor Ibrahim Solih—adopted a pro-India stance to counter the role of the Chinese in the Maldives. The Sinamale’ Bridge thus remained a controversial infrastructure even after the end of Yameen’s presidency. In a pendulum swing of sorts in the Maldives domestic politics theatre of regional rivalries between India and China, India then later financed the construction of the Thila-Male’ Bridge,<sup>10</sup> to connect three other islands in the capital region with Male’ City, with a strategic intent to replace the Sinamale’ Bridge as the most iconic piece of infrastructure. This move was touted by President Ibrahim Solih’s Maldivian Democratic Party’s (MDP) government as the Maldives’ largest-ever infrastructure project and as an assertion of Indian influence in the country to counterbalance that of the Chinese.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Abdullah, Hameed and Shiyam (eds), *The making of the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge*, pp. 121–122.

<sup>9</sup> Jason Koutsoukis, ‘China’s \$7.5 billion Myanmar Port “crazy”, Suu Kyi adviser says’, published online 25 May 2018, available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-05-25/china-s-7-5-billion-myanmar-port-crazysuu-kyi-adviser-says>, [last accessed 5 June 2018].

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of National Planning, Housing and Infrastructure; see <https://infrastructure.gov.mv/en>, [accessed 9 January 2024].

<sup>11</sup> The country is deeply divided by internal domestic politics. The MDP is the largest political party in the country. The current 2018–2023 administration is an MDP-led coalition government. The MDP was the main opposition party during Yameen’s administration (2013–2018) and was heavily critical of Yameen’s pro-China foreign policy. Solih’s MDP government has maintained an India-first foreign policy.

There has been extensive research on China's Belt and Road Initiative since its initial launch by Xi Jinping in 2013 and its burgeoning bibliography grows daily in both Chinese and English. Scholars from a diverse range of fields have explored its geopolitical and economic dimensions.<sup>12</sup> Others have focused on aspects of the political economy of Chinese investments in host countries, including the increasing presence of Chinese foreign workers and expatriates in those countries,<sup>13</sup> the high economic risks and environmental impacts of particular projects,<sup>14</sup> and policy implications of Chinese foreign direct investment.<sup>15</sup> Both hard and soft power BRI investments across the historical Silk Route strive to redefine China's position in the world order, but despite extensive scholarly enquiry into the BRI, there has been scant attention paid to its rich and complex ideational elements, and even less to what might be identified as the religious dimensions of BRI infrastructure. With particular reference to Buddhism, Raymond argued that religion has been a strategic entry point through which China's soft power is wielded as a cultural resource.<sup>16</sup>

Woods and Palmer have drawn attention to the ways in which the BRI has fostered 'a new civilizational imaginary' in international relations,<sup>17</sup> and called on researchers to explore the unintentional effects of the BRI to facilitate, intensify, and manage religious connections and circulations across Asia.<sup>18</sup> Building upon Raymond's argument, Woods presents a three-fold approach to understanding the ways in which infrastructure commons implicate the futures of Southeast Asian countries embedded in this Chinese soft power deployment of Buddhism.<sup>19</sup> At the sub-national level, Emily Hertzman has examined how Chinese diasporic communities in Indonesia position themselves in relation to China's new civilizational imaginary, and the ways in which infrastructure commons work to reconcile geopolitical tensions.<sup>20</sup> While zooming out to more regional dimensions, Murton and Lord explored the ways in which the BRI's

<sup>12</sup>Mark Beeson, 'Goeconomics with Chinese characteristics: The BRI and China's evolving grand strategy', *Economic and Political Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2018, pp. 240–256, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20954816.2018.1498988>; Selina Ho, 'Infrastructure and Chinese power', *International Affairs*, vol. 96, no. 6, 2020, pp. 1461–1485; Michael Dunford, 'The Chinese path to common prosperity', *International Critical Thought*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2022, pp. 35–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21598282.2022.2025561>.

<sup>13</sup>G. Murton and A. Lord, 'Trans-Himalayan power corridors: Infrastructural politics and China's Belt and Road Initiative in Nepal', *Political Geography*, vol. 77, 2020, pp. 1–13.

<sup>14</sup>Haiyue Liu, Yile Wang, Jie Jiang and Wu Peng, 'How green is the "Belt and Road Initiative"? Evidence from Chinese OFDI in the energy sector', *Energy Policy*, vol. 145, October 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2020.111709>.

<sup>15</sup>D. Sutherland, J. Anderson and N. Bailey, 'Policy, institutional fragility, and Chinese outward foreign direct investment: An empirical examination of the Belt and Road Initiative', *Journal of International Business Policy*, vol. 3, 2020, pp. 249–272, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s42214-020-00056-8>.

<sup>16</sup>G. Raymond, 'Religion as a tool of influence: Buddhism in China's Belt and Road Initiative in mainland Southeast Asia', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2020, pp. 346–371, DOI: [10.1355/CS42-3b](https://doi.org/10.1355/CS42-3b).

<sup>17</sup>Orlando Woods and David Palmer, 'The sacred dimensions of the BRI's infrastructural commons', in this special issue.

<sup>18</sup>'Infrastructures of faith: Religious mobilities on the Belt and Road', available at <https://asiar.hku.hk/brinfaith/home/>, [accessed 12 December 2023].

<sup>19</sup>Orlando Woods, 'Between the commons and the cosmos: The sacred politics of the BRI in Southeast Asia and beyond', *Area Development and Policy*, 2022.

<sup>20</sup>Emily Hertzman, 'In the shadow of the BRI: The figurative infrastructures of Chinese religion along the Maritime Silk Road', in this special issue.



creation of infrastructure commons seeks to address geopolitical tensions across the Himalayas.<sup>21</sup>

In this article, we turn our attention to the case of the Sinamale' Bridge to consider some of the ways in which new forms of materiality associated with BRI infrastructure projects produce sacred spaces in the context of an emphatically Islamic nation of islands in the middle of the Indian Ocean. The geolocation of BRI infrastructure in the small Indian Ocean islands of the Maldives complicates a conceptualization of infrastructure commons. In contrast to the model developed by Woods for Cambodia and Myanmar,<sup>22</sup> diverse factors of structural engineering, political alignments, geopolitical relations, and imaginations of economic development in Maldives are examined in relation to conceptions of national identity and religious identification. These sacred dimensions of the BRI are locally produced.

### Materiality and meaning making

To understand how relatively new material infrastructure such as the Sinamale' Bridge can generate strong emotional responses that speak to deeply resonant conceptions of religious and national identity, this article frames itself around an interweaving of theoretical approaches from infrastructure studies and the study of space/place, building upon earlier work by Saeedh<sup>23</sup> and recent discussions of 'political theology' in non-Western contexts by Bolotta, Fountain, and Feener.<sup>24</sup> Here then the Sinamale' Bridge is approached not just as an asset of physical infrastructure but also a 'place' in and of itself. As Larkin has highlighted, similar to the ways in which infrastructure builds 'networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space',<sup>25</sup> the Sinamale' Bridge emerges into unexpected encounters in everyday life in the Maldives and manifests itself in diffuse ways across the economic, political, social, and religious spheres.

Dominant academic discourses on infrastructure 'spaces' provide grounds for analyses of engineered material structures in relation to abstract conceptions of economic development, networks, and political power dynamics. In contrast, approaching infrastructure as 'place' opens further opportunities to pursue critical discussions of contextualized cultural values.<sup>26</sup> Memory and representation contribute to the creation of conditions where a location or structure can be invested with a range of

<sup>21</sup>G. Murton and A. Lord, 'Trans-Himalayan power corridors: Infrastructural politics and China's Belt and Road initiative in Nepal', *Political Geography*, vol. 77, 2020, pp. 1–13.

<sup>22</sup>Orlando Woods, 'Infrastructural splintering along the BRI: Catholic political ecologies and the fractious futures of Sri Lanka's littoral spaces', in this special issue.

<sup>23</sup>Saeedh, 'Embodied place(s)'.

<sup>24</sup>Giuseppe Bolotta, Philip Fountain and R. Michael Feener (eds), *Political theologies and development in Asia: Transcendence, sacrifice, and aspiration* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

<sup>25</sup>Brian Larkin, 'The politics and poetics of infrastructure', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 42, 2013, p. 328.

<sup>26</sup>J. Agnew, 'Space and place', in *The SAGE handbook of geographical knowledge*, (eds) J. Agnew and D. N. Livingstone (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2011); Tim Cresswell, *In place/out of place: Geography, ideology, and transgression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Tim Cresswell, *Place: An introduction* (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2015); Edward Relph, *Place and placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976); Yi-Fi Tuan, *Topophilia: A study of environmental perception, attitudes, and values* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974).

subjective associations. As the largest and most prominent infrastructure project on the developmental landscape of the Maldives, the Sinamale' Bridge affords the cultivation of sentiments of identity, belonging, and aspiration for the local community along the lines of what Hertzman proposes as 'figurative infrastructure'.<sup>27</sup>

## Methodology

Ethnographic approaches and a focus on materiality can facilitate new paths towards understanding the political theology of the Bridge. This allows for constructive explorations of the complex ways in which religious concepts continue to shape public discourses on modern politics—even in such presumably 'secular' sectors as that of infrastructure and economic development.<sup>28</sup> Moving beyond the abstract philosophical discourses that political theology has heretofore taken in Eurocentric discussions, these more grounded trajectories within the field have already gained traction on the ambivalence of modernizing projects carried out alongside expressions of confessional nationalism in Asia.<sup>29</sup>

This article draws on local ethnography in the Greater Male' environs of the Bridge as well as on interviews conducted in both the southern- and northernmost parts of the country carried out between 2019–2022. Data gathered for this work look closely at the performances associated with the Bridge, such as its inauguration, the revival of the spirit of nationalism through reproductions of traditional poetry, songs about national heroes that draw on invasions and the fight for independence, language used about the Bridge and the significances afforded to it through language, such as during political party rallies of Yameen's PPM-PNC coalition,<sup>30</sup> as well as the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party's (MDP)<sup>31</sup> counter campaigns around the development of the Bridge.

Over 30 unstructured interviews were conducted across genders, age groups, political affiliations, and urban/rural contexts to ensure a diverse range of viewpoints. This included interviews with engineers and government officials involved in the development of the Bridge, which afforded a three-tiered perception: public, national, and geopolitical. The data are supplemented by social media data from Twitter, Facebook, and other media channels; news sources documenting posts, images, and discussions; articles about the Sinamale' Bridge; as well as the visuals (print and video) produced by the Chinese embassy in the Maldives. The data were then analysed to understand common themes that arose around development, religion, and nation, as well as the frequency of these themes to demonstrate this striking piece of physical infrastructure, built by a foreign, non-Muslim power, as entangled in a complex web of deployments of Islam and Maldivian nationalism. To respect informants' desire for

<sup>27</sup>Hertzman, 'In the shadow of the BRI', in this special issue.

<sup>28</sup>Giuseppe Bolotta, Philip Fountain and R. Michael Feener, 'Transcendence, sacrifice, and aspiration: The political theology of development in Asia', in *Political theologies and development in Asia*, (eds) Bolotta, Fountain and Feener, pp. 1–17.

<sup>29</sup>Armando Salvatore, 'East of Westphalia: Shaping the body-politic via institutional charisma', in *ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>30</sup>Political party in government from 2013–2018, led by former President Yameen Abdul Qayyoom.

<sup>31</sup>Opposition and largest political party in the Maldives led by former President Mohamed Nasheed until 2023 when he left to form a new political party called The Democrats.



confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used for all informants, and to further conceal identities, certain details in their narratives such as profession and location have been changed. In some cases, where anonymity was urged by informants, terms such as ‘government official’ are designated.

### Maldivian Muslim political theology

Craig Calhoun has argued that ‘Nation-hood cannot be defined objectively, prior to political processes, on either cultural or social structural grounds. This is so, crucially, because nations are in part made by nationalism.’<sup>32</sup> If, in this sense, nationalism is a crucial element of nation-making, so too has the modern ideological construction of Islam contributed to the shape of Maldivian nationalism. In the case of the Maldives, this is unique as the Islamist movement is oriented both to the nation and *umma*. This is in part because the Dhivehin (citizens) are ethnolinguistically homogeneous, without distinct ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, as codified in its constitution. Islam in the Maldives invokes homogenous identities as an *umma*, while at the same time framing cultural heterogeneity within and across social and political units. The aftermath of the royal conversion from Buddhism to Islam in the mid-twelfth century is reflected in copperplate inscriptions (*loamafaanu*) highlighting the state confiscation of property from the *sangha* (Buddhist monastic community) and its reallocation by the sovereign to support mosque construction.<sup>33</sup> Over the centuries that followed, the identification of the sultans ruling from Male’ with Islamic religious authority was to become an integral component of both state law and local Muslim belief.<sup>34</sup>

Maniku, one of the Maldives’ most eminent national historians, describes the conversion of the island’s first Muslim monarch as an ‘enlightened political decision. It gave impetus to Maldivian nationalism and the all-pervading beneficial rule of the king under a well-organized code of divine law.’<sup>35</sup> This modern rationalization of medieval religious transformation, moreover, echoes tropes of ‘Enlightenment’ and the role of royal patronage as deeply embedded in traditional local ‘Maldivian’ narratives of Islamization. The most widely known myth of the coming of Islam to the islands is that of the sea demon Rannamaari. This conversion story has been passed down over generations, taught in the schools, performed on stage, and reproduced as a myth of origin across multiple media. As most origin stories go, the Rannamaari story in the Maldives is also contested, with some local critics claiming that it was actually a cover

<sup>32</sup>Craig Calhoun, *Nationalism* (London: Open University Press, 1997), p. 99.

<sup>33</sup>All of the known surviving copperplate inscriptions from the twelfth-century Maldives have been digitized by the Maritime Asia Heritage Survey and can be viewed at: R. Michael Feener (ed.), *The Maritime Asia Heritage Survey Online Archive*, available at: <https://maritimeasiaheritage.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/manuscript-viewer/waqf-endowment/>, [accessed 12 December 2023]. Further references can be found there to modern (Thaana-script) Dhivehi transliterations and/or English translations of some of these early Muslim texts from the Maldives.

<sup>34</sup>R. Michael Feener, ‘Maldives’, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, (eds) Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas and Everett Rowson (Leiden: Brill, 2021); published online in 2020, available at: <https://maritimeasiaheritage.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/THE-ENCYCLOPAEDIA-OF-ISLAM-3-Maldives-Feener.pdf>, [accessed 12 December 2023].

<sup>35</sup>A. Hassan Maniku ‘Conversion of Maldives to Islam’, *Journal of the Sri Lanka Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 31, 1986/1987, p. 79.

for the then king's rape and murder of young girls. One author heard the tale retold in Atoll as follows:

The islands [Dhivehi Raajje] were haunted by a sea demon. Every full-moon night, a young virgin girl had to be sacrificed to appease this sea demon, called Rannamaari. So each full moon night, a virgin girl was outfitted and placed in a temple at the eastern seafront in Male', ready for sacrifice. Come dawn, the girl's family would return to the temple to find her lifeless body. For centuries this continued, until a Muslim travelling scholar from Morocco, Abulbarakaat Yoosuf Al-Berber, visited Male'. One day, when he returned to the house he was residing in, he found his host family in deep distress. He was relayed the story of Rannamaari and that their daughter had been chosen for sacrifice. The scholar then volunteered to take the place of the young girl. Disguised in the temple, he spent the whole night reciting Qur'an. At dawn, the people found the scholar alive and unharmed. Upon hearing the words of the Qur'an, the sea demon had left and never returns to terrorize the people. Upon hearing this, the king summoned the scholar and converted to Islam, declaring that the entire country will follow.

The story, in its various iterations,<sup>36</sup> is commonly interpreted with an emphasis on the miraculous salvific power of the Quran. At the same time, the prominent association of tyrannical rulership and a temple of pagan worship with the horrors of Rannamaari functions as a literal 'demonization' of the pre-Islamic history of the islands. This has, over the centuries, provided a crucial symbolic foil for the assertion of a fundamental Muslim identity for the population of the Maldives Islands—to the point that today only the barest traces of a pre-Islamic past remain.<sup>37</sup>

The conversion of the king was followed by the disbanding of the *sangha* and the dismantling of structures for the practice of Buddhism. Their material resources were reallocated to support mosque building and the establishment of Islamic institutions. Subsequent centuries of ongoing Islamization then served to all but obliterate persistent traces of the islands' Buddhist past across the atolls. Buddhist ritual complexes were deserted and left to fall into ruin, the coral stone of their buildings quarried for reuse, and their devotional images either destroyed or buried.<sup>38</sup> Antipathy towards the idea of the Maldives having ever been anything other than a Muslim country continues to run strong in some segments of the population today, and can at times be mobilized

<sup>36</sup>A published English translation of this tale notes the external literary elements of this Maldivian myth of Islamization, recognizing the structure of this narrative as being mapped like that of the *Nandapakarana* story from the *Panchatantra*, and the legend of the converting saint being from the Maghreb as coming from the Arab traveller Ibn Battuta's fourteenth-century account of the Maldives. Xavier Romero-Frias, *Folktales of the Maldives* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2012), pp. 74–75.

<sup>37</sup>R. Michael Feener, Patrick Daly, Michael Frchetti, Ibrahim Mujah, Maida Irawani, Jovial Pally Taran, Ahmad Zaki, Fathimath Maasa, Mohamed Shamran, Multia Zahara, Mariyam Isha Azees, Krisztina Baranyai, Paula Levick, Hala Bakheit, Jessica Rahardjo and Gabriel Clark, 'The Maldives Heritage Survey', *Antiquity*, vol. 95, no. 381, 2021, DOI: [10.15184/aqy.2021.45](https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2021.45).

<sup>38</sup>For 3D visualizations of Buddhist sites and objects from the Maldives, see <https://sketchfab.com/MaritimeAsiaHeritageSurvey/collections/maldives-buddhist-artifacts-28ffbfaaebf44788524f575c5b4501>, [accessed 12 December 2023].

in the service of partisan political agendas. This was dramatically evidenced by the brazen daylight raid on the Maldives National Museum in 2013 during which vandals smashed a number of rare Buddhist artefacts on display.

It is not only the pre-Islamic past, moreover, that is seen to embarrassingly compromise hegemonic notions of religious identity and cultural homogeneity. Since the 1930s, successive waves of Islamic reformist thought have washed over the islands, leaving diverse imprints, from the Aligarh modernism of the Maldives' first president, Mohamed Amin, to trends more popular in later decades of the twentieth century at al-Azhar, the alma mater of the Maldives' longest-serving president, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. Over the decades just before and after the turn of the twenty-first century the Maldives has also seen a significant expansion of Salafi visions of Islamic revival.<sup>39</sup> While at times divided over questions of political ideology, nearly all of these diverse agendas for reforming Islam shared a considerable level of discomfort—if not outright animosity—towards established forms of traditionalist Muslim practice in the islands. Thus the overwhelming majority of Maldivians today also reject many forms of Muslim practice that had been popular across the country until the mid-twentieth century, including pilgrimage to Sufi shrines (*ziyaaraaiyy*), the burial of bodies in close proximity to mosques, and the ritual recitation of extra-Quranic religious texts. Now, with the coming of age of a third generation of Maldivians raised with instruction in reformist interpretations of Islam, such practices have been not only castigated, but almost completely forgotten, with many old mosques, cemeteries, shrines, and recitation halls (*maulood ge*) razed, abandoned, or repurposed.<sup>40</sup> Understandings and experiences of Islam in the Maldives are thus today considerably more uniform across the national population than they are almost anywhere else in the contemporary Muslim world.<sup>41</sup>

The Maldives today is a country of apparent homogeneity. In the National Constitution of the Maldives, citizenship is defined as being limited to Muslims.<sup>42</sup> To be Maldivian is thus to identify as both being a *Dhivesseh* in ethnicity and a Muslim in religion. Today this notion is deeply embedded in popular consciousness and governs the norms and behaviours of the everyday lives of citizens. At the same time, nation and religion—the Maldives and Islam—are frequently conflated in public discourse of religious solidarity and state sovereignty in opposition to the 'foreign' and the 'un-Islamic'. The social standing and moral worth of local Muslim citizens is thus starkly contrasted to those of 'outsiders' (*beyrumeehun*). This distinction is reinforced through a range of means and forms, from emblems of state to the social constraints of everyday practice.<sup>43</sup> This separation of citizen and non-citizen—Dhivehin and *beyrumeehun*—across the spheres of state policy and everyday social praxis affords

<sup>39</sup> Azim Zahir, *Islam and democracy in the Maldives: Interrogating reformist Islam's role in politics* (London: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>40</sup> Feener, 'Maldives'.

<sup>41</sup> For more on Islam in the contemporary Maldives, see Azra Naseem, 'Democracy and Salafism in the Maldives: A battle for the future', in *Religion and politics in South Asia*, (ed.) Ali Riaz (London: Routledge, 2021); Boris Wille, 'The appropriation of Islam in the Maldives', in *The Oxford research encyclopedia of Asian history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.680>.

<sup>42</sup> Maldives National Constitution 2008, Article 9(d), 10.

<sup>43</sup> Saeedh, 'Embodied place(s)'.

the consolidation of ethnic, national, and religious homogeneity. Azim Zahir<sup>44</sup> has chronicled the ways in which statist models of modern Islamic reform have been embedded in the political domain and institutionalized under a dominant ideological rubric of 'one nation, one religion, one language' (*Eh qaumeh, eh dheeneh, eh baheh*). Everyday Islamic practice in the Maldives has, as such, been intricately interwoven with conceptions of identity and the state.

Even in a '100 per cent Muslim nation' with the ethnic and linguistic homogeneity of the Maldives, however, there remain gaps in the ways in which particular understandings of religion coalesce with dominant discourses of religious belonging.<sup>45</sup> Opposing political factions each advocate their own religious criteria to define standards of legitimacy and belonging.<sup>46</sup> This in turn enables an increasing degree of competition between parties. All political parties in the Maldives claim to be based to some degree on 'Islam', albeit with competing understandings of what that entails. The conflation of religion and nation thus becomes as much a point of contestation as it does a unifying rubric of solidarity within a relatively homogenous society.

### Regional dynamics

The long history of Islam in the Maldives, however, has also been one that has been shaped by and is actively reshaping trans-regional connections and the circulation of commercial commodities, people, and ideas. Situated at the centre of Indian Ocean trade routes, the religious history of the islands unfolded in dynamic interaction with diverse cultures along multiple and overlapping vectors as ships navigated its two major East-West deep-water channels, and called at harbours in sheltered atolls to trade in its critical commodities of coir rope and dried fish, as well as its valuable trade goods of cowries and ambergris.<sup>47</sup> Through all of this interaction with outside 'others', moreover, the Maldives maintained a remarkable degree of local sovereignty,<sup>48</sup> interrupted only by rare instances of foreign threat over the past five centuries: a Portuguese invasion that installed a Christianized Maldivian exile (formerly Sultan Hassan IX) as King Manoel Siri Dhirikusa Loka from 1558–1573,<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup>Azim Zahir, 'Islam and politics in the Maldives: Rethinking political Islam', in *Routledge handbook of political Islam*, (ed.) Shahram Akbarzadeh (London: Routledge, 2020); Azim Zahir, *Islam and democracy in the Maldives: Interrogating reformist Islam's role in politics* (London: Routledge, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003181453>.

<sup>45</sup>Roger Brubaker, 'Religion and nationalism: Four approaches', *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2011, pp. 2–20, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8129.2011.00486.x>.

<sup>46</sup>Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism. Five roads to modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>47</sup>Anne Haour and Annalisa Christie (eds), *Archaeological investigations of the Maldives in the medieval Islamic period: Ibn Battuta's island* (London: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>48</sup>The islands were nominally a protectorate under the Dutch in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and then under the British until 1965. They were, however, administered more in (tributary) relation to their colonies in Ceylon, and no European residents were established at Male'. Under the agreement with the British, the country gave up its sovereignty in matters of foreign policy but retained internal self-government. The country continued to be regulated by Muslim traditional institutions. The Maldives gained total independence from the British on 26 July 1965, though the latter continued to maintain an air base on the island of Gan in the southernmost atoll until 1976.

<sup>49</sup>C. R. de Silva, *Portuguese encounters with Sri Lanka and the Maldives: Translated texts from the Age of Discoveries* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009).

a short-lived occupation by Malabar in 1752,<sup>50</sup> and a 1988 attack on Male' by Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers attempting to overthrow then President Maumoon.<sup>51</sup> Nineteen Maldivians were slaughtered during the insurgency and hundreds were taken hostage, but the attack ultimately failed due to the intervention of the Indian government, after which President Maumoon strengthened bilateral relations with India.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the strategic bilateral relationship with India came to encompass close cooperation in the spheres of maritime security, education, public health, and national defence. Following the turn to China under Yameen's presidency, the current administration under President Ibrahim Solih (2018–) has returned to a broadly pro-India orientation under which India has recently committed to the construction of a bridge connecting three other islands in the capital region of the country, with designs to replace the Sinamale' Bridge as the largest infrastructure investment in the history of the Maldives. In the face of this, the present opposition, affiliated with Yameen's former PPM-PNC coalition, has promoted an 'India out' campaign elaborated as a stand against perceived threats to national security and identity.

### Domestic politics

The complex interweaving of the rhetoric of national sovereignty with alignments to much larger and more powerful allies abroad has animated Maldivian domestic politics ever since. Under Yameen's presidency, new visions of Islam and Maldivian nationalism were elaborated alongside a turn to China and engagement with infrastructure megaprojects connected to the BRI. Appeals to the Yameen government's initiative to engage with BRI infrastructure projects became central to the legitimizing discourse of nationalism for his ruling PPM-PNC coalition. As such, he had to negotiate a complex relationship between an openness to cooperation with China, established identification with Islam, and the aspirational development dreams of many modern Maldivians. Beyond the Bridge itself, several other projects funded by the Chinese in the Maldives that technically fell outside the rubric of the BRI carried with them further significant debt obligations. These included a 7,000-unit social housing project also contracted under Yameen's presidency. That project, the Hiyaa (Dhivehi for 'shelter'), is the largest housing initiative in the country, comprising 16 towers of 25 stories each, to address the housing demand in the Greater Male' area connected by the Sinamale' Bridge (see Figure 2). After Yameen lost the 2018 presidential election to the MDP, the administration of President Solih has continued an openness to Chinese foreign investment projects, including the expansion of the country's main seaplane terminal at Velaana International Airport at one end of the Sinamale' and the construction of the Madivaru Airport in Lhaviyani Atoll by the Beijing Urban Construction Group (BUCG).

The physical infrastructure of the Chinese financed projects in the Maldives has created multiple loci for the reimaginings of nationalism, implicating conceptions of religion, ethnicity, and visions of 'progress'. As if to temper any compromise of Islamic

<sup>50</sup>H. C. P. Bell, *The Maldivian islands: Monograph on the history, archaeology and epigraphy* (Colombo: Ceylon Government Press, 1922).

<sup>51</sup>H. Tajuddin, M. Muhibuddin and I. Sirajuddin, *Dhivehi Tarikh* (Male': National Centre for Linguistic and Historical Research, 1981).



**Figure 2.** Hiyaa towers in Hulhumale', Phase II. Source: Thoiba Saeedh.

bona fides that might be entailed by the embrace of a major communist superpower with a troubling record of abuse towards some of its own Muslim citizens, Yameen doubled down on the role of Islam in establishing his own political legitimacy. At the same time, he assumed a monopoly on the deployment of the symbolism of Maldivian Muslim political theology by castigating the opposition MDP with imagined offences that compromised the nation's Islamic identity. This was not a straightforward line of criticism, however, as all political parties in the Maldives positioned themselves as supporters of 'Islam'—albeit with variations in their understandings and interpretations of this potent master signifier in Maldivian political discourse.

Otherwise rare spaces of interaction between individual Chinese and Maldivian citizens occur more often in the tourism sector. Chinese tourists comprised the largest single national source of tourist revenue up until travel restrictions implemented to counter the spread of Covid-19 resulted in a sharp drop in the number of tourists arriving from China after 2020. Since the pandemic India has replaced China as the country's largest source of foreign tourists. While these short-term visitors from both countries are largely isolated on resort islands, the economic boom that both tourism revenue and infrastructure investment have helped to fuel also facilitated increases in labour migration.<sup>52</sup> Even so, interactions between Chinese labourers and Maldivians remain

<sup>52</sup>Luke Heslop and Laura Jeffery, 'Roadwork: Expertise at work building roads in the Maldives', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2020, pp. 284–301, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.13236>.





**Figure 3.** Chinese labourers working on bridge construction. Source: R. Michael Feener.

limited. As one local resident, Nadheem, commented, ‘When the Bridge was being constructed, I could see them [Chinese labourers] grocery shopping near Dharubaaruge where their living accommodations were. I was very curious about them... we heard they were convicts being used as labourers as part of paying off their sentence...’<sup>53</sup> The Chinese labourers were housed in designated barracks from which they were only permitted to leave for shopping and had to return promptly. While locals expressed their curiosity about the Chinese they saw out while running their errands, few seem to have made any effort to initiate conversations during these brief encounters (see Figure 3). Aside from the engineers and government officials who engaged directly with the Chinese, interpersonal interactions between Maldivian Muslims and these outside ‘others’ were extremely limited.<sup>54</sup>

One significant element in this sense of separation between individual Maldivians and Chinese migrants has been religion. As opposed to Chinese religious diplomacy, which has intensified alongside Chinese BRI infrastructure projects in Southeast Asian countries such as Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia,<sup>55</sup> the Chinese government’s limited expressions of soft power in the Maldives have been focused on aspects of language, arts, and culture. Whereas the centrality of Buddhism as a shared cultural resource

<sup>53</sup>Technical officials from the Ministry of Environment, Urban Planning and Infrastructure with whom Thoiba Saeedh spoke shared that convicts from China were used in the labour force that built the Sinamale’ Bridge.

<sup>54</sup>Thoiba Saeedh and R. Michael Feener, ‘Spectral encounters on the Sinamale’ Bridge: Affective infrastructure along a watery stretch of the Belt Road’, *Asian Ethnology* (forthcoming).

<sup>55</sup>Raymond, ‘Religion as a tool of influence’.

between China and many Southeast Asian nations is observed along the interconnected corridors of the BRI, the ‘100 percent Muslim’ nation of the Maldives constrains the potential for any such deployment of cultural diplomacy touching upon religious identities. Indeed, even such historical moments of connection as that of the early fifteenth-century chronicler Ma Huan, who praised Maldivian adherence to the tenets of Islam in his account of the visits of the Ming fleet to the islands, largely avoided public pronouncement—as for many Muslims in the Maldives and elsewhere in the twenty-first century, China’s engagements with Islam have come largely to be framed in relation to the state’s persecution of its Uighur minority population. During the Sinamale’ Bridge construction and expansion of Chinese development projects in the Maldives, the situation of Uighur Muslims in China was reported in local news outlets and was used by the then opposition to depict China as a poor ally for the Maldives based on its history of the mistreatment of its own Muslim population. Chinese authorities and diplomats have accordingly consistently maintained that their interventions in the Maldives are limited to economic development initiatives and trade, professing to have no interest in intervening in Maldivian domestic affairs (see Figure 4).

A Maldivian economist from the Baani Think Tank presented an economic assessment of the Sinamale’ Bridge during one of its seminars attended by Thoiba Saeedh. He referred to the Bridge as a ‘necessary evil’ in reference to the dangers of opportunities for corruption, inescapable debt, and a loss of sovereignty that it entailed, while at the same time facilitating ease of connectivity for the third of the country’s population residing in the Greater Male’ Region. How is ‘evil’ relevant in the context of a linguistic image of an infrastructure, a material structure made of concrete and metal? National and cultural features of the concept of evil and good are based on Islamic notions of good and evil. Ibn Sina,<sup>56</sup> the Islamic theologian, defined evil (*sharr*) as inadequacy (*naqs*) or privation (lack of good/*adam*), and maintained that evil was a necessity for certain things to exist. Placing an explicitly moral valence upon a massive piece of material infrastructure thus invokes cultural perceptions and moral categories well beyond the structural and utilitarian calculus of engineering and public policy. While the Bridge is obviously a substantive entity, it might nonetheless also be productively viewed as a morally precarious contingency that enables such things as mobility and economic development.

There are, at the same time, other, less philosophically abstract, elements of Islamic and Maldivian cosmology that have factored into local discourses on the Bridge and its locally produced meanings. Anxieties of development have been noted in diverse local narratives via stories of haunting, encounters with *jinn*, and imagery of non-corporeal presences integrated into this new BRI infrastructure in the Maldives. Woods explores the intersection of religion, environment, and infrastructure to talk about the existential crisis triggered by BRI infrastructures in Southeast Asia.<sup>57</sup> We have discussed elsewhere the ways in which encounters with *jinn* by people crossing the Sinamale’ Bridge play a role in local processes of meaning making—albeit on a register somewhat

<sup>56</sup>Ibn Sīnā, *al-Shifāʾ: al-Ilāhiyyāt*, (eds) Muḥammad Yūsuf Mūsā et al. (Cairo: Al-Hayʾah al-ʿĀmmah li-Shuʾūn al-Maṭābiʿ al-Amīriyah, 1960), pp. 414–422.

<sup>57</sup>Woods, ‘Between the commons and the cosmos’.



Figure 4. A Chinese cultural event held in Male'. Source: Thoiba Saeedh.

different from that of 'eliciting awe and reverence' in the way that Gergan<sup>58</sup> has described for other contexts. Stories such as those of taxi drivers who reported

<sup>58</sup>M. D. Gergan, 'Animating the sacred, sentient and spiritual in post-humanist and material geographies', *Geography Compass*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2015, p. 263, DOI: [10.1111/gec3.12210](https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12210).

encounters with *jinn* while riding across the bridge late at night or drivers who felt *jinn* hitchhiking on the back of their mopeds on the Bridge enfold it within narratives deploying elements of traditional Maldivian Muslim cosmology. This unprecedented infrastructural intervention in the landscape is given localized meaning with reference to beings recognized within the Quran and is rich with meanings and aesthetic associations within Dhivehi cultural traditions.<sup>59</sup>

### Discursive deployments—memorialization of the Sinamale' Bridge

Under Yameen's presidency, however, there were also more formal state-sanctioned attempts at establishing the Sinamale' Bridge within a Maldivian cultural framework. At the opening of this article, we described the spectacle of the Bridge's opening ceremony. Here we return to some specific cultural references deployed therein, and in particular to the text of the particular *madhaha* played at the event. The selection of this specific text suggests its perceived utility in fostering deeper associations of the Bridge with established conceptions of Maldivian Muslim nationalism:

ދިވެހި ގެ ދަރިވަރުންނަށް  
 ދަރިވަރުންނަށް ދަރިވަރުންނަށް  
 ދަރިވަރުންނަށް ދަރިވަރުންނަށް  
 ދަރިވަރުންނަށް ދަރިވަރުންނަށް

*Ilaahu*, meaning Allah the Benevolent, Land of Allah the Benevolent, Land of my birth, land of the Dhivehin, [may the] abundance of care You bestow never be erased from this land of the Dhivehin.

Beyond this general statement of divine sanctification of the nation, other texts of Dhivehi poetry selected for recitation at the Bridge's opening ceremony referenced much more specific expressions of Maldivian sovereignty in the face of foreign threats. This was a prayer in the *lhen* genre written by Abdul Rasheed Hussein, who was executive secretary to President Maumoon Abdul Qayoom during the Tamil invasion of 1983. In 1989, he submitted this *lhen* for his daughter to sing at a televised school singing competition, where it was set to the track of the 1980 hit Indian song *They're hey zameen, they're aasmaan*. The *lhen* is comprised of five stanzas written as a five-stanza prayer to safeguard the land of Dhivehin and to safeguard for eternity the blessings of God upon the islands with their abundant coconut palms, fresh air, delicious fish, and great natural beauty. The *lhen*'s prayer concludes with a supplication for Allah's mercy and blessings (*baraka*) on this land—proud of its independence, where martyrs bled to preserve its sovereignty in the face of invading forces.

Outside the context of its performance at the opening ceremony of the Sinamale' Bridge, the song is a staple of National Victory Day celebrations commemorating 3 November; it regularly references nationalistic imaginaries of the threat of foreign invaders who would threaten the safety of Dhivehi women, children, and men, and fears of infidel foreigners forcing un-Islamic norms onto the Muslim population of the islands. The choice to deploy this popular song, with its emotive language,

<sup>59</sup>Saeedh and Feener, 'Spectral encounters'.

historical resonance, and nationalistic defensiveness, at the opening ceremony of the Bridge was a strategic one for Yameen's government, linking the promotion of this massive piece of physical infrastructure built by an overseas non-Muslim power to his political agenda of religious nationalism and his bid for re-election. These stories not only vaunt Maldivian Muslim unity, but also cast dramatic images of their enemies as 'traitors' who facilitated past assaults on the religious dignity and national sovereignty of the Dhivehin. The emotive language, significance, and historical meaningfulness of this particular song for the local public, its usage in this particular setting, as well as the display of fireworks at the opening of the BRI development, demonstrate a powerful effort by Yameen to represent the Sinamale' Bridge as a space/visual that speaks of development which places the country's religious sovereignty and independence at the forefront.

Maldivian nationalist historiography not only vaunts the virtue of heroes like Muhammad Bodu Thakurufaanu, who led the armed resistance against the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, and Dhon Bandaarain, who led the campaign to expel the Malabarais from the Maldives during their brief occupation of some islands in 1752. The stories of these movements of resistance against outside invaders also emphasize the treachery of those—like the apostate King Manoel Siri Dhirikusa—who opened the door to infidel incursions against Maldivian Muslim sovereignty. In the political discourse of Yameen's PPM-PNC coalition, such traitors to the nation were rhetorically connected to the MDP, with leaders of that party also labelled with localized forms of Arabic terms of infamy including *Dhaajjaal* ('Antichrist'), *Ibilee*s and *shayatin* ('devils'), and *Abu Jahulu* (the name of a Meccan who led early opposition to Muhammad and his followers).

### Figurative infrastructure and symbolic representations

The political theology of Yameen's developmentalism was enacted and experienced both virtually and in person, even after his electoral loss and subsequent imprisonment. Saeedh recalls sitting with a woman in the living room of her two-bedroom apartment in Male' one evening. Her host reclined on an indoor swing (*ondoli*) with her eyes closed, listening intently to the television. The sounds of prayer filtered into the room with a supplication for protection, for safety, and for strength. A Muslim scholar addresses a gathered group of men and women, elderly, middle-aged, and young, some wearing disposable raincoats against the evening drizzle. His voice crackling with emotion as he spoke in a rhyming prose, drawing out the syllables, the audience is enraptured, their hands are raised, palms held together, heads slightly bowed, some with their eyes closed in concentration, caught in the strength of the prayer. When the prayer is concluded, the crowd voices an amen, running their palms over their faces. The sound vibrating across the televised gathering, booming through screens being watched in rooms across the archipelago. It was a powerfully addressed prayer, delivered in solemn tones, with undertones of urgency, worry, fear, and concern reminiscent of the Friday *Khutba* (sermon) which addresses the public on pressing issues and concerns across the country. The mood of the audience was similar: frustrated, concerned, worried, and tense. They had responded to an invitation sent out to 'all Maldivians who loved Islam and the prophet Muhammad, from all walks of life' by the event organizers, appealing to ideals of national unity and a shared Muslim religious



identity. The gathering, with few empty seats, was held in the ‘carnival area’ of Male’ City and televised on a private channel across the country.

Gatherings of this type are known as *ihthijaaq jalsaa* (rally); they were organized by Yameen’s PPM-PNC supporters and held for several consecutive days in 2019 to rally against the MDP government for the sentencing of Yameen to five years in jail and imposing a US\$ 5 million fine for embezzling public funds. Many of those in attendance were dressed in pink (the party colour of the PPM-PNC), with some wearing black vests bearing prints of Yameen’s face. They were calling to ‘free Yaameen’ from what they viewed as his ‘unfair’ and ‘unjust’ sentencing (*aniyaaveri hukumaai dhekolhah*). Following opening prayers, speakers praised Yameen as *tharaqqeege baanee* (founder of development), a president whose policies took the country to new heights of development without—they claim—undermining its sovereignty. Yameen was praised as the president whose strategies prioritized the protection of Islam in the Maldives above all else, a president who, according to the speakers, will defend the country’s freedom with his ‘body’. These assertions were made all the more forcefully in the face of opposition critiques that called attention to the compromising position in which massive debt exposure to Chinese development finance had placed the Maldives.

Saeedh attended another *ihthijaaq jalsaa* in person in December 2019. The PPM-PNC office is on the outskirts of Male’ City overlooking the Bridge. The room where the event was held was completely decked out in pink—from the paint on the walls to the colour of the chairs. Behind the podium, the political party flags of PPM and PNC and a national flag flanked a black backdrop banner with the words ‘Free Yameen’. On the opposite wall of the room another banner featured a picture of Yameen against the modern skyline of Male’ with the Sinamale’ Bridge and the King Salman Mosque (a gift from Saudi Arabia constructed in the area where the Bridge connects to Male’) featuring prominently. The banner visualized a striking image of the PPM-PNC’s political theology of development, uniting images of party leadership, Islamic religious institutions, and, most notably, the Sinamale’ Bridge (see Figure 5). It also, however, prompts one to consider the nature and extent of Chinese and Saudi interests in the country as well as the geopolitical rivalry between China and India for influence in both the Maldives and the broader Indian Ocean region.

Construction of the Chinese-funded Sinamale’ Bridge coincided with that of the King Salman Mosque, a US\$ 24 million project funded by Saudi Arabia. This new mega mosque, covering 41,500 square feet over six floors, was erected on the same narrow strip of coast where the Sinamale’ Bridge connects to the island of Male’. Saudi Arabia has invested considerably in both religious and educational institutions in the country, while also providing generous scholarships for Maldivians to study religion in Mecca and Medina.<sup>60</sup> Across the broader Indian Ocean region, the tandem expansion of investment in both economic development/infrastructure projects and the establishment of military installations by Saudi Arabia and China have become increasingly evident over recent years—as, for example, in Djibouti. The role of Saudi Arabia in the configuration of cultural imaginaries of overseas investment and development is thus

<sup>60</sup>James M. Dorsey, *China and the Middle East: Venturing into the maelstrom* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 51.





**Figure 5.** Members gathered at a PPM-PNC *jalsaa* in Male'. Source: Thoiba Saeedh.

something that deserves careful further consideration in attempts to understand the dynamics of religious transformation in Muslim countries involved with China's BRI.

As Feener and his colleagues have written elsewhere, ‘developmentalist state projects... [can be] particularly important sites in which to analyse historically situated political-theological formations in Asia’.<sup>61</sup> During his presidency, Yameen actively promoted the Bridge as a monument to his developmentalist ideal of *tharaqqee* in ways that reinforced the PPM-PNC coalition’s particular conceptualization of *Dhivehinge ithiqilaal* as a mode of religious nationalism.<sup>62</sup> It was not that the Bridge stands for religion or that the Bridge is in a direct sense deployed as a tool of religion, but rather that the Sinamale’ Bridge materialized the idea that large-scale infrastructure development can be achieved without comprising the national integrity, sovereignty, and religious identity of the country, heavily promoted by Yameen’s government and his supporters since. The Bridge is Yameen’s most successful and largest development initiative, one that is also most visible and provokes a religious nationalism. The flip side of this association of developmentalist ideology and specific pieces of BRI infrastructure with the Islamic nationalist bona fides of Yameen has been the castigation of his political opponents as enemies of the state, and the elevation of Yameen and his followers’ interpretation of Islam.

In the ritual prayer sessions and political rallies held by Yameen's supporters, poems, songs, and stories of Maldivian heroes feature prominently. One line of Dhivehi poetry often recited at PPM-PNC political rallies has been:

ז' א' ג' ד' ה' ו' ז' ח' ט' י' י"א י"ב י"ג י"ד י"ה י"ו י"ז י"ח י"ט  
 כ' כ"א כ"ב כ"ג כ"ד כ"ה כ"ו כ"ז כ"ח כ"ט ל' ל"א ל"ב ל"ג ל"ד ל"ה ל"ו ל"ז ל"ח ל"ט

<sup>61</sup>Bolotta, Fountain and Feener, 'Transcendence, sacrifice, and aspiration', p. 8.

<sup>62</sup>Numerous examples of this are available at: <https://presidency.gov.mv/>, [accessed 9 January 2024].

Do not provoke on my nation, my religion, my peace,  
Reckon with history and do not be traitors

In the context of its domestic political deployment, such rhetoric serves to differentiate a body politic that is rather homogenous in terms of both ethnicity and religious identity by drawing internal lines of distinction around a particular conception of 'loyalty'. In this identification of religion and nation by the PPM-PNC coalition, Yameen's opponents are frequently labelled as 'traitors', linking them to potent images of those judged to have compromised the Maldives' treasured *Dhivehinge isthiqlaal* in the past.

Being Muslim and Dhivehi are shared identities for all Maldivian citizens regardless of political party affiliation. As Wald and Wilcox have argued,<sup>63</sup> in a nation defined by religion, politicians who are members of the same religion seek political recognition and sovereignty based on degrees of behaviour, belief, and belonging. As in many other nations across South Asia and beyond, the centrality of religion remains salient to national identity in the Maldives. Opposition narratives have sought in some ways to discredit the Bridge, but this has also had the effect of further energizing Yameen's supporters who have actually amplified their claims epitomizing the Bridge as symbolizing national sovereignty. Following the election of Ibrahim Solih in 2018, his new MDP-led government put less emphasis on the symbolic valences of the Bridge, reducing engagement to the basic level of its functionality as a piece of transportation infrastructure.

Following Yameen's loss of the presidential elections in 2018 and his subsequent arrest over allegations of embezzling public funds, the focus on infrastructure investment in the country has shifted away from further Chinese entanglements in favour of a reaffirmation of the historical strategic relationship with India. In these developments the geopolitical rivalry between China and India has taken on new valences in Maldivian domestic politics, each appealing to different aspects of a Maldivian Muslim political theology, with the PPM pushing public 'India Out' demonstrations and the MDP voicing concerns over Chinese treatment of its some of its Muslim minority populations.

## Conclusion

As in many other nations across South Asia and beyond, the centrality of religion remains salient to national identity in the Maldives.<sup>64</sup> Analysing the content and public consumption of the rhetoric and imagery of PPM-PNC poems, songs, stories, and speeches reveals how both allies and enemies are identified in relation to not only ethnicity and religion, but also to development initiatives concretized by a massive piece of BRI infrastructure. Here, a recognition of the complex ways in which understandings and experiences of religion have been reconfigured in relation to modern conceptions of 'development'<sup>65</sup> can help us to interpret the significance of the Sinamale' Bridge in

<sup>63</sup>Kenneth D. Wald and Clyde Wilcox, 'Getting religion: Has political science rediscovered the faith factor?', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 100, no. 4, 2006, pp. 523–529.

<sup>64</sup>Roger Friedland, 'Religious nationalism and the problem of collective representation', *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 27, 2001, p. 129.

<sup>65</sup>R. Michael Feener and Philip Fountain, 'Religion in the age of development', *Religions*, vol. 9, no. 12, 2018, p. 302, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9120382>.

relation to both the geopolitics of BRI infrastructure as well as aspirations for progress and the reassertion of Maldivian Muslim national sovereignty.

As Ken George has demonstrated in the context of Muslim-majority Indonesia,<sup>66</sup> material objects can be contextualized in multiple ways within political discourses on political theology. Here we have examined some of the complex ways in which the Sinamale' Bridge presents a concrete locus for both debates over local electoral politics as well as for geopolitical contestation. Since its construction, this high-profile element of BRI infrastructure has afforded diverse and often contradictory positions on religion, nationalism, and state sovereignty in the '100 percent Muslim' nation of the Maldives. Built under the presidency of Yameen Abdulla, this mega development project was envisioned both as a symbol and source of modernization and economic transformation. Beyond these familiar valences of developmentalist ideology, however, we have demonstrated that in the Maldives this massive piece of BRI infrastructure also served to anchor amplifications of discourse on an Islamic political theology emphasizing aspiration. Such visions resonated broadly through many sectors of society as it was actively promulgated through the circulation of poems, songs, and stories of national heroes promoting a conception of *Dhivehinge isthiqlaal* that conflated Islamic religiosity and nationalism in popular discourses on sovereignty. What is even more remarkable is that this was accomplished in the face of deep entanglements of foreign investment debt and technocratic dependency that made this massive work of infrastructure possible through Chinese capital and expertise mobilized under the rubric of the BRI.

The Sinamale' Bridge is not inherently sacred, but is tactically referenced to represent religion and nation in a political theology of development. This massive piece of infrastructure has thus been extensively used by Yameen and his supporters to advance partisan policy agendas on the national level. Directing our attention to the sacred dimensions of this mega infrastructure project thus helps us to gain some new interpretive traction on the inherent tensions surrounding the Sinamale' Bridge that remain unaddressed by more neatly ideological and/or economic interest approaches to the politics of infrastructure.

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<sup>66</sup>Kenneth M. George, 'The theopolitics of art: Qur'anic objects and their publics in Indonesia', in *Political theologies and development in Asia*, (eds) Bolotta, Fountain and Feener, pp. 87–103.

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