

Strains between Malé and the atolls in the Maldives

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Forced migration, “development” pressures, political neglect and the climate crisis have assailed the Maldives’ less-populous atolls, eroding the country’s identity and driving thousands to the capital

In his book Descent into Paradise, the journalist Daniel Bosley begins one chapter by asking, “As the seas rise, how long can the islanders really stay on the islands?” The following excerpt from the book follows various Maldivian governments’ promises of land reclamation and mega-development projects, to the detriment of the environment and atoll communities and their culture. The United Nations’ recent projections suggest the Maldives’ population will rise by close to a million by mid-century, with a full two-thirds of its people being drawn to Malé. Pledges to bypass regional hubs and continue relocating communities to the Greater Malé area do not take into account the costs of mass migration and the political and social issues reported by previously relocated communities. Bosley writes, “While some people on the smallest islands expressed a desire to relocate to the capital, many of the so-called raajjethere meehun (country people) ... view Malé more as a necessary evil than a gleaming opportunity for a better life.”

For thousands of years, the highly dispersed Dhivehi civilisation has carved out resilient and independent communities, subsisting in harmony with their environment. Indeed, the medieval scholar Al-Biruni’s description of islanders made them seem semi-nomadic, simply transplanting their kadjan huts and palm trees to the next island whenever their ocean (or jinn) landlords served notice. But since the waves of development washed through, leaving concrete roots on every island, a society comprised of over 120 villages with fewer than a thousand people has become harder to sustain. Before the tsunami hit, the number of inhabited islands had hovered at around 200 for centuries. President Ibrahim Nasir had forcefully depopulated eighteen islands that lacked a quorum of forty men for Friday prayers – including Kalhaidhoo – but had allowed their return in 1975. We met islanders on Gaafu Alif Kondhey who still joyously commemorate the return with their own little “Independence Day”, as well as some on Alif Alif Rasdhoo who can only cast resentful glances across the channel where they’d found a new resort blocking their own minivan (independence/freedom). The former president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom had grasped the thorny subject of population consolidation in the late nineties, finding limited success with voluntary schemes, and instead launching the further-centralising Hulhumalé artificial island project, inaugurated just months before the tsunami had forced the issue. By the 2014 census, over a dozen communities had been officially relocated to other islands, though on our trip north we’d found many of their “new” homes empty a decade later, still waiting for electricity and sewerage systems.

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Gaadhoo was the last island we visited on our tour of Laamu Atoll. There, an elderly islander generously led us around, showing nesting sites for turtles, pointing out the grand Buddhist stupa and sharing a local folk tale about a lady whose life's desire had been to possess the land upon which she stood. She would have been disappointed: the people were all gone, the streets empty and the houses abandoned to the encroaching jungle. As we were shown around, the only remaining life – and roof – was at the mosque: the living quarters of former residents who'd leased the whole island to harvest its still-plentiful coconuts. On the wall of one crumbling home, obscured behind trespassing vines, a four-year-(very)-old Progressive Party of Maldives promise on a campaign stencil could still be made out, followed by the candidate's name: "*Gaadhoo'ge tharaggee* [Gaadhoo's Development], *Adurey*."

In 2015, Gaadhoo had been island number 188 before its residents were abruptly informed that this was one too many. Evicted islanders we met on nearby Fonadhoo complained of broken promises, a lack of consultation, inadequate new facilities and tensions with new neighbours. The precise reasons why a community over a thousand years old had been given just a few months' notice to vacate were unclear, with unsubstantiated rumours swirling that China wished to use the island for a naval base. Whatever the reasons, yet another badly handled relocation process had evidently left many others worrying they could be next. Raees [President] Abdulla Yameen accidentally declared the similarly sized island of Mundoo to have been officially depopulated at the same time as Gaadhoo (perhaps explaining the grumpy *mudhim* [prayer caller] during our later visit).

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I'd once visited the ruins of Pompeii and the ghost towns of America's old west, and even Chernobyl now attracts many a tragedy tourist seeking the thick air of melancholy for displaced Romans, cowboys and Soviets. But on Gaadhoo, amid the humid sense of loss for *dhivehin* (islanders), thoughts of the islands' future mingled with those of the past. As we'd enjoyed warm welcomes into island homes, it was hard not to think about the absent residents in whose empty beds we were sleeping. While some people on the smallest islands expressed a desire to relocate to the capital, many of the so-called *raqjethere meehun* (country people) I'd talked with (and some I'd married) view Malé more as a necessary evil than a gleaming opportunity for a better life. Riz [the journalist Ahmed Rilwan], who had been born in the city, always had his heart in the atolls. "Urbanisation is not civilisation. No identity or values, just greed and wealth," he'd written, while [the activist and blogger] Yameen Rasheed wondered what kind of development constituted families squeezed in single rooms paying rent higher than their salaries.

When the Maldives' reluctant migrants occasionally speak up, their accounts usually go viral on local networks (and deserve to be heard in full). This post came from a "resident" of Addu's smallest island, Hulhudhoo:

The stress of living in Malé with all the congestion and pollution is exacerbated by the fact that we have to constantly worry about finding a place we can afford to live. Work becomes meaningless when paycheck after paycheck after paycheck has to be transferred to the landlord. Moving back to the island has been our wish for as long as we have been forced to migrate here ... Every time someone talks about providing services in islands or highlight systematic discrimination faced by

migrants, someone will say it's not "feasible" to develop islands. Meaning it's not profitable to their pockets to provide essential services to other islands.

Every single government has championed commodification of essential services such as housing, healthcare, and education ... We need an economic system that democratically works for all of us, and not just a few tycoons: the root cause of all of these issues ... It is no longer "feasible" for us to just let them rule and enrich themselves while we are stuck doing miserable work only to pay rent and die.

The former president Mohamed Nasheed's proposed solution to the development dilemma had been to decentralise political authority and establish regional service hubs, dispersing Malé's dangerous concentration of politics and population. As with the climate crisis itself, however, Raees Yameen's government paid lip service to regional development, while simultaneously scrapping decentralisation. His finance minister complained that having people spread across 187 islands was an obstacle to the government's idea of development, offering poor "value for money" on infrastructure projects: "You can stay alive at an uninhabited island as well. But you can only enjoy a certain quality [of life] and a certain lifestyle in islands with large populations." The housing minister later suggested that the vacated islands could be used by paying guests as the government binged on tourism development. It refused to renegotiate the "Stealing Paradise" leases [The 2016 *Al Jazeera* investigation on a corruption scandal involving embezzlement and cut-price resort leases], as it aimed to increase resorts by 50 percent in just five years, to bring the number almost equal with inhabited islands. Scarcely able to contain this indifference to island lifestyles, the president himself casually suggested the entire country relocate to the Greater Malé area, with the alarmed opposition objecting that such depopulation-by-proxy would destroy the country's core identity.

Observing these debates from the atolls had further confirmed my belief that only a very narrow definition of "quality of life" could support the assertion that living in the city was objectively better. While life in the atolls certainly lacks many economic, health and educational opportunities - which, I admit, are easy things to take for granted when coming from a "developed" country - I'd sensed an abundance of the less tangible things that many would argue constitute "quality" and, dare I say it, happiness. These included things I was seeing less and less of in the UK - and some I'm not sure I've ever seen - such as healthy social, cultural and family lives, as well as a sense of mental well-being deriving from community and belonging. Being an islander in Malé had felt just like being an islander in Britain: crowded, overworked, underpaid and disconnected from the natural environment. The city may be *in* Dhivehi Raajje (the Maldivian name for the country, loosely translates as "island kingdom") but seems no longer to be *of* Dhivehi Raajje.

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The UNDP's 2014 Human Development Report found that, although essential services were often neglected in the atolls, poverty and inequality were also rising in Malé's often "slum-like conditions". Urban centres, sometimes referred to in convenient climate parlance as "heat islands", are by no means immune from environmental crises. The devastating effect of microscopic particulate matter, for example, is only just being realised, but has been shown to lower cognitive performance - the ultimate irony for young islanders forced to migrate to Malé for school. This pollution is often recorded at twice the World Health Organisation's recommended levels in the city, while acute respiratory infections doubled between 2010 and 2015. More generally, evidence mounts that it's inequality that has a far greater impact on the overall health of a society - and its quality of life -

than raw GDP figures, and that money can't patch up the social fabric the UNDP was told is being destroyed in the Maldives.

The psychological and physical costs of mass in-migration haven't been studied in the country, though the lost boys of Malé's gangs provide violent anecdotal evidence; one of the [2007] Sultan Park bombers was from Laamu Kalhaidhoo, while Kandholhudhoo islanders - relocated after the tsunami - are said to have the highest incidence rate of diabetes in the country. The mathematics of population consolidation are far from straightforward, requiring careful economic, social and cultural equations, and not the crude calculations of a disconnected and discredited elite.

This forced migration and cultural erosion wasn't started by the climate crisis, but it will certainly be accelerated by it. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has mentioned migration from small islands as yet another multi-faceted process that requires better understanding. But as the world wonders when the atolls will be depopulated by the symptoms of its unchecked industrialisation, the root ideological causes - greed, environmental exploitation, inequality and cancerous economic growth - are so deeply ingrained that, if some local leaders had their way, the islands would be deserted before the rising seas get a look in.

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When the waves of British naval officers had first arrived to clear a path of "progress" through the atolls, their ethnocentric conclusion was that islanders' evident contentment with life must be "of a spurious kind". These colonial "progressives" went on to conduct phrenological examinations on islanders, measuring heads to assess development. Today, it seems we're all still measuring the wrong qualities when ministers of a middle-income country contend that maintaining their island communities is an unacceptable burden, or when the government refuses to distribute the wealth generated by the nation's natural assets while suggesting islanders abandon their islands so a handful of oligarchs can afford to "save" them (expecting gratitude and votes in return).

The future of Dhivehi island culture is sadly unthinkable without significant adaptation, but asking islanders to prematurely sacrifice their very identity can only hurt community resilience by draining its greatest strength. It's for this reason that the preservation of a distinct and unifying island culture with a robust faith should be a priority. The Maldivian historian (... and former wife of president Ibrahim Nasir) Naseema Mohamed has summarised this very idea: "At some point in Maldives unrecorded history, the realisation must have set in, that unity was absolutely essential to survive, overcome natural disasters and invasion by people who did not wish them well ... This could have been the beginning of the Maldivian nation."

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If unity was the beginning, division will surely be the end. While the unquestioning acceptance of the market as an organising principle for humanity has coincided with the widespread dismissal of organised religion as something oppressive and destructive, it's the gods of the former who have brought forward judgment day in the course of just a few decades.

Historians speculate that the first migrants to the Maldives may have arrived nearly 4000 years ago

from the ancient Indus Valley civilisation, whose demise is increasingly thought to have been related to a changing climate. More recently, the disappearance of the Maldives' aboriginal people – the female-led, staunchly independent and Tamil-descended “Giraavaru people” – offers a cautionary tale. After first being relocated from their final redoubt to Hulhulé in the early seventies, and then to Malé a few years later to make way for the airport extension, the Giraavaru have today become indistinct from prevailing society. Their unique culture is barely a memory; a rare footnote in a travel guide. The cause of their evacuation is sometimes said to have been administrative and sometimes linked to erosion, though the Giraavaru island resort has been running quite successfully since 1980. The fate of the archipelago's earliest residents, whose home and name literally translate to “the island of erosion”, holds grim portent for today's population, to whom history might soon grant the same moniker.

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P.S.

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