CHAPTER-V

LOCAL ADMINISTRATION
This chapter analyses the local administration in Maldives. It explicates with the powers and functions of the Atoll-Chief and the Island-Chief. It focuses on how the national government controls the local administration, highlighting the type of political system that strengthens the local administration. The urban/municipality administration of Maldives has been discussed. It analyses the Central-Local administrative relations, and also how local administration is carried out in the country. The economic development of the local-level administration is another subject of study in this chapter. It focuses on the budgetary allocations of the Central government to the local administration. Finally, this chapter foregrounds the socio-economic indicators of the country, and how much the policies and programmes of the Central government are beneficial.

The administrative framework of Maldives has formed a pyramidal structure. Inhabited islands occupy the lowest administrative unit; the atolls come at the intermediate level; and the Central government forms the apex structure. Two levels of local government have existed in Maldives since 1965. The local government of Maldives started during the colonial times, when South Asian countries have not even started enjoying local government status. Local government in Maldives enjoys the status of self-governance at the national level in the present time.

The administrative framework of the local government of Maldives has been divided into two levels: the rural and the urban. Urban/municipality administration is placed only in Male, the State capital. The atoll and the island level of the administrative framework of Maldives have been divided into three levels: the national level, the atoll level and the island level. In this chapter, the main focus is on the functions of the Atoll-Chief and the Island-
Chief, and the functions of the local administration. The local government system was established only after the independence.¹

There is no strong decentralization of power in Maldives; but for easy administration the Central Government has controlled the local administration. There is no strong decentralized political structure and no autonomy of the local administration in the Maldivian political system. There were no political parties, and even if people were interested in local self-government.

The two levels of local administration are Atoll level and Island level of administration. There is administrative decentralization and some rudimentary elements of local representation found in Maldives but no decentralization of power. The present Constitution of Maldives also does not provide for any strong local government set-up. In the past there were semblances of local autonomy and self-government. There was even an attempt to convert local administration into self-government units; however, centralization of power has prevailed at the end.

Modern communication technologies have facilitated the centralization of the government’s decision-making process. In a situation characterized by a small population and land area, lack of appropriate personnel, and few services, there was hardly any compulsion for a decentralized administration. This has resulted in modernization of the economy and the polity, with new technologies of transport and communication being able to bring the numerous Coral Islands of the Maldives together. That is why local administration is likely to give into centralized self-government and autonomous units of government at island and atoll level in the country.²

The Atoll Administration

There are 20 administrative units now in Maldives, 19 atolls and Male. The atolls are Alifu, Baa, Dhaalu, Faafu, Gaafu, Dhaalu, Gnaniyani, Haa Alifu, Haa Dhaalu, Kdaafu, Laamu, Lhaniyani, Meemu, Noonu, Raa, Seenu, Shaviyani, Thaa, and Vaava. However, Article 106 of the 1998 Constitution states that there shall be an Atoll-Chief appointed by the President for each Atoll of the Maldives. But the Ministry of Atolls Development oversees the atoll affairs.  

Qualifications of an Atoll-Chief

Article 107 of the Maldives 1998 Constitution talks about the qualifications required of an Atoll Chief. He or she must be a citizen of Maldives; he or she must be a Muslim, and should have attained 30 years of age. A person must be, in the opinion of the President, competent enough to discharge the duties and responsibilities of the Office of Atoll-Chief. The Atoll-Chief should not have been convicted of any offence during the past five years, and he or she must not be a foreign national. Only after meeting these eligibility he or she can be appointed as the Chief of the atoll.

The Atoll-Chief resides in the capital island of each atoll. There are administrative units with government offices. Atoll Chiefs are the Heads of these units. In 1964 the Maldivian Government decided to have elected atoll committees and thus set up a procedure, whereby people wishing to be nominated could apply to the Election Division in Male for clearance. The procedure allows six candidates in an atoll. Getting the highest number of votes become the atoll committee members. Whosoever garners the highest votes becomes the Atoll-Chief. During those times, the term of an atoll chief was for two years.

---

4 Ibid
The procedure at that time was characterized by factionalism, and there were lack of qualified people. After 1978 the election system was abolished. Atoll and Island functionaries once again began to be appointed for infinite terms by the Ministry of Home Affairs. The new Ministry is independent of the Home Ministry, whose jurisdiction is now restricted only to Male City. The new Ministry is charged with the responsibility of economic and social development of the atolls and islands. It also looks after and coordinates other Departments and Ministries.

It is interesting to note that the term of national government is only five years, while the term of local administration is indefinite, which was appointed by the President. The salaries of the local functionaries are also included in the budget of the Government of Maldives. Most of them are educated men who do not have many stakes in the local spoils system but who can implement development policies. The Chief of atoll and other officers basically belong to local Atoll Chiefs (verins) and are transferred every three years. They may also be posted as Under Secretaries in the Ministry.

The Ministry of Atolls Development regularly trains the Atoll-Chiefs and the local staff. But there are still no women Atoll-Chiefs. There are no constitutional provisions for appointment of women candidates. In the local administration, powers are not divided like the power structure in the federal government. President Gayoom who is in power since 1978 has been sensitive to the growing pro-democratic sentiments in the country. The recent constitutional change has not fully created a space for free competition for power within the democratic framework. But at the atoll level there are other important officials like treasurers, clerks, workmen, cooks, peons and several Gazis (judges).


The main functions of the Atoll Chief (verin): is to control the local administration from Island to atoll levels. The President provides policy guidance and directions to Atoll-Chief so that the Atoll-Chief dispenses his functions effectively. The Atoll Chief is required to visit each inhabited island every month. In such visits, he is accompanied by Gazis (judges) to settle disputes and adjudicate inheritance claims.

The Atoll-Chief is also the local coordinator of all development activities at the atoll level. There is an Atoll Development Assistant Committee at the atoll level. This committee consists of prominent local citizens nominated by the Government. For reasons stated in the Island Development Assistance Committees, these have also not been very effective in discharging their functions.

The Ministry of Home Affairs looked after the local level administration till 1978. After that, the Ministry of Atoll Administration was created. The Ministry of Atolls Development is now responsible for the local level administration. The Central Government plays an important role in the local level administration because the political system in Maldives is highly centralized. There are no constitutional provisions, which grant more power to the local level administration. The Ministry of Atolls Development takes responsibility for local-level administration in the Central Government. Its main functions are to coordinate all island-level developmental activities in health, education, fisheries, agriculture, and other sectors. The Ministry of Atolls Development identifies and implements IRD for the atolls in collaboration with the Ministry of Planning and Development. The Central Government trains island and atoll-level officers in carrying out administrative or developmental functions and in creating public sector awareness and responsibility. The national government has established the atoll and island

---


development assistance committees for improving social services and creating awareness about self-reliance. The Ministry of Atoll Administration is also responsible for upgrading the basic social infrastructures of institutions such as mosques, island or atoll offices, courts of Maldives etc. These are the important functions and the basic responsibility for local-level administrations of the Ministry of Atoll Administration.

In discharging the above functions, the Ministry is associated with Atolls Development Advisory Board (ADAB), which was created in December 1978 by the President's Office. The Ministry of Atoll Administration functions as its Chairman, while officials directly dealing with atoll development and representatives from the atolls are the members. In Divehi language there are no words for village, town or city. All are simply island with the basic administrative unit. Only 200 of the Islands are inhabited, while many are more sandbanks, scarcely wooded.10

The Ministry of Atolls Development is responsible for building a peaceful environment in Maldives through the implementation of developmental activities at atolls and national levels and by equal distribution of resources. The primary concern of the Ministry of Atolls Development is to sustain development for the people of the atolls. It is the Ministry's endeavour to further enforce livelihood through modern technology-oriented workforce.

There are committees established by the Maldivian Government to improve the socio-economic conditions of the people at local level. Atoll offices and Island offices, together with Atoll Development Committees (ADCs) and Island Development Committees (IDCs), assist the Ministry in discharging its functions. Atoll Development Committees and Island Development Committees, place emphasis on the importance of decentralized planning and management of development activities. The government has

---

established fully operational Development Cells in atoll administration under the aegis of Atolls Development. As scattered islands characterize Maldives, it is difficult to provide equal service delivery to people. Therefore the government has adopted a population and development consolidation policy to minimize the difference in the economic scale by promoting economy viable for population concentrations. The Government has developed a policy and strategy to encourage the inhabitants of small islands, below a population of 500, to voluntarily move to places where socio-economic services and employment opportunities are enough to enable them to enjoy a better living.\(^{11}\)

The functions of the Atoll Development committee are: (a) to assist the activities conducted by the government or supported by the government; (b) to work to improve the living conditions of the people of the atoll and to foster good will, harmony, and cooperation among the people; (c) to generate income for the people; (d) to mobilize the island development committees and women's development committees; (e) to monitor the activities of the island development committees and advice the committees on favourable changes; (f) and to give the committees fullest cooperation to the Atoll-Chief when needed.\(^{12}\)

The Chairperson of the Atoll Development Committee is the Atoll Chief. In the absence of the Atoll-Chief, the Committee will have an Acting-Head of the Atoll. The Atoll Development Committee consists of 10-20 appointed members.\(^{13}\) The Ministry of Atoll Administration, considering the population of each atoll, decides the number of members. The members are appointed by the Ministry of Atolls Development in consultation with the Atoll-Chief. At least a Woman Development Committee must be in Atoll. However, if a member need to leave the atoll for any purpose, he or she should inform the chairperson of his or her absence. The Atoll Administration is most important for the local level administration set-up in the country.

\(^{11}\) [www.nationencyclopedia.com/Asia and Oceania/Maldives Local Government](http://www.nationencyclopedia.com/Asia and Oceania/Maldives Local Government).

\(^{12}\) Ibid.

\(^{13}\) [www.Sean suns Maldives.com/government.html](http://www.Sean suns Maldives.com/government.html)
Without this set-up, the Maldives could scarcely be governed, as a single socio-economic political entity.

**Island Administration**

Each island in the Maldives has an Island Chief or Katheeb, who looks after day-to-day affairs of the islands and its development. The Island Chief reports to the Atoll Chief or Atholhuverin, who is in charge of the overall administration of all the islands in an atoll.

The Ministry of Atoll Administration appoints the Island Chief. According to the Islamic law (Shariah), there are qualifications required to be an Island-Chief. Island-Chief must be a Muslim; he or she must be a citizen of the Republic of Maldives; he or she must be a person who has attained thirty years of age and not be a foreign national. Hence, the Island-Chief is helped by one or more Kudu Katibus (Assistant Katibu) and a Mudimu in keeping the records and the performance of religious duties to help the Island-Chief. All these people are called Island Officials. These officials are appointed from the local areas because they are more concerned with the local areas. All these functionaries are paid by the national government. All the Island Officials have to undergo a month-long training course for Katibus. Such types of institutes are called the Institute of Islamic Studies and Ministry of Atolls Administration.

The Atoll Administration has established Island Development Committees for the development at the local-level. It emphasized the importance of decentralized planning and management of development activities. The members of the Island Development Committees comprise prominent people nominated by the local community. The function of the Islands Development Committees (IDCs) and Women Committee is to help

---

14 [www.islands.com/Maldives](http://www.islands.com/Maldives)

the island administration in the planning, implementation, and monitoring of projects within their jurisdictions. During 1998 to 1999, the Ministry of Atoll Administration has given priority to increase political and legal awareness of women in the island. This has been done to encourage women to occupy leadership positions, to increase women’s participation in the political arena, and to create awareness on the legal rights.

A landmark event, which has been a result of the recommendations made by the participants of the political and legal awareness works, was the inclusion of a female representative from each atoll at the Atoll-Chief’s meeting held every two year. In the past, as only Atoll-Chiefs attended the meeting, the issues discussed were only from a male perspective, while others were not taken up at all.  

Women’s Committee has been set up in Atoll and Island levels to bring about gender equality and the advancement of women. This is reflected in the changes seen in public perception and in the changes of portrayal of woman by media. Efforts have been made by other sectors for the advancement of woman and gender equality.

However, the Island Development Committees have not been very effective due to lack of man-power. In February 2000, the national government of Maldives has established an Advisory Committee on public sector reform and modernization to strengthen and develop the Maldivian system of public administration.  

The Maldivian Government has been functioning effectively on the island level. The President of Maldives has even appointed a woman as the Junior

---


Island Chief of the Maradhoo Island. It shows that the national government has been trying best for developmental programmes at the local level, which have opened up scope for women.

The Main Functions of the Island-Chief

The main sources of revenue of the Island administration are the lands managed by the Island Office and the income from uninhabited island assigned to them. The Katibu maintains the records of census and the vital statistics, accounts, and daily records of fish catch. It is also the function of the Katibu to keep track of the island lands in the inlands and the products of Island trees. The important work of the Island Chief is to keep contact with the atoll office through walkie-talkie and submit records of fish catch and also weather reports.

As the major sources of income depend on fishing, shipping, and tourism, the Island-Chief has an increasing number of developmental responsibilities to deal with. In Maldives, in the more populous Island, the Island-Chief implements rules and regulation, including the one on entitlement of house or plot in the Island. Another important function of the Island-chief is to settle disputes, and solve factional problems. For dispensing justice on minor matters but for violations of law and orders, the Katibu calls the Gazi from the atoll office. The atoll office controls the island office and regulates the functions of island-offices. The Central Government has established communication between island-offices and the atoll offices. The Ministry of Atolls Development provides the policy, guidance, and directions to each Island-Chief through the Atoll-Chief.

Municipality Administration of Maldives

Male can be considered as the only city in Maldives, although its geographic dimensions may not qualified as a "city." The Male Municipality, established in 1982, is the municipal authority of Male, which is an office administered under the Ministry of Home Affairs. The Chairman of the Male Municipality reports directly to the Ministry of Home Affairs, Housing, and Environment.

Male has an area of about 1,77km. It houses about one-fourth of the national population. Immigration from other islands to Male is the major reason for the rapid growth in the population of Male. Major reasons for immigration are the higher standard and broader range of facilities, services, and education and also employment opportunities available in Male in comparison to those available in other islands. 20

Urban local administration in Maldives is vital to the political system and governance of the country. Thus, the local administration of Male is highly significant into contributing to the smooth governance at the national level. Male is divided into four wards. Reclamation of project carried out recently in the shallow waters within the western and southern reefs has added almost one-third of its original size to the island. 21 Civil amenities in Male are provided by two organizations, namely the Male Municipality and the Maldives Water and Sanitation Authority.

The Male Municipality is headed by the Home Minister, and in this capacity, the Home minister is also called the President of the Municipality. The municipality functions directly under the President’s Office. In urban local administration there is a Municipal Council, which consists of several departments of administration to assist the President of the Municipality. The Municipal consists of two members from each of the four wards and high level

---


officials from relevant government departments. The Maldivian President directly appoints this Municipal Council Body and it continues for a term of five years. The Municipality of Male of the Republic of Maldives has more than 600 permanent employees.

The Main functions of the Municipality

The main functions of the Maldives Municipality are providing services to the mosques, roads, streetlights, and housing, etc. The municipality administration registers the people living in Male. This type of census involves a proper house to house survey enumeration. It also responsible for cleaning up public roads, office buildings, and diplomatic premises. The Male Municipality has entrusted a private company with the responsibility to remove of garbage from the various points to a final disposal.

There are four departments under the Male municipality. This includes administration department, roads departments, community services department, and registration department. These departments are headed by the Senior Under-Secretary, the Chief Engineer, the Assistant Under-Secretary, and Under Secretary respectively. All these officers in the Male Urban Local Administration of the atoll states are liable to be transferred to other Ministries or Departments. Considering the roles of the urban local administration, it is very important that they add to the smooth functioning of the Maldivian political system.

The main source of income of the municipality is Central Government grants and foreign assistance. For road constructions, donations are received from beneficiaries; particularly from wealthy people. There is also a small fee

---


for registration, which serves as a source of income. Sanitation in Male is the concern of the Maldivian Water and Sanitation Authority.

The Male Municipality maintains close links with Water and Sanitation Department. In Male, the households collect drinking water from rainwater. In Maldives, municipality administration and urban local administration prohibit well in every house. Water filter with a power pump supplies piped water to the households for other uses.

The Male Municipality has adopted a long-term strategy for improving the provision of public services by means of information technology. A national project is underway for the development and implementation of government information systems; a similar one is in the process for government agency networking. With the establishment of the Ministry of Science and Technology in 1998, the government of Maldives is rapidly undertaking development of both infrastructure and services to build an enabling environment for municipality and administrative districts/wards to move into the e-age.

Maldives has minimal natural resources. It is much dependent on trade and commerce for its development and its continued growth and prosperity. Given this scenario, it is also evident that e-applications and other e-resources will provide a gateway that supersedes natural resource restrictions. Thus, the development of information systems in Maldives would be instrumental in bringing about growth and prosperity.24

Center-Local Administrative Relations

The constitution of Maldives has provided for centre-local administrative relation. The central government makes policies and programmes to develop conditions (socio-economic) of the people at the local level.

---

The Republic of Maldives is a strong unitary State with a weak local-self government. Though there is no decentralized self-government and autonomous units of government in the islands and the atoll levels, there is an administrative decentralization across the country. There are very close relations between the central government and the local administrations. The political system in Maldives makes the country's administrative, financial and legislative relations different from other countries in South Asia.

As mentioned earlier, the Ministry of Atolls Development is responsible for local-level administration for the central government. Atolls Development Committees (ADCs) assist the Ministry in the local-administration. The Ministry of Atolls Development has three regional sectors North, South, and Central. The Ministry of Home Affairs’ jurisdiction is restricted only to Male. In fact, the central-local administrative relations are like the Executive and the Subordinate.

The Central Government has allocated finance for developmental works to the local level administration. The Central Government has already started various projects in various atolls. The government aims to provide for a better living standard for the local people in regions far from Male.

**IT Development Project:** Maldives has been trying to use information technology for development. It has developed a network of communication around the nation and with the world. Hence, the Government of Maldives has been investing a lot in training manpower and in getting the latest technology in various atolls including Male. **Outer Islands Electrification Project:** The Ministry administers loans for electrification in islands from the Ministry of Finance and Treasury of Maldives. Revolving fund schemes are utilized for loans from these sources for the people. **Regional Development Project:** The project is proposed for development as a sector loan within the framework of Gayoom's six Development National Plan (NDP’). It will be set within the

---

context of the NDPs overarching themes of regional development, ongoing poverty reduction, community development, improvement in the sanitation, solid waste management, planning sectors etc. **Southern Atolls Development Project:** The goal of the project is the wellbeing and increase in the income of the people. Atoll Development for Sustainable Livelihoods (ADSL), under the UNDP practice area of Governance, aims to (a) contribute to the formulation of government policies on local development and further operation through the development of systems, procedures, and guidelines; (b) contribute to the capacity development at the individual, organizational, and societal level in the ADCs, IDCs at outer Island offices, WDCs, NGOs, Credit institutions, CBOs etc; (c) contribute directly to the efforts for poverty alleviation through financial supports for developing infrastructure and improve access to financial services. Its main aim of institutional, infrastructural, and environmental improvements will provide a better living standard for the local people in Maldives.

The present government has taken special note of the social and economic implications of this regional imbalance, and programmers for widespread development of atolls are being put into operation. President Gayoom and Ministry of Atoll Affairs Administration have held meetings and led mass prayers not only in the Capital but also in outlying areas. His obvious attempt has been to half make neglected areas develop and integrate with the rest of the country.

The number of schools, community, and health centres has increased. Community centres and school farms are established in many atolls, with a view to imbibe community spirit of the country. The government has launched an integrated rural development programme for greater educational facilities, better health and sanitation measures, greater administrative cohesion, and more cottage industries.

---

26. *The Republic of Maldives, Male, Ministry of Atoll Administration*
Major emphasis has also been placed on improving transportation and communication between Male and other atolls, as well as among islands within the atolls. The Central Government has established the Atolls Trading Corporation with a view to purchase locally produced items from the atolls, thus encouraging the development of small-scale industries and expediting the growth of an inter-island transport network. The Maldivian government has also set up developmental activities in various islands. It has introduced democratic elections to Island Development Committees and Atoll Committees. The government has also introduced information technology to Male including and other parts of the country.

However, understanding the socio-economic indicators of Maldives and how much the government policies have helped the local level administration is necessary. Development has been centered on the tourism industry and its complementary service sectors like transport, distribution, real estate, and construction. Taxes on the tourist industry have been put into infrastructural use and have been utilised to improve technology in the agricultural sector. DGP in 200 totalled dollar 640 million or about dollar 2,200 per capita. Maldives has experienced relatively low inflation in the recent years.

Real DGP growth averaged about 10% in the 1980s. It expanded by an exceptional 16.2% in 1990, declined to 4% in 1993, grew to 10% in 1990 and has since leveled to 5- 7% range. Maldives has been running a merchandise trade deficit in the range of $200 to $ 260 million since 1997. The trade deficit declined to $ 208 million in 2002 from $ 233 million in 2001.

---

30. 
International shipping to and from Maldives is mainly operated by private sectors, with only a small fraction of the tonnage on vessels operated by the national carrier, Maldives Shipping management Ltd. Over the years, Maldives has received economic assistance from multilateral development organizations, including the UN Development Bank and the World Bank. Individual donors like Japan, India, Australia, and European and Arab Countries (including Islamic Development Bank and the Kuwaiti fund) have also contributed.31

Economics Sectors

Tourism: Over the recent years, Maldives has successfully marketed its natural assets for tourism: beautiful unplowed beaches on small coral islands, diving in blue waters, abundant with tropical and glorious sunsets etc. Tourism now raises about $198 million a year. Tourism and related services contributed 31% of the GDP in 2002.32 Since the resort was established in 1972, more than 87 islands have been developed, with a total capacity of 19,000 beds. The number of tourists visiting Maldives increased from 1,100 in 1972 to 280,000 in 1994. In 2000, the number of tourist arrivals exceeded 466,000; the number reached 500,000 for 2003. The average occupancy rate is 69%, with an average tourist staying 8 days and spending about $396.33

Fishing: This sector employs about 11% of the labour force and contributes 7% or 10% of GDP. As the use of fishing net is illegal, all fishing is done by line. Production was about 164,003 metric tons in 2002, most of which was skipjack tuna.34

In the wake of the challenges affecting to social services and economic needs, the government’s budget allocations have increasingly reflected a higher expenditure on social services. Monetary expansion and consequent

32. Ministry of Planning and National Development, Male, Republic of Maldives
34. Statistical Yearbook of Maldives, 2005
have covered the budgetary deficit by depreciating exchange rate. Much of this has come about due to rapid expansion of various fields in a bid to speed up development, and also through foreign aid. This shows that the Maldivian Government’s policies and programmes are focussed on the development of the local administration of the country. The Central-Local administrative relations have been positive since 1965, but Central Government should allow more budgetary allocations to the local level administration in Maldives.

The relationship between the central and local level administration of the country is important and necessary to strengthen the development of the Maldivian system of public administration. “The President has assumed short-term initiatives to establish the public sector reform and the process of modernization in the country.” It is not only for the political relationship at the local level administration, which is important but also relationship other level. It may be at the economic and social level. There are drawbacks in the functioning of the centralized power system in the country. However, the Maldivian Parliament has now allowed political parties.

Central Government does not give importance to the decentralization of power, as it does not uphold democracy as a political set-up. Undoubtedly, such a situation has impeded the evolution of a consensus of politics at all levels in the State. Its physiography contributed to the need for a decentralized political framework.

Therefore, the process of strong decentralization of power is very difficult. It is essential to incorporate the additional institutional networks and

---


support system to form the central government. People's consciousness and people's participation in the political system is the need of the hour. Proper implementation of the above analysis is needed to ensure the decentralization of power.  

Whatever policy and guidance come from the central level have to be implemented practically on the national level by the atoll administration. The atoll administration has to devise mechanism for self-reliance. It has to train Island and Atoll-levels officials to carry out administrative and developmental works at of the local level.

However, the traditional framework of political conduct has been the customary practice since long. As a consequence of the traditional practice of governance, constitutional changes did not bring any significance among the power elites. The main problem is faced at the local level administration. Strong centralization of power has made the local administration weak. There is a possibility of political mobilization for a strong local self-government if people make strenuous effort to change the existing political system in the country. That can be made possible only if consciousness and participation in the internal dynamics of the nation's political system is made possible.

Conclusion

It is quite apparent that there is a high degree of centralization in the administrative set up of the Maldives. The geographical point of view that Maldives is composed of numerous coral islands and separated from one another impedes the strong decentralization of power. The present constitution of the Maldives does not provide for a strong local government set-up. However, this may be possible as modernization and information


technologies make inroads into the economy and the polity, and the new technology of transport and communication. Commutation has brought the numerous Coral Islands and the Maldives together so that local administration likely to give autonomous units of government at the atoll and island level in the country, thus making a proper decentralized self-government possible.