CHAPTER-II
THE EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL SYSTEM
This chapter analyses the evolution of political system in Maldives from the ancient period. It specifically deals with the political system of the Sultanate system in the pre-constitutional development period. This chapter also emphasizes the nature and structure of the Sultanate political system; and what were the institutions, how power was concentrated, and how the Sultan governed the atoll-state. It extensively analyses the impact of colonialism (Portuguese, Dutch and British rule) on the political system of Maldives. The chapter also highlights the agreements with Britain and its impact. An analysis of the constitutional development and the political system under various constitutions up to the period of independence has also been given. The purpose is to find out the nature of the political system during the pre-independence period so that the continuity and change in the post-colonial political system can be identified in the Maldives.

Maldives remained a Sultanate system uninterruptedly for more than 800 years. The Sultanate system lasted from 1153 to 1965, excepting the fifteen years of Portuguese interlude and a brief period of presidential rule in 1953. According to the history of Maldives, there were ninety-three Sultans, including four Sultanas. A highly organized central administrative system had evolved in the course of the long history of Maldives. The first known king was Koimala Kalo of the Male Dynasty, who actually ascended the throne in A.D.1141. Twelve years later the country embraced Islam. The period that followed the conversion to Islam in A.D.1153, with the King Koimala Kalo assuming the title of Sultan is believed to have witnessed the formulation of a stable central administration, and a constitutional monarchy gradually evolved with advisory councils. This system continued unto 1932, when the first democratic constitution was proclaimed.

However, the political system (Sultanate) in the pre-constitutional development was very interesting and important in Maldives. There were regular successions from Sultan to Sultan, basically from father to son; or at
times in the absence of a son or as a result of a conflict of power, there used to be change in the family, which held the power.

Traditionally, the country was ruled by hereditary succession to the throne, bristled with coups and squabbles: a common phenomenon in many monarchical systems. It is true that the Sultanate functioned by giving priority to the political and economic aspects of Maldives society. Basically, Islamic law regulated the political system. The religious and political structures were operated in such a way that the former was subordinated to the latter. The authentic historical records clearly indicate that the people of Maldives did actually participate in the governance of the country. The ruler or Sultan listened to even the views of the people, and were respected and very often considered. The decisions of the rulers were never despotically enforced on the people but were rather taken by the Sultan on the advice of the administrative councils set up for the purpose. The structure of the political system of the Sultanate system was very important in Maldives. Most of the political activity and power struggles were confined to Male and the neighbouring islands in Maldives. The Sultan has been, from the olden times, exercised his administrative powers more or less in a capacity similar to that of a constitutional monarchy.

The Sultan’s predecessor had conventions that had been looked upon as laws in the administrative structure. When necessity arose under new circumstances, the Sultans deviated from the normal procedures with the advice and consent of the councils. The Sultan was considered the head: he had the de jure supreme power and say in administrative affairs. The ruler was never a despotic or autocratic. All his actions were constantly reviewed by the councils of advisors and chiefs who voiced the views of the people at the meeting of the councils where the Sultan himself was only member. It is

true that Sultans could even be deposed on the decisions taken by the
councils if they had contravened the existing customs and conventions. One
would therefore be justified in drawing the conclusion that the de facto
supreme power in governance rested with the people, and that the system
functioned fairly and smoothly.

It can therefore be said that a high degree of democracy in its modern
sense was maintained throughout the country's known history. The Sultan
functioned as a constitutional monarch and was assisted in his administrative
duties by three important councils:

(a) Raskamuge Is Majlis

(b) Raskamuge Dhevana Majlis and

(c) Rasmkamuge Thinvana Majlis.

These councils can be compared in broad principle with the present
day constitutional organs such as the senate, the legislative and the local
government institutions. The three constitutional councils had existed right
through the known recorded history of the country, subject to variations in
the number of members in each council. But essentially, the functions of
each council remained unchanged.3

Therefore, the Raskamuge Is Majlis, the first council of the realm,
consisted of the king and his most trusted and closest advisors known as
Kliegs or Noble Chiefs. This council was summoned when decisions on
matters of great importance and exigency were to be taken. When the
meetings of this council were held, the Sultan himself attended as a member
of the Majlis. He was titled the Raskilege the King Kilege, which indicated
that he was the first among the equals. Hence, the right to rule the country

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was vested in the Sultan, but the most important characteristic in the execution of his authority and rule was that he delegated part of his powers to the Kileges in carrying out the day-to-day administration in his name and on his behalf. Thus, the Sultan’s powers were divided among his immediate subordinate Kileges who exercised them with a deep sense of responsibility. The Sultan was therefore a primus inter pares, who was assisted and advised by the Kileges.

The second council was the Raskamuge Dhevana, which consisted of the kileges; the Chief Justice or Qaazi; some nobles called Wazirs; the Treasurer and the Controller of government revenue known as the Bodu Bandeyri; the Handheygiri or Shah Bandar, the principal collector of customs; and Avashuverin, who were the nobles representing the four wards of Male. This council met more often than the first council of the realm and discussed matters related to the affairs of government.

The third council of the Realm was the Raskamuge Thinvaana Majlis. It was consisted of the members of the first and second councils together with Edhuru Beykalun, which included the four; Badi Koshi, Gunners, the Kuli Koshi and the exponents of martial arts. The provisional chiefs were known as Kangathi Kolilee Beykalum. These Kangiathi Beykalums were in charge of the administration in the provinces or atoll and were directly responsible to report to the Handheygiri, who represented the authority of the central government. The duties of the provisional chiefs were to maintain law and order and manage the affairs of the provinces and to keep the Hadheygiri constantly informed of the developments in their regions. They had the right to advise the Sultan about the administration of the provinces. They usually gathered in Male and held council with the Sultan and other responsible officers towards the end of the southwest monsoon season. Interesting aspects they discussed were the general administration in the

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atolls, revenue, and taxation during the proceeding year, and planning of specific policies. So, the Sultanate system in the preconstitutional development period was basically traditional, hereditary system, similar to that of a constitutional monarch\(^5\)

Overall, the Sultanate system did not follow modern ideas and modern democratic political system but followed basically traditional and hierarchical political system. The power was centralized and the king was the head. The system was basically made to appear in consonance with or sanctioned by Islamic law. The country was highly centralized and no question of decentralization of power arose. Socio-economic position was not in good condition. Views of the people were respected but common people did not enjoy any political right. So, the right to rule the country was vested in the Sultan, who had the powers to appoint or dismiss even the highest ecclesiastical official.

**The Advent of European powers in the Maldives**

According to historical facts, the European Colonial powers came to the Maldives about 16\(^{th}\) century, beginning with the Portuguese, then the Dutch, and finally the British. When Maldives was under foreign domination and rule, the country's political and economic systems underwent a change. But the European colonial powers did not change the socio-political fabric of the Maldives.

There were many reasons for the colonial control of the Maldives. Sultan Hassan IX was the ruler from A.D.1550 to A.D.1552. During his rule he had a dispute with his ministers over a certain matters, which turned the ministers and even the people against him. He wanted to renounce Islam and that caused turmoil in the country. After this incident the Sultan became so unpopular that he was forced to flee to Cochin in India. After a few days, the

\(^5\) Maldives, *Department of Information and Broadcasting*, Historical Background of Maldives, 1970.
Sultan got himself baptized into Christianity by Francis Xavier. The Sultan was strong-minded and later converted the population of Maldives to Christianity. After that, he went to Goa and requested the Portuguese leaders to lend him a ship to attack and capture the Maldives. This was the interesting story about how the leader of one's own country invited the colonial power to rule in the country.6

However, Sultan Ali Vi of Maldives ruled from A.D.1557 to A.D.1558 in the country. He was a good ruler and attempted to improve the deteriorating condition of the country, but he proved unsuccessful. Despite his efforts, the biggest Portuguese war-expedition arrived in the Maldives under the leadership of Andreas Andre and the Sultan Ali lost his country to the hands of the Portuguese. He was killed in battle against the invading Portuguese.7

The Portuguese Invasion and Occupation

The Portuguese occupied the islands for 15 years. The people of Maldives were not happy with the state of affairs prevailing in the country that time. The main aims of the invaders were to hold a monopoly of trade; religious conversion (to convert the natives to Christianity) and complete colonization of the country. During the Portuguese invasion and occupation nothing was done to improve the welfare of the people. Consequently, the patriotic and religious people of Maldives started forming small groups against the policies of the Portuguese. Even the Portuguese power could not change the ways of the people. There was a conflict between the people of Maldives and the Portuguese, and many Portuguese were killed and others surrendered. After about 15 years of foreign domination, Maldives once again became an independent country.8

8. A brief historical sketch of the Portuguese period is available in Bell's reports. Amin Didi also deals with the account of Maldivian interaction with the colonial powers in a book on Maldivian history in Divehi.
During the Century the Dutch ousted the Portuguese as a principal
force in the Indian Ocean. In 1645 Maldives established diplomatic ties with
the Dutch Governor of Sri Lanka and exchanged tribute for cowries shells. In
return the Dutch provided of spices, nut and ammunition.

In 1796 the British took over Sri Lanka from the Dutch in and trade
between Male and Colombo increased. At that time the Sultan of Maldives
took himself very seriously. He wrote a letter to the Governor of Sri Lanka,
asking him not to welcome any enemy but to take care of any shipwreck
from Maldives. The Dutch did not interfere with the local government and
affairs of the Maldives. After the Dutch, Maldives became a British
protectorate in 1887. Actually, between 1887 and 1965, Maldives remained a
British protectorate, but Britain did not interfere with the internal affairs of
the country. After becoming a British protectorate, Maldives continued to be
on its own. The British did not enter the country physically till the Second
World War, when they established a staging post on Gan Island in
Southernmost Addu Atoll.

The Period of British Suzerainty

After the withdrawal of Dutch from Ceylon, the Sultan of Maldives, in a
communication to the Governor of Ceylon in 1798, expressed his desire for
maintaining good political relations with the British. There were five
important agreements between the two countries. The first agreement was
signed on December 16, 1887. According to the 1887 agreement, the
responsibility of recognizing and installing the Sultan, as well as the control
of the country and its defense and foreign relations were vested in Great
Britain. Another agreement was signed at Male on April 24, 1948 between
the United Kingdom and the Maldives Islands. The third agreement was
singed in 1953 between the two countries. The agreement was the legal basis

10. H.C.P. Bell, The Maldives Islands: An Account of the physical feature, climate,
History.
on which the Gan airfield was being constructed. The fourth agreement was signed in 1956; under this agreement, the inhabitants of Gan were to be resettled elsewhere at the expense of United Kingdom. The fifth agreement was signed in 1965; under this agreement, Britain’s rights over Addu Atoll were reduced to a period of 30 years from 100 years. The 1887 agreement was very important for both the countries because it had important implications other than Maldives becoming a British protectorate.

What happened after the agreement between the two countries which made Maldives a British protectorate? More importantly, the agreement underlined the principle of non-interference in local affairs. At the same time, the British pledged to protect Maldives from any external aggression. For this, Maldives was to pay an annual tribute to Britain to build a staging post on Gan Island during World War II. In 1965 Gan was converted into an air base for exclusive use to HM forces till it was vacated in 1976.

The political system can see the changes made by the British even in the outside world particularly India and Sri Lanka. After the changes made by the British in political system of Maldives, the educated male elite wanted to introduce a reform in the political structure because they urged that colonial government should not be supported directly. This is evident from the constitutional changes in 1932, which were largely fashioned on the Donough constitution of Sri Lanka promulgated a year earlier. “This was politically correct that Britain provided for an elected People’s Assembly, Legislative Council and a Council of Ministers.”

As there was an agreement of non-interference, the colonial government mediated to resolve disputes between its subject and the Maldivian government only if and when requested by the Sultan. There were

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also provisions for the Sultans of Maldives, who came to the throne in accordance with the constitutional practice of the country. It means, Britain recognized the Sultanate system, but Britain never had a physical presence in Maldives to exert any influence on the internal administration of the islands.

But, then why did the colonial power mediate to resolve disputes between the subjects and the Maldivian government; and what happened between the two countries. The colonial government was protecting the island through shortened principles, for which Britishers were trying hard to get it. But the Sultan of Maldives did not understand the actual politics, which the British were playing. During the Sultanate system, governance without interference from the external powers was smooth. But the colonial powers came and did not solve the problem. As for the British, with the 1887 agreement the effective political status of Maldives came under the British rule as a protectorate till 1965. In internal matter and the conduct of domestic politics, the Maldives remained largely unhindered. And at the constitutional level, certain changes were brought about, that did not seem to affect either the pace or the pattern of social structures, except in a formal sense.

However, “under the 1956 agreement, the United Kingdom was entitled to such defense facilitates in the Maldives as they after consultation with the Maldives Government, determined to be required for the defense of the Maldives or any part of the common wealth.” The 1956 agreement was the result of consultation in accordance with the 1953 agreement, which formed the construction of legal basis of Gan airfield.

According to the 1960 agreement (which was a largely- restatement of 1956 agreement), Britain’s rights over Addu Atoll were reduced to a period of 30 years from 100 years. Payment of $100,000 was made to the

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14 Maasud Ull Hasan Nuri, Maldives in the 1990’s, Spotlight on Regional Affairs, No. 4, 1992, pp. 65-195.
Male Government immediately and another $ 750,000 was promised over a period of five years for development works. In addition to the annual sum of $25,000 in foreign exchange, the government received salary of the 900 odd islanders working in the British installations.\textsuperscript{16}

Thus, the British colonial power came into the domestic politics of Maldives. Because of the absence of any treaty or agreement underlining the relations between the two countries, the British had desisted from interfering in the numerous instances of coups and take over of Sultanship and government by dissident factions. They were mostly into commercial activities; British subjects conducted business in Maldives territory. Trade with British India and Ceylon had been also increasing consistently.\textsuperscript{17}

The colonial powers did not make an impact on the political system of Maldives. People of the country tried to understand how to get freedom from the colonial powers. They managed to retain the Sultanate system. Finally, when Ceylon attained independence in 1948, Maldives also suggested for a new agreement to be drawn. The new agreement, which was based on the first, was signed between the two countries. According to the new agreement signed in Male on April 23, 1948, Maldives was to stop paying the tribute to British whilst still remaining its protectorate status. It is very important that the colonial powers (Portuguese, Dutch, and British) urged to change the political structure of the Maldives, but even then, there was no change in the local level system (atoll, island levels).\textsuperscript{18}

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\textsuperscript{15} The Department of Information and Broadcasting, \textit{The Constitution of the Republic of Maldives} (Male, n.d.).
\textsuperscript{16} Times, 5 February 1960.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
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Modernization of Political System and Various Pre-1968 Constitutions of the Maldives

Maldives did not have a written constitution until December 22, 1932. There were systems of taxation, national defense, and discharge of public duties and administration of justice under unwritten constitution.19 These were clearly defined by usage and customs, though not by written documents. “A deeper study of the evolution and development of the system of government and administration in the Maldives would show that there was an unwritten constitution which was firmly established in the country.”20 The people, in the form of time-honoured customs and traditions, accepted it; so these records clearly indicate that the people were respected and were very often considered by the ruler in power. The decisions of the rulers were rather taken by the Sultan on the advice of the administrative councils set up for the purpose. Hence, we found that democratic character was there even before independence in Maldives. Modernization of the political system was maintained more or less in Maldives even in earlier times.

Therefore, the history of the constitutional evolution of Maldives up to the present day can be divided into three periods:

(a) The first period covers the ancient and medieval eras when administration was carried out according to the unwritten constitution as dictated by customs and conventions;

(b) The second period was when the existing customs and conventions were written down and backed by law; and


During the third period amendments to the written constitution began to be brought about as and when the necessity arose. 21

However, in the Maldives there were various constitutions in the pre-1968 period. Discussed in detail are various important pre-1968 constitutions. These were 1932 constitution, 1954 constitution and 1964 constitution.

The Constitution of 1932

In 1932, Muhammad Shamsuddin III, who had been recognized by the British over his rivals, was persuaded to accept the first written constitution in history of Maldives. It not only limited his powers but also introduced the principle of elections. The first democratic constitution of the Maldives was proclaimed in 1932. The Sultan became the Head of State and a cabinet of Ministers headed by a Prime Minister was elected. The first written constitution of the country was largely based on the customs, conventions and other traditional administrative practices that have been followed for centuries. So, the constitution of 1932 provided a People’s Assembly consisting of 47 members elected by people- four each from the larger atolls, two each from the smaller atolls, one from Mulaku Island and four from capital of the country ‘Male’. Only literate males were granted voting right. A legislative council was elected every five years, consisting of twenty-eight members of whom seven were nominated by the Sultan. In the first stage, the People’s Assembly elected the rest. The President of the Council generally became the Prime Minister, who was appointed by the Sultan in consultation with the Legislative Council. Even other ministers were to be chosen by the Prime Minister with the consent of the Sultan.

No minister was to indulge in any business or trade of the country. Therefore, a large part of the revenues was reserved for the Sultan’s count

21 Ibid.
and the office bearers. Despite this, ministers were engaged in trade and enjoyed certain privileges in the purchase of goods from the government and hence, openly contravened the above prohibition. There were some problems for the legislative council; the dispute was as usual. The new cabinet attempted to take certain measures which ironically helped strengthen the former Prime Minister in his efforts to let the political forces swing in his favour. Demonstrations against the council of ministers took place in Male.22

Also, the Borah merchants, who went on strike in July 1933, closing their shops, refusing to buy fish from Maldives further, confounded the power tussle. It was an attempt to keep their monopoly of the rice or fish trade, which was being threatened by the new constitution and Maldivian government’s intention to purchase its own steamer to fish and bring in rice. The British had intervened as intermediary and settled the matters by ensuring the continuation of the constitution. The Sultan had repealed the reform and the taxation measures. Even the idea of purchase of a government steamer was dropped. Thereafter, certain ministers were expelled from Male so that power was restored to persons related to the former Prime Minister Abdul Majid Didi.23

The first 1932 written constitution lasted for 23 years because Muhammad Amin Didi sought a referendum for the abolition of Sultanate system in Maldives. During the first 1932 written constitutional period, there was more corruption, and a large part of the revenue was reserved for the sultan’s court and the office-bearers.

The Government had continued to remain a close family preserve. There were power tussle among sons of the Sultans. It was a difficult period for the people to enjoy their freedom because it was like a limited monarchy,


23 For the text of the constitution see co Affairs of the Maldives Islands, Eastern, No. 164.
and the actual government was in the hands of oligarchs, who were all members of an exclusive and closely allied aristocracy.

It is evident that the political elite (Sultan) had been trying from the very beginning to get political power. Power was a close family preserve. Even the elected councils did not have power but only consisted of nominees of the ministers. They had little influence over the minister’s activities. The legislative council had power to only pass the Annual Budget; but this too appeared to have existed on paper only. The Sultan dominated the whole system, which was based on oligarchy. As a result there was another attempt for liberalizing the constitutional framework of Maldives politics. The 1953 Republican constitution lasted for less than a year because Ibrahim Mohammed Didi, who became the Sultan, suspended the constitution and took over the government.  

So, only few families controlled the political power, and they enjoyed complete power during the period:

The 1954 Constitution: Reversal from Republican to the Sultanate

Further constitutional changes took place in Maldives after the death of the Mohammed Amin Didi. Maldives brought about changes in the internal constitutional structure. The 1954 constitution was considered another milestone in the constitutional history and trend of political liberalization. It was consisted of 48 members; the Majlis along with the nobility elected the Sultan. The Majlis, which was largely an elected body, could override the Sultan’s veto. During this period, a constitutional social reform took place in Maldives. It was basically about the abolition of unreasonable forced labour in Maldives.  

Therefore, the form of government, especially the sultanate system, was considered archaic and hardly had any progressive thought. There had

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been an earlier manifestation of this same desire in 1953. When the People’s Assembly and the Majlis decided to establish Republic, Mohammed Amin Didi was chosen to be the Head of State by a popular referendum.²⁶ Existing political system of that time considered the people’s decision to be valuable. The 1954 constitution recognized the superiority of the Sultan even though the Majlis members and the nobility elected the Sultan of the country. The Sultan still enjoyed the power of the State. It was only when the Republican constitution came into force in 1953 that the power came in the hands of the President, but it lasted for only one year. The 1954 Constitution was based on the Republican system after the Sultanate. It can be said that the government was a constitutional Sultanate, where the Sultan was really powerful.²⁷ Ten years later in 1964, the constitution was again changed. The Sultan became a figurehead. All executive power was vested in the Prime Minister.

The 1964 Constitution

This constitution was promulgated fully in 1964. It formed the basis of its first post-independence constitution under which, amongst other things, the Sultanate system finally came to an end forever in the atoll island-state. The main objective remained how to secure the tenure of Gan which, it was agreed, would continue under the 1960 agreement. The first draft of the agreement with regard to this was submitted in mid-May 1964, and by July 1965 an agreeable draft was ready and signed. The agreeable draft emphasised for the complete independence of Maldives on July 26, 1965.²⁸

However, in July 1965, Britain was faced with pressure from various quarters- internal (public opinion in the Maldives) and external (rising support from regional and other countries) to agree to independence of the


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Maldives.\(^\text{29}\) But it had retained the lease of Gan base up to 1986. This was prematurely terminated by it in 1976 as part of the British Policy of withdrawal from East of Suez.\(^\text{30}\)

Therefore, the period 1960 to 1965 was very crucial because the country was fighting with the British’s monopoly system on Gan Island. The country urged the British to grant them complete independence, with the right to conduct her own external relations. Maldives finally became an independent state in July 26, 1965. Before, it was very difficult to deal with British. Under terms of an agreement signed between Sir Michael Walker, (the British High Commissioner in Sri Lanka) on behalf of the United Kingdom, and Ibrahim Nasir (the Prime Minister) on behalf of the people of Maldives, finally, Maldives was recognized as a fully independent state in 1965.

It was under the reign of Sultan Mohammad Fareed I that Maldives attained a sovereign independent status by discarding its protectorate status. On November 11, 1968, the Sultanate was abolished and replaced by Republic. President Ibrahim Nasir, who was the Prime Minister since 1957, became the first President of the second Republic.\(^\text{31}\) The new constitution of the Republic of Maldives was adopted on March 15, 1968. This new 1968 constitution recognized that Maldives is a composite, sovereign, and fully independent state bearing the official name of the Republic of Maldives.\(^\text{32}\)

Constitutional and political development took place in Maldives as a result of the search for a new image for the country. Constitutions of Maldives were changed one after one. Even the 1953 constitution lasted for less than one year; this happened because of lack of communication after its


independence from Sultanate, and after the change in the internal constitutional structure. The 1964 constitution was changed because it did not evidently satisfy the mood of the Maldives people for long. The Prime Minister and the constitutional Sultanate were not satisfactory; another thing is that the constitutional Sultanate position was not strong. This is more or less applicable even in the traditional Maldives polity. Once a political leader is accepted at any level, as an island Headman, an atoll Chief or the Head of the nation, it means that a strong individual leadership is expected. That was why the 1964 constitution was changed in Maldives. So, Maldives was declared a Republic for the second time in 1968. In fact, the 1964 constitution was changed due to change of the system. The Sultan became a figurehead (nominal head). All executive powers were vested in the Prime Minister. The reigning Sultan, Muhammad Farid Didi was ill and was without an heir. He was deposed and the Republic came about in a peaceful manner on November 11, 1968. The new (1968) constitution of the Maldives was adopted in March 1968

Under the constitution of 1968, elections were held for the first time in September 1969. However, the 1968 constitution vested considerable powers in the President, including the right to appoint and dismiss the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. These were the developments in the political system during the 1960s.33

However, from 1932 onwards, Maldives has been a form of modern democracy in which necessary amendment in the constitution were brought about by the consent of the 48 member’s of the Citizens’ Majlis, which is a unicameral legislature and has gradually assumed full legislative powers. This phase culminated with the declaration of the first Republic of Maldives in 1953, which lasted only for seven months. The Sultanate was then reinstalled and an elective monarch continued till 1968, when the second

33. The Department of Information and Broadcasting, The Constitution of the Republic of Maldives (Male, n.d.)
Republic was proclaimed. It is this system, which had incorporated several amendments and modification in the 1968 constitution that can be found in Maldives today.

What is remarkable in the process of the constitutional evolution in Maldives is the present constitution, which is not entirely a new one. The old political system has been modified and amended to suit the present day requirements. It has always responded to the political, social, economic, and cultural uniqueness of the country, covering interrelations between the islands and atolls.\textsuperscript{34}

It is true that political system during the Sultanate system was different. The power structure had assumed a different and important role under the Sultanate system. The people of Maldives have not forgotten about the constitutional system because it has not changed the country’s character and democratic spirit.\textsuperscript{35} The country has come into contact with other countries but its character has not been changed entirely. Even various socio-political and cultural influences have had their impact. These types of influences were but minimal in Maldives from the very beginning.

**The End of the Sultanate System in Maldives**

In the Maldives political system, there was more than 815 years of Sultanate system. The sultanate system was basically hereditary. There was no arrangement of merit and capability as the basis of becoming the State. The monarchical system was based on Islamic law. The Sultan (the King) had all powers. The Sultanate system was not working well for the whole people because there were problems for common people, which were yet to be addressed. They could not enjoy their rights as citizens of the country.

\textsuperscript{34} "Maldives Islands. Attainment of Independence", Current Notes on International Affairs, Vol.37, January 1966, p.32.

People tried to be free under the system but they did not get opportunities to exercise their rights. So, the system came to an end in the atoll-state.

Actually, the country reverted to Sultanate rule in 1954 and remained so till 1968, from when it named itself the Republic of Maldives under an elected President. Maldives acquired political independence in 1965. No colonial power directly ruled the Maldives islands, except the Portuguese who managed to gain control over it from 1558 to 1573. The Dutch occupied Male with a detachment of troops for some time though this seemed to have had no significant impact on Maldives. After the Dutch, the British came to hold protectorate rule over the islands. The British did not enter the country physically till the Second World War, when they established a staging post on Gan island in southernmost Addu Atoll. Maldives remained a British protectorate even though Britain did not interfere with the internal affairs of the country. It was during the reign of Sultan Mohammad Fareed I that Maldives attained a sovereign independent status by discarding its protectorate status on July 26, 1965. It formally became an independent nation on November 11, 1968. Following a national referendum, the Sultanate system was abolished and was replaced by a Republic so that the sultanate system came to an end in Maldives forever.

38 Clarence Malony, The People of Maldives Islands, (Madras, 1980), p.185
Conclusion

It is evident that no western colonial power directly ruled the Maldives except the Portuguese who managed to gain control over it for 15 years. As Britain became a protectorate power and the conduct of domestic politics remained unhindered. At the constitutional level, certain changes were brought about in the social structures. In Maldives, the traditional framework of political conduct was still practiced. Customary ruling of the country was carried out through a hierarchical set-up of an aristocratic oligarchy at the top, the Heads of island and Chief of atolls in the lowest level. Despite relative decentralization because of constant pressure, constitutional changes did not herald any significant change in the power elite. The Sultan and his descendants and also other nobles continued to rule the roost. In this context, practically all political squabbles and changes were family affairs. With the heralding of independence in 1965 in such a background, political democratization still needed to go a long way in the new state called Maldives.