Cost of Politics

The cost of politics in the Maldives

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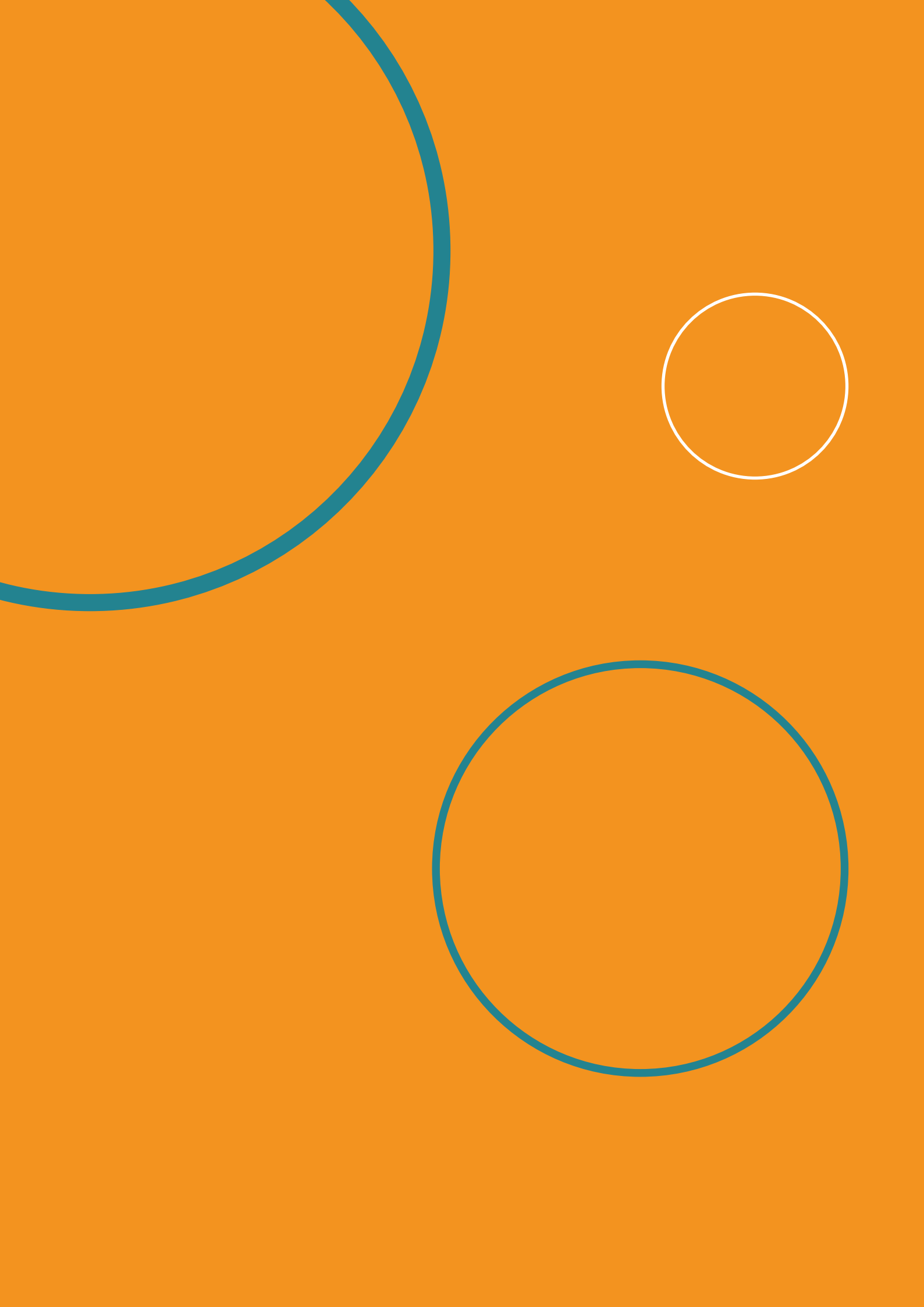
Table of Contents



Introduction

The relationship between money and politics has been a pivotal issue in the Maldives, particularly since the adoption of a multi-party-political system in 2008. With elections serving as the cornerstone of representative democracy, the financial demands placed on candidates and political parties have grown exponentially, shaping the nature of political competition and governance and influencing electoral strategies, voter engagement, and, ultimately, political outcomes.

Recent parliamentary elections in the Maldives have also often been shaped by the presidential elections that precede them[1]. With shifts in political power having a cascading effect on parliamentary races by influencing party finances, shaping alliances, and impacting voter behaviour. Money too is increasingly important in determining electoral outcomes, as parties and candidates vie to consolidate influence and secure majorities.

Although election success in the Maldives is not guaranteed by financial expenditure alone, few candidates can effectively compete without significant personal spending, support from external groups, or leveraging established family ties in politics. The heavy financial burden of political campaigns, coupled with a campaign culture that often prioritises personal and individual interests over policy discussions, risks undermining principles of accountability, inclusivity, and fair representation.

This report aims to explore the key drivers and patterns of political expenditure in the Maldives, examining costs incurred not only during campaign periods but also in the lead-up to and aftermath of elections. It seeks to analyse the economic dynamics and assess the broader implications of these financial pressures on Maldivian democracy by presenting findings that provide insights into electoral incentives, barriers to entry, and the financial sustainability of political engagement, along with recommendations which can contribute to reduced influence of money in Maldivian politics.

Methodology

The core of this approach was in-depth qualitative interviews using a detailed questionnaire, but with an open-ended approach to allow interviewees to freely volunteer information. Participants were assured full confidentiality to encourage candid sharing of information.

In total 22 in-person key informant interviews (KIIs), 13 of which were with candidates who ran in the most recent parliamentary elections, and nine with non-candidate experts. Further data was gathered from a digital questionnaire shared directly with candidates and written input from six candidates who responded to a condensed version of the interview questionnaire.

Interviewees were selected to cover a comprehensive overview of the different contexts in which parliamentary elections are held in the Maldives. They included successful and unsuccessful candidates, candidates from both major parties, aspirants from multiple minor parties with diverse platforms, and independents. Geographically, candidates came from Male' City which has about 40% of the population of the country, as well as smaller cities and from larger islands, and from islands small enough that they shared their seat with other islands instead of having their own constituency. Six of the candidates interviewed were female and three youth, with a blend of experienced campaigners who had won parliamentary elections before as well as candidates running in their first election engaged.

To supplement these insights from candidates, nine interviews were also undertaken with representatives from regulatory and administrative bodies for elections, experienced high-level public officials, academics, political journalists, senior-level campaign leaders, domestic civil society organisations (CSOs) and political consultants. A focus group

discussion (FGD) was also held with a sample of ordinary citizens across ages to understand how they participated in, and viewed, the 2024 parliamentary campaign. Finally, data was gathered from a desk research of publicly available secondary sources such as official election regulations and guides, as well as electoral observation and evaluation reports covering recent elections. When developing recommendations, existing literature on policy interventions related to the proposals made was also consulted.

Prior to publication, the key findings of the report were presented during a validation session with 12 representatives from across Maldivian civil society, government officials, political party leadership, and election bodies. This not only ensured the robustness of the findings but provided a forum for discussing and refining potential solutions.

The electoral framework

President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom governed the Maldives for three decades, from 1978 to 2008, making him one of Asia's longest-serving leaders. During his tenure, restrictions on opposition parties compelled the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) to organise in exile, starting in the United Kingdom in 2001. Although challenges to his rule had emerged as early as the 1980s, significant pressure culminated in 2004 when riots in the capital, sparked by allegations of prisoner abuse, forced President Gayoom to initiate a democratic reform process.

These reforms brought transformative changes to the political landscape, including the adoption of a new constitution in 2008, which paved the way for political pluralism and the formal establishment of political parties. The 2008 constitution remains the foundation of the Maldives' governance system, providing the legal framework for parliamentary elections and legislative authority. It vests legislative power in the People's Majlis, the Maldives' unicameral parliament, and guarantees all Maldivian citizens aged 18 and above the right to vote in elections and referendums by secret ballot. The basic law also introduced multi-party democracy and elections for the first time.

The method of determining the number of Members of Parliament (MPs) – elected for five-year terms from population-based constituencies across the Maldives 21 administrative divisions - is prescribed in the constitution and the Parliamentary Constituencies Determination Act. Each administrative division elects two members for the first 5,000 persons registered for each administrative division of Maldives, or for each administrative division with less than 5,000 persons. For every additional 5,000 registered persons in an administrative division, one extra member is elected. This population-based allocation has led to a steady increase in parliamentary seats over the last four elections, growing from an initial 77 seats to the current 93.

The Elections Commission (EC) was also established under the 2008 constitution as an independent and impartial institution to manage elections, conduct referendums, and oversee the electoral process. It is also responsible for monitoring political party compliance and has the power to penalise those who do not comply. The Election Act (2008) provides the general policies and matters in accordance with which the EC must plan for and conduct all elections. This includes the nomination of candidates, campaign regulations and campaign finance guidelines. All candidates must pay an administrative fee of 5,000[2] Maldivian Rufiyaa (MVR) at the time of making an application to contest in parliamentary elections. The Act also stipulates campaign expenditure limits derived on the basis of MVR 2,000 per eligible voter in the constituency and all candidates are required to submit a financial statement of all transactions in relation the parliamentary elections within one month of the date of election. However, the EC has found it difficult to verify the expenditures and amounts stated in the declarations, with

only the issue of candidates who do not submit the financial declaration within the timeframe – 36 in 2019 and 19 in 2024 - investigated by the Commission and sent for prosecution. However, of these submissions, no criminal cases against any candidate has been brought to date.

The Election Act also prohibits foreign individuals, agencies, governments, or organisations; international organisations; anonymous contributors; public bodies (other than assistance legally provided by the state to political parties); and any company or entity in which the government holds a stake from providing financial or material assistance for or in association with a candidate's campaign. The Act specifically prohibits any persons from offering something or provision of a service or a promise as such to an individual, group of people or for the public, to acquire support for a candidate in an election, or negatively impact the electoral right of another candidate within the period between announcing for an election and 30 days post announcement of results. Any such acts or attempts are deemed to constitute an offence of bribery or offence of attempted bribery. Such offences can carry a penalty of fines between MVR 72,000-288,000 or a jail term between one and four years. Although any acts of bribery in relation to elections can be investigated by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), to date there have been no criminal prosecutions.

Currently, there are 11 registered political parties in the Maldives, of which five[3], plus independents won seats in the 2024 elections. Political party formation and regulation is set out in the Political Parties Act 2013 which governs the formation, registration, and membership requirements of political parties. According to the Act, political parties require at least 3,000 members to be registered, with a party that has membership exceeding 10,000 eligible for government funding that corresponds with the number of registered members[4].

Following the April 2024 parliamentary elections, on 20 November 2024, Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu ratified the sixth amendment to the Constitution of the Maldives[5]. The amendment specifies that an MP will lose their seat if they defect from the political party under whose ticket they were elected, join a political party after being elected as an independent candidate, or voluntarily leaves or is expelled from their political party while in office. Currently, 75 out of the 93 MPs, belong to the ruling party, the People's National Congress (PNC), but only 66 ran on their ticket, with the remaining nine switching after the election.

Cost of campaigning

Primary elections

Major parties[6] dominate the Maldivian political landscape. Primary elections within those parties are highly competitive and are often viewed as the most significant hurdle to winning a parliamentary seat. This is particularly true in constituencies where one party is strongly favoured to win. Primaries within the ruling President's party are also especially competitive and expensive in regional constituencies, since winning the primary is regarded as the "real" election. Aside from regional constituencies where the incumbent MP is a nationally prominent businessman who heads their own minor party or in constituencies with particularly popular and long-serving national figures, parliamentary seats have swung toward the ruling President's party by large margins in previous parliamentary elections. Between this and on-the-ground appraisals of constituency sentiment, certain races are viewed by candidates as very likely locks, or easy wins, in the general election. Even still, only those with the resources to partake in the expected 'bidding war' can compete.

The campaign budget required for primaries were estimated by candidates to be between MVR 200,000-500,000. But in some valuable or high stakes races, interviewees expressed

that even primary elections can cost as much as MVR 4 million. As candidates do not receive party funding at this stage, this outlay can risk financial devastation for candidates pursuing this path. Typically expenditures are dedicated to core campaign activities—transportation, volunteer support, headquarters rent, and organising events—which are similar to those in a general election campaign, albeit at a reduced scale. Vote-buying also happens less frequently in primary elections compared to general elections, and it is less expensive when it does occur. This is because the pool of voters in a primary election, which consists of party members, is smaller and typically includes individuals who are more actively involved in, and committed to, the party's values and processes.

Across interviews, both candidates and other experts emphasised that party leaders played a significant role in the primary process. Party leaders have a large influence over which individuals rise to leadership roles within the party, assign individuals to key roles of responsibility, and facilitate them forming formal and informal connections. In addition to these longer-term elements feeding into succeeding in a primary election, party leaders are often perceived to put their thumbs on the scale to shape the outcome of certain races.

Cost of general elections

With the dispersed and heterogeneous nature of the Maldives and its constituencies, many candidates face different contexts and challenges when running for Majlis. Parliament is based in the capital city of Male', where about 40% of the population of the Maldives lives in one of the most densely populated pieces of land in the world. The rest of the country is dispersed across a few cities and over 150 small islands spread out over around 90,000 square kilometres. In most smaller islands, resident populations are only a few hundred people and "everyone knows everyone", creating a very different context for candidates. Even larger islands, aside from the four main cities, have populations below 5,000[7]. Many of the islands are so small that parliamentary constituencies are made up of multiple islands. As a result, aspects of campaigns are quite different for candidates running in Male' City, in other cities like Addu City and Kulhudhuffushi, in larger islands like Naifaru or Eydhafushi, and in constituencies made up of multiple smaller islands. Despite this, interviewees for this study highlighted many commonalities in the experience of candidates, and a flattening of the difference in experiences and expectations across the different types of constituencies.

Interviewees estimated average campaign budgets to be from MVR 2-5 million with some races costing as much as MVR 15 million, and a general acceptance that these costs were rising with each election cycle. There were candidates who spent less than this MVR 200,000-800,000 and one who spent just MVR 50,000 but these less-resourced campaigns were often unsuccessful[8]. However it is worth noting that with the legal limit for total campaign expenditures set at MVR 2,000 per constituent, which translates to an estimated legal limit of around MVR 10 million per constituency, the majority of figures stated by interviewees comply with the legal framework requirements, even if there appears to be some discrepancy between what is formally submitted and what is actually spent. It was suggested during the validation session that candidates report an official number that is a bit more "realistic" to what people know campaigns actually cost.

"Enforcement is lacking and it's very difficult to enforce since its one to one deals without much evidence is very hard to find…Opening a campaign account and putting **MVR 300,000-600,000** in the campaign account doesn't mean the actual full cost of the campaign is there."

These expenses were the amount candidates described for their overall campaign, which includes costs before the start of the official campaign period[9]. Six candidates, primarily within Male', noted expenses of MVR 2-3 million, and expert interviewees also estimated that campaigns in Male' would be generally under MVR 3 million in costs. Multiple candidates gave around MVR 4-5 million as the average budget needed to run in a regional constituency, with some estimates ranging from MVR 7 million or so all the way up to MVR 15 million. Despite living in Malé, many residents are still required to vote for candidates from the constituencies where their permanent residence is registered, rather than their current place of residence. As a result, candidates vying for regional seats must engage with voters in the capital, even though their primary constituency may be located outside of Malé.

Key figures

- The average campaign budget in Male' was estimated at MVR 2-3 million or between £107,142-160,710.
- Median monthly income in Maldives according to 2019 data is MVR 9,600 (£514, or US$1,237 when adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP).
- MVR 2-3 million is therefore around 5.1 to 7.7 years of Male' median household income.
- The "market rate" to buy a vote, MVR 5,000, is £268 (or $644 PPP)[10] in both Male' and regional constituencies. MVR 5,000 is around two weeks of median monthly income.

Expenditure breakdown for campaigns

The data gathered provides a valuable breakdown of the costs involved in parliamentary campaigns.

Travel

Travel is a significant cost, for candidates running for island seats while living in Male', and especially for those contesting multi-island constituencies. Transport budgets alone ranged from MVR 300,000-700,000 for these races. Chartering a speedboat was around MVR 20,000 per day, and with campaign trips to constituencies taking an average of three days, transport expenses per trip for a campaign team would be around MVR 60,000. For air travel, with around 20-30 people traveling on teams for campaign trips, ticket costs were around MVR 60,000-100,000 per trip.

Campaign operations and events

Renting campaign headquarters was estimated at around MVR 15,000 per month. Volunteers get "coffee money" or living stipends of MVR 200-250 per day which is in line with average daily income per person (MVR 246 in Male', MVR 128 in islands). To supplement this, the major parties, who are the best resourced and who also receiving state funding, provided posters, banners, flags, and campaign materials. Parties also provide data. In Male' where many residents rent in different areas from their registration, this data gives their candidates a major edge when it comes to voter outreach.

Holding events come with catering costs; around MVR 45,000 per event for around 500 people. Even events held in free public spaces have costs – three or four events can add up to MVR 200,000 in catering. However, many of these costs are reduced or covered through candidates relationships with local businesses, who provide significant discounts for candidates who hold events at their restaurants or venues. Similar networks help cover printing costs, with billboards, a key way to increase candidate recognition, costing from MVR 15,000-25,000 for prime locations. At the same time candidates noted that they were often charged at a premium because providers knew that campaigns were both well-resourced and in urgent need given the short time window for campaigning, further

highlighting the value to candidates from having established relationships with local businesses.

Established public figures, incumbents, and ruling party endorsed candidates also get greater media coverage. Both public media and private news operations primarily cover the current administration, which not only means that any engagements held by the President will receive much more visibility, but that media provides more consistent coverage of their party's promised projects or initiatives, keeping them at the forefront of voters' minds. Influencer endorsements were priced at MVR 10,000, but interviewees suggested this could be significantly higher for the most popular influencers.

Vote buying

The majority of electoral budgets are allocated to vote-buying. The role of vote-buying as key campaign strategy was widely acknowledged across all interviews. Some candidates stated that the core organisational elements of a campaign in Male', including campaign events and materials, were only about MVR 300,000 out of a total budget of MVR 2-3 million. In regional constituencies where spending on travel could add up to another MVR 700,000, bringing these core expenditures nearer to MVR 1 million, a similar percentage of total budget of MVR 4-5 million was dedicated to purchasing votes. In total between 75% and 90% of allocated campaign budgets were set aside for vote-buying, an activity that happens throughout the campaign and on election day.

Vote buying for the purpose of this report is considered as the offer of financial or material inducements to voters by candidates during an election campaign period and/or on election day in exchange for electoral support. These financial or material inducements are funded from private resources, as opposed to administrative resources or other public goods[11]. Although criminalised under the Election Act, it remains common and expected for candidates to offer voters individual favours during interactions. Across interviews, we consistently found a baseline rate to be around MVR 5,000 for votes across cities and islands, although this can vary by region and circumstance. Particularly high stakes races may see rates surge up to MVR 7,000-10,000 while for some smaller races the amount can drop to MVR 1,000-2,000.

These can take the form of direct cash payments, although these cash payments would be mostly requested in euphemistic terms as assistance or support provided by candidates to meet voters' needs. But voters also often request specific types of assistance such as paying off unpaid bills, funding medical-related international travel, or buying household appliances. Vote buying is also not always targeted at individuals but can be done at a group level, involving households, families or larger communities. During door-to-door campaign visits, families may request paying for things such as home repairs or renovations, whilst local organisations or interest groups may seek funds for valuable capital goods or equipment.

This transactional dynamic shifts the focus from policy or ideological alignment to material exchanges, with candidates treating the act of vote-buying as an investment for electoral success. However this dynamic is often described not as vote-buying by those who participate in it, rather as candidates using their good fortune and resources to help or support the unmet needs of voters.' The campaign period is presented as a natural opportunity for candidates to meet individual voters, hear their concerns and address their needs once they become aware of them. Whilst this dynamic persists after election and is a significant ongoing financial cost as well as a constant source of pressure on MPs, it is most intense during campaign periods, a reality that is shown by the significant share of campaign budgets allocated to it.

The normalisation of vote buying has created a small cottage industry around the election calendar: a structured and organised set of economic activities spring up around election periods to capture windfall resources coming in from campaigns, with structures and dynamics replicable across elections. Vote-buying practices are not limited to just one-on-one "goodwill gestures" offered organically during voter-candidate interactions, but also takes place in an organised manner with economic actors. In fact, vote-buying operations are often highly systematic and organised. Campaign teams use a mixture of local teams' knowledge and available data - including possibly leaked private information - to carefully profile voters who can be approached and to design the best ways to target them. Informed locals are also used to provide information to campaigns about the history and personal problems of voters, such as chronic health issues, family members with drug issues, business difficulties, financial troubles, or other vulnerabilities. This information gives campaign workers or candidates insights into which voters might be most receptive to offers and enables them to tailor approaches accordingly.

On the flip side many constituents have also organised operations around the campaign period to help them secure the resources on offer. Groups of constituents often form loose "unions" and send representatives to negotiate with campaign workers or candidates offering their bloc of votes in exchange for specific benefits or financial compensation. With the impact that even a large family, let alone a block of up to 30-40 people, can have given the small size of constituencies, these representatives have the bargaining power to garner more cash per voter. This dynamic, with active participation from both candidates and constituents, is increasingly turning the electoral process into a marketplace where votes can be bought and sold. It also contributed to framing the act of vote-buying into a legitimate action that responds to community needs and demands.

> "I don't know if it's the same in every race but during my door-to-door campaigning, do you know how many voters this election asked me about vision and policies when going to Majlis? Zero. Not even one voter. Nobody seems to care about policies – so people with policy visions won't get elected and everyone knows it."
>
> **- Candidate KII**

Binding voters to actually voting for the candidate they have received payment from is still a challenge faced across campaigns. One element used to try and ensure that buying votes translates into ballots being cast is religion. Voters felt that taking money to vote for a candidate and then not following through would be a sin. Some candidates were described as taking the Quran on campaign visits and having voters who accept favours from a campaigning candidate to place their hand on the holy book and swear upon it to follow through[12].

Voters who can be "confirmed", such as the elderly or people with disabilities who need assisted voting, often receive much larger payments than the average voter, because the person assisting them with their vote can more easily ensure they did vote for said candidate. In the past, asking voters to mark their ballots in a way that could be checked later during the counting process as proof was one way to assure voters followed through, but legislative changes that invalidate ballots with any markings have made that approach no longer possible.

Finally, political apathy provides fertile ground for transactional politics. One approach that it is on the rise is paying uncommitted voters or voters leaning toward the opponent to give up their ID cards from before the election up until end of voting. By doing so, campaigns reduce the pool of potential voters, increasing the proportion of 'safe' voters that they can confidently rely on. Focus group respondents reported individuals selling their ID cards for around MVR 5,000,

with some demanding up to MVR 20,000. One estimate given for ID card harvesting was around MVR 100,000 for a bundle of 40 ID cards[13].

There are also other forms of bribing voters beyond cash distribution, namely the abuse of state resources, which is significant and often even more widespread than cash for votes. This is covered in more detail in the 'National party dynamics' and 'Abuse of state resources' segments, but includes things like allocating jobs in state owned enterprises (SOEs) or offering political appointments in government in exchange for votes or securing them through facilitating state resources such as concessional loans or scholarships. While this does not entirely replace traditional campaign spending, it does give the ruling party an unfair advantage as their candidates can leverage these government assets to influence voter behaviour. This allows those in power to amplify their influence and potentially sway elections by rewarding loyal voters with access to valuable state resources.

Election day expenditure

The 24 hours before the election also sees significant expenditure, although the dynamic of vote-buying is different from the negotiations that feature throughout the campaign period. Direct cash payments in banknotes for MVR 500 or MVR 1,000 may need to be distributed as a form of last-minute voter persuasion. Disengaged but eligible voters, such as drug addicts, are approached on election day with cash in exchange for going to vote. "Emergency response teams" are used by candidates on election day to address last-minute voter demands for cash or favours.

Election day also comes with significant expenses for voter mobilisation. Campaigns hire small fleets of taxis to transport voters back and forth between their residence and their registered ballot box, organise speedboat or plane trips with voters who had not updated their information and were registered to vote in a different island, and even book international flight tickets for voters living abroad but registered locally, and vice versa. Overall these expenses, including cash distribution, can cost around MVR 300,000.

Non-financial and personal costs

Candidates experience stress related to public visibility, as campaigns often bring heightened scrutiny, including criticism of personal behaviour, speech, and appearance. Modern technology increase these stresses, with social media abuse coexisting alongside persistent disinformation and misinformation. Established candidates with a longer public presence are often less affected by these dynamics, but new candidates and particularly younger or female candidates find these forces shape their nascent public image. The constant scrutiny can also take a toll on

> "There is a lot of disinformation and fake news. This isn't that big of a factor for candidates already known by the public because it's harder to believe, but it's a bigger challenge for people who aren't already known and younger candidates. People taking selective screenshots, etc… is very common. Younger candidates and newer candidates have major problems, going directly to frontline politics is very challenging. Anti-campaigning has increased as a trend a lot – some negative patterns that never used to happen before – people might say things like that I am importing drugs or having marital problems without proof."
>
> **- Candidate KII**

After being elected

MPs are expected by constituents to leverage their influence for favours to meet individual constituent needs on a range of issues. Constituents request financial support from their MPs for medical expenses, especially for medical treatment abroad; ask for government jobs or positions in SOEs; request personal loans or connections that lead to private contracts, such as construction jobs or business deals; ask for help with home repairs or renovations; or just ask directly for cash payments when in direct communication with their MPs. Individuals also ask MPs to intervene in administrative issues from placements on housing allocation lists to having their children transferred to a different public school. Examples were given of people who were caught red-handed or who had committed major crimes being released without being charged or prosecuted because MPs called and put in a word, with police officials fearing personal consequences if they did not comply. In this system, the politician's role transforms from a representative of the people's collective will to a personal benefactor, obligated to meet individual needs to maintain political support. MPs who refuse to provide financial assistance or handouts may find it difficult to maintain the support of the electorate, as constituents assess their MP based on their willingness to dispense patronage rather than effectively do their legislative duties.

However, MPs interviewed remained cynical about the actual electoral value of spending throughout their terms. Despite all of the advantages that incumbents have that their competitors lack access to, a majority of incumbents have lost their next race in the previous two elections. Although current expectations are that MPs should (mis)use influence on behalf of their constituents as part of their basic duties, MPs doing so do not always receive additional positive recognition, but the social expectation ensures that they receive criticism for any situation where they cannot successfully intercede in an administrative issue for a constituent. This fuels a perception among MPs that not participating in spending throughout their term would guarantee their loss, even if it might be likely regardless.

> "In the 5 years out of power, often there is very little asked by constituents – about 1 or 2 maybe per day will ask for anything. Now at least 10+ people per day for things like medical expenses through NSPA (National Social Protection Agency), flats, job applications, they expect MPs to do things for them through clientelism instead of policy.
>
> Around 20 or so people per month will ask for support for going abroad. Even if it's just US$100 or so per person that is around US$2,000, people who can't pay for water or electricity bills then MPs are expected to chip in. Sometimes big families or groups with 30-40 voters sometimes plan out and rotate monthly requests. Sometimes there's a 'representative' from each family who always asks. Our MVR 20,000 allowance is all that goes to our rent and living, the rest often has to be distributed to people."
>
> **- MP KII**

Interviewees across the board agreed that a majority of the renumeration for MPs[14] were often fully spent, or even exceeded, meeting the costs incurred during a MPs time in office. Corruption and misuse of state resources were seen as the means through which to stay solvent financially, especially when it came to repaying their loans to benefactors. In addition to corruption in the procurement and contracting process being a source of income for MPs, these were also described as a means of fundraising for incumbents. Government contracts are often channelled to member-owned or affiliated companies according to experts interviewed at well over market prices,

allowing MPs to funnel resources toward their own re-election funds at the same time as enhancing their personal enrichment. These companies could also then hire people from their constituencies to give them jobs, further strengthening future election chances.

But most candidates interviewed welcomed reforms and restrictions that would tie their hands effectively enough to dissuade voters from demanding individual influence-peddling by MPs. Almost universally, MPs felt that the expenses and burden of providing cash and dispensing favours, as well as the stress and attention span to consistently respond to requests, were a drain on their day-to-day lives, and expressed feeling trapped within the status quo.

Source of funds

Candidates have to fund the bulk of their own campaigns and for the most part draw on their own savings. To supplement this, candidates also draw on financial support provide by family and friends, "well-wishers" from the community, supportive businesses, and other benefactors. Candidates who already have these informal relationships and networks with local businesses and wealthier members of the community find it easier to raise sufficient funds for a primary campaign, which is solely funded by candidates without any party support.

During general elections, where costs can often be an order of magnitude higher, candidates still have to independently raise funds to be successful, although they do receive some additional support if running on the ticket of a major party. This is often in-kind and includes campaign materials like posters, flyers, flags, and T-shirts, promotional opportunities and media appearances, and access to voter databases. Despite this, informal funding sources like personal loans from friendly businesses are common, and in some cases, candidates take out loans and go into debt when raising the resources required for their campaign.

> "The wealthy and businessmen have generally had almost complete control over elections and government including how governments use their own power as well, especially resorts. Every small island will have two or three wealthy business owners who basically control the entire island, the government or parties are generally well connected with these individuals and have relationships with them where they promise favours in exchange for their support if they win."
>
> **- Government official KII[15]**

With most successful campaigns requiring at least over MVR 2 million be spent on vote-buying alone, even informal networks and funding has to be provided through personal funds, wealthy beneficiaries or businesses. Businesses who fund candidates expect to eventually see a return on their investment. This can include a leg up in securing government contracts, access to concessional loans or funding opportunities, the cutting of red tape, being able to avoid investigation or punishment, or for candidates to be their liaison in lobbying efforts across government. This creates a patronage system where businesses provide resources to candidates who then distribute this among voters, with candidates beholden to both the businesses that fund them as well as voter expectations for individual benefits.

Some interviewees also suggested that many candidates cultivate relationships with local criminal organisations and gangs. The justification for this was that gangs are able to provide large flows of money without a paper trail, as well as being useful for organisational and mobilisation roles, or even providing security at campaign events[16 17.] ,

Ties with criminal organisations can also lead to intimidation or coercion of voters, although interviewed candidates expressed this being less common in 2024 than in previous elections. In exchange, some interviewees believed that MPs may direct government funds to projects that benefit these groups, such as sports complexes and clubs, award contracts to front companies or organisations, intervene with law enforcement or lean on the criminal justice system on behalf of criminal organisations when requested[18].

Expert interviewees also expressed a belief that illicit foreign funding has entered local elections at the party level, particularly from countries with significant geopolitical interests in the Maldives and Indian Ocean region[19]. From a cost of politics perspective, foreign funding does not seem to be significant at the individual candidate level but acts as another means through which major parties strengthen their financial advantage over smaller ones.

Misuse of state resources

Candidates from the ruling President's party have access to the resources and infrastructure of the state, given the Maldives relatively strong executive branch. State resources are utilised within the campaign process both directly and implicitly, particularly by ruling party candidates. Job opportunities in SOEs are one of the most common ways in which candidates assure votes, with one candidate estimating that on average 40 to 50 and sometimes up to 100 SOE positions are promised per constituency during an election. On a lesser scale, jobs as political appointees are also a means of securing votes, with hundreds of appointees given high-paying government roles in the leadup to parliamentary elections. The monetary value of these jobs can dwarf even the millions of Rufiyaa being spent directly on campaigns. For example, estimates for SOE jobs handed out per constituency alone adds up to around MVR 10 million over two years or MVR 25 million over a full 5-year term: an amount which far exceeds the average island campaign budget of around MVR 5 million.

> "People in elections here very rarely ask for cash amounts directly – some people ask for favours or support. Majlis candidates do help citizens with small things like medical support. Around 40, 50 up to 100 or so jobs have to be promised for each candidate so even if the actual campaign costs are low, the 'maintenance cost' for each elected candidate is hundreds of thousands."
>
> **- MP KII**

> "With regional utility SOE employees in particular, it was difficult for us to track the number of employees in connection with elections increasing. Sometimes there are island offices where you need five or so staff, but there are 25 or so people hired. With consecutive elections, a huge number of jobs are given right before a presidential election, and then another wave of jobs for parliamentary election, and so on."
>
> "We don't have official numbers, but our methodology estimated a huge addition to payroll starting the week or so before the election, and a huge increase in new punch-in cards for employees entering human resource systems in this timeframe as well."
>
> **- CSOs[20]**

Ruling party candidates also benefit from much greater media coverage. Concerns were expressed over the state control of media regulatory bodies, which have typically displayed bias in favour of government-run media and restricted coverage of political opposition. A sizable majority of the populace—87%—believes that the media should be held accountable for the political division in the Maldives, and this shapes a belief that the media contributes to the country's political polarisation[21]. Media independence is also influenced by SOEs,

who are one of the biggest advertisers even in private media and therefore a key revenue source. This makes stories that are critical about SOEs easier to suppress, which provides further cover for the widespread use of SOE jobs and use of SOE resources in campaigns[22].

Another illustration of the abuse of state resources is the combining of official trips with campaign activities. The topography of the Maldives means that campaigns, particularly for candidates living in Male' or candidates with constituencies made up of multiple islands, require very expensive chartered speedboats for travel. The ACC guidelines released on reducing electoral corruption can be interpreted as allowing this, given that "unofficial time" during official trips can be used for campaigning. However this has incentivised combined trips where official events are held in the day and campaign events at night, with travel costs paid for by state resources. SOE-owned speedboats are also used by candidates to travel to such events giving them an additional edge against opposing candidates who have to spend tens of thousands on travel.

Beyond costs

National party dynamics

National parties play a key role in general elections. Since the establishment of open elections in 2008, there have been two dominant parties at any given time. These major parties provide significant electoral strengths that are difficult to surmount for minor party or independent candidates. Major parties have an extensive apparatus and organisation with a presence across the country, name recognition, brand identity, financial interests, and extensive networks of influence. For the most part, national parties do not provide direct financial support but contribute materials to candidates' campaigns such as posters and flags; provide valuable voter data for use in voter outreach activities; offer marketing and public platforms for the candidate to reach more voters; and undertake PR to "polish up" a candidates' image. They can also direct and facilitate senior party leaders or officials to make appearances alongside candidates, and help find election observers.

Across interviews, the single biggest determining factor shaping the outcome of parliamentary elections was seen to be the role played by the party of the sitting President, who traditionally enters office in the November of the year preceding parliamentary elections. Since 2013, three successive parliamentary elections have resulted in a majority, supermajority[23], and supermajority for the party of the sitting President. In the 2019 elections, the incumbent coalition lost 38 seats while the sitting President's party gained 39 seats to finish with 65 out of 87 seats; in 2024, the incumbent party lost 53 seats while the sitting President's party and allies gained 64 seats and now governs with 75 out of 93 seats. This is partly due to significant advantages in the campaign environment that come from having control of the executive branch. But it is also driven by a belief among the public that parliamentarians are more effective when connected with the executive.

Many voters view MPs less as lawmakers or representatives with oversight duties and more as intermediaries or liaisons between constituents and the government. This creates a dynamic where voters perceive better access to state resources to result from electing an MP from the same party as the sitting President. There is also a widespread perception that MPs need strong ties to the executive to be effective in meeting constituents' needs, with an emphasis on MPs acting as conduits for the executive's resources rather than independent representatives.

Constituents expect MPs to illegally leverage their influence to secure favours related to government services, such as health insurance, loans, and housing allocations. These services are perceived as more accessible when

mediated by ruling party MPs, given that government officials, agencies, and other bodies may unlawfully prioritise cooperation with ruling party MPs over their opposition counterparts. Voters also see alignment with the ruling party as a measure to ensure their constituency remains on the government's radar, a reality that has been solidified with the fact that ruling party MPs have historically been able to deliver on significant local projects or benefits in their constituencies through their connections. During the 30-year rule of former President Maumoon Abdul Gayyoom's one-party government, many islanders believed that the margin of their vote for Gayyoom in every election would directly impact the investment and development done for the island by the central government.

Perceptions about voting for the ruling President's party have also been heavily influenced by the narrative crafted during recent parliamentary elections. In both the 2019 and 2024 elections, the then ruling parties, ran strong campaigns emphasising the importance of securing a parliamentary majority to effectively implement the President's agenda. This messaging framed legislative dominance as essential for political stability, efficient governance, and the delivery of development promises. Consequently, many voters now view electing ruling party MPs as necessary to ensure progress. To further drive this home, a new President often outlines many new initiatives as Majlis elections approach. Every one of these initiatives or projects could be pointed out by a ruling party candidate as a project that would become mired in gridlock unless the President's party gains a majority. Since strong ideological fault lines are not a feature of Maldivian politics, with all major parties taking similar positions on most major issues, voters often do not have ideological reasons to vote a certain way and are more focused on delivery, meaning this narrative tends to resonate.

Socio-cultural barriers

Women candidates face additional costs and challenges stemming from entrenched gender norms, internal party dynamics, and societal expectations. The biggest factor in the reduced participation of women in politics was pinned by interviews on political parties. During primaries, women's political capabilities and likelihood to win are questioned by predominantly male political leaders whose actions dissuade or prevent women from succeeding in primary elections. Women experience having their credibility undermined, subtly or overtly, and face gendered language about their capacity to be a political leader.

Even before official primaries, women struggle to gain the same level of support from party leaders and influential factions as their male counterparts, and face challenges in being invited to the same informal social spaces. These spaces, which are essential for building relationships and networks with party leadership and advancing within the political structure, are largely closed off to women, hindering their ability to rise through the ranks.

This is in spite of their involvement in grassroots political activism and organising. Many women were passionate organisers and grassroots activists during the early years of free elections. Women organisers built up huge networks of close ties and trust within communities, demonstrated commitment and party loyalty, and showed their ability to competently run campaign-scale operations. However, these women often find their contributions relegated to administrative or supporting roles in political parties after elections. A disillusioning experience that is compounded by the fact that male counterparts, regardless of their length of experience or network size, are often afforded leadership roles and opportunities for higher political office, which they are able to leverage for continued influence and power. In many cases, men are elevated based on their

perceived leadership potential, while women, despite demonstrating equal or superior organisational skills and loyalty, are limited to supportive functions and are rarely considered for the same opportunities. Women who do make it as candidates experience tokenism and are expected to be a mouthpiece for the party when it comes to gender issues.

At the broader societal level, women candidates are often subjected to intense scrutiny over their appearance and behaviour, with societal expectations that they fulfil the traditional roles of wives and mothers. When women assert themselves during campaigns, they are frequently labelled as "troublemakers" or "uncouth", while women who adopt a quieter, more reserved style are criticised as "walkovers" or "puppets" lacking the strength to lead. Women perceived as more outwardly liberal are attacked as non-religious, but outwardly observant women are also attacked for being too religious. There is also a distinct double standard when it comes to women's role within families. Women in politics are frequently criticised for neglecting their family responsibilities to be on the campaign trail but no such criticisms made of their male counterparts. Any problems related to their husbands or children are framed as these women having failed in their parenting role in ways that male candidates often do not experience. This not only discourages women from running but also reinforces the cultural expectation that women's place is in the home, not the political arena.

Women in the public eye are subjected to slander and misogynistic attacks, including accusations of engaging in sexual favours, rumours about promiscuity, criticism about their looks, and online sexual harassment[24]. Online platforms have also increased the personal costs of campaigning for women, who are now subject to harassment campaigns led by prominent social media accounts, who share edited photos, social media posts that attack their credibility, and even deepfake pornography. Younger women candidates, perceived as more vulnerable, often encounter predatory behaviour from powerful or wealthy male figures. One way in which the campaign experience differs by gender is that male candidates who seek connections with influential figures can do so without even having to think about possible sexual advances that young women have to navigate.

> "38% of women candidates have experienced degrading talk with sexual connotations, but only 10% of men. One woman says that she receives death threats 'all the time', often online, and that she has been stalked. She thinks that death threats of the kind she receives disproportionally affect women who are seen as 'modern.' In interviews, male candidates mostly talk about political rumours, such as rumours suggesting that the candidate in question secretly worked for a different party or was being disloyal to his constituents. The rumours that are spread about women candidates are quite different, as they question the morality and the private lives of the women candidates, but rarely mention their political stance or activity. Visual disinformation of a sexual nature seems to be widespread, with photoshopped pictures of candidates in bikinis being one of the most common method."
>
> **- Extract from "The continuum of election violence: Gendered candidate experiences in the Maldives 2014 election"** [25]

Implications

Transactional politics as the norm

Across interviews, all respondents expressed unhappiness with the status quo. Candidates and expert interviewees all see vote-buying as a prisoner's dilemma situation, where changes are necessary but unilateral change is impossible without conceding the ability to win an election.

Candidates are aware that a lot of their spending does not guarantee or change the outcome of an election and agree that the major party spending arms race cancels each other out. Furthermore it is accepted that prevailing individualist and transactional approach to elections has a pernicious effect on the policy environment and social fabric. However, with expectations established, there are now often stark political consequences to not participating. Candidates are concerned that in a situation where a voter asks multiple candidates for financial or material inducements and one does pay it but the other does not, the one who fails to engage would not only offend the voters but would have their character be perceived as miserly. If multiple candidates all offered financial incentives, then voters may not even have any reason to choose the one who gave the absolute most, but would almost certainly be alienated by the one who gave the least, a belief that heightens the pressure to match or outbid one another.

"If someone tries to honestly approach politics where they try to avoid the corrupt costs of politics methods, political opponents and parties will close ranks around them to try damage them reputationally and attack their character. So there is a significant added barrier or challenge for candidates who want to try run without corrupt costs (whether through a primary process or independently)."

- Government official KII[26]

Ineffective government

The offering of appointments as a vote winning strategy can lead to positions being filled based on political loyalty rather than merit, resulting in a government workforce that lacks the capacity to deliver policy and programmes effectively. Over time, this undermines public confidence in government institutions, as citizens perceive them as serving political interests rather than addressing the true needs of society.

Exclusionary politics

Just three of the 93 MPs in the current parliament are women. This was in spite of the fact that in 2024 the overall number of women who ran increased to 43, or 11.6% of the total, although only eight of these stood on major party tickets.

For women, financial challenges are amplified by gendered inequalities in access to economic resources. Many women, especially those in lower-income brackets, lack the financial independence or personal wealth required to launch competitive political campaigns. Women who have managed to overcome these hurdles are often wealthy, with those who face these economic constraints less likely to secure funding and financial support from political patrons or 'well-wishers.' This is compounded by the fact that women lack access to such networks, which are historically male dominated.

However, it is worth noting that even though the campaign experience can be particularly harsh and impose high personal costs on women running for election, this is not viewed as making women any less electable when on the ballot. This is because the key forces shaping a general election, primarily the incumbent president and national party dynamics, usually dwarf the individual characteristics of the candidates themselves.

"These were three women across three different parties who the public acknowledges as very capable, but all faced unfair gendered criticism and were attacked. When asking a lot of capable women why they haven't run for election, they say that the reason they don't run for election at all is because they are worried that they will face a lot of attacks including gendered attacks on their character, which is too much of a risk in their view."

- Official in elections sector

Persons with disabilities (PwDs) also experience exclusion, exploitation, and tokenism in the political process. PwDs are systematically excluded from the rungs of power in parties while also facing negative perceptions about their capabilities from potential voters. This exclusion is not only due to physical and logistical challenges but is rooted in deep-seated prejudice and misconceptions about the capabilities, value and potential of PwDs. Prejudiced and pity-based views limit opportunities even for highly qualified candidates whose disabilities would have no bearing on the responsibilities of a campaign or on parliamentary duties.

During campaigns, politicians were seen to exploit people with disabilities for PR and political benefit. Photos taken with PwDs, especially disabled children, are widely used on public and social media and campaign materials to boost a candidate's image. Candidates also regularly gift wheelchairs, medical devices, accessibility tools, or ramps during campaigns but neither they nor their parties actively support PwDs on an issue basis or encourage them to stand as candidates themselves.

> "PwDs are heavily excluded but are also used to "show off" performatively to do things for the disabled like having photo ops and posters/social media/public billboards of the photo ops awarding wheelchairs or accessibility tools. This also wins votes of PwDs who are already very excluded within society and don't often receive this outreach outside of election period. Even the use of PwDs in political props also invites backlash to them. Votershave very retrograde views about disabled people and don't vote for them, and even say things like this in door to door campaigns."
>
> **- Focus group**

Political disengagement by youth

The age composition of the 2024 Majlis is relatively young. Twenty-six out of the 93 MPs are in their thirties[27]. However, young people in focus group discussions expressed a sense that there were limited pathways to success in politics without connections, particularly when it comes to being a part of major parties. Many youth, particularly those without existing wealth and family connections, feel disconnected from the political process, viewing it as corrupt and controlled by entrenched elites. So when a young person does try to enter politics, their peers often believe that they entered politics through corrupt means. In many cases, young people have already seen parties uplift and promote figures with family or business connections to positions of power and influence within parties and groom those figures to take over as leaders, even ahead of more merit-worthy options.

Given this widespread cynicism, there is often no 'good outcomes' for young candidates entering politics – even for an outsider, as if they succeed on any level in politics, their peers will believe that it must have been through their ability to access these networks and their resources. On the other hand, with political parties being hotbeds of competitive and ambitious people, young people perceived as a potential future successful candidate often will be pre-emptively dealt with before they become a threat to established figures. Many young people considering entering politics have to weigh up their low chances of winning against the almost-certainty of alienating their peers, going through brutal public scrutiny, and being subject to rumours and public attacks. Young women face similar challenges that are compounded by harassment and gendered expectations, with very limited systems of support within the political sphere available. This has led many young people to see disengaging from politics as the rational choice.

"No young people ever say they want to be an MP as a career choice. Nepotism at all levels, especially with how parties play behind the scenes to get their friends or family the seats. Any youth trying to participate in politics will be called out as someone's puppet or having sold out. There is a lack of civic education in schools. For many youth, their first contact with politics is being approached right after they turn 18 by parties trying to pay them off. Youth see parties turning into cults, there is always people supplicating to some leader. Many youth can't stand having to participate in this just to enter the fold."

- Focus group

Younger candidates that do decide to try and compete in electoral politics face an uphill climb simply as a result of having had less time to interact and build relationships within the party and with party leadership, and by having the rungs of the ladder above them already occupied by party members who have been there longer and have had more time to build up their power within the party. Party leaders often support their favoured candidates in primaries, and a key consideration is there electability – which includes having enough independent wealth or access to fundraising networks to be able to run a costly general election campaign - or their ability to boost their preferred family/business connections.

Young candidates rarely have the financial resources to run an effective primary and election campaign. This financial barrier is further exacerbated by the informal system of funding through party connections, where only those with established links to business elites or wealthy individuals are able to access resources such as restaurants willing to host campaign events or printers willing to produce campaign materials for free.

Young candidates are also dismissed or underestimated due to their age by older voters. Cultural differences are stark between younger generations and older generations. One common example is that Gen Z is often less fluent with linguistic registers distinct to class and prestige[28] and this lack of fluency in verbal communication while trying to communicate with older voters is perceived negatively, regardless of how capable or qualified these young candidates may be when talking about policy issues.

Finally youth candidates also face the challenge of being unfamiliar to voters, and the first impression they make on their communities are often the distorted and negative picture painted of them by election opponents. Opposing candidates, prominent social media accounts, and the media can be used to create a first impression of a young candidate that they do not have the resources to counter. This can cause immediate, and longer-term, damage to their political prospects.

Given this reality, young candidates entering politics often end up having to "pay their dues" by working behind the scenes or supporting older candidates, gradually building relationships with party leaders and influential figures, which can give them a better shot at running for election. By doing so, they also get an opportunity to establish a reputation for themselves among the public that can withstand the mudslinging of an election campaign. But by this time they are likely to be significantly older, more immersed in the mainstream thinking of the party and away from fresh outside perspectives, bound to any baggage associated with the party, and perceived as part of the establishment.

Recommendations

Both candidates and voters see the status quo as untenable and want change; both candidates and voters see electoral corruption and vote-selling as the only way to get something rather

than nothing; and both candidates and voters expressed deep disillusionment with the system and would like to see changes introduced to overhaul it. Strengthening legal and regulatory frameworks around elections and campaign finance by reducing vagueness and closing loopholes, ensuring stronger monitoring and enforcement of punishments for violations, and introducing reforms to increase participation and inclusivity are all part of the solution to tackling the high costs of politics[29]. The recommendations presented centre around three main areas: addressing the root causes of transaction politics; changing the election process; and shifting culture and social norms.

Area 1: Tackling the root causes of vote-buying

Establish scoring systems for public service allocation, procurement, and infrastructure or development projects

▪ To curb the subjectivity that allows MPs to influence public service allocation, procurement and development projects, it is recommended that explicit scoring systems that are transparent and fair be implemented. Explicit scoring criteria, where points are allocated based on conditions, would tie the hands of MPs and allow them to credibly respond to voter demands for intercession. In one of our interviews, a candidate expressed that recent changes making it more difficult for MPs to directly intervene in a certain policy did end up reducing public demands for intervention as people adjusted to it no longer being possible. This same concept can be used to increasingly cut down possible avenues for MPs to intervene and use their influence[30].

▪ Nationwide mapping and scoring tools could be used to standardise and objectively evaluate a set of criteria to guide infrastructure and development decisions. This system could incorporate factors such as resident population, island industries, distance to existing infrastructure (such as airports or facilities), housing needs, and land reclamation potential.

The existence of transparent scoring can facilitate debate and discussion – both internally among party MPs and officials, as well as among the general public, media, and CSOs or think tanks - and encourage more responsible allocation of infrastructure and development projects. Project allocation outside of what is justified by objective mapping criteria should require explicit justification for approval.

▪ Strictly defined criteria, with inbuilt safeguards, could help institutions like the ACC identify and investigate potential abuses of state power more effectively.

Cap public sector roles and formalise employment structures for public bodies

▪ Caps – done carefully to avoid unintended consequences, such as staffing shortages in essential public services - on numbers for discretionary public hiring, particularly political appointees and jobs at SOEs, would eliminate a key distortion in electoral politics and a significant cost driver for elections. These caps should apply to the total number of political appointees by an executive, as well as the total number of employees and political appointee positions

▪ Including SOEs and uniformed bodies in such a framework is critical to avoid circumventing limits on executive branch jobs through these other jobs still on the government payroll. Formalising an organisational structure for all SOEs which assigns the number of employees under the structure, job positions and qualifications/criteria for each post as well as requirements to publish transparent and up-to-date information on hiring practices, including job vacancies and payroll details, would limit the ability of aspirants to freely offer SOE jobs during the election period.

▪ An independent body or committee could be set-up and tasked with monitoring the allocation of political appointee roles and jobs in SOEs to ensure that they are based on merit and necessity rather than political considerations.

▪ Increased transparency on public hiring on political appointees and SOEs is also needed. A system that would require each ministry to have all political employee posts listed on their organisational structure, and for SOEs to release transparent and timely information on hires and payroll at office level is one such approach.

Place restrictions on uses of state resources during a pre-election period

▪ Restricting the use of state resources during a pre-election period can not only reduce costs during elections, but can also reduce continuing drains on national resources in the aftermath[31]. This should include restrictions on major government spending, including infrastructure and development announcements, public service distribution and state-funded media campaigns.

▪ Monitoring by the ACC or EC to ensure compliance, with penalties for attempts to bypass the restrictions, can support the enforcement of such measures.

Streamline administrative capacity for improved service delivery

▪ Reducing corruption, bribery, and influence-peddling can be done by increasing administrative efficiency, reducing opacity, speeding up processing and response times, and simplifying procedures . Introducing comprehensive legislation that gives statutory powers and clear mandate to a single body like the National Centre for Information Technology could improve and make inter-agency and inter-government coordination more effective, building on initiatives like the OneGov[32] programme.

▪ Improving service delivery requires the capacity building of civil servants through regular training, establishing clear performance metrics, and introducing competitive incentives. To further support this there is a need for streamlining organisational structures by standardising workflows, adopting rigorous auditing processes, and applying lean management practices to reduce delays and redundancies.

▪ Transparency and accountability can be enhanced through public dashboards for tracking requests, an independent grievance systems, and mandatory reporting on service delivery metrics. Tools that can foster public trust and minimise inefficiencies.

Introducing campaign finance monitoring tools

▪ Introducing a campaign finance observation tool similar to Chanda Salli Meetare[33] , which is designed to enhance the capabilities of election monitoring organisations in Sri Lanka, can support the public observation and analysis of election expenditures and the effective implementation of regulations like Sri Lanka's Election Expenditure Act. By providing a transparent platform to track and report campaign spending, such tools increase public awareness about the role of money in elections and its potential influence on voter behaviour. Furthermore, it encourages active citizen engagement in monitoring campaign finances, thereby promoting efforts to enhance accountability and reduce the risk of corruption and undue influence on the electoral process.

Area 2: Changes to the election process

Combine the Presidential and Majlis elections

▪ Combining the presidential and Majlis elections reduces the impact of the presidential incumbent determining the outcome of the parliamentary vote[34]. What currently supports voters asking ruling-party candidates for demands is their belief that those MPs would then be aligned with the executive and able

to provide the favours expected. Without that foreknowledge, voters might be more willing to take policies and merit into consideration when casting their ballot potentially giving smaller parties and independent candidates a better chance at success.

Implement ranked-choice or proportional voting in larger constituencies

- Restructuring constituencies to cover larger geographic units, such as administrative divisions as per the constitution, and electing multiple representatives using a ranked choice voting system would increase the difficulty of simply buying votes. Providing individual favours for thousands of people is much less feasible than doing so for just a few hundred.
- Combining this with a ceiling on the number of MPs, could ensure balanced representation without contributing to legislative bloat.

Revise the existing legal framework to close gaps around vote-buying, and improve enforcement mechanisms

- Amend the Elections General Act to include voter-specific offences. Similar to the standards set for candidates, accepting any funds from a candidate for any reason without documentation would be deemed as vote-selling. Supporting and strengthening effective oversight mechanisms would need to go hand in hand with such legislative reforms.
- Whistleblowers can play a critical role in exposing corrupt practices, including vote-buying and misuse of public funds. But without proper protection they are likely to be discouraged from coming forward. A legal framework that protects whistleblowers should be implemented. Even though enforcement may be difficult, the signalling and messaging aspect of making it absolutely clear that accepting funds from candidates for any reason is a criminal office is itself a valuable tool.
- Civic education and awareness campaigns around elections can support efforts to establish new social norms around vote-buying.

Improve party governance and reduce barriers for women, youth, and PwDs

- Encourage political parties to establish quotas to ensure women occupy leadership positions. Learnings can be taken from the 69 countries worldwide that have internal quotas for political parties, and the 120 countries that either have internal party rules or legislative rules requiring a slate of women candidates[35]. Internal party leadership quotas for PwDs would also ensure they have a seat at the table.
- Support the introduction of dedicated policies to promote the advancement of youth within party ranks and address barriers faced by youth.
- Explore measures to improve the transparency and internal democracy of political party primaries and work with political parties to develop internal indicators that allows parties to better measure their progress and performance.

Establish temporary legislative quotas to boost participation of women

- Legislative quotas are a common tool globally, with 61 countries having legislated candidate quotas and another 18 having reserved seats[36]. The structural barriers faced by women combined with financial costs impose barriers that prevent many from being able to participate in competitive races. The impact of short-term quotas as a "reset" in cultural and political perceptions of the electability and leadership of women can be significant[37]. The introduction of gender quotas also can compel parties to invest in a strong roster of women candidates in order to compete effectively for those seats, with direct electoral consequences if they do not do so.
- A ranked-choice voting system or proportional voting system can make having quotas much simpler practically than trying to map out quotas in a first-past-the-post system.

Area 3: Directly shifting culture and social norms

Roll out awareness campaigns for the public at island level

▪ Public-facing awareness and persuasion campaigns are needed to change social norms and cultural expectations around elections. Public education campaigns should also aim to clarify the roles and capabilities of MPs and the separation between legislative and executive powers. Ideally, these should be a comprehensive effort delivered by a coalition of public, political, and civil society bodies and be paired with longer-term reforms such as the strengthening of civic education in school curricula.

▪ Accessibility is also key, therefore ensuring that voter information and education programmes and materials are available and accessible to PwDs and those with limited comprehension of English is critical.

▪ Religious leaders can also play a crucial role in counteracting this message, and in promoting values that align with ethical voting given the role religion can play in binding transactional political commitments.

References

1 Presidential elections are held in September with the president assuming office in November. Parliamentary elections are held in March or April of the following year.

2 As of January 2025 the official exchange rate is $1 = 15.4 MVR fixed, or £1 = 18.96 MVR.

3 People's National Congress won 66 seats; Maldivian Democratic Party won 12, Maldives Development Alliance won two seats; Jumhooree Party and Maldives National Party won one each, and 11 independents were elected.

4 As of last update, the only active parties with over 10,000 registered members are the PNC, MDP, and Jumhooree Party. The Progressive Party of Maldives also had over 10,000 registered members in latest figures, but a decision has been made to dissolve the party.

5 The President's Office. 2024. 'President ratifies sixth amendment to the Constitution of Maldives. 20 November. Available at https://presidency.gov.mv/Press/Article/32225

6 Currently, the two major parties are the PNC and MDP. This has changed with election cycles, with the MDP and the Progressive Party of Maldives the dominant forces in the previous two electoral terms, and MDP and the Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party in the term before that.

7 Maldives Bureau of Statistics. 2022. 'Maldives population and housing census.' Available at https://census.gov.mv/2022/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Provisional-Result-Publication-amnded-2423.pdf

8 These candidates also tended not be affiliated with the major parties, making it difficult to isolate the impact of spending from national party dynamics, even though it is likely a factor.

9 The official campaign period starts when the names of candidates are announced by the Election Commission until 6pm on the day before the election.

10 Almost all interviewees who gave a number, provided a figure of MVR 5,000.

11 Taken from the definition provided by International IDEA. 2022. 'Vote Buying: International IDEA Electoral Processes Primer 2.' Available at: https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/vote-buying.pdf

12 This would generally be viewed as an unbreakable commitment, where violation would be a great sin. Even if the voter was unethically pressured or coerced into making this promise, they would be very unlikely to break that promise.

13 MVR 2,500 per ID card is a lower average than individually negotiating for ID cards, but the provenance for ID cards being harvested is more uncertain with some reports of coercion or deception, and how the received payments are shared among the harvester and the original ID card owner is also uncertain in these cases. This is the opposite of a pattern found in vote-selling where families utilise their bargaining power to get more per person on average.

14 MPs expressed living expenses being around 25% of their total compensation and the rest being spent on constituent favours.

15 Official who has served in government since before advent of free elections, including in both Male' and islands.

16 See Ramachandran, S. 2023. 'Daniel Bosley on the Maldivian state, gangs, religious radical, and power brokers.' The Diplomat. 4 December. Available at https://thediplomat.com/2023/12/daniel-bosley-on-the-maldivian-state-gangs-religious-radicals-and-power-brokers/

17 See US State Department. 2022. 'Integrated country strategy.' p.3. Available at https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/ICS_SCA_Maldives_Public-2.pdf

18 See Shivamurthy, A G. 2024. 'The challenges in Muizzu's Maldives: a stocktaking. Observer Research Foundation. 5 April. Available at https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-challenges-in-muizzus-maldives-a-stocktaking

19 Interviewees suggested these as mainly being India, China, and the United States.

20 These two quotes were given by two separate CSOs.

21 International Federation of Journalists. 2023. 'Media mirror: Unveiling public trust in the Maldivian media. Available at https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/reports/detail/media-mirror-unveiling-public-trust-in-the-maldivian-media/category/publications

22 This issue is also addressed in page 23 of: Transparency Maldives. 2024. '2023 Presidential election observer report.' 2 April. Available at https://transparency.mv/publications/2023-presidential-election-observation-report/

23 Supermajority referring to over 75% of seats, sufficient to unilaterally pass constitutional amendments

24 Bjarnegård, E. 2023. 'The continuum of election violence: Gendered candidate experiences in the Maldives.' International Political Science Review, 44(1), 107-121.

25 Although this study is from 2014, experiences reported by women on psychological costs of participating in politics were qualitatively in line with what was described here, although our sample size through KIIs is insufficient to compare percentages accurately.

26 Official who has served in government since before advent of free elections, including in both Male' and islands.

27 With the median age of the Maldives being 30, even a relatively young parliamentary makeup may not be viewed by many young people as representing their peer cohort.

28 In Dhivehi, this would be maaiy bas and reethi bas vs common speech.

29 Additional and detailed recommendations are also proposed by Transparency Maldives based on observations of the 2023 Presidential election. See Transparency Maldives. 2024. '2023 Presidential election observer report.' 2 April. Available at https://transparency.mv/publications/2023-presidential-election-observation-report/

30 While this is more narrowly about a transparent scoring rubric to rank applicants and place them in queue for public housing applications, this can also be applied more broadly to services that are based on qualification criteria. In housing, the scoring system to measure eligibility for social housing schemes is set to look at factors like income thresholds, number of children, age, disability status, marriage status or single parenthood, existing land, etc and give objective scores on a publicly available rubric. For highest-need candidates, they would go to the top of the queue for the next wave of eligible housing, and among qualifying candidates for a scheme with the same score, the tie-break for ranking on the queue would be time of application.

31 See also recommendation by Transparency Maldives on enforcement and enhancement of legal measures around misuse of state resources, and development of explicit guidelines and mechanisms on use of state resources by the executive during election periods: Transparency Maldives. 2024. '2023 Presidential election observer report.' 2 April. Available at https://transparency.mv/publications/2023-presidential-election-observation-report/

32 OneGov is meant to be a unified digital public service delivery platform of the Government of the Maldives. As of January 2025, seven ministries, six agencies and one local council are integrated, offering 125 digital services such as registrations, permits, applications, and requests.

33 The Chanda Salli Meetare is available here https://chandasallimeetare.lk/home

34 See also recommendation by Transparency Maldives to consider consolidating presidential, parliamentary, and local elections into one cycle: Transparency Maldives. 2024. '2023 Presidential election observer report.' 2 April. Available at https://transparency.mv/publications/2023-presidential-election-observation-report/

35 This includes countries such as Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, El Salvador, France, Greece, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, Mauritius, Philippines, South Korea, Spain, Thailand, Turkey, and the UK.

36 See the International IDEA Gender Quotas Database. Available at https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas-database/database

37 It is worth noting that the Maldives' Gender Equality Action Plan and the Elections Commission's Strategic Plan both include quotas and that there could be opportunities to review lessons and findings from the local council 33% quota when designing a quota proposal.

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