

Orchestrated Social Media Campaign in Maldives- An Analysis

It is often said that good things come in small packages but it is not always so. It would be hard to believe at first but even the calmest states can sometimes encompass major political upheavals in its depths. And in a world of today where a little spark can start a fire, Maldives is no exception.

1. Setting the Plot:

A nation of islands, dominant with two major political parties has witnessed Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom from **Progressive Party of Maldives** as its president from 2013 to 2018. However, politics is not so transparent as it appears to be. In the presidential elections of September 2018, surprisingly, opposition leader Ibrahim Mohamed Solih won the electorate. In retaliation, PPM filed a [law suit](#) in the Supreme Court imputing the elections as rigged. Not no surprisingly, the allegations were denied by the Election Commission resulting in the threats to the commissioners by Yameen supporters.

Not only the Presidential Elections but even the forthcoming [Maldivian parliamentary elections](#) were won by **Maldivian Democratic Party** led by Ibrahim Solih and Mohamed Nasheed. MDP continued with the existing policy of maintaining friendly ties with nations of the world, including China. They were even compliant with the '[India-first policy](#)' which has come under major scrutiny over the previous years. As expected, this was hard to digest for allies of Yameen.

2. Dismantling #IndiaOut

The world today has become a global village and nothing connects us better than the social media. Yameen knew this well and to execute his game plan, he took the help of Twitter. Upon researching, we found out that a Twitter hashtag #IndiaOut has suddenly gained momentum in 2019 and picked its peak in September 2020. The graph attached below would suffice.

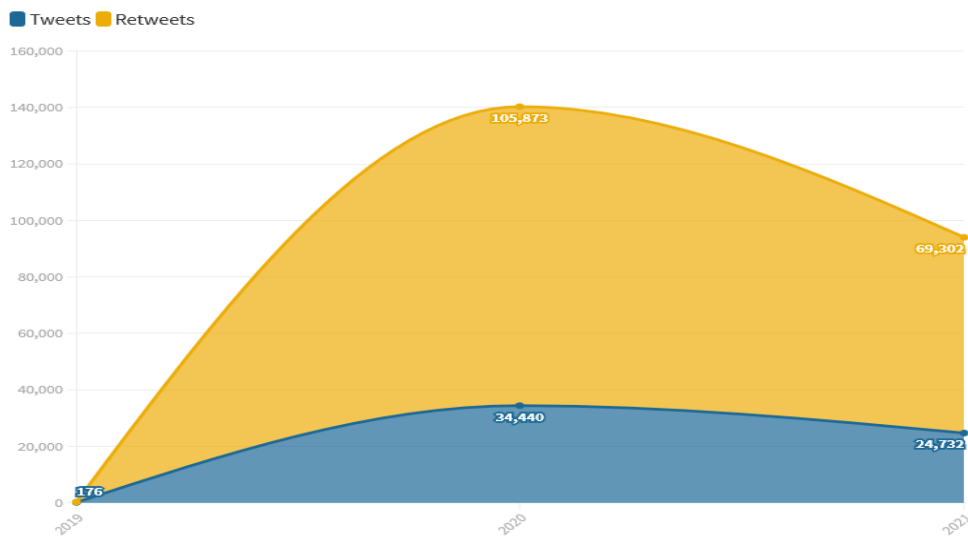


Figure 1: Number of Tweets and retweets posted from January 2019-October 2021 on the hashtag

The activities upon the hashtag are evident from the graph. In 2021, it was extensively used from March to July. Even till now, you could find it hither and thither upon Twitter.

An analysis of events that overlapped with the trend of hashtag would help you understand the strategic info-war better.

Time Frame	Total Tweets	Political course of action
Aug, 2020	1638	Minister of External Affairs of India, Dr. S. Jaishankar announced the launch of direct Cargo Ferry Services between India and Maldives along with Foreign Minister of Maldives on August 13, 2020
Sep, 2020	20855	Minister of State for Shipping of India, Mansukh Mandaviya and Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation of Maldives, Aishath Nahul jointly e-launched a direct cargo ferry service between India and the Maldives on 20 September, 2020. On the same date, Chinese Ambassador to Maldives

		Zhang Lizhong shared a video message upon twitter, dismissing allegations against China of luring Maldives into a 'debt-trap.'
Oct, 2020	8088	On Oct 12, 2020, the government of Maldives signed the GMCP loan agreement of USD 400 million provided by India for the construction of the Thilamale' bridge.
Nov, 2020	2766	India and Maldives signed four MoUs in November 2020. The development was expected to flourish the bilateral ties between India and Maldives.
Mar, 2021	2736	On March 17, 2021, the Dhivehi National Action (DNA) has called to disclose the agreement signed by the government with India for the development of the Uthuru Thila Falhu (UTF) dockyard. The agreement garnered major criticism on the grounds that the agreement grants India too much power.
May, 2021	3669	India's Union Cabinet, chaired by its Prime Minister Narendra Modi approved the opening of a new Consulate General of India in Addu City, Maldives in May 25, 2021.
Jun, 2021	5253	Former Home Minister Umar Naseer of Maldives stated that the planned Indian Consulate in Addu City is part of India's plan to establish a military facility in the city.
Aug, 2021	1559	On August 25, 2021, the largest ever infrastructure project, GMCP was signed between India and the Maldives.

3. #IndiaOut- A Conspired Controversy

The #IndiaOut campaign was kick-started by *twitteratis* in order to express their anguish over the loss of India in various sports matches. This hashtag was widely used by Indian Twitterati following India's loss at the AFC Asian Football cup.

Interestingly, the hashtag was then turned and twisted to suit the agendas of certain parties in Maldives. The hashtag has been used a whopping 59.3Ktimes by various handles, mainly Maldivian, to put forth strategically designed anti-India content. Astoundingly, these massive 59.3Ktweets were tweeted from merely 2252 handles, out of which 949 were freshly created accounts from 2019 to 2021.

Total Number of Tweets	59348
Number of handles engaged in it	2252
Handles created between 2019-2021	949
Fake/bot accounts amongst the 949 handles	Over 400
No of handles contributing 80% of content	210

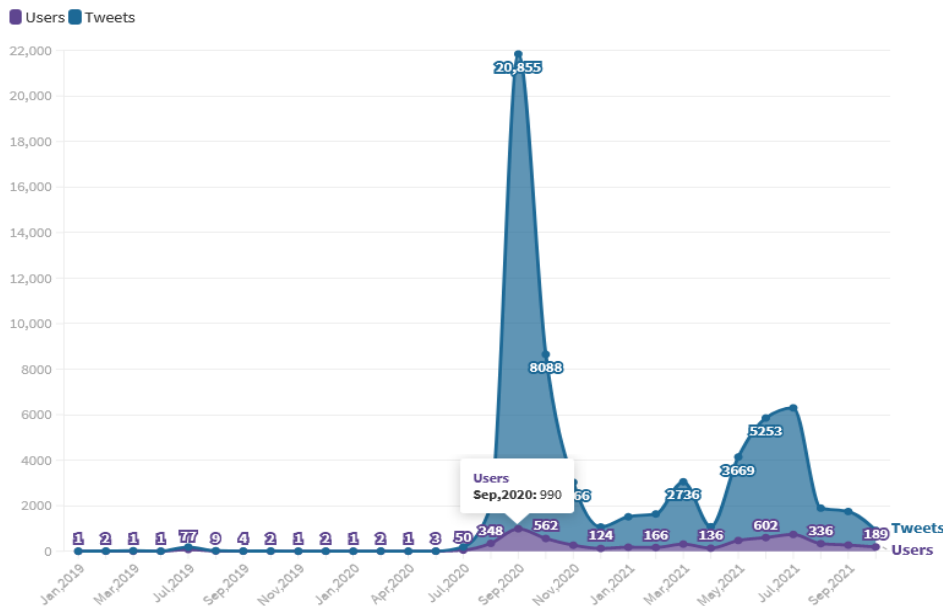


Figure 2: A total of 59348 tweets were done by 2252 handles

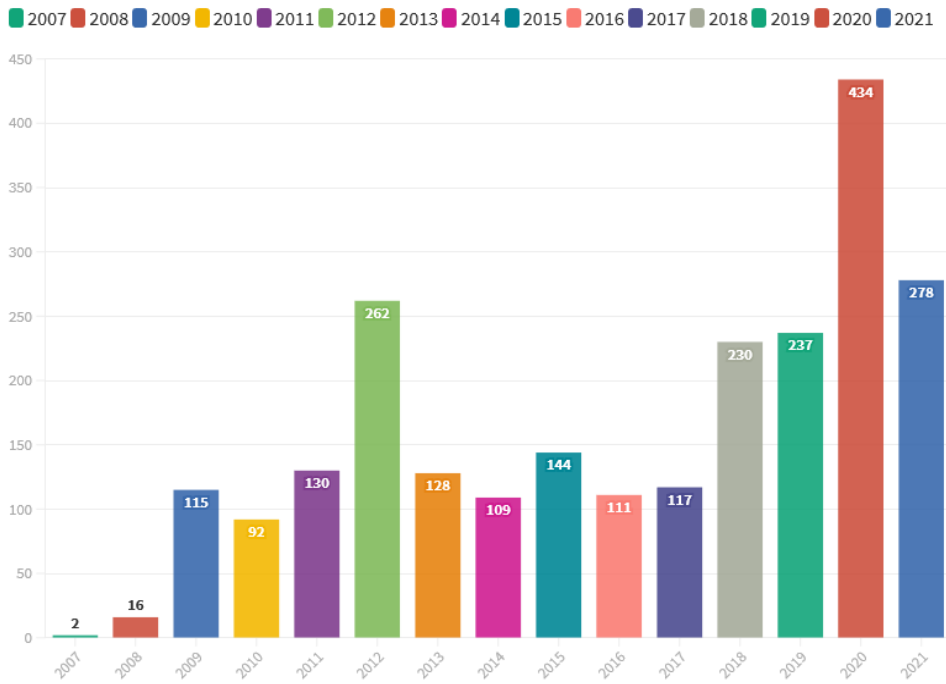


Figure 3: List of Maldivian handles created from 2007-2021

Out of these 949 handles, over 400 were deemed as fake/bot accounts, solely made for the purpose of sprouting same hashtag with multiple accounts. These accounts had no display pictures or bio but only the tweets mentioning the hashtag within a scheduled time frame.

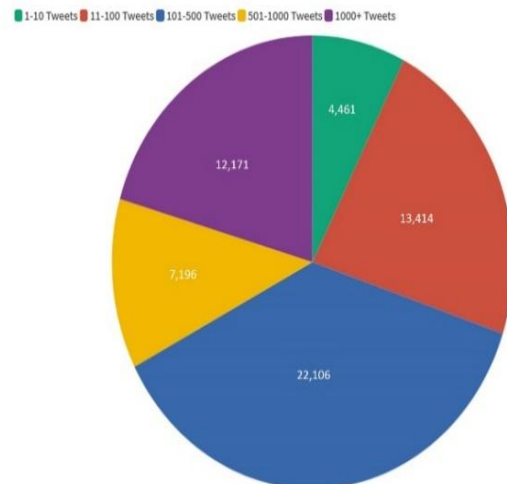
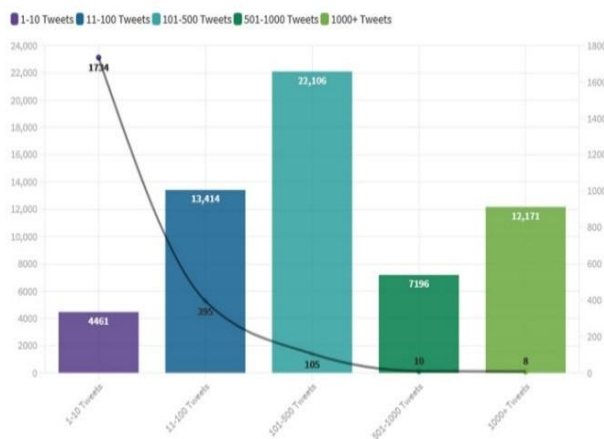


Figure 4 Fake/bot handles engaging in #IndiaOut



Figure 5: Out of these fake/bot handles, an account named Ali got engaged with #IndiaOut for a massive 2422 times despite having a following of only 122.

A significant development to note over here is that around 210 handles had contributed a gigantic amount of 80% in the hashtag. The graph below explains the same wherein mere 8 handles had contributed a colossal number of 12,171 tweets and 105 handles contributed 22,106 tweets with their tweets ranging from 101 to 500.



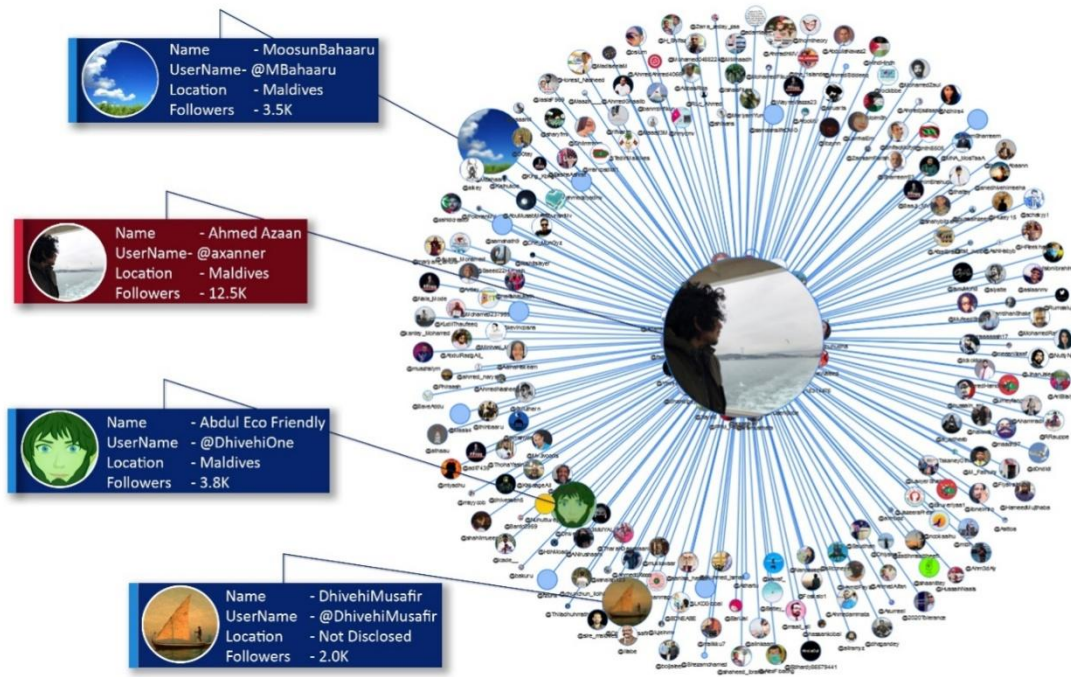
4. The Ascent of 'Azaan'

The content posted upon these fake/bot accounts was politically motivated or we may say, directly picked from tweets of **Ahmed Azaan**(@axanner), journalist and co-founder of 'Dhiyares', 'Maldives Journal' and the poster boy of Yameen. The two media outlets and its co-founder's handle were in contention of publishing callous content inciting resentment against India in Maldives. Attached below is the proof:



Figure 6: Maldives Journal criticizing the Indian Prime Minister

Azaan has used the hashtag for 479 times from 2019 till date. A notable point to observe over here is that out of 2252 handles in total who have contributed to the hashtag, 1272 handles were common who also turned out to be Azaan's followers. The network diagram attached below highlights how Azaan has been the focal point of this whole network which was run through in the name of collective Maldivian sentiments where as in reality, it was only a work of handful handles who were tirelessly running this bogus campaign.



Analysing the tweets of Azaan and the terminology used by him, his nationalist identity has come under major question mark. Despite being a Maldivian citizen, his concerns towards China and threatening his own people becomes difficult to comprehend.

Ahmed Azaan @axanner
 Replying to @sziyad @ibrahimmdidi and 8 others
 Hambantota port case isnt a typical case of loan default. It is being managed by a joint venture between a Chinese company and a Sri Lankan company as far as I know. Also they were not able to pay the loans as a result of **India/Western interference**
 10:21 PM · Feb 13, 2019 · Twitter Web Client

Ahmed Azaan @axanner · Sep 27, 2013
 #BREAKING **China is preparing to put a Watch on Maldivian situation reminding India to pull back from Maldivian Internal affairs!**..
 2 7 1

Ahmed Azaan @axanner · Jul 4, 2017
 If Maldives has the blessing of **China** it will be very hard for the opposition to do anything against the gov through EU.
 8 3

Ahmed Azaan @axanner · Jul 6, 2019
 India doesnt have the capacity to finance mega projects like **China**. As for EU their loans often comes with political conditions. Working with **China** is the best option for a developing country like Maldives. Sad that our FM Shahid cannot even visit **China** due to Indian pressure.

Ahmed Azaan @axanner · Mar 12, 2020
 Why isnt the government of Maldives **requesting assistance from China?** Even European countries are asking for Chinese help in this matter.



Ahmed Azaan @axanner
 Replying to @Badruddeen
Dear Ambassador, this man once tweeted saying Maldives should support Taiwan's independence and stated that China is a threat to world peace. After assuming a position at Maldivian Embassy in KL, he has removed those tweets.
 2:35 PM · Sep 27, 2019 · Twitter Web App

Ahmed Azaan @axanner
 Replying to @China_Amb_Mdv
 China is ready, but it doesnt seem like Maldives is ready. 9 months in office and not a single senior government official has visited China.
 1:49 PM · Jul 25, 2019 · Twitter Web App

Ahmed Azaan @axanner · Jul 12, 2020
 In this open letter, @MohamedNasheed claims that the former administration sold the sovereignty of Maldives to the communist party of **China**. @AmbassadorZhang @zj517

MDP Secretariat @MDPSecretariat · Jul 12, 2020
 An Open Letter by MDP President – Maldivian Democratic Party
 mdp.org.mv/archives/79197

1 10 10

Ahmed Azaan @axanner · Jul 8, 2019
 Maldivian journalists should do proper research before writing whatever they find on western media as established facts. Saw many reports on Maldivians newspapers **blaming China for the debt crisis** in Lanka.

Figure 7: Azaan's pro-Chinese stance

20 more accounts were found that were actively engaging with the hashtag.

Name	Username	Followers	Verified?	Account Created	Location	Total Tweets on the Hashtag	Total Retweets
Ali	@Ali59681228	120	No	May, 2018		2422	1093
Ahmed #indiaout	@AhmedAhmed4066	1376	No	Mar, 2019	Male	1898	1897
35 + million Black bag	@hassankobai	1071	No	Jan, 2019		1670	1061
DhivehiMusafir	@DhivehiMusafir	2009	No	Jul, 2019		1278	6603
MaldivianMuslim	@SecularBillOut	406	No	Nov, 2019		1267	545
Abdul Eco ...	@DhivehiOne	3776	No	Jul, 2016	Maldives	1230	6124
Ahmed Shifaz	@AhmeddXXXX	113	No	Sep, 2013		1217	286
MoosunBahaaru	@MBahaaru	3575	No	Aug, 2018	Male', Maldives.	1189	8559
Adam Naseer Mohamed	@AdamNaseerMoha8	1506	No	Jan, 2020		977	1975
	@MadiseelaM	2241	No	Mar, 2020		941	1859
Hdh Mode	@HdhMoadu	3437	No	May, 2017	Maldives	937	1048
JIMMY ALI	@JIMMYALII	227	No	Aug, 2020	Maldives	825	607
Bodu_Thilhadhuhm...	@Thiladuhmathi	1774	No	Jun, 2018		680	681
Dhivehin	@dhivesseh5	212	No	Feb, 2018	Maldives	643	597
Yuppe. Logical Maldivian	@ttst_yuppe	745	No	Feb, 2018	Sri Lanka	606	708
#IndiaOut #ChinaOut...	@sharyfmv	227	No	Mar, 2016	I belong to the world	578	600
JaahAli_DiDi	@Jaah43036491	19	No	May, 2021		506	62
Fly Over Maldives	@FlyOverMaldives	9	No	Aug, 2019	Maldives	503	81
Ahmed Azaan	@axanner	12520	Yes	Mar, 2010	Maldives	479	21083
Rumaalu 05	@Rumaalu_05	9430	No	Dec, 2012	Male' Maldives	473	1818

Evaluating the content posted by these accounts, it could be safely assumed that:

1. All the accounts involved seem to be staunch supporters of President Yameen. However, only two have explicitly mentioned in their profiles but all were putting forth the content in support of Yameen.
2. The accounts shared the content from mainly two news outlets, Dhiyares and Maldives Journal, which is also incidentally run by Azaan.
3. The main account which was actively involved in escalating this strategic hashtag was of Azaan. The impact of his tweets could be acknowledged from the fact that his account single-handedly managed to gain 12% traction. For better understanding you may turn to the pie-chart below which portrays the contribution of users (in%) upon the hashtag.

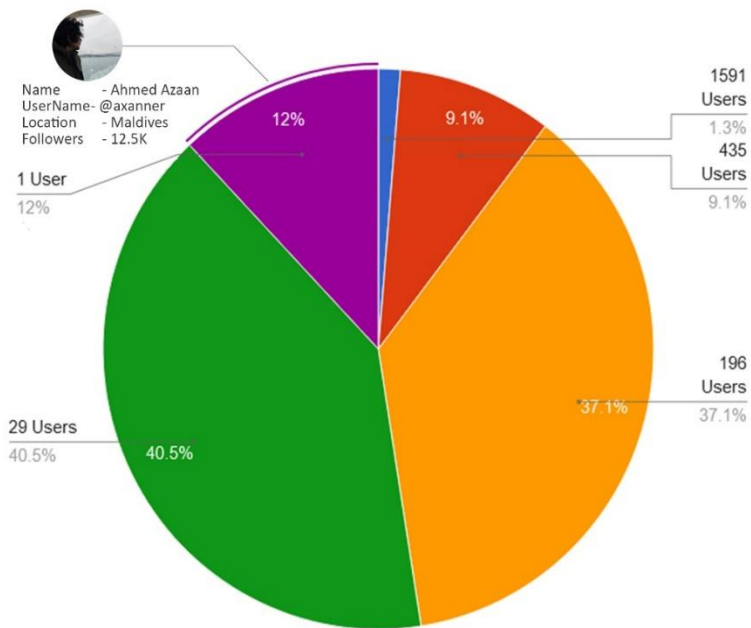


Figure 8: Impression pie-chart highlighting the contribution of handles upon the hashtag.

5. Assessing the Influence:

1. The #IndiaOut campaign has been single-handedly run and propagated by Azaan and his proponents. The journalistic ethics of Azaan has gone for a toss. There are very few instances in the world where reputed journalists and media houses have been involved in peddling a specific agenda as Azaan's. It's a bolt to the integrity of Maldivian journalism.
2. Azaan has not only served as an amplifier for Yameen but instead his tweets and articles highlights his clear bias towards China. Regarding his vocal anti-India stance along with his unyielding pro-China bias, it is evident that he might be on the funding list of a super power. Unlike the internal influence of India that Azaan is fighting against, he is exceptionally silent against the influence exerted by China or its projects. This needs more attention from the Maldivian police establishment.

3. #IndiaOut was an attempt by a handful of handles, most of them being fake with the intention of discrediting India for political gains. As a result, the real dialogue that is needed on making Maldives self-dependent and ensure equal distance from its two significantly large neighbouring countries has been missed out. This is a clear campaign to push the balance in favor of China.

4. In a nutshell, #IndiaOut is a strategically planned info-war perpetuated by a handful handles with outright agendas, than a random outburst of Maldivian sentiments. At the same time, it also serves as a lesson that is easy to manipulate people when you hold the position of power. We have witnessed the same pattern in neighbouring countries of Maldives like Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan.
Finally, not everything you see on social media is true. Disinformation spreads faster than information.