

Maldives President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih celebrates victory in parliamentary election

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Male: Maldives President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's party is leading in the vote count in the parliamentary election and has already declared a landslide victory that could give him a free hand in efforts to restore political freedoms and tackle corruption.

The official results are expected late Sunday. Local reports say Solih's Maldivian Democratic Party is leading in 60 out of the 87 seats in Parliament.

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More than 2,64,000 people were eligible to vote for 386 candidates running for the 87 seats. Voter turnout in Saturday's election was over 78 per cent.

Solih said the people should not forget "the immense challenges that lie ahead of us" as his party began celebrating after the counting started Saturday night.

"The work to strengthen our democratic institutions, to deliver basic services for citizens, to our promise of bringing corruption, past and present to book and ending impunity starts now," he said in a statement Sunday. "I look forward to working with all of you to realize our promises to the people."

Solih's party is seeking at least 44 seats in for a majority to pass legislation needed to implement pledges from last year's presidential campaign. His coalition currently has 52, but one partner with 22 seats is aligned with former strongman Yameen Abdul Gayoom.

Solih defeated Yameen last year, giving new hope to the young democracy that has gone through a tumultuous transition that threatened to drag the Maldives back to its autocratic past. Yameen had curtailed freedom of speech and jailed his political rivals.

Solih was only a fallback choice as president for his party because charismatic former President Mohamed Nasheed had been sentenced to prison under Yameen and was ineligible to run.

Solih promised reforms, an end to political influence over the courts, police and the bureaucracy, and the recovery of money lost through corruption.

Opposition politicians came together in a grand alliance to defeat Yameen, their common foe. But soon the coalition cracked and despite repeated efforts, Solih failed to secure parliamentary approval for promised commissions to inquire into corruption, the disappearance of a journalist and the killing of a blogger during Yameen's rule.

- AP