



The Island President Discussion Guide

Director: John Shenk

Year: 2011

Time: 101 min

You might know this director from:

Lost Boys of Sudan (2003)

FILM SUMMARY

THE ISLAND PRESIDENT presents Mohamed Nasheed, who for 20 years led a pro-democracy movement in the Maldives and endured multiple arrests and torture before becoming its first democratically-elected president in 2008. In his first year in office, Nasheed takes his political brilliance, charisma, and tenacity to the international stage to fight for the survival of his nation and people. If carbon emissions and the global temperature are not reduced, the Maldives—an archipelago of 1,200 islands with a population of 400,000—could soon be submerged in the ocean and uninhabitable.

With fascinating glimpses of backroom diplomacy and dramatic negotiations, the film follows Nasheed as he prepares for the Copenhagen Climate Summit in 2009. This portrait of a courageous man who is willing to challenge larger nations for the fate of his country is compelling enough on its own. What makes the story resonate even more is that in February of 2012, amid political and religious turmoil, Nasheed resigned. He and his supporters maintain it was a forced coup.

Throughout the film, stunning aerial and underwater shots of the Maldives' extraordinary beauty are contrasted with remnants of its recent oppressive history, including prisons where political opponents were tortured and a corrugated iron sheet cell, like the one Nasheed suffered solitary confinement in for 18 months. This juxtaposition of horror and paradise conveys the precarious existence of the Maldives, an island nation trying to build its future amidst the threat of rising sea levels and a fragile democracy.

FILM THEMES

For the Maldives, climate change is not an abstract issue. The survival of an entire nation—its people, identity, and civilization—depends on the cooperation and concerted efforts of everyone in the world.

CLIMATE CHANGE

In the last half of the 20th century, the global temperature rose approximately 1° C (2° F) resulting in substantial melting of the glaciers, rising sea levels, increased risk of drought, wild fires, and plant and animal extinctions. This film reveals a conflict between the short-term economic interests of wealthy nations and their desire to solve climate change. Representatives from economic superpowers argue against lower CO2 levels, putting economic self-interests and advantages above their desire to reduce the threat of global warming.

ENVIRONMENTAL REFUGEES

Knowing he may not succeed in setting new CO2 limits in Copenhagen, President Nasheed developed a contingency plan for relocating the 400,000 Maldivian citizens to a new homeland, possibly in Sri Lanka or Australia. More of the world's population is being forced to give up their homes, culture, and communities and move to other countries. It's estimated that there are more environmental refugees than political refugees. In 2009, 36 million people were displaced by natural disasters. Scientists predict this number will rise to at least 50 million by 2050. Some say it could be as high as 200 million.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Environmental justice is a growing movement that links environmental and social justice issues. One issue is how low-income populations disproportionately suffer the effects of environmental damage caused by industrialization and natural disasters. The film shows the unfair advantage most powerful nations have in promoting their own self-interests and those of their industry allies over those of smaller nations that cannot command the same level of economic might.

DAUNTLESS ACTIVISM

Though Nasheed does not manage to convince the world's most powerful nations to agree to limit their carbon emissions to the levels he'd hoped for, he still achieves a partial victory and in the process shows that smaller nations can play their part in larger climate change negotiations. And although he is no longer president, he continues to fight for democracy and climate action. He became a global figure during his presidency, but his dedication to social activism began long ago and promises to continue despite arrests and an uncertain political future for the Maldives.

“It is going to be very difficult for us to adapt to climate change issues if we do not have solid and secure democratic governance.”

Mohamed Nasheed

“Nasheed is like an action hero racing against a ticking time bomb. He inspires me to ask, ‘What can I do in my life to change things for the better?’ What would happen if we all asked that question every day?”

Director Jon Shenk

FILM FACTS:

- In December 2004, scores of people in the Maldives were killed and many islands suffered severe damage when a tsunami generated by a powerful undersea earthquake off the Indonesian coast hit the Maldives. The government said the disaster set development work back by 20 years.
- Nearly 400,000 people live in the Maldives, a Sunni Muslim country, which is considered the lowest lying country in the world.
- The Maldives is composed of 1,200 coral islands off of the Indian sub-continent, of which 200 are inhabited.
- In a 2013 report, the United Nations Environment Program warned that immediate action must be taken to reduce emissions enough to limit the rise in average global temperatures to 2° Celsius above pre-industrial levels. That is the maximum warming that many scientists believe can occur without causing potentially catastrophic climate change.
- CO2 generates more than 55% of human-induced greenhouse gases. The anthropogenic CO2 comes from fossil fuel use (coal, oil, natural gas), industrial processes, and deforestation.
- Even the most efficient coal-fired power plants emit more than 15 times the amount of CO2 per unit of electricity compared to renewable energy sources, and more than twice the amount of efficient gas-fired plants.
- More than half of all carbon pollution released into the atmosphere comes from five countries: China, the USA, India, Russia, and Japan.
- In 2012, Mohamed Nasheed resigned under duress, according to some, in a controversial transfer of power. In November 2013, he was defeated by Abdulla Yameen in a much-delayed presidential election run-off. Yameen is a half-brother of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who ruled the Maldives for 30 years.
- At the 19th annual meeting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2013, a loss and damage mechanism was agreed upon: an international structure to provide developing nations with better protection against loss and damage caused by extreme weather events and slow onset events such as rising sea levels.
- THE ISLAND PRESIDENT won the People's Choice Award for Best Documentary at Toronto International Film Festival.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others the chance to learn from Mohamed Nasheed's message about democracy and climate change. Use Facebook and Twitter to get the word out.
2. Make an effort to reduce your own greenhouse emissions: plant a garden, buy locally-produced food, reduce heating and electrical use, buy energy-efficient appliances, sign up for renewable energy, use a reel lawnmower and other powerless tools, take shorter showers, ride a bike, walk, carpool, buy secondhand, etc.
3. Join a global movement that seeks to solve the climate crisis. Get involved at [350](#).
4. Support efforts to expose human rights violations in the Maldives and around the world. [Amnesty International](#) and the [Human Rights Watch](#) have great programs.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

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