

India's corruption scandals and the clamor for a "Jan Lokpal" Bill

Kranti Kumara, Keith Jones
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The numerous corruption scandals engulfing the Indian establishment have justifiably generated popular outrage over the mercenary relations that exist between government ministers, senior bureaucrats, opposition politicians and the country's business houses.

Nothing has better demonstrated these relations than the ongoing 2G (second generation) telecom scandal. The current Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government sold off publicly-owned telecom frequency spectrum at bargain basement prices to Indian capitalists, including shady fledgling companies that flipped them to other players. This fire sale is estimated to have cost the public exchequer about \$40 billion, a gargantuan loss especially when compared to the total revenue of India's central government in the 2010-11 fiscal year, a mere \$155 billion.

Defrocked Telecom Minister A. Raja is now languishing in jail, awaiting trial on a long list of corruption charges. So are several telecom company executives. Yesterday, India's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) laid charges against five additional people including Kanimozhi Karunanidhi, the daughter of the Tamil Nadu chief minister and like Raja an MP for the DMK, a Tamil Nadu-based party that is part of the UPA.

And there is more. As a result of the 2G scandal, wire-tapped conversations have come to light in which lobbyists for Indian conglomerates like the Tata Group and Reliance Industries can be heard dictating government policy and even the selection of cabinet ministers. (See "India's government rocked by 2G mobile license scandal")

Such is the public outcry over the 2G and other scandals that Kishor Chaukar, the executive director of Tata Sons, the controlling shareholder in the Tata Group, has warned that they could give rise to Egyptian-style mass protests. "The dimensions of this are so large," Chaukar told the British *Financial Times*. "The wrongdoing is brought into focus in such a large manner. A large number of youth are saying 'This is enough.' To crony capitalism, they are saying: 'Let's get rid of it'."

Against this backdrop, a relatively obscure 71-year-old social activist and self-proclaimed anti-corruption crusader, Kisan Hazare, launched a "fast unto death" in New Delhi on April 5 to press the government to adopt a Jan Lokpal (Citizen's Ombudsman) bill to fight corruption. Only a few months before, Hazare had joined forces with a number of religious leaders and politically conservative philanthropists to promote a new "anti-corruption" NGO. Indians Against Corruption (IAC) is dedicated to promoting a "Jan" or Citizen's Lokpal bill, co-authored by a former Supreme Court justice, in opposition to the Lokpal bill that the UPA government proposed last year. According to the IAC, its Jan Lokpal bill is "the solution" to corruption.

Whereas the government bill provides for an ombudsman with only advisory powers, requires complainants to pay fees, and makes them liable to punitive measures, including a two-year jail sentence, if their complaint is found to be baseless, the IAC-promoted Jan Lokpal bill would establish an ombudsman with vast powers and effectively free from parliamentary oversight.

Hazare's fast was aggressively promoted by sections of the corporate media, with the *Hindu* playing a particularly prominent role. Invariably the media took to referring to Hazare as *Anna* (elder brother) Hazare, the fawning appellation used by his followers.

Whether Hazare was prompted to mount his anti-corruption campaign by some of the business leaders who patronize his various charitable trusts, by sections of the political establishment itself, or took the initiative on his own cannot be said. But important sections of India's corporate elite have most definitely rallied round Hazare's anti-corruption drive. They are seeking to use it to channel the popular anger over corruption away from the business houses and toward the politicians and to intensify, in the name of fighting corruption, their longstanding drive for deregulation, privatization and the elimination of any and all government oversight of their activities.

The UPA government, which has been severely shaken over the past six months by the combination of the 2G scandal and mounting inflation, initially tried to ignore Hazare's fast. But it soon found itself on the back foot after thousands of middle-class youth, attorneys and others expressed their support for his campaign by taking to the streets in many Indian cities. Scores of people launched sympathy fasts and many well-known personages, including actors, retired judges and prominent social activists rallied to Hazare's support. Particularly significant was the support accorded Hazare's campaign by Medha Patkar and her National Alliance of People's Movements. Patkar has been prominent in defending the rights of India's tribal peoples and is popularly identified with the left.

Buoyed by the publicity and support he had received, Hazare soon escalated his demands. He called on the government to include "civil society representatives," himself included, in the committee charged with drafting a revised Lokpal law for presentation to parliament. The irony of a self-appointed anti-corruption crusader asking for a seat at the table with the corrupt Congress Party and UPA bosses was totally lost on the corporate press and Hazare's growing list of politically influential and well-heeled supporters.

Four days after Hazare launched his fast, the UPA government announced that it had accepted his demands. He called off his protest and proclaimed victory, but he has vowed to resume his hunger strike if legislation to his liking is not adopted during this summer's Monsoon Session of parliament.

More than two weeks on the issue of the Jan Lokpal bill continues to dominate the official political debate in India.

In an indication of how significant and explosive the debate over a Lokpal bill has become the Congress Party, which dominates the UPA, has named five of its most important ministers to sit alongside Hazare and four other "civil society" representatives on the 10-member committee now charged with drafting a new version of the bill.

The five Congress nominees include Pranab Mukherjee, who is the UPA finance minister and generally considered to be third most powerful figure

in the government (after Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi), Home Minister P. Chidambaram, and Law Minister Veerappa Moily.

India's corruption scandals and the furor over a Jan Lokpal bill raise a series of critical political questions.

Corruption is not an accidental nor an incidental element of Indian life that can be lanced from the body politic. It is only the most evident and direct manifestation of the character of India's social-political order—of the domination of the cash-nexus and the complete subordination of government at all levels to the dictates of big business.

The Indian bourgeoisie has ruled India since independence. But over the past 20 years, as it has transformed India into a cheap-labor producer for world capitalism, big business' domination of government has become ever-more complete and all-pervasive.

As the 2G scandal exemplifies, government policy in New Delhi and the states is formulated in the most immediate and direct sense in response to the lobbying, bribing, and bullying of domestic and foreign business interests.

Other prominent examples of this include the never-ending tax giveaways to big business, the deliberate running down of public sector enterprises so as to justify their privatization at fire-sale prices, the systematic failure to enforce the country's utterly inadequate labor standards, the gutting of environmental regulations, and the push for the privatization of public sector pensions so as to turn workers' savings over to the financial houses to use in their speculative gambling.

The end result has been a massive growth of social inequality and economic insecurity. While India now boasts the world's fourth largest number of billionaires, 55, three-quarters of the population survive on less than \$2 US per day, and 200 children under the age of five die every hour.

Although the Tatas and other prominent Indian capitalists feign alarm and anger over corruption, it has served them well as a mechanism for advancing their interests and forcing through policies that are inimical to the interests of India's workers and toilers.

The Indian corporate media's anger over corruption is highly selective. Last month a US embassy cable made public through WikiLeaks provided fresh evidence that the government had bribed MPs to survive a July 2008 non-confidence vote arising from its push to secure a "global strategic partnership" with the US. But the Indian media rallied round the UPA and declared this blatant corruption and subversion of democracy a non-issue. (See "India used bribes to win vote on US nuclear accord, WikiLeaks cables show")

Sections of the elite in India and elsewhere have frequently brandished the reputedly non-class and apolitical anti-corruption banner to deflect social tensions and manipulate popular anger.

While Indian big business certainly did not welcome exposure of the 2G scandal, it is now using the debate over the Jan Lokpal bill to try to define the parameters of the political debate so as to further its own agenda. Thus the focus is being placed not on the dominance of business interests over politics, but on the politicians, who in exchange for serving as errand boys for the corporations receive all manner of kickbacks and favors.

Moreover, the anti-corruption debate is being framed so as to prevent any questioning of the social-economic order—of capital's prerogative to exploit the working class and toilers.

In Hazare the Indian ruling class have found a candidate well-suited to serve as the moralizing public face of an effort to deflect popular anger away from big business. A former member of India's armed forces, Hazare claims to be a follower of Gandhi. He has won numerous awards and praise from the World Health Organization and other NGOs for having transformed his native semi-arid village of Ralegan Siddhi in the state of Maharashtra into a "model village" by adopting soil conservation methods and by stamping out alcoholism.

But Hazare's methods and statements reveal his contempt for the masses and hostility to democratic values. At his direction the villagers of Ralegan Siddhi ordered liquor shop-owners to close their establishments. Those who did not were driven out, in vigilante fashion, by razing their shops to the ground. Villagers who still resorted to drinking were given three warnings after which they would be tied to a pole and severely lashed. Hazare has justified this barbaric practice by comparing it to the bitter medicine a mother would administer to her sick child.

Earlier this month, Hazare warmly praised Narendra Modi, the Chief Minister of Gujarat and principal instigator of the 2002 anti-Muslim Gujarat pogrom, for his supposed prowess at rural development. In fact, Modi's rural development record is in keeping with his foul communal politics. Despite being one of India's most industrialized states, Gujarat after more than a decade of Modi at the helm has poverty rates rivaling some of India's most impoverished states.

Evidence has also come to light of Hazare using his charities for self-aggrandizement.

The widespread support Hazare's campaign for a Jan Lokpal bill has won among sections of the urban middle class is indicative of the build-up of social tensions.

While the Indian elite never tires of proclaiming that the country has arrived on the global stage, the world economic crisis has buffeted India. Rapid economic growth has resumed after a sharp fallback in 2008-9, but the incomes of all but the most privileged sections of the middle class are being stretched by the rapid run-up of prices, especially for food.

Tens of millions of middle class people—professionals, small businessmen and university students—are struggling and under conditions where, because of the nonexistence of any social safety net, the loss of a job or an illness or injury in the family can spell catastrophe.

If big business has free rein to harness and exploit the frustration and anger of wide sections of the middle class, it is because the working class has been politically paralyzed by its ostensible leadership, the Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and their Left Front.

Over the past two decades, the Stalinist parties have suppressed the class struggle, playing an instrumental role in a series of governments at the center, including the UPA in its first term, that have implemented the bourgeoisie's neo-liberal agenda. And in those states where the Left Front has formed the government, such as West Bengal, the Stalinists have implemented "pro-investor" policies, slashing jobs and social spending, banning strikes in the IT sector, and using violence to quell peasant opposition to the expropriation of prime agricultural land for Special Economic Zones.

In response to the 2G scandal, the Stalinists made some perfunctory denunciations of the UPA government, which they had sustained in power for four years, for being at the beck and call of big business. They then focused all of their energies on mustering a campaign with the rightwing opposition parties, including the Hindu supremacist BJP, to force the government to organize a Joint Parliamentary Committee to investigate the 2G scandal.

Recent months have seen signs of growing working class unrest, including a series of militant strikes at factories owned by major transnational companies. However, for the power and transformative potential of the working class to be unleashed, it must break through the political straitjacket imposed by the Stalinists and become the leader and spearhead of a movement of all the rural toilers and oppressed aimed at breaking big business' vice-like hold over the country's socio-economic life and implementing socialist policies.



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