

# India's government uses authoritarian measures against self-styled anti-corruption crusade

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India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance coalition government is in disarray after using preventative detention and mass arrests in an unsuccessful attempt to block a protest led by self-styled Gandhian and self-anointed anti-corruption crusader Anna (Brother) Hazare. The principal spokesmen for "Indians Against Corruption," Hazare is pressing for changes to a government bill, decades in gestation, that establishes a *Lokpal* or Ombudsman to help curb corruption.

The government's recourse to draconian methods to thwart Hazare's "anti-corruption" campaign has been condemned by the corporate media and the entire opposition, from the Stalinist-led Left Front to the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and has occasioned protest rallies in Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore and urban centers across India. The *Hindu's* editorial on the government crackdown was titled "Corrupt, Repressive and Stupid," while that in the *Times of India* was headlined "Wrongful arrest."

Yesterday, in response to opposition demands that the government explain its resort to repression, India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh took the rare step of reading an identical statement in both houses of India's parliament. Claiming that Hazare's campaign constituted a "challenge" to "the authority of the Government and the prerogative of Parliament," Singh mounted a full-throated defense of the police's actions. The authorities had demanded that Hazare accept 22 restrictions on the protest he intended to launch in a park in India's capital on Tuesday, August 16, including limiting the number of participants to just 5,000 and ending his own public "fast unto death" after three days. When Hazare and his entourage balked at six of the conditions, which they rightly termed an arbitrary attempt to limit their democratic right to protest, the government invoked Section 144 of the Criminal Code. This draconian measure, which dates back to colonial times, allows the authorities to ban gatherings.

On Tuesday morning Hazare and six others were subject to preventative arrest as they left for the park where the protest was to be held. Over the next few hours, Delhi police arrested more than 2,600 other people who had either made their way to the park or were en route. According to Singh, this constituted "the minimum steps necessary to maintain peace and tranquility."

In his statement to parliament, India's prime minister included a transparent appeal to India's corporate elite, broad sections of

which have encouraged Hazare over the past six months, because they view his campaign as a useful tool in deflecting public ire over corruption away from themselves and towards the political establishment and as a means of pressing for a further reduction in state oversight of business. India, said Singh, is "now emerging as one of the important players on the world stage. There are many forces that would not like to see India realize its true place in the Comity of Nations. We must not play into their hands. We must not create an environment in which our economic progress is hijacked by internal dissension."

Originally Hazare had been ordered held at Delhi's notorious Tihar jail for a week. But on Tuesday evening the government reversed course and announced that the 74 year-old would soon be released. Government sources credited this turnabout to the intervention of Rahul Gandhi. The Congress Party General-Secretary, Rahul Gandhi is the heir apparent to the Nehru-Gandhi family dynasty that for decades has controlled the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government. In recent months, as Manmohan Singh's leadership has come under mounting criticism from both within and without the government, he has been increasingly touted as Singh's successor as prime minister.

Hazare and his entourage, however, had other plans. Recognizing that the government had been rattled, they balked at the government's insistence that Hazare agree as a condition of his release not to proceed with his protest in its original form.

Ultimately, it was the government that backed down. Late Wednesday night, after more than 24 hours of negotiations, the government agreed to waive all restrictions on Hazare's protest, with the sole exception that his fast and the protest surrounding it must be limited to 14 days.

Long before this agreement was announced, the press had unanimously concluded that the government has emerged from the Hazare affair seriously weakened. "The authority of the Manmohan Singh government suffered a devastating blow on Tuesday after public outrage forced it to [announce the impending] release of Anna Hazare from prison barely 11 hours into a seven-day jail sentence," declared the *Economic Times* in its lead article Tuesday. "The 'one step forward, two steps backward' decision of the government represents a major setback for the prime minister and his chosen crisis managers, who were pushing for a 'let's-brazen-it-out' approach. The PM has been personally

overseeing the anti-Anna operation and had even got the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs to back his tough line.”

The Secretary-General of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Rajiv Kumar, was quick to draw the conclusion that the government will now be unable to deliver on its oft-repeated promise to initiate a new round of regressive economic reforms, including opening the door to foreign multi-brand retailers and gutting restrictions on layoffs and factory closures. “Unfortunately,” lamented Kumar, “politics has trumped economics again. This was the time we needed urgent focus on economic policy and reform, but that is not going to happen. Investments have stalled and we are facing a possible double-dip recession. We needed urgency.”

The state suppression of Tuesday’s Indians Against Corruption protest was an egregious attack on democratic rights by a right wing government that has increasingly denounced any and all opposition as an illegitimate challenge to its right to govern.

That said, Indian workers should harbor no illusion in Hazare and his anti-corruption campaign. It is a right wing movement that has been vigorously promoted by the corporate media and actively supported by the BJP.

Hazare, a former Indian army officer, is calling his campaign a “second war of independence,” but there is nothing progressive or emancipatory about it.

The self-styled “civil society activists” in the leadership of Indians Against Corruption are conservative philanthropists, in the mold of Hazare, and religious figures who have no association with genuine struggles of the oppressed or in defense of civil liberties. Not surprisingly, several, including Hazare, have expressed sympathy for the Hindu right.

Indians Against Corruption has openly solicited and received the support of powerful sections of big business. One only has to look at the lavish press coverage accorded Hazare and his campaign. On Tuesday and Wednesday, India’s dailies were chock-full of reports gushing over the reputed mass participation in the sympathy protests that erupted following his arrest. “Anna Hazare arrest: A million mutinies across India,” proclaimed one headline; “Unprecedented support for Anna Hazare from across India,” declared another.

In fact, the protests have been both numerically and socially limited, with crowds comprised almost exclusively of students, businessmen, lawyers, software developers and other professionals, and numbering possibly tens of thousands in New Delhi and hundreds or at most thousands elsewhere.

The protests were considerably smaller than the one-day walkout of bank employees earlier this month, let alone the fall 2008 one-day general strike called by the Left Front and the unions in which well over 50 million participated.

Unquestionably, sections of India’s corporate elite are now alarmed by the extent to which the Congress-led UPA government has been politically weakened. But generally big business has looked favorably on Hazare’s movement.

Following the eruption of the 2G cell phone spectrum scandal in which business houses were revealed not only to have robbed billions from the state, but to dictate in the most open and crass manner government policies and the selection of cabinet ministers,

business was anxious to have the issue of corruption reframed as primarily a problem of politicians on the take.

Then, when the anti-corruption movement gained some traction in middle class, it came to be seen by sections of big business as a way of pushing for further deregulation, with the claim that business must be freed from the corrupt politicians and government bureaucrats.

The reality is that corruption is the inevitable product of a society in which the cash nexus rules, that has become ever-more socially polarized, and in which the political elite pursues policies on behalf of a tiny capitalist elite at the expense of the country’s impoverished toilers, that is the mass of the population.

Unquestionably there is tremendous social anger in India. Recent months have seen a growing wave of strikes, particularly in subsidiaries of transnational corporations and their suppliers, and protests against the expropriation of peasant farmers for business development projects.

If this anger has yet to find a progressive political expression it is because the ostensible political representatives of the working class, the Stalinist parliamentary parties and their Left Front, have systematically suppressed the class struggle. For the past two decades, during which the Indian bourgeoisie has endeavored to attract foreign investment and transform India into a cheap-labor producer for world capitalism, the Stalinists have supported one right wing government in New Delhi after another, including providing the Congress-led UPA with its parliamentary majority from 2004-8. And in those states where they have held office they have ruthlessly pursued pro-investor policies.

The immediate response of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and Communist Party of India to the government’s anti-democratic crackdown against Hazare’s protest was to participate in a meeting of caste-, communal- and regional-based opposition parties, including the BJP and Shiv Sena. The Stalinists justified their collaboration with the BJP on the grounds that it was limited to the defense of democratic rights—no matter that the BJP is a virulently communal party, with a decades-long history of inciting communal violence and that, in the name of fighting terrorism and separatism routinely attacks the government for not making even deeper inroads on basic civil liberties.



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