

# Indian government seeks compromise with anti-corruption campaigner

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Confronting a continuing fast by self-appointed anti-corruption crusader Anna Hazare, India's Congress-led government is desperately seeking a compromise over his demand for the establishment of a *Lokpal* or Ombudsman. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared on Saturday that there was "a lot of scope for give and take" over the Lokpal legislation.

Singh's conciliatory statement was an abrupt about-face after a police crackdown on Hazare and his supporters backfired when protests began to multiply. The government was forced to release Hazare and allow him to conduct a hunger strike in a central Delhi park. Just last week, Congress party spokesman Manish Tewari had described the "Indians against Corruption", also known as Team Anna, as "armchair fascists, over-ground Maoists, closet anarchists".

On Sunday, tens of thousands of Hazare's supporters packed the Ramila Maidan, a public ground in New Delhi, as well as joining protests in other towns and cities. Hazare told the crowd: "Even if the prime minister comes, I will not withdraw my hunger strike until the Jan Lokpal bill [his version of the ombudsman legislation] is passed in parliament. I can die but I will not bend."

Hazare, a 74-year-old who styles himself in the image of Gandhi, has declared that he is leading a "second freedom struggle"—that is, akin to India's anti-colonial movement. His populist rhetoric is heavily laced with appeals to Indian nationalism—"Hail Mother India"—and Sunday's event featured performances of patriotic songs. Hazare has given the government until August 30 to pass his bill.

Singh made another appeal on Monday for "a reasoned debate on all these issues." He declared that "all concerned individuals should convey their concern on different aspects of the [government's] bill to their representatives in parliament and to the standing committee." Hazare dismissed the government's Lokpal bill as too weak and demanded stronger powers for an ombudsman, including to investigate the prime minister and the country's top judiciary.

While Hazare told Sunday's gathering that he would not bend, representatives of Team Anna have indicated that they are open to negotiation. Hazare aide, Prashant Bhushan, told the *Hindustan Times* that his organisation was prepared to talk to "clean people with political authority". He added that Hazare's Jan Lokpal legislation had "gone through 13 revisions and a 14<sup>th</sup> draft is possible." Bhushan insisted, however, that there had to be a "written agreement" not "mere assurances".

Hazare's focus on "corruption" betrays the right-wing populist character of his movement, which has seized on widespread revulsion over repeated corruption scandals that have hit the Singh government and also more recently the Hindu supremacist opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The most prominent affair has been the so-called 2G scandal that exposed the collusion of business and government figures in the allocation of lucrative licences for the 2G spectrum used by mobile phones.

Big business latched onto the anti-corruption campaign both as a means of deflecting attention from its own practices and of pressing the Singh government to push ahead with stalled pro-market reforms. Hazare has been accorded Bollywood star status in the Indian media, which has promoted him as the new Gandhi, leading a "revolution" against corruption. The issue is dominating the Indian press to the exclusion of other matters.

Hazare's appeal is particularly directed to younger layers of India's new middle classes—graduates, professionals and entrepreneurs who have emerged over the past two decades of economic restructuring. His campaign against "corruption" voices their own frustration that government at all levels acts as an impediment to their personal advancement and enrichment.

The *Hindustan Times*, for instance, reported that the IT sector in Haryana was badly affected when staff took time off to participate in Hazare's protests in Delhi last week. Pradeep Yadav, president of the IT business confederation, told the newspaper that businesses had complained of attendance rates

as low as 50 percent, putting the IT sector in serious trouble.

Reportedly, members of Team Anna have been previously involved in “anti-reservation” protests—that is, demands by high-caste layers for the abolition of university places and jobs “reserved” for the lower castes and so-called untouchables. While the reservation system has done nothing to end caste oppression or poverty in India, the “anti-reservation” protests were aimed at entrenching the position of the wealthy, high-caste elite.

Hazare’s concentration on “corruption” deflects attention from the real source of collusion between government and big business, which lies in the profit system itself, particularly since the advent of pro-market reforms in 1991. Moreover, “Indians against Corruption” has shown no concern for the pressing social issues confronting tens of millions of working people—unemployment, endemic poverty, rising prices and the lack of essential services.

In response to criticism of his right-wing agenda, Hazare made reference for the first time on Saturday to the killing of three farmers protesting over the diversion of water. He also criticised corporate policies as “anti-worker” and “anti-labourer”, declaring: “They should not suck their blood.” The occasional demagogic statement, however, only underscores the fact that Hazare does not even pretend to champion the poor. A former member of the Indian armed forces, Hazare is known for his autocratic methods in his “model village” of Ralegan Siddhi and for his connections to the Hindu supremacist right.

Hazare’s proposed Jan Lokpal legislation centres on the establishment of an unelected ombudsman with extensive police powers and considerable resources to investigate and prosecute the judiciary, state bureaucracy and government. This apparatus, which would be effectively free from parliamentary supervision, would become a vehicle for the Indian ruling elite to pressure, change or even remove elected governments—all in the name of the fight against corruption. Significantly, the corporate elites do not come under its ambit.

The attitude of big business and the corporate media to the anti-corruption movement has been ambivalent. While milking the Hazare phenomenon for all it is worth as a means for putting pressure on the government, there is a degree of nervousness that the protests could encourage working people to begin to voice their demands in opposition to the pro-market agenda of cuts to jobs, working conditions and services.

Expressing these concerns, a *Times of India* editorial last week set forth its own proposals for a compromise that would end the standoff between the government and Hazare. “Both

the government and Team Anna claim to be doing what they’re doing ‘for the people’,” the newspaper declared. “If that be so, neither side should allow ego to come in the way of a solution that best tackles the curse of corruption and serves the cause of India and its people.”

Virtually all the opposition parties—from the BJP to the Stalinists of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM)—denounced the government’s arrest of Hazare last week. At the same time, they have emerged as “defenders of parliament” and opponents of Hazare’s attempt to “impose” his legislation.

CPI spokesman D. Raja declared: “Legislation must be enacted by parliament.” CPM leader Sitaram Yechury insisted: “There is a constitutional scheme of things; a legislative process that cannot be abandoned.” These criticisms of Hazare from the standpoint of defending the norms of bourgeois parliamentary rule highlight the degree to which the Stalinists function as an integral part of the Indian political establishment.

For decades, the CPI and the CPM have subordinated the working class to one or other section of the Indian bourgeoisie. Following the 2004 general elections, the Stalinist parties provided political and parliamentary support for the Congress-led government, under the guise of blocking the communal BJP. The CPI and CPM continued their backing even as Congress accelerated pro-market reforms that further devastated the living standards of working people.

Now the CPI and CPM have jumped on the Lokpal bandwagon in league with bourgeois parties, based on regional and caste politics. These include the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), which is founded on Tamil communalism and is notorious for its anti-working class policies. This grouping of nine parties is planning protests today across India to call for a “strong” Lokpal and “effective measures to fight corruption.”

It is precisely the betrayals of the CPI and CPM that have blocked any independent struggle by the working class and thereby opened the door for right-wing figures such as Hazare to emerge. A concerted political struggle by workers against the Singh government and the corrupt profit system on the basis of a socialist program would win the support of the most oppressed layers of the middle classes—peasants and small business—and quickly shift the balance of forces.



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