

Stand-off continues over Indian anti-corruption bill

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Despite growing concern in ruling circles, the standoff between the Indian government and self-proclaimed anti-corruption campaigner Anna Hazare continues. Hazare, who is entering the 12th day of fast in a New Delhi public ground, is continuing to demand that the main features of his Jan Lokpal or ombudsman legislation be adopted, despite concessions by the government.

In a letter to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Friday, Hazare declared that he would not break his fast unless three key features of his proposed legislation were accepted in writing by the parliament. These include establishing anti-corruption ombudsmen in all 28 Indian states, bringing the lower sections of the government within the ambit of the Lokpal bill and preparing a “citizens’ charter” for all government departments that clearly lists penalties for under-performance.

Hazare has drawn significant support for his right-wing, anti-corruption drive, particularly from sections of India’s new middle classes who regard the government and its endemic corruption as an obstacle to their ambitions and enrichment. Big business has exploited the Hazare phenomenon, which has been systematically inflated in the media, as a means for pressing their own demands for a new round of pro-market restructuring.

The government initially tried to prevent Hazare from starting his public fast by arresting him and his supporters, but was forced to release him after a public outcry. Now Prime Minister Singh is desperately seeking to defuse the standoff. On Wednesday he convened an all-party meeting, which issued a joint

statement calling for Hazare to end his fast, but insisting that the parliamentary process had to be followed in considering the Lokpal legislation.

On Thursday, the prime minister issued an appeal to Hazare to end his fast, promising to present the Jan Lokpal legislation, along with other proposed Lokpal bills, for debate in parliament. Singh lavished praise on Hazare for his “idealism” and as “the embodiment of our people’s disgust and concern about tackling corruption,” but he did not commit to meeting Hazare’s main demands.

The opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) put further pressure on the government on Thursday evening by breaking ranks with other parliamentary parties and declaring its support of Hazare’s legislation. BJP leader L. K. Advani met with members of what has been dubbed Team Anna, while BJP President Nitin Gadkari wrote to Hazare declaring that his Jan Lokpal proposal was “the basis for a strong and effective” anti-corruption bill.

The Hindu supremacist BJP’s about-face reportedly came amid pressure from the associated right-wing Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) organisation. An RSS leader told *Business Standard*: “The RSS and Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) have been openly supporting Anna Hazare’s movement and are regularly at the Ramila ground [the site of Hazare’s fast]. But the BJP leadership is completely missing.”

The comment highlights the connections between the Hazare movement and Hindu communal organisations. Hazare is a former member of the Indian armed forces and self-proclaimed Gandhian, who is notorious for his

autocratic methods in imposing his theories in his “model village” of Ralegan Siddhi. His blend of right-wing populism laced with heavy doses of Indian jingoism has appealed to layers of India’s privileged middle classes. Among the members of Team Anna are those who have previously been involved in the upper caste “anti-reservation” movement.

Sections of the corporate elite and establishment media, while continuing to exploit the anti-corruption movement, have become increasingly nervous about the parliamentary logjam that it has created and its potential for political instability. A prominent comment in the *Times of India* on Friday, while highly critical of the government, noted the “atmosphere of confrontation” and urged compromise.

Under conditions of a deepening global economic crisis and a slowing Indian economy, big business is pressing for the government to proceed with a battery of pro-market reform legislation. However, with the current session now into its fourth week, parliament has been paralysed, first by a corruption scandal over the 2010 Commonwealth Games and now Hazare’s protest fast.

The *Times of India* comment expressed concerns that Hazare’s bill “concentrates too much power in a single individual and is overambitious.” The Jan Lokpal legislation envisaged a massive anti-corruption bureaucracy with extensive powers to investigate and prosecute, headed by an unelected ombudsman effectively free from parliamentary supervision and reaching into every aspect of government.

The business elite also fears that if Hazare’s protest is too successful it will only encourage others, including the working class, to take matters into their own hands. Such calculations are behind Singh’s insistence on the “supremacy” of parliament—in other words, politics and power must be confined to the parliamentary arena. Significantly, India’s two main Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India Marxist—have been the most strident proponents of this stance against Hazare.

Some cracks have begun to appear in Hazare’s camp.

By Friday, two prominent supporters expressed their displeasure at Team Anna’s failure to reach a compromise in talks with the government. A former Supreme Court judge and a member of the joint Lokpal drafting committee, Santosh Hegde, said: “I feel I am not in Team Anna anymore.” Another supporter Swami Agnivesh called for an end to the hunger strike, saying that Hazare had missed a golden opportunity to end his fast after Singh’s appeal.

In a bid to defuse the political crisis, the government called a special sitting of parliament yesterday to discuss the Lokpal legislation. Most of the day was taken up with procedural moves and countermoves, with the government and opposition seeking to gain control over the discussion. An agreement was finally reached to allow Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee to introduce a statement this morning that will then form the basis for debate and a vote.

If a resolution is adopted that includes Hazare’s three conditions, he has indicated that he will end his fast but maintain his protest with his supporters in central New Delhi until the government agrees to the other elements of his Jan Lokpal legislation. Whatever takes place today, the ongoing anti-corruption protests ensure that the political crisis facing the Singh government will continue.



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