

Uneasy truce between Indian government and anti-corruption campaigner

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Under pressure from big business to end the political stalemate, India's self-proclaimed anti-corruption campaigner Anna Hazare yesterday broke his 12-day fast at the Ramlila Maidan, a public ground in New Delhi. On Saturday, the Indian parliament passed an "in principle" resolution agreeing to include three of Hazare's demands in proposed Lokpal or ombudsman legislation. Though tensions have eased, nothing has been settled.

Hazare, who headed large anti-corruption protests, has backed away from his previous demand that the government pass his own Jan Lokpal bill by August 30. The government, which initially sought to suppress the protests by arresting Hazare and his supporters, has been forced to promise to include his three demands in the legislation.

Hazare ended the fast yesterday by accepting coconut water and honey from a Dalit (formerly known as an "untouchable") and a Muslim girl. This cosmetic gesture cannot hide the fact that he draws his support largely from better-off sections of the Indian middle classes, and he and his advisers—the so-called Team Anna—have connections to right-wing Hindu communal organisations. His focus on "corruption" has been to the exclusion of the economic and social crisis facing the vast majority of working people.

Hazare's anti-corruption drive reflects the sentiment among middle-class layers that governments are a barrier to their ambitions and enrichment. Big business and the corporate press have seized on the Lokpal issue to press for an acceleration of pro-market restructuring. Hazare envisages the establishment of an ombudsman apparatus with wide powers to investigate and

prosecute all levels of government, without any significant parliamentary oversight.

Hazare's three demands included the appointment of anti-corruption ombudsmen in all 28 Indian states, bringing the lower section of the state bureaucracy within the ambit of the Lokpal bill and preparing a "citizens' charter" for all government departments that clearly lists penalties for under-performance and corruption.

The media, which was responsible for inflating the Hazare phenomenon to the dominant issue in Indian politics, has hailed the compromise between the government and Hazare. The *Times of India* declared on the front page of its Sunday edition, "Anna wins it for the people." An editorial in yesterday's *Hindu*, entitled "significant victory," described the outcome as "a triumph for the anti-corruption mood in the country and for the Gandhian technique of non-violent mass agitation on issues of vital concern for the people."

In reality, these newspapers were congratulating themselves for having successfully brought pressure to bear on Prime Minister Manmohan Singh without encouraging protests by other layers of society—particularly the working class—over job losses, rising levels of poverty and deepening social inequality. Just as Mahatma Gandhi used "non-violence" and his fasts to prevent the anti-colonial movement from slipping out of the control of the Indian bourgeoisie in the 1930s and 1940s, so Hazare has used similar "techniques" to manage his right-wing, populist movement.

All the major parties, including the ruling Congress

party and opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have expressed concerns at the threat to political stability posed by the use of extra-parliamentary methods. The country's two main Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPM)—have been in the forefront of defending parliament as the chief mechanism for maintaining bourgeois rule.

Last Friday, Congress general secretary Rahul Gandhi, heir to India's Gandhi-Nehru dynasty, cautiously expressed this fear of wider protests, warning that the Hazare movement could set a “dangerous precedent for democracy.” He stated: “Today, the proposed law is against corruption. Tomorrow, the target may be something less universally heralded.”

The parliamentary session on Saturday saw all parties—including the CPI and CPM—coming together to unanimously vote for a “Sense of the House” resolution in both parliamentary houses to incorporate Hazare's three demands. The *Times of India* was effusive in its praise for the spirit of bipartisanship between Congress and the Hindu supremacist BJP, hailing the “non-partisan” character of the speeches and declaring that “the resolution was the result of a remarkable display of give-and-take by all the protagonists.”

The newspaper, which has been prominent in building up Hazare into a “new Gandhi,” is clearly hoping that the bipartisanship will extend to other “reforms.” It praised Team Anna for proposing that “electoral reform,” including the right to reject and recall parliamentarians, should be the subject of “Anna's next crusade.” In its August 19 edition, the *Times of India* set out a 10-point agenda to control “corruption” that included changes to election rules.

Well aware that the fragile truce agreed over the weekend could break down, the newspaper called for the government and Team Anna to “now move from conflict to cooperation” and ensure there was no “renewed breakdown in negotiations.” While the government voted for Saturday's resolution and would pay a political price if it reneged, it is not bound in any legal or parliamentary sense to implement Hazare's

demands. For his part, Hazare told supporters yesterday: “I have only suspended my agitation. I will not rest until all the changes that I look to are achieved.”

One of the government's calculations in ending the standoff is that Congress confronts a number of state assembly elections next year, including in the most populous state of Uttar Pradesh, and is desperate to retain the support of the middle classes. According to one estimate, the middle class—which was defined as those with a monthly income of between 20,000 and 100,000 rupees (\$US300 to 1,500)—has significantly grown from 25 million in 1996 to 160 million at present.

These layers have benefitted from the opening up of the Indian economy to foreign investment over the past two decades that has led to an expansion of young IT specialists, entrepreneurs, researchers and other professionals. The government is counting on their support to help drive through the next round of pro-market restructuring, which will have a devastating impact on the jobs and conditions of the working class.

Whatever the final form of the Lokpal legislation, it will do little to end the endemic corruption that, in the final analysis, is the product of the profit system. The incestuous relations between governments and big business have only deepened after two decades of pro-market reform, restructuring and privatisation.

The immediate political crisis may be over but it could rapidly flare up again. For the ruling elites, the Hazare movement has, if nothing else, been a useful political diversion from class tensions that are certain to sharpen as the economy continues to slow and the government intensifies its assault on the social position of the working class.



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