

Modi signals India's calamitous 21-day lockdown to be extended, as coronavirus cases surge

Wasantha Rupasingha, Keith Jones
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According to media reports, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has signalled that the 21-day lockdown his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government imposed to “break the chain” of coronavirus infection will have to be extended beyond the originally planned April 14 end-date.

Modi, who only a few weeks ago was boasting that India was a model for the South Asian region and the world in successfully containing the pandemic, yesterday told a government-convened all-party leaders’ meeting that the world’s second most populous country confronts a situation akin to a “national emergency.”

The virtual meeting was meant to be “closed-doors.” However, an audio clip was leaked to the media in which Modi can be heard saying, “I have been talking to (state) chief ministers and the feedback from them and the district magistrates ... is unanimous that lifting the lockdown all at once is not advisable. I will talk to (the chief ministers) again. But the sense as of now is clear that lifting the lockdown is not going to be possible. We have to take tough measures to enforce social distancing.”

Prior to yesterday, India’s far-right BJP government had been indicating that it would lift the lockdown, at least partially, in much of the country starting next week.

However, confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths have surged in recent days. There are now over 5,700 confirmed cases, more than three times the 1,637 reported on April 1. During that same one-week period, the number of COVID-19 fatalities has risen from 38 to 198, with 26 people dying on Wednesday alone.

Moreover, although New Delhi continues to publicly

insist that there is no evidence of “community transmission,” most health experts in India and internationally believe that the real number of infected is far higher, and that the relatively low number of confirmed cases is a function of the failure to test widely. Since late January when the first Indian coronavirus case was identified, authorities have conducted no more than 100,000 tests in a country that is home to 1.37 billion people.

India is especially vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic because of endemic mass poverty, poor to non-existent sanitation, the high density of its population, and the lack of public health facilities and personnel.

Yet the government’s response to the coronavirus has been characterized by criminal negligence, including sudden, ill-prepared policy reversals.

Modi announced the unprecedented nationwide lockdown in a March 24 national broadcast less than four hours before it went into effect. Nor were the states or opposition parties consulted in advance.

The consequences of the government’s reckless improvisation have been calamitous. As a result of the lockdown, hundreds of millions of workers and rural toilers, with little to no savings, were deprived overnight of their jobs and all income, with the government offering them no more than a promise of a coming package of relief measures.

Announced two days later, the government’s relief package proved to be thin gruel—the equivalent in per capita terms of around 1,200 rupees, or US\$16. Much of it consists of recycled, previously promised money, or of handouts of basic foodstuffs that will only be made available weeks and even months hence.

In the meantime, millions of migrant workers with no means of sustenance, and often deprived of their lodgings along with their jobs, fled Delhi and other urban centres, setting out to return on foot to their native villages. Tragically, this mass migration—for which the government bears sole responsibility—has likely spread the coronavirus deep into India’s countryside, where health facilities are virtually non-existent.

Ultimately, the BJP central government intervened to block the migrant workers’ return to their villages, instructing state governments and security forces to prevent them from crossing state borders. Millions of migrant workers are now housed in makeshift internal refugee camps, which are likely to also serve as disease transmission centres.

Tens of millions of other workers are also facing unprecedented hardship. According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), the urban unemployment rate has leapt to more than 30 percent, and rural unemployment is now above 20 percent.

Because they fear the socially explosive consequences of the pandemic and its impact on an economy that was already in the midst of a pronounced slowdown, India’s opposition parties have rallied round a BJP government that till recently many of them were denouncing as “fascist,” and which continues to assault basic democratic rights, as in last week’s attempt to impose censorship on the media’s coverage of the pandemic. (See: Amid India’s calamitous lockdown, Modi seeks to censor coronavirus reports)

All the main opposition parties, including the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), dutifully participated in yesterday’s all-party meeting. While they reportedly made certain criticisms, including urging the government to do more to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) to medical workers and relief to the poor, all offered the government their collaboration and agreed to leave it to Modi to decide the timing of the easing and ultimate lifting of the lockdown.

The prime minister normally fulminates against his establishment opponents, attacking them in vile communalist terms for “appeasing” Muslims and portraying them as “anti-national,” if not treasonous. Yesterday, in a further sign of the crisis now roiling his government, he lavished praise on them. “The

country,” said Modi, “has witnessed constructive and positive politics through the coming together of all sections of the polity to present a united front in this battle.”

While the government employs the rhetoric of “national unity,” it has responded with repression to mounting protests from health care workers over the authorities’ failure to provide them with PPE, thereby putting their lives, their families and the public at grave risk.

Health care workers who have sought to draw attention to their plight on social media have faced reprisals and threats of legal action. “Healthcare workers are being targeted for raising their voice against the non availability of PPE or substandard PPE,” Dr. Srinivas Rajkumar, general secretary of the Resident Doctors Association at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMC), told NewsClick. Referring to several such incidents, he reported, “One doctor was issued a transfer order, another was taken for questioning by the police in Kolkata. Doctors from Haryana were taken for questioning as well.”



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