

Modi launches mass repression against two-month-long farmer agitation

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India's far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has seized upon the "violence" and "anarchy" that erupted in Delhi during a Jan. 26 Republic Day protest against its pro-agri-business laws to launch a long-prepared campaign to repress the farmers' agitation through state intimidation and violence.

This campaign is being spearheaded by the Delhi Police—which are under the direct authority of Home Minister Amit Shah, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's chief henchman—and the BJP state government in neighbouring Uttar Pradesh (UP). The latter is led by Yogi Adityanath, a Hindu high priest, ardent Hindu supremacist and political thug.

On Thursday, UP Chief Minister Adityanath ordered district authorities and police to forcibly end all farmer *dharna* (sit-down protests) in India's most populous state. Even before this, on Wednesday night, police had brutally attacked a group of farmers while they were sleeping and destroyed the encampment they had maintained since Dec. 19 at Baduat on the Delhi-Saharanpur national highway.

On Thursday evening, police attempted to evict farmers from the much larger protest site on the Delhi-UP border at Ghazaipur. Backed by a massive deployment of security forces and an order under Section 144 of the Criminal Code banning all gatherings of more than four people, the authorities demanded the protesting farmers evacuate their site. This they refused to do, despite a government-ordered cut-off of the protesters' electricity and water supply, resulting in a tense stand-off.

Indian security forces, who are notorious for their brutality, are no doubt waiting for further reinforcements and, most importantly, a direct order from the Modi government to mount an all-out assault. Such action would invariably result in a bloody clash, with potentially explosive political consequences.

According to media reports, farmers flocked to the Ghazaipur encampment yesterday in response to a vow to defy the BJP government's evacuation order that has since gone viral from *Bharat Kisan* (Indian Peasant) Union leader Rakesh Tikait. "There is a conspiracy against us. I will not surrender even if the police fires bullets at us," declared Tikait.

The Delhi Police have issued First Information Reports (thereby opening criminal investigations) that identify 37 farmer protest leaders as implicated in the violence that erupted during Tuesday's tractor parade and march. Those named include Tikait, political scientist and former *Aam Aadmi* (Common Man's) Party leader Yogendra Yadav, environmental and social justice activist Medha

Patkar, eight other *Bharat Kisan Union* leaders, and representatives of the umbrella group the *Samyukta Kisan Morcha* and other *kisan sabhas* (farm unions).

The FIRs claim that "the rioters/protesters and their leaders had a pre-planned objective" to defy the numerous restrictions police had imposed on the Republic Day protest, including that they strictly adhere to police-designated routes far from the city centre. This, the FIRs assert, led to numerous crimes include rioting, criminal conspiracy, and attempted murder.

Delhi Police Commissioner S. N. Shrivastava has said his force is using facial recognition technology and CCTV and video footage to identify those who engaged in rioting. "Those involved in the violence will not be spared and the farmer leaders will be questioned," he declared.

Not only is the Delhi police, under the thumb of home Minister Shah; its ranks are rife with supporters of the government and its Hindu right allies. Delhi police savagely attacked last winter's mass protests against the government's anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act, and stood by, and in some cases participated in, the three days of anti-Muslim violence that convulsed north-east Delhi in late Feb. 2020.

Yesterday, Delhi police facilitated a violent, BJP-instigated assault on farmers at their protest encampment at Singhu on the border between Haryana and the Delhi National Capital Territory.

Police had denied water trucks and journalists access to the Singhu protest site. But it was a different story when it came to pro-BJP goons, who were armed with stones and sticks, chanting their support for the police and demanding the farmers be expelled for "insulting" the national flag. Police allowed them to enter and set upon the farmers, then intervened with *lathi* charges and tear gas volleys to protect the goons.

"They are not locals, but hired goons," 21-year-old farmer Harkirat Mann Beniwal, told *The Tribune*. "They were throwing stones, petrol bombs at us. They attempted to burn down our trolleys also. We are here to resist them. We won't leave."

As it did on Tuesday, the Haryana government cut off telecom, internet and SMS services in much of the state.

Underscoring that its campaign of repression has only begun, the BJP government used Friday's opening of the budget session of India's parliament to reiterate its commitment to the three pro-corporate farm "reform" laws it rushed into law last September, and to vilify the protesting farmers.

In an address to a joint session of parliament, Indian President

and BJP minion Ram Nath Kovind boasted that the farm laws provide “new facilities and rights to the farmers” and enjoy widespread support among them. In a barbed, lying reference to Tuesday’s events he declared, “The national flag and a holy day like Republic Day were insulted in the past few days.” This was followed with an admonishment to the farmers that oozed with hypocrisy and ruling class malice. “The Constitution,” intoned Kovind, “that provides us freedom of expression, is the same Constitution that teaches us that law and rules have to be followed seriously.”

Other BJP leaders, including Minister of State for Home G. Kishan Reddy, have been even more menacing, denouncing the farmers for “sedition.”

The government responded to the launch of the farmers’ Delhi *Chalo* (Let’s go to Delhi) agitation on Nov. 26 with a massive show of force—including mass arrests, the invocation of Article 144 across Haryana and parts of UP, and widespread cellphone and internet service cuts—with the aim of smothering it from the outset. It was able to prevent opponents of its farm laws from reaching the capital. But it was thrown into political crisis when there was an outpouring of support from workers and toilers across India for the tens of thousands of farmers who, having defied the state security gauntlet, encamped themselves on Delhi’s borders.

In the ensuing two months, the BJP government maneuvered, hoping to split and wear down the farmers with endless rounds of negotiations in which they offered to make minor amendments to the three farms laws. At the same time, it sought to lay the groundwork for state violence by smearing the agitation as China- and Pakistan-supported and infiltrated by Sikh separatists, and by supporting public interest litigation petitions to have the protest declared illegal by the Supreme Court on the grounds it was impeding traffic.

Now Modi and Amit Shah have seized on Tuesday’s events to activate and legitimize their longstanding plans for state repression by painting the mass agitation against the government’s three pro-agribusiness laws as violent and illegitimate.

In this, the corporate media has been a key accomplice. It has promoted lurid claims of the farmers plunging Delhi into violence and anarchy on Republic Day.

Much about what happened on Tuesday remains unclear, but whatever violence did occur has been grossly exaggerated. Moreover, the actions of the police are being whitewashed: their provocative restrictions on the protest; the violence they visited on the farmers; and their conspicuous security lapses.

In an action that demonstrates the authorities’ nervousness in this regard, the BJP governments of UP and Madhya Pradesh have issued FIRs against six senior editors and journalists for their reporting on Tuesday’s violence, including of farmer claims that one protester lost control of his tractor and died because he was shot by police.

The government-police accusations against the 37 farm leaders are a transparent frame-up—a legal-political vendetta of the type for which the Hindu supremacist BJP is notorious.

The police-government attempt to implicate the farm leaders in violence turns reality on its head. The farm leaders bowed to all of the police’s demands concerning Tuesday’s protest, only to find

that the authorities had taken numerous provocative steps, including barricading the prescribed march routes. They vehemently denounced the violence as soon as it erupted.

Moreover, throughout the agitation they have been at pains to describe it as “non-political” and have made no broader appeal for support by, for example, raising demands that address the specific needs of the agricultural workers and marginal farmers. They have thus made clear that in no way do they want to challenge the authority of the Modi government and its class war agenda, of which the farm laws are only a part.

A central element in the government campaign to smear the protest as “anti-national” is Tuesday’s mysterious appearance of a small number of protesters atop Delhi’s storied Red Fort, from which the prime minister delivers the annual independence address, and their raising of a farm union flag, as well as a Sikh religious pendant. Numerous observers have pointed out that a significant security detail is normally present at the Red Fort, and access to its roof barred by lock-and-key. Moreover, as the farm organizations have noted, the Punjabi actor who led the contingent that entered the Fort, Deep Sidhu, was until very recently publicly identified with the BJP.

While the anger of the farmers at having been forced to camp out for two months in inclement weather before being allowed to demonstrate in the capital was palpable, everything suggests that elements within the police, acting at the government’s orders, connived in the “breakdown” of “law and order” to provide the pretext for state repression.

Ominously, an increasingly important element in the BJP’s campaign to delegitimize the farmers’ protest is the stoking of anti-Sikh communal sentiment.

In what they said was a show of support for the farmers, sixteen opposition parties, led by the Congress Party, till recently the Indian ruling elite’s preferred party of government, and including the twin Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, and the Communist Party of India—boycotted yesterday’s opening of the budget parliamentary session and presidential speech.

The CPM and CPI are working to harness the swelling mass opposition to Modi and his BJP to the Congress Party and various right-wing regional and capitalist parties, while confining the working class to the sidelines, so as to prevent it from intervening in the crisis as an independent political force, rallying the rural toilers behind it in the fight against the Modi government and Indian capitalism as a whole.



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