

Modi government calls exposure of its use of Pegasus to spy on political opponents ‘fake news’

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30 July 2021

India’s political establishment has been engaged in bitter recriminations for the past two weeks over the revelation that the country’s far-right Narendra Modi-led government has used the Pegasus spyware to illegally surveil opponents across the political spectrum. Those targeted include everyone from left-wing activists to senior figures in the opposition, and even government members who have fallen afoul of Modi and the high command of his Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for one reason or another.

Virtually since the Monsoon session of India’s parliament began on July 19, its proceedings have been badly disrupted by opposition protests demanding a full parliamentary debate and independent investigation into the spying. Meanwhile, Modi and his cronies, while conspicuously refusing to categorically deny the Indian state has been using Pegasus to spy on BJP opponents, have denounced the opposition for spreading “false news,” “maligning Indian democracy” and “defaming India.”

The Pegasus spyware program was developed by the Israeli-based NSO Group, which claims to sell it only to “vetted governments” and with the approval of the Israeli government.

The revelations concerning its widespread use, including by India’s government, came to light earlier this month after Amnesty International and the Paris-based media nonprofit Forbidden Stories got access to leaked records of thousands of phone numbers that NSO Group clients had selected for potential surveillance. They then shared the lists with 16 media partners around the world, including the *Wire* in India.

The list of potential NSO surveillance targets contain at least 1,000 Indian phone numbers. Of these, the *Wire* has verified about 300 that were listed as potential targets for surveillance during 2017-19.

The identities of those targeted leaves no doubt about the fact that the spying was directed from the inner circle of the

Modi government. As the *Economist* wrote in a summary of those targeted, “The list includes numbers used by some 40 journalists who share nothing but a critical stance towards Mr. Modi’s government. Some belong to Rahul Gandhi, leader of the opposition Congress Party, and his personal friends. Others belong to a political consultant credited with state-level wins against Mr. Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party, and to a former top election official who had recommended penalising Mr. Modi for flouting rules during the 2019 general election, as well as to members of his family. Figures from inside the government may have been targeted, too, among them at least two BJP ministers, senior civil servants and a number of senior security officers.”

The BJP government has responded to the opposition parties’ attempt to force an independent inquiry into the state spying with brazen lies, stonewalling, and by pointing out that previous Congress-led governments also spied on their opponents. On Friday, as the opposition continued to disrupt parliamentary proceedings, the government threatened to run roughshod over traditional parliamentary procedures to ram through a raft of reactionary pieces of legislation without debate. These include a bill that would pave the way for privatisation of the power industry and another that would strip workers in defence industries of the right to strike.

In light of the Indian bourgeoisie’s notorious record of violating democratic rights, the Pegasus exposure comes as no surprise. The Modi government, which came to power in the 2014 general elections by exploiting mass anger towards the previous Congress-led government, has accelerated the implementation of pro-investor “reforms,” while whipping up Hindu communalism and using trumped-up charges, including sedition and terrorist offenses under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) to victimize opponents. It and the BJP-led state governments have also lashed out with censorship and state violence against critics of their criminal mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These ruthless attacks directed above all against the working class and rural toilers have been met with little more than handwringing and pro forma denunciations from within the political establishment. By contrast, the opposition has raised a hue and a cry over the Pegasus revelations. This is because they fear and are outraged that Modi is employing authoritarian methods to consolidate political power at their expense and those of the sections of the ruling elite for which they speak

To date, the *Wire* has confirmed that at least 40 journalists were either targets or potential targets for Pegasus surveillance. The web news portal has conducted forensic analysis on the phones of seven journalists, “of which five showed traces of a successful infection by Pegasus.” Of these, two belonged to M.K. Venu and Siddharth Varadarajan, themselves founding editors of the *Wire*. Others proven to be under state surveillance included Muzamil Jaleel, an *Indian Express* journalist who covers Kashmir, Sandeep Unnithan, an *India Today* journalist who reports on defense and the Indian military, and Vijaita Singh, the *Hindu* journalist who covers the Home Ministry.

The *Wire* has found at least nine numbers belonging to eight of the 16 leftists and Dalit activists who were arrested between June 2018 and October 2020 for their alleged roles in the Elgar Parishad (or Bhima Koegaon) case. Among them was the 84-year-old Jharkhand-based tribal activist and Jesuit priest, Father Stan Swamy, who was arrested and jailed in October last year. He died on July 5 of complications from COVID-19 after having been systematically denied proper medical care for months (see: “Modi government’s “terrorism” frame-up vendetta leads to death of 84-year-old tribal-rights activist”).

Along with the accused in the Elgar Parishad case, the *Wire* identified some 41 “activists, lawyers and academicians” as possible targets of surveillance by the government and the various Indian security agencies. A number of relatives, friends and lawyers who appeared for the Elgar Parishad accused were also targeted for surveillance. The NSO lists also included: Umar Khalid, a former student of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), who is now in jail awaiting trial as an accused in the trumped-up Delhi riots “conspiracy” case; Shiv Gopal Mishra, a railway union leader; Alok Shukla, an anti-coal mining activist; Bela Bhatia, an academic and a chronicler of life in Maoist-dominated regions; and Saroj Giri, a Delhi University professor.

The *Wire* found at least two mobile phone accounts used by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi among the hundreds of verified Indian numbers listed as potential targets by an official Indian NSO client. The numbers of five of his friends and acquaintances were also placed on the list of

potential targets, despite the fact, reports the *Wire*, that “none of the five plays any role in politics or public affairs.” Highlighting that Gandhi was targeted for surveillance when he was president of the Congress and leading his party into the 2019 general election, the *Wire* writes that this “raises troubling questions about the integrity of the election process.”

Significantly, the NSO records show that Ashok Lavasa, the only member of the three-person Election Commission to rule that Modi had violated the Model Code of Conduct while campaigning for the 2019 general election, was listed as a potential candidate for surveillance just weeks after his dissent.

In a separate analysis, the *Wire* suggested that the Pegasus spyware may have played a role in the BJP’s toppling of the state government in Karnataka in 2019. The article noted, “The numbers of Chief Minister H.D. Kumaraswamy’s secretary, deputy chief minister G. Parameshwara and the secretary of former CM (chief minister) Siddaramaiah were all selected as potential targets for snooping in the run up to the collapse of the JD(S) [Janatha Dal (Secular)]-Congress coalition government.”

Major political figures in West Bengal’s ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) were also selected as potential targets for surveillance in the run-up to this year’s election in the state, which saw the BJP fall short in its objective of coming to power. Those whose numbers appear on the target list include both the personal secretary of West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and her nephew, Abhishek Banerjee, who is also a TMC minister.

Much of the media has rallied round the Modi government, both by minimizing the significance of the Pegasus revelations and presenting the BJP’s lame response as credible. Other “liberal” voices are more critical. They fear the Modi government’s open resort to authoritarian methods of rule is exacerbating divisions within the ruling class under conditions of increasing social opposition from below and, above all, that its actions are dangerously discrediting the institutions of the capitalist state in the eyes of India’s workers and toilers.

“When the Israeli vendor insists that the spyware is sold only to ‘vetted governments’,” declared a July 21 *Indian Express* editorial, “the government does not have the option of brazening it out or resorting to conspiracy mongering.”



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