

BJP provocation against Indian farmer protest leaves nine dead

Kranti Kumara
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Four protesting farmers and a local journalist were killed Sunday in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh after a convoy of SUVs—including one owned by Ajay Kumar Mishra Teni, the minister of state for Home Affairs in Narendra Modi's far-right BJP government—deliberately ploughed into them.

The driver of one of the SUVs and three BJP workers were killed when farmers outraged by the wanton attack set upon them and beat them to death. Two SUVs were also set alight.

The deadly altercation occurred near Lakhimpur Kheri on the Tikonia-Banbirpur road about 130 kilometres from the state capital Lucknow.

According to farmers who witnessed the attack, one of the four farmers was shot dead by BJP Minister Ajay Mishra's son, Ashish Mishra. The latter, however, claims he was not part of the convoy.

The dead farmers—Gurwinder Singh, 19; Lovepreet Singh, 20; Daljeet Singh, 35; and Nachattar Singh, 60—were among a crowd that had gathered to protest the BJP's pro-agribusiness farm laws. Ajay Mishra, the local MP, was a particular target of the protest because he had recently made threatening statements against the now nearly year-long agitation against the BJP's farm "reform" laws.

The speeding SUVs also injured 12 farmers, and a further 50 sustained injuries, some serious, when the Uttar Pradesh police intervened with their customary savagery.

Sunday's murderous attack on the farmers has prompted an outcry across India and fury in the Lakhimpur Kheri district. The Uttar Pradesh (UP) government, which is led by close Modi ally Yogi Adityanath, has placed the district under the draconian Section 144 of the Indian Criminal Code, outlawing all gatherings of more than four people. It has also deployed paramilitaries, and, without any public announcement, suspended Lakhimpur Kheri's internet and cellphone service. Opposition leaders who have attempted to visit the area to speak with the farmers, including the Congress Party's Priyanka Gandhi, have been barred from doing so and detained.

Such tactics—which have long been employed by Indian governments, whether led by the Congress or BJP, in Indian-held Kashmir—are increasingly being used to suppress social opposition across India.

The Lucknow Journalists' Association has sent a letter to the

UP government demanding a judicial inquiry into the death of local television journalist Raman Kashyap and the laying of murder charges against those responsible. It is also seeking financial compensation for his family. There are conflicting reports as to how Kashyap died. According to some accounts, he was beaten to death by BJP goons for having filmed the SUVs deliberately mowing protesters down.

Media reports say the BJP government in Uttar Pradesh has announced a 4.5 million rupee (about \$61,000) compensation package for the families of the dead farmers.

The exact details of the attack are unclear, but there is no question it arises out of the increasingly violent atmosphere being whipped up against the protesting farmers by the BJP government at the centre and in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state. Chief Minister Adityanath is a virulent Hindu supremacist who routinely runs roughshod over basic democratic rights and unleashes state violence to terrorize government opponents, Muslims and other minorities. He has denounced the farmers' protests—an agitation that has galvanized farmers especially in the north Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, and Punjab and won the sympathy of working people across India—as "a conspiracy to destabilize the country."

In a tweet, the UP chief minister vowed Sunday's events will be "thoroughly investigated and the involvement of antisocial elements ... brought to light." "Antisocial elements" is a phrase Adityanath and other BJP leaders often use to smear those opposing their pro-big business and Hindu supremacist agenda.

Relatives of the deceased farmers and their supporters remained at the site of Sunday's murderous attack, with their battered corpses on display, for much of Monday. While the UP government mobilized state security forces, it ultimately relied on the leaders of the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU—Indian Peasants Union) to help defuse the situation. They urged farmers to "maintain the peace" and not descend on Lakhimpur Kheri. After meeting with top UP officials, BKU spokesperson Rakesh Tikait convinced those at the attack site to disperse. He told them they had won a major "victory" as murder charges have been laid against Ashish Mishra, and the state government has agreed to appoint a retired state judge to investigate Sunday's events.

Criminal charges have also been laid against Minister of State Ajay Kumar Mishra. Neither Modi nor Home Minister Amit Shah have made any comment on the affair, let alone asked Mishra to resign while he is under criminal investigation.

In September, Mishra threatened local farmers when they displayed black flags during a previous appearance in his home constituency. “Fix yourselves or face me,” declared Mishra. “I will fix you in a matter of minutes.” Boasting about his thuggish past,” he continued. “I am not just a minister or an MLA (state assemblyman) or an MP. Those who know me from before I became a legislator would also know I never retreat from challenges.”

Since late November, tens of thousands of farmers have camped out on the outskirts of India’s capital Delhi to press their demand for the repeal of the three pro-corporate farm laws the BJP rushed through parliament in September 2020. India’s agriculture sector has been in crisis for the past two decades or more with wide swaths of the rural masses, both small farmers and agricultural labours, living in grinding poverty. Although about half of the country’s 1.39 billion people depend on agriculture for their livelihood, it produces just 15 percent of the country’s \$2.9 trillion dollar GDP.

The government’s greatest fear is that the farmers’ agitation will intersect with growing popular anger over the Indian ruling elite’s criminal mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic and a wave of worker struggles against the BJP government’s pro-investor policies— austerity, privatization, the gutting of environmental and labour standards and the promotion of precarious contract labour employment.

Sunday’s murderous attack is indicative of a Modi government and BJP that are increasingly angered and frightened by the mounting popular opposition. To their dismay, they have failed in their attempts to wear down the farmers or to engineer a significant split in their ranks through offers of token amendments to the three farm bills.

Increasingly, Modi and his BJP are seeking a way out through violence. In the state of Haryana, one of the hotbeds of the farmer agitation, the BJP state government under the leadership of Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar ordered police to violently attack a farmers’ protest in late August. A 55-year-old farmer named Sushil Kaja died after being savagely beaten by the police and scores of other farmers were injured.

In a recent video-speech to BJP members, Khattar urged them to form goon squads armed with *lathis* (wooden truncheons) to go around the state to beat up protesting farmers. He was quoted as saying: “In every district, particularly the northern and northwestern districts, we will have to raise groups of 500-700 kisan (farmer) volunteers and then [mount] *Sathe Shathyam Samacharet* (tit-for-tat).” In the video the audience of BJP members are heard laughing at this open call for violence.

From the get-go, the BJP central, UP and Haryana state governments sought to repress the farmers’ agitation. They

succeeded in preventing the farmers from entering Delhi at the start of their agitation last November, but they could not prevent hundreds of thousands from making it to the city’s outskirts. And as the protest stretched into weeks and became a rallying point for broader popular opposition, the BJP government was visibly thrown into crisis. True to their authoritarian instincts, Modi and Home Minister Shah laid the groundwork for violently dispersing the protesting farmers, mobilizing tens of thousands of security forces and mounting a propaganda campaign to smear them as “anti-national.”

The Supreme Court has sanctioned one anti-democratic and communalist action of the BJP government after another. However, due to fears among broad sections of the ruling class that a violent crackdown could backfire and serve to galvanize the working class to intervene in the mounting political crisis, the court balked at greenlighting the BJP’s plans to suppress the farmers’ protests by declaring them “illegal.” Later, it sought to provide the government with a mechanism to defuse the situation, by ruling that application of the three farm laws should be suspended while the farmers and government negotiated.

However, like the BJP and clearly reflecting mounting pressure from big business for speedier implementation of its pro-investor policies, the Supreme Court’s attitude towards the farmers is hardening. When farm protest leaders recently approached the court for permission to enter the capital to stage a rally, a panel of Supreme Court justices denounced the farmers’ agitation. “You have strangulated Delhi,” the court declared, “by holding sit-in protests on highways ... even blocked movement of armed forces and jeered them. Now you want to come inside the city and create chaos?”

On Monday, just hours after the BJP’s violent provocation against the Lakhimpur Kheri farmers, another Supreme Court bench openly questioned the legitimacy of the farmers’ agitation. It chastised the farmers for mounting protests when the farm laws are stayed and for protesting, while challenging the laws’ constitutionality in the courts. “When farmers are in court challenging the laws, why protest in the street?” asked the judges. Ominously, India’s highest court announced that on October 20 it will rule on whether there is an “absolute” right to protest—all but announcing that it intends to provide the government with a legal fig leaf for employing state violence to end the farmers’ agitation.



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