

Delhi Chief Minister jailed on politically manipulated charges as India's election campaign kicks into high gear

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Arvind Kejriwal, the Chief Minister of Delhi and a prominent leader of the INDIA opposition electoral alliance, has been detained since March 21 in a politically manipulated corruption case.

On Tuesday, the Delhi High Court rejected out of hand the arguments of Kejriwal's lawyer contesting his arrest by the Ministry of Finance's Enforcement Directorate, which is controlled by India's far-right, Narendra Modi-led, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government. Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma ordered that Kejriwal, who leads the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP or Common Man's Party) and has headed the government in India's capital territory since 2015, continue to be held in Delhi's Tihar jail until at least April 15.

The legal counsel for Kejriwal had argued that his arrest in the middle of the campaign for India's national election, which will unfold in seven phases from April 19 to June 1, was politically motivated, with the double-aim of smearing the AAP and its leadership and disrupting its election campaign. He also argued that the evidence Kejriwal participated in an alleged kickback scheme relating to the privatization of liquor sales in Delhi was contrived, consisting largely of testimony from "approvers"—i.e., persons who turned state's evidence.

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) alleges the AAP government conspired with what it has dubbed the "South Indian liquor lobby" to inflate prices for liquor, with at least 100 crore rupees (US \$12 million) in excess profits funneled back to the AAP via kickbacks, and that Kejriwal was "the kingpin" of the scheme.

In addition to the Delhi Chief Minister, two other senior AAP leaders are in jail on money-laundering charges arising from the alleged liquor scam. Manish Sisodia, Kejriwal's chief deputy until his arrest, has been incarcerated since Feb. 2023 and Satyendar Jain, an ex-Delhi cabinet minister, since May 2022. Earlier this month, India's Supreme Court freed AAP MP and national spokesman Sanjay Singh on bail after six months in jail. At the bail hearing, India's highest court admonished the ED for its conduct of the case, including its failure to recover or even trace a single rupee of the billions the AAP is said to have received in kickbacks.

The decade-old Modi government is notorious for its use of the Central Bureau of Investigation, other law enforcement agencies, and manipulated and trumped-up charges against its political

opponents. But with the approach of the elections, it has become even more brazen in using all means at its disposal to attack its bourgeois political opponents, suppress social opposition, and stoke communal reaction.

This is because Modi and the BJP—all their boasts about India's "world-beating" economic growth and emergence as a "world power" notwithstanding—are keenly aware there is seething popular anger over mass joblessness, chronic hunger, and the ever widening chasm between the mass of the India people and the tiny crust of billionaire and multi-millionaire capitalists who rule the country with their upper middle class hangers-on.

From the ranks of the BJP there is now a growing clamor for the central government to use the corruption charges leveled against Kejriwal and other senior AAP leaders as the pretext to place the National Capital Territory under "president's rule," thereby sacking the AAP government and handing full control over Delhi's administration to the BJP-led central government.

On Wednesday, the Delhi Labour Minister, Raaj Kumar Anand, resigned saying he did not wish to be part of a party "that's involved in corruption." An AAP representative responded by charging this was further proof that the BJP was mounting a concerted campaign to break the party through arrests and intimidation. "Everyone knows that there was an ED raid at his (Anand's) residence," said AAP leader Saurabh Bharadwaj. "He was under pressure and got scared. ... He was given a script and he had no other option but to read it."

The AAP is a right-wing, capitalist party founded in 2012 under the banner of "fighting corruption." Apart from Delhi and the nearby north-west state of Punjab, where it was catapulted to power in 2022, the AAP has only negligible electoral support. Nevertheless, its control of Delhi, India's capital and largest urban agglomeration, gives it an outsized role in Indian national politics and makes it a focus of national media attention. The BJP legal assault on the AAP is clearly aimed not just at boosting the BJP's electoral fortunes in Delhi and Punjab, but at tarring the entire INDIA (Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance) electoral bloc.

In kicking off his campaign for a third term as Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi fatuously declared, "While Modi's mantra is to eradicate corruption, (the opposition parties) credo is protect the corrupt."

The reality is that corruption is endemic to Indian capitalist politics and the BJP a particularly fetid cesspool of corruption. Modi is personally implicated in “crony capitalist” dealings with India’s and Asia’s two richest billionaires, Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani.

On March 31, the INDIA alliance had a major “Save Democracy” rally in Delhi to denounce Kejriwal’s detention. It was addressed by many of the foremost leaders of the INDIA alliance, including Congress Party leader Rahul Gandhi; Samajwadi Party leader and former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav; Uddhav Thackeray of the far-right, erstwhile BJP ally, the Shiv Sena (UBT); and Sitaram Yechury, the general secretary of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist).

“Opposition leaders are being intimidated and arrested,” Gandhi told the rally. “This is match-fixing.” He continued, “This is not an ordinary election ... This election is to save the country, protect our constitution.”

Of course, Gandhi—whose party has led India’s government for more than two-thirds of the 77 years since it gained independence and was the bourgeoisie’s preferred party of national government till 2014—could provide no explanation apart from the malevolence of Modi and the Hindu supremacist BJP as to why Indian democracy is collapsing.

The jailing of Kejriwal follows a series of other patently politically manipulated “corruption” cases.

These include the freezing of the Congress Party’s accounts since February on the orders of the Tax Department on claims of tax irregularities. “This is a criminal action” against the Congress Party “done by the prime minister and the home minister,” Rahul Gandhi told a March 21 press conference. Subsequently, the tax department issued a series of orders for the Congress to pay taxes and fines totaling 36 billion rupees or some \$450 million. The Congress has accused the BJP government of “tax terrorism” and charged it with trying to “financially cripple” it in the midst of the election campaign.

Other opposition parties, including the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Trinamool Congress, the governing party in West Bengal, have also been hit with income tax department orders to fork over large sums.

In February, Hemant Soren of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), an INDIA alliance partner, stepped down as Jharkhand chief minister after the Enforcement Directorate arrested him on charges of acquiring land through illicit means. Soren and the opposition claim the charges are yet another fraudulent case manipulated by the BJP government.

Last month amid the flurry of corruption cases targeting opposition leaders, the *Indian Express* published a report that underscored the politically motivated and manipulated character of the BJP government’s “anti-corruption” campaign. It showed that out of 25 opposition leaders facing corruption probes, 23 got reprieve after they crossed over to the BJP. The politicians involved were from various opposition parties including the Congress Party.

The government is also targeting left-wing opposition media voices. Since last October, Prabir Purkayastha, the founder and editor of the NewClick website, has been detained without charge

under India’s draconian anti-terrorism laws. According to reports, the Delhi police filed an 8,000- page First Information Report against Purkayastha at the end of March in which they accused him of accepting Chinese funds and publishing Chinese propaganda.

The US State Department and Germany’s foreign office have issued pro-forma statements on Kejriwal’s arrest, expressing concern that the elected chief minister receive a “fair, transparent, and timely legal process.” The imperialist powers have shown time and again that they are prepared to look the other way as Modi runs roughshod over fundamental democratic rights and whips up Hindu communalism, so long as the BJP government continues to integrate India every more fully into the reckless US-led military-strategic offensive against China.

The Modi government made a point of taking umbrage at the US and German statements despite their anodyne character. It summoned US and German embassy officials to voice its objection to what it called “interference in India’s domestic affairs.”

For its part, the London-based *Financial Times* published an editorial last week headlined, “The ‘mother of democracy’ is not in good shape,” in which it expressed alarm at “the sharp step-up in state enforcement agencies apparently being used to stifle opposition parties and politicians as the election approaches.” Like a minority faction of Indian big business, the FT is concerned that Modi’s ever more authoritarian rule could spark massive popular opposition threatening “India’s attractiveness for investment.”

The ruthlessness with which the Modi government is attacking even its bourgeois rivals must serve as a warning to the working class as to how it will respond to any challenge form below.

In February and March when farmers attempted to march on Delhi, they were met with a massive mobilization of state forces. Tens of thousands of police and paramilitary forces were deployed; multi-layer barricades made up of massive concrete blocks and barbed wire erected; internet and social media shut down and protesting farmer brutally attacked with tear gas canisters fired from drones.

To defend their democratic and social rights and defeat Modi and the Indian bourgeoisie, which stands four-square behind his far-right government, India workers must mobilize their class strength, uniting their struggles and rallying the rural toilers behind them in opposition to Indian capitalism and all its political representatives.

This means implacably rejecting the attempts of the Stalinist CPM and its Left Front to once again subordinate them to the BJP’s ruling class opponents, organized today in the Congress Party-led INDIA election bloc. In the name of defending India’s “democratic and secular” character it proposes to continue the same ruinous socio-economic and foreign policies as the Modi-led regime—“pro-investor reforms” and the anti-China Indo-US “global strategic partnership”—while adapting to and conniving with the Hindu right.



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