

Modi government unleashes massive repression to crush protests against purge of India's electoral rolls

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Huge protests demanding the resignation of India's Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), Gyanesh Kumar, have convulsed Delhi, Mumbai and other cities in recent days.

The Hindu-supremacist Narendra Modi-led BJP government has responded with a campaign of repression unprecedented since Prime Minister Indira Gandhi deployed the army to break a May 1974 national railway workers' strike, then in June of the following year imposed emergency rule.

In what is a major step toward consolidating a dictatorial regime, the Modi government is seeking to criminalize a burgeoning opposition movement that has galvanized students and recent college graduates across the country and is increasingly drawing in broader sections of the population.

On Saturday, October 10, Delhi, the national capital was transformed into an armed camp, as the government went to extraordinary lengths to prevent a mass protest at Jantar Mantar, a traditional protest site near the parliament buildings.

The BJP-controlled central and Delhi National Capital Territory governments deployed thousands of para-militaries in support of the central government-controlled Delhi Police to snuff out the protest before it began. Meanwhile, BJP state governments across north and west India mobilized to prevent government opponents from reaching Delhi.

Nevertheless, in an act of courageous defiance, thousands did protest in Delhi on Saturday, with impromptu mobilizations continuing on Sunday.

More than 7,000 and possibly as many 15,000 protesters were detained nationwide in the lead up to and during Saturday's Jantar Mantar protest, among them numerous protest leaders and opposition politicians. The authorities shut down essential transport networks and police stood by when government-aligned, Hindu-supremacist thugs attacked protesters.

The protests were triggered by an investigative report in the *Indian Express* that exposed how CEC head Gyanesh Kumar has directed a massive illegal purge of the voter rolls through the so-called Special Intensive Revision (SIR). Between 130 and 150 million names—overwhelmingly those of poor people, migrant workers, Dalits and Muslims—have been struck from the electoral rolls, a gargantuan campaign of voter suppression aimed squarely at sections of the population that oppose the BJP.

The demonstrations have been led by the Cockroach Janata Party (CJP)—a newly-founded “Generation Z” movement led by Boston University-trained communications strategist Abhijeet Dipke—together with Stalinist and Congress Party-supported student unions, such as the All India Students' Association (AISA), which is affiliated with the Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) Liberation (CPI-ML).

The two mainline Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPM) and the older, smaller Communist Party of India (CPI)—as

well as the Maoist CPI-ML Liberation, are all active participants in the Congress Party-led INDIA opposition bloc.

As the WSWWS has documented, the CJP is a “political safety valve” aimed at keeping India's deprived youth within the framework of capitalist politics. The Stalinist “left” parties, which were integrated into the capitalist establishment decades ago, are working to corral the protest movement behind the INDIA bloc, which aims to replace Modi at the next election, due in 2028, with a right-wing capitalist government committed to continuing the BJP's “pro-investor” policies and India's military-strategic partnership with US imperialism.

None of these forces is calling for the bringing down of the Modi government. Instead, they are seeking to limit the protest moment to calls for the removal of Gyanesh Kumar and suspension of the SIR voter-revision. All are bitterly opposed to mobilizing the social power of the working class against the Modi government and the Indian bourgeoisie which stands behind it, and to linking the struggle to defend democratic rights to the fight against capitalist oligarchy and for workers' social rights.

A city under siege

The Delhi Police denied permission for the October 10 demonstration, citing the “lateness” of the application—submitted three days before the gathering—and alleged violations during an earlier protest. The government invoked Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (India's criminal code), which empowers it to ban any meeting or protest, across the New Delhi district.

The repression unleashed ahead of Saturday's protest was preemptive and total. The government ordered the closure of 45 Delhi Metro stations starting Friday evening and deployed 41,000 police and paramilitary personnel across the capital.

The authorities suspended cell phone and internet services within a four-kilometre radius of the Jantar Mantar protest site for 24 hours. Security personnel carried out intensive identification checks on the major roads entering Delhi and at railway stations, bus terminals and hotels. They also visited schools, where students and teachers were warned not to participate.

Most extraordinarily, the Ministry of Railways cancelled 75 mail and express trains reaching or departing Delhi, citing “congestion fears.” Around 165 trains were scheduled to reach New Delhi and Hazrat Nizamuddin stations on Saturday; 40 were cancelled, including the Kanpur Shatabdi Express, the Lucknow Mail and the Howrah Rajdhani,

with 35 departures from Delhi also scrapped. A railway veteran told the press that the cancellation of trains due to “road congestion” was “unprecedented in recent rail history.” The National Capital Region Transport Corporation likewise closed its Namoo Bharat stations at Sarai Kale Khan and New Ashok Nagar.

The Indian Express documented the full scope of what it called a “37-point dragnet.” The Union Home Ministry—to which the Delhi Police reports—made 221 companies of Central Armed Police Forces, some 23,000 troops available until Monday.

Fifteen detention centres were prepared across the city’s districts, including stadiums at Bawana and Chhatrasal. Hotels and guest houses were instructed “not to take in new visitors who appear to be arriving for the protest.” Police coordinated with ride-hailing aggregators Ola and Uber to “regulate movement to central Delhi.” Officers traveled to the hometowns of identified protesters to urge them to stay away—a measure decried as de facto house arrest.

In BJP-ruled states such as Madhya Pradesh, police detained youth—midway while traveling on trains from Maharashtra to New Delhi. Activists in Mumbai, Thane, Nagpur and Pune reported police visiting their homes or calling them on trains and then detaining them. The Maharashtra Director General of Police subsequently admitted to having ordered these actions. In BJP-ruled Gujarat, police compelled anti-government activists to sign undertakings that they would not travel to Delhi.

On Saturday, right-wing Hindu supremacist groups assaulted protesters and journalists, with many of their thugs beating demonstrators in front of police personnel. At Connaught Place in the heart of Delhi, *Hindustan Times* reporters witnessed such beatings while heavily-armed police stood by.

The same template was applied in April when tens of thousands of contract workers in the Delhi industrial suburbs of Noida and Manesar struck against brutal exploitation—12- to 14-hour workdays, starvation wages and the routine flouting of overtime regulations. As the WSWS has documented in detail, the response of the Indian state was mass arrest, torture, preventive detention and the invocation of the colonial-era National Security Act (NSA), which permits imprisonment without charge or trial.

Many workers still remain in jail on trumped-up charges of violence. Labour activists—Aditya Anand, Rupesh Roy, Manisha Chauhan, Himanshu Thakur, Satyam Verma and Aakriti Choudhary—are being held under the NSA, with Roy alleging he was subjected to “brutal custodial violence” and that police planted kerosene bottles and torch sticks on him, then forced him to pick them up while videographing him.

Mass arrests

On Saturday, the Delhi Police detained more than 4,000 protesters, most of them picked up before they could reach Jantar Mantar and whisked away in buses and vans to stadiums and makeshift detention centres. CJP leaders Abhijeet Dipke, Ashutosh Ranka and Saurav Das were detained on landing in the national capital. Several INDIA bloc leaders were also detained as they attempted to join the protest, including former state chief ministers Arvind Kejriwal, Mamata Banerjee, Pinarayi Vijayan and Manik Sarkar.

The CJP leaders were released after approximately 24 hours in detention. Addressing the media on Sunday, October 11, CJP co-convenor Saurav Das said, “The state is at a war with its own citizens ... In the entire country, there is an open Emergency-like situation.”

According to Das, the police did not permit them to talk to their lawyers

after being detained. He expressed concern that their phones that were seized by the police could have been hacked and “evidence” planted.

CJP leader Ajinkya Shinde, handed responsibility for leading the protests after Dipke’s detention, declared that “every day, there will be marches to Jantar Mantar from now on, until Gyanesh Kumar is sacked as CEC.”

India’s Supreme Court has once again revealed itself as a rubber stamp for the Hindu-supremacist government’s authoritarian actions. Hearing petitions—including one filed by CPM General Secretary M.A. Baby—challenging the banning of Saturday’s protest, a bench headed by Chief Justice Surya Kant observed that the government “cannot use a hammer to kill a fly.” He then directed the authorities to somewhat scale back the suspension of train and metro services, while making clear the court’s chief concern was not to uphold citizens’ democratic right to protest but for the “undue hardship” the disruption of transport would cause commuters and businesses.

This is entirely consistent with the court’s record. It approved the SIR process itself, and when the scale of the deletions in West Bengal became undeniable, it merely handed the final stage of the revision to judicial officers while leaving the purge of voters intact. It was Chief Justice Kant whose denunciation of unemployed youth as “parasites” and “cockroaches” triggered the social media storm that led to the creation of the CJP. In the Noida case, a Supreme Court bench heard directly from tortured detainees—and ordered them to remain in custody under the NSA, intoning that the “law has to take its course.”

The opposition’s response has been to appeal to the very institutions of the state that are carrying out the repression. Terming the situation “Emergency-like,” Opposition leaders marched Friday from Parliament House to the Rashtrapati Bhavan to meet with the President, a BJP stooge, and plead for relief. The Stalinist CPM is an integral part of this charade. In the name of “fighting the BJP,” the CPM and CPI have spent decades propping up right-wing governments, suppressing the class struggle and binding the working class to the Congress Party and other right-wing caste- and ethno-regional parties.

The Modi government’s response to the protest movement is born of fear, not strength. It recognizes that it sits atop a social powder keg.

The critical question is to mobilize the social power of the working class, employing the methods of class struggle. This means opposing all those forces—above all, the Stalinists—who masquerade as left and seek to tie the youth, workers and rural toilers to the Congress and other capitalist parties and to the decrepit institutions of Indian capitalist “democracy.” The struggle against the voter purge and the defense of democratic rights must be linked to the struggle against the entire capitalist order and for the socialist reorganization of society.



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