

The campaign he started online while completing a master's degree brought millions on to the streets, writes *Michael Stott*

The man who humbled India's prime minister came home to a hero's welcome this week.

Supporters and family members showered Abhijeet Dipke, the founder of the "Cockroach" youth movement, with rose petals and painted a red mark of blessing between his eyebrows as he returned to Chhatrapati Sambhajanagar, the city where he grew up.

Dipke's campaign against failings in India's education system morphed from memes to a mass movement in a matter of weeks, forcing Prime Minister Narendra Modi into a rare retreat.

"It is a great pleasure to be home after such a long struggle," said the bearded 30-year-old student leader. "If the media does not trouble me for the next few days, then I can live a normal life, as I did before."

That wish is unlikely to be granted. Instantly recognisable in his T-shirt and jeans, the inventor of the Cockroach Janta Party is now a household name.

"I think he himself has been somewhat surprised by the turn of events," says Chietigj Bajpae, a south Asia specialist at Chatham House. "In the very beginning, this was seen to be a satirical online movement. Then it became a lightning rod for the country's disaffected youth."

In May, such a dramatic change in India's political weather seemed improbable. Modi was riding high after his Bharatiya Janata Party had notched up the latest in a string of election victories. Dipke was finishing a postgraduate degree in public relations in Boston, Massachusetts, and applying for jobs.

"None of this was intended," Dipke told the FT in June. "It's just that when I read a comment of the Honourable Chief Justice of India comparing the youth with cockroaches or parasites merely for expressing their opinions . . . I felt really upset."

Using his prior experience as a social media volunteer for an opposition party, Dipke put together a satirical online campaign. Its website featured AI images of giant black cockroaches. "What", Dipke posted on X, "if all cockroaches come together?"

Millions of young people responded, frustrated by the difficulty of finding a well-paid job. Dipke's new followers demanded that he convert the online campaign into a real-life movement, so he returned to India and started a sit-in at Jantar Mantar, a protest site in Delhi.

The government was confident the movement would fizzle. But the CJP leader is not one to shy away from challenges. Born into a family of Dalits, a historically marginalised caste, Dipke exhibits a quiet, steely determination. Drawing inspiration from his two heroes, non-violent independence movement leader Mahatma Gandhi and BR Ambedkar, a Dalit who shaped India's post-independence constitution, the CJP leader persisted.

"He will always go into the crowd and very patiently listen to people because that is something he genuinely enjoys," says Vaishnavi Gaur, a CJP



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The face of India's 'cockroach' protests

spokesperson. But, she adds, Dipke also knows his mind. "He will listen to everyone, but he will do what he wants to do."

On July 18, police intervened to remove a veteran rights activist on hunger strike in support of the CJP from Jantar Mantar. The protests suddenly ignited. Dipke's moment had come.

Two days later, riot police fired tear gas at thousands of protesters marching on parliament and beat them with wooden sticks, sparking widespread outrage. The following weekend, the CJP's main target, education minister Dharmendra Pradhan, resigned and the government conceded the movement's other demands.

What comes next is less clear. CJP leaders say they plan to take a break and then conduct a nationwide tour to listen to the concerns of the youth. But Modi is not standing still.

"If the government can quickly get some visible things going, like the committee which has been set up [on exam reform]," says one senior official, "this

will contribute towards blunting the very limited agenda of the so-called CJP."

"There will be other distractions now," he adds. "Modi's ability to come up with a disruptive idea is way more than these kids could think of."

Advaita Kala, a screenwriter and col-

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umnist, believes many young Indians could still vote BJP at the next general election in 2029 because they trust the government more than its adversaries.

"Remember, we're into the 13th year of a Modi government and the opposition has repeatedly not turned up," she says, noting that the main opposition Congress party only joined

the CJP protests in their final week.

Ruchi Gupta, executive director of the non-partisan Future of India Foundation, notes that the CJP was the first protest movement to force out a minister in Modi's term. But she thinks Dipke has missed a golden opportunity to institutionalise his movement.

"The fact that he did not tell us something about what his broader ambitions may be," she says. "A political leader would have immediately converted this to an organisational framework."

For now, India's "Cockroach" leader is still trading on his brand of irreverent humour. When asked at his homecoming about Modi's belated attempts to win over the youth via Instagram, he replied: "He is doing an excellent job in that role. Perhaps he should step down as prime minister and become an influencer."

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Additional reporting by Jyotsna Singh