

India opposition parties protest voter list revision

BY SHEIKH SAALIQ

NEW DELHI — India's opposition parties held a protest Monday calling for the rollback of a revision of the voter list in one of the country's poorest states, where key elections are scheduled in November, and warning it could lead to voter disenfranchisement.

Hundreds of lawmakers and supporters began the protest from Parliament and were confronted by police, who stopped them from marching toward the Election Commission of India office in the capital, New Delhi. Police briefly detained some lawmakers, including opposition leader Rahul Gandhi.

The opposition accuses the commission of rushing through a mammoth electoral roll revision in the state of Bihar, saying the exercise could render vast numbers of citizens unable to vote. The revision of nearly 80 million voters involves strict documentation requirements from citizens, triggering concerns it could lead to the exclusion of vulnerable groups, especially those who are unable to produce the paperwork required to prove their citizenship.

Some of the documents required include birth certificates, passports and matriculation records. Critics and opposition leaders say they are hard to come by in Bihar, where the literacy rate is among the lowest in India. They say the exercise will affect minorities the most, including Muslims, and disallow them from voting.

India does not have a unique national identity card. The widely used biometric-linked identity card, called Aadhaar, is not among the documents listed by the poll body as acceptable proof for the electoral roll revision.

The election agency has denied the allegations and said it has ensured no eligible voter is "left behind." It has also said the "intensive revision" is a routine update to ensure the accuracy of electoral rolls and is needed

to avoid the "inclusion of the names of foreign illegal immigrants."

According to the commission, some 49.6 million voters whose names were included in a similar exercise in 2003 are not required to submit any further documents. But that still leaves almost 30 million other voters potentially vulnerable. A similar roll revision of voters is scheduled to be replicated across the nation of 1.4 billion people.

Bihar is a crucial election battleground state where Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party has only ever governed in a coalition. Poll results there probably could affect the balance of power in Parliament, where Modi's government relies on coalition partners, including a regional party from Bihar.

BJP has backed the revision and said it is necessary to update new voters and delete the names of those who have died or moved to other states. It has also said the exercise is essential to weed out undocumented Muslim immigrants from neighboring Bangladesh who have fraudulently entered India's electoral rolls.

Critics and opposition leaders have warned that the exercise is similar to that of a 2019 citizenship list in the eastern state of Assam, which left nearly 2 million people at risk of statelessness. Many of those left off the final citizenship list were Muslims. They have been declared "foreigners," and some of them faced long periods of detention.

Gandhi, the opposition leader, made public last week his Congress party's analysis from the southern state of Karnataka that alleged nearly 100,000 votes cast for a seat in the 2024 general election were fraudulent. The Election Commission dismissed his claims.

"A clean voter roll is imperative for free and fair elections," Gandhi said Sunday on X.

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OPPOSITION lawmakers try to break through a police barricade during the protest in New Delhi.