

'Cockroaches' Threaten to Overrun Narendra Modi's Kitchen



EAST IS EAST
By Sadanand Dhume

Narendra Modi has loomed large over Indian politics for more than 12 years. The prime minister has vanquished opposition parties, expanded his own Bharatiya Janata Party into an election-winning juggernaut, and intimidated many critics. But Mr. Modi may have finally met his match in a Generation Z movement that began less than three months ago with a satirical social-media post.

The protest movement is led by the Cockroach Janta Party, named after a disparaging remark India's chief justice made about unemployed Indian youths. Last week the cockroach movement achieved a major victory: It forced Mr. Modi's education minister, Dharmendra Pradhan,

He looks vulnerable as India's unemployed youths transform an insult into a political rallying cry.

to resign. Mr. Pradhan had emerged as a focal point for nationwide protesters upset by India's ramshackle education system and meager job opportunities for young people.

The education minister's resignation followed a dramatic week. On July 18, police in Delhi forcibly hospitalized a prominent environmental and educational activist who had undertaken a nearly three-week hunger strike in solidarity with protesters. On July 20, thousands of protesters surged toward the Indian Parlia-

ment. Policemen and paramilitary forces armed with batons, tear gas and pellet guns clashed with the protesters. At least 60 protesters and more than 100 police officers were injured in the clashes, according to Delhi police. Videos showing police using excessive force quickly spread across social media.

The melee in Delhi marked the climax of several weeks of protests. Their trigger was a government decision in May to void a national medical-school entrance exam after evidence emerged that its questions had circulated in advance on messaging apps. Police arrested more than a dozen people who were allegedly part of a network that leaked the exam questions. The leak—part of a recurring pattern in recent years—sparked widespread outrage among both students and their parents.

Young people were further angered when India's chief justice on May 15 referred to unemployed youths as "parasites" and "cockroaches." In a cheeky response posted the next day on X, Abhijeet Dipke, a 30-year-old Indian in Boston who graduated last year from Boston University with a master's degree in public relations, asked a simple question: "What if all cockroaches come together?"

With help from friends and AI, Mr. Dipke set up a website for the Cockroach Janta Party, which calls itself "a political party for the people the system forgot to count." (Janta or janata is Hindi for "the



Protesters celebrate after the resignation of India's education minister, July 26.

people.") Within weeks, the movement's following on Instagram had skyrocketed to 22 million followers, more than twice as many as Mr. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party. (It's nearly three times as many now.) In June Mr. Dipke returned to India to lead the protest movement he had sparked.

Many observers have likened India's cockroach movement to the Arab Spring, which swept away Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and several other rulers in the 2010s, as well as to more recent protests in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal that ousted established politicians from office.

These parallels are overblown. Unlike Egypt or Nepal, India is an established democracy with a long tradition of power changing hands

through the ballot box. The government has firm control over police and paramilitaries, and the Indian army, unlike many of its peers in the developing world, has a record of remaining apolitical. India is also too big and decentralized for any group to oust the government simply by paralyzing the national capital. The country's politics, finance, entertainment and technology aren't concentrated in a single city.

Nonetheless, Mr. Modi has reason to worry. On paper he may appear close to the apex of his power, having quickly recovered politically after losing seats in the 2024 general elections. Over the past two years he has led the BJP to electoral victories in important states, and large-scale defections to the BJP have hol-

lowed out several opposition parties.

On closer inspection, however, Mr. Modi's vulnerabilities become apparent. Twelve years ago, he won power by promoting himself as a reformist who would end public corruption and solve India's unemployment problem. He hasn't come close to achieving either goal. While traditional Indian media may back him, this is becoming much less important in the age of social media.

At 75, the prime minister presides over a young country (median age 29) roiling with both ambition and disillusionment. About a quarter of India's 1.5 billion people are between 15 and 29. According to a recent study by economists at Azim Premji University, 40% of Indian graduates under 25

are unemployed.

External circumstances don't look propitious. AI threatens to flatten India's information-technology industry, one of the few reliable creators of middle-class jobs. The war in Iran drags on India's energy import-dependent economy. And the Trump administration has cracked down on immigration from India, effectively closing an escape valve for ambitious young people.

The Indian journalist Varghese George describes the BJP's confrontation with the cockroach protesters as a face-off between India's older "WhatsApp generation" and the "Instagram generation." As these protests have shown, the Instagram generation has both numbers and energy on its side.

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