

India detains thousands, locks down Delhi in bid to foil election chief protest

Cockroach Janta Party condemns its leaders' 'authoritarian detention' vows to continue protesting

• By SAURABH SHARMA,
SARITA CHAGANTI SINGH
and SAKSHI DAYAL



POLICE OFFICERS detain a protestor during a Cockroach Janta Party demonstration demanding the resignation of India's chief election commissioner, in New Delhi yesterday. (Photo by Ritesh Shukla/Getty Images)

NEW DELHI (Reuters) – Police detained more than 2,000 protesters and the founder of the Cockroach youth movement in Delhi on Saturday as security forces locked down parts of the capital to thwart a rally demanding the resignation of India's election chief.

Thousands of police and paramilitary personnel were deployed across the city, mobile internet services were suspended in the central business district, and dozens of metro stations and markets were shut as authorities moved to stop a demonstration organized by the Cockroach movement.

The protest was aimed at Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar over a revision of voter lists that critics say disproportionately benefits Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The movement had planned to gather thousands of people at Jantar Mantar in central Delhi, but the area was sealed off by security forces before the demonstration began.

A home ministry official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that more than 2,000 people were detained in Delhi. Local media said about 400 protesters were held in India's financial hub, Mumbai.

There was no immediate comment from police on the detentions.

Small protests broke out elsewhere in Delhi, including at a popular crafts market and at the site of the memorial to freedom movement leader Mahatma Gandhi, with demonstrators demanding Kumar's resignation.

"Long live the revolution," some young protesters chanted as police chased them and dragged scores of others into buses to be taken away, even as more arrived, a Reuters witness said.

"This is violating the rights of the people and the country will not tolerate this anymore," Yogendra Solanki said as police escorted him away.

Police detained Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) founder Abhijeet Dipke and senior leaders Saurav Das and Ashutosh Ranka when their flight from Mumbai landed in Delhi, the

group said in a statement.

Television footage showed Dipke challenging officers who approached him on board the aircraft.

"I have come to be arrested, arrest me... I am not afraid of you guys," he said.

"No, this is not an arrest," one officer replied. "Please cooperate."

The movement condemned what it called the "authoritarian detention" of its leaders, demanded their release and vowed to continue protesting.

"We will continue our protest tomorrow, day after... until Gyanesh Kumar resigns. We will be on the streets," CJP leader Ajinkya Shinde told reporters.

CJP also said authorities refused to provide updates on the leaders' whereabouts or health, even after news arrived of the death of Dipke's grandmother. Police said Dipke was informed of her death and was offered help to return home for the funeral.

Some opposition lawmakers and former chief ministers Mamata Banerjee of West Bengal, Arvind Kejriwal of Delhi, and Pinarayi Vijayan of Kerala were also detained, TV channels showed.

Representatives of two digital news

outlets said police briefly detained four of their reporters while they were covering the demonstrations. A Reuters journalist was also detained briefly before being released.

Across the capital of about 20 million people, security forces set up checkpoints on major roads and entry points, boarded buses searching for protesters and inspected vehicles.

Barricades and concrete blocks disrupted traffic while anti-riot vehicles equipped with tear-gas launchers guarded key routes.

The demonstrations represent one of the most serious tests yet for Modi, stemming from allegations that election authorities improperly revised voter rolls ahead of recent state polls.

Protests intensified after the Indian Express reported last week that two election commissioners had questioned Kumar's voter-list revisions that removed roughly 130 million names from voter lists.

Kumar has not commented, but the Election Commission and the BJP have denied allegations of wrongdoing.

The BJP says its electoral success reflects Modi's popularity and India's economic growth, and accuses opposition parties of spreading mis-

information.

The near-daily protests come just months after demonstrations over exam paper leaks forced his education minister to quit.

The unrest also comes ahead of a series of important state elections beginning in early 2027.

Rahul Gandhi, leader of the main opposition Congress party, said Modi's opponents would not back down.

A senior BJP member, Ravi Shankar Prasad, said the party was not opposed to demonstrations but the street protests had been "weaponized" by rivals due to election defeats.

Opposition parties say the deletions affected the outcome of recent state elections won by the BJP and have cast a shadow over voting in the world's largest democracy.

Election Commission data show about 130 million voter entries were removed during the verification exercise, including 63 million people who had relocated, 30 million who could not be traced and 28 million who had died.

The commission says the removals relate to entries identified during the draft revision process and that any eligible voter incorrectly deleted can re-enroll.