

Indian protesters held amid voter roll anger

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Police in India have used tear gas and water cannon and detained dozens of protesters calling for the resignation of the country's chief election commissioner, following allegations he wrongly disqualified millions from voter rolls.

The protests were called by the opposition Indian National Congress and civil rights activists, who say mass deletions from voter lists over the past year have tilted the political playing field in favour of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's governing Bharatiya Janata Party. The election commission, headed by former civil servant Gyanesh Kumar, has denied wrongdoing.

"Gyanesh Kumar has betrayed the country. He has no right to occupy the chair of the chief election commissioner. Arrest him," demanded protesters in one video posted by sympathisers.

The Cockroach Janta Party, a youth-led movement, has joined the push against Kumar, vowing to start a "nationwide agitation" next week if he does not resign by today. Protests called in the summer by the Cockroach movement over problems in India's exam system forced the resignation of Modi's education minister.

"Today, citizens and Congress workers hit the streets demanding accountability over the capture of their fundamental right to vote and the Chief Election Commissioner's diabolical mischief," the Congress party said.

"The frightened Modi government has cracked down on protesters and detained Congress leaders and workers, young citizens and students and civil society activists," the party said.

Police used water cannon against demonstrators in the northwestern city of Chandigarh and northeastern Patna city, according to video footage posted by protest organisers. They used tear

gas in the eastern state of Manipur, while security forces in the capital blocked demonstrators from occupying the central protest ground at Jantar Mantar, the scene of the summer "cockroach" protests.

The opposition has been complaining about the overhaul of electoral rolls since last year, but the protests were sparked by reports this week in the Indian Express newspaper, which alleged Kumar had ignored at least 14 formal objections to the exercise by his two fellow commissioners.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi said the mass deletion of voters was part of a "vote theft" conspiracy directed by Modi and his home minister, Amit Shah. The BJP has dismissed Gandhi's allegation as lies from "a frustrated leader not able to win people's support by democratic means".

Kumar was appointed to head the officially independent election authority in February last year.