

India's Cockroach movement leader accuses Modi of 'war on citizens'

Hannah Ellis-Petersen
Aakash Hassan Delhi

The leaders of India's Cockroach movement accused the Narendra Modi government of going to "war with its own citizens" and vowed to continue with their protest after being released from police detention, as anti-government unrest rocked Delhi for a second day.

The three leaders of the youth-led Cockroach Janta party (CJP) were taken into custody on Saturday when thousands were detained by police as authorities went to extreme lengths to prevent young people taking to the streets to protest.

By yesterday morning, a magistrate had ordered that the three CJP leaders, Abhijit Dipke, Saurav Das and Ashutosh Ranka, be released on the condition that they would not "breach peace" for a year.

In a social media post soon after his release, Dipke, CJP's founder, pointed his criticism directly at the prime minister. "Modi, as PM, is an embarrassment to India. Never has this country seen a bigger coward and bully," he said.

Saturday's protest was called by the CJP alongside student groups and civil society leaders to demand the resignation of India's election commissioner, Gyanesh Kumar, who is accused of an "assault on democracy" by overseeing an exercise that has deleted 130m names from India's electoral roll.

Kumar is accused of implementing the voter roll revision to help Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) entrench its power and to disenfranchise minority groups, such as Muslims, who are not traditionally part of the BJP's voter base.

Those who attempted to take part in Saturday's demonstration

were ruthlessly obstructed by a security crackdown, in which more than 25,000 police barricaded roads and the internet and public transport were shut down. More than 7,000 people were taken into police custody.

Despite the heavy-handed police response, it was still an unprecedented display of dissent against the Modi government, which has been notoriously intolerant of any political opposition or criticism over its 12 years in power. Several senior opposition leaders were among those who tried to protest and were detained.

By yesterday, the centre of Delhi still resembled a high-security fortress, with roads blocked by barricades and tens of thousands of police and paramilitary still deployed. Supreme court judges have ruled that the government must restore internet and reopen local metro stations.

Small groups of students and Cockroach supporters, many freshly released from police detention, again attempted to demonstrate in Delhi and were detained.

Among those taken into custody for a second time was the student leader Neha Bora, whose repeated defiance in the face of the police

▼ More than 7,000 people were taken into police custody during Saturday's demonstration

PHOTOGRAPH: PRIYANSHU SINGH/REUTERS



crackdown has made her a figurehead of the movement.

In a video she posted on social media after she was picked up by Delhi police, Bora showed a detention bus with metal grilles over its windows and four small "jail-like" compartments secured with latches.

She said six to eight protesters were crammed into each of the compartments, and that male protesters were subjected to verbal abuse and physical violence.

"So many troops, so much police presence, so much violence, abuses targeting mothers and sisters, caste-based slurs - why?" Bora said in the video. "Simply because you want to protect a thief, Gyanesh Kumar."



◀ Cockroach movement leaders Saurav Das, right, and Ashutosh Ranka, said 'the fight is on' after being released from detention

PHOTOGRAPH: BHAWIKA CHHABRA/REUTERS

"They can use as much force as they want to silence us, but it will be futile"

Surbi Yadav
Student protester

Marching alongside Bora was Surbi Yadav, 20, an undergraduate student at Delhi University, who said police detained her on Saturday morning. She accused police personnel of dragging her, injuring her arm and leg. "They treated us like animals. They pushed us into a bus and took us to a sports facility that had been turned into a detention centre," Yadav said, while showing scars on her arms.

Yadav was released on Saturday evening. By yesterday afternoon, she was back on the streets with other students. She vowed to return the following day and keep protesting until their demands were met.

"We are not afraid any more. The government and the police will have to understand that," she said. "They can use as much force as they want to silence us, but it will be futile. In fact, it will only backfire. Every day,

more people are turning against this government because of the way it is treating protesters."

At a press conference yesterday afternoon, the CJP leaders Das and Ranka condemned the police and government for turning Delhi into a "war-like situation" and reiterated their message of defiance that "this fight is on". They added that it was no longer just about Kumar, but also targeted at Modi and his home minister, Amit Shah.

"The state is at war with its own citizens," Das said. "An atmosphere of fear has been created in [this] country, it's clearly being done to save one person. We want to ask Modi and Shah, why are you trying to save Gyanesh Kumar?"

There was no response from Modi to the accusations by the protesters. However, the BJP's spokesperson, Gaurav Bhatia, said earlier that the voter roll revision was a legitimate exercise to remove dead and illegal voters.

The weekend's protests had drawn support from the leader of India's opposition alliance, Rahul Gandhi, who has accused the Modi government of "vote chauri" or vote cheating. Gandhi was detained twice last week as opposition parties attempted to hold a protest in central Delhi calling for Kumar to resign.