

India's 'Cockroaches' urge more protests

Youth movement defiant after leader held as Modi clamps down on dissent

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NEW DELHI

The leaders of India's youth-led Cockroach Janta Party have vowed to step up protests challenging to the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi following the release of the movement's founder from police custody.

Amid protests in New Delhi, Abhijeet Dipke, founder of the upstart CJP, and two of his close associates were freed by a court yesterday. Dipke had been detained inside an airliner shortly after

landing in the capital to join demonstrations the day before.

Dipke said protesters would "hit the streets again". Delhi police had denied permission for the Saturday demonstration to demand the resignation of India's elections chief and had tightened security across the Indian capital of more than 20mn.

"Narendra Modi is the biggest coward this country has ever seen," Dipke told journalists. The prime minister has yet to comment on the protests.

The three leaders were released on condition they would maintain "peace and good behaviour" for a year. Dipke said he had not "signed any bond" agreeing not to protest.

"The government has made a big mis-

take by arresting our leaders and clamping down on democracy," Ajinkya Shinde, another CJP leader, said yesterday after calling for further protests and labelling the detentions "unlawful".

Delhi was turned into a fortress by security forces over the weekend — with barricades and tens of thousands of police — following a week of protests demanding the resignation of the head of the election commission, Gyanesh Kumar, over a controversial voter verification drive.

Police were seen dragging protesters and stuffing them into buses and cars. Senior members of the opposition, including former chief ministers of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, and Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal, were also detained

as they headed to protest on Saturday.

"This is worse than the Emergency," said Kejriwal, in a reference to 1975, when late former prime minister Indira Gandhi imposed a state of emergency under which civil liberties were suspended and opponents were jailed.

On Saturday, Shinde claimed "over 15,000" people "faced illegal detentions and police clampdowns" after Dipke called for elections chief Kumar's removal. Delhi police did not reply to requests for comment.

Some demonstrators were detained at flash protests in central Delhi yesterday. "We are under a state of emergency. The government of India is at war with its own young citizens," said Saurav Das, one of the released CJP leaders.

Earlier, India's top court had ordered the government to restore the internet, ensure metro and rail services functioned normally, permit the free movement of people and stop detentions of those gathering peacefully.

The anger against what Kumar called an exercise to "purify" the electoral rolls, which removed an estimated 130mn names from the register, has turned into one of the biggest challenges to Modi since he rose to power in 2014.

Young dissenters and veteran politicians claim the voter deletions may have benefited Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party in some recent state elections.

Das said: "The country's youth has been awakened. They are demanding accountability."