

India's Cockroach movement tests Modi with march on parliament

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As the day progressed, the gathering spilled beyond the protest site, with demonstrators filling surrounding streets and roads.

Many carried backpacks with water and food, expecting a long day. Others waved Indian flags as chants against the education minister and Modi rippled through the growing crowd.

A satirical movement grows into a youth-led campaign

The Cockroach Janta Party emerged in May, after the Supreme Court chief justice compared some unemployed young people to “cockroaches” during an unrelated hearing. Supporters embraced the remark, turning it into a satirical movement that has attracted millions of followers on social media.

The movement has gained momentum after repeated leaks of high-stakes entrance exams for medical colleges and government jobs sparked public anger. It drew wider attention after police forcibly moved hunger-striking activist Sonam Wangchuk to the hospital on Saturday.

Protesters calling themselves “cockroaches” have camped at Jantar Mantar for the past month, with members of several student groups joining Wangchuk’s hunger strike. Thousands of supporters have also turned out at universities and rallies in other cities. They are demanding the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, reforms to the examination system and compensation for the families of students who died by suicide following paper leaks.

Government outreach emerges amid a tense standoff

Senior leaders in Modi’s government have taken a hard line against the movement. Pradhan

Leaks of medical and government job entrance exams have fuelled widespread public anger in India.

has accused the protesters of acting against the nation, while other ministers have acknowledged students’ concerns but insisted there is no need for talks or negotiations with the movement.

Though that appeared to shift Monday, when representatives of the movement held talks with Health Minister JP Nadda. It was the first apparent sign of government outreach to protest leaders, who sought to bring their demands directly to lawmakers, prompting authorities to tighten security around the complex.

CJP spokesperson Das, who met Nadda, said he presented the protesters’ demands, including the immediate resignation or removal of the education minister.

Separately, activist Wangchuk appealed for permission to temporarily leave the hospital and join the march.

In a handwritten note, he also said he would end his nearly three-week hunger strike only if the government took responsibility for failures in the education system and exam paper leaks, or if protesters were allowed to reach Parliament and lawmakers pledged to raise the issues in both Houses.

Protests pose a challenge to Modi’s government

The protests have become a rare public challenge to Modi’s Hindu nationalist government in its third term, drawing support from opposition parties, rights activists and some Bollywood celebrities. Protesters say space for dissent has shrunk under Modi, whose government has been criticised for suppressing public protests by jailing activists and, in some cases, using forceful police crackdowns.

Jyoti Rajput, a yoga teacher, said she joined the protests because “this rotten system refuses to take action.”

“It cannot see the pain of students, and that’s why so many people have joined this movement,” she said.

For many others the campaign has expanded into a broader protest over government accountability. Some said they were driven by frustration with what they see as a lack of transparency and responsiveness from elected leaders.

Sneha Eppili, a 26-year-old protester, said she joined the demonstration because she believes the government has a responsibility to answer their questions.

“I voted for this government, so I think it’s accountable to answer our questions. That’s the basic human right that I deserve,” she said.