

India's 'Cockroach' Movement Intensifies

Thousands of supporters demand the removal of the education minister

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NEW DELHI—In one of the biggest demonstrations to have faced Prime Minister Narendra Modi in years, thousands of people protested Monday over a university entrance-exam scandal that has touched a chord with young Indians frustrated with their economic prospects.

The Cockroach Janta Party movement, a new youth-led group that this year channeled anger over a botched entrance exam, called for protesters to march to India's Parliament in New Delhi and press for the removal of the education minister.

Police and paramilitary forces barricaded streets around Parliament. Police fired tear gas and hit protesters with batons, news photos and footage showed. The police didn't respond to a request for comment.

Subway exits were also barricaded and mobile internet was jammed. Nevertheless, large numbers of people gathered in the capital, some of whom had traveled hundreds of miles.



Cockroach Janta Party supporters scuffled with police Monday during a protest over a university entrance-exam scandal.

Many were galvanized by the police's decision over the weekend to forcibly hospitalize a prominent activist who has been on a hunger strike in support of the movement.

For millions of young Indi-

ans, competitive exams are a key route to securing university spots and government jobs. Both paths offer young people upward mobility in an economy where the private sector isn't creating enough jobs.

But exam papers have been repeatedly leaked and exams annulled. In May, a medical exam was canceled after allegations emerged that some test takers had purchased it ahead of time.

"This is not just about one exam," said Anand Sagar, a 20-year-old from the eastern Indian state of Bihar, who arrived in the capital this summer for a marketing course. "It's happening every time."

The Cockroach Party began as an online meme in May, in response to remarks by a judge disparaging unemployed youth as "cockroaches" and "parasites." It has since mushroomed into a political movement and the group has been holding sit-ins in the capital for weeks.

"[The government] thought, 'This is nothing; it will finish in one or two days,'" said Vibhuti Yadav, a 19-year-old student who attended Monday's protest.

"But it didn't," chimed in her friend, Lakshita Singhania. "This is still going on."

Monday's march to the Parliament was set to be led by 59-year-old activist Sonam Wangchuk, who has led protests in support for more rights for his home region in northern India.

Last month, he joined the Cockroach sit-in and went on a hunger strike, a protest tactic in India associated with Mahatma Gandhi. Police took Wangchuk to hospital over the weekend after he lost about 20 pounds.

In a letter posted on his X account on Monday, Wangchuk requested permission to join the march, but he didn't attend the protest, saying in another letter that he remains in "illegal detention." India's Home Ministry didn't respond to a request for comment.

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