

Modi locks down capital's heart to thwart voter rights protest



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Police officers carry away a protester in the centre of the Indian capital New Delhi on the weekend

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The government of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi locked down India's capital with thousands of security forces in a bid to thwart a mass protest over an effort to clean up voter lists that critics say is stripping millions of Indians of the right to vote.

Last year, India's election commission began a clean-up of voter lists that, according to activists, have resulted in some 130 million people being cut from preliminary or final voter rolls.

Mr Modi's government and his ruling Bharatiya Janata Party have said the clean-up – the first in two decades – was needed to preserve the integrity of the lists and remove deceased, duplicate or fraudulent voters, such as illegal immigrants who they say have entered from India's eastern border with Bangladesh.

The anger over the voting lists has melded with grievances from young Indians struggling to find work, together presenting a stiff challenge to Mr Modi.

A youth movement called the Cockroach Janta Party emerged in the spring following a scandal over a university entrance exam. The group has thrown its support behind those protesting the voting issue, joining in Saturday's protests in New Delhi.

In the Indian capital, police – who were deployed starting before dawn – stopped vehicles and pedestrians at yellow metal barricades. Dozens of metro stations were closed and many intercity trains were cancelled.

Abhijeet Dipke, the founder of the Cockroach party, posted a video of himself and fellow pro-



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Two more protesters are led away by female officers

test leaders being taken into custody on their arrival at New Delhi's airport to join the demonstrations.

"This is dictatorship," Mr Dipke shouted as the police officers entered the plane.

A police spokesman didn't immediately respond to a request for comment. In a statement, police said that "people should be able to raise their concerns peacefully. Our responsibility is to create the conditions in which they can do that safely, while keeping the city functioning."

Wall Street Journal reporters saw about 100 people detained over two hours. Some protesters shouted "Long Live the Revolution" from inside one police bus, as they were driven away.

Ishrat Ansari, 49, said she set off at dawn from her home in the north of the capital, walking nine miles to reach the protest area.

She said she, her son and her daughter received notices this year from election authorities that their names had been flagged

for discrepancies. In her case, she thinks it was because her name appeared on 2002 voter rolls with the honorific "Khatun," often used by Muslim women, which doesn't appear on her current identification. The social worker, who mainly goes by her first name, reckons that a poll worker might have added the honorific to her name in the past.

"They ask for so many documents," she said, to remain on the voting list. She feared that she may have received the notice because she is a Muslim. "Is it because my name is Ishrat that I was cut?" Mr Modi's BJP has promoted a form of Hindu nationalism that his critics say discriminates against India's Muslim minority. The government denies that, and says its policies are focused on the progress of all Indians.

The election body and the government have also denied targeting Muslims in the clean-up of the voter rolls.

Protests flared in recent days in the capital and other major cit-

ies after Indian newspaper reports cast fresh scrutiny on India's election authority. Protesters have called for the resignation of the head of the body.

That call puts the government in a bind, political experts say. In July, the Cockroach movement succeeded in forcing the education minister to resign after massive protests over unhappiness with the administration of state exams that offer a chance at subsidised university spots or a path to government jobs.

Firing the election body chief could make the government look weak and fuel perceptions there was something improper in the voter revision process. Yet the voter revisions have affected so many people that the government is finding it difficult to quell the widespread discontent.

Manoj Tak, from the north-western state of Rajasthan, said he was a local election worker in his constituency and a member of the opposition Congress Party. He took an overnight train to witness the protests in the capital.

In his constituency, he said, tens of thousands of voters were deleted – enough to potentially swing a victory in the seat.

Mr Tak said he didn't believe only deceased voters were being removed. "Even people who are alive and standing in front of you have been removed," he said. "If we don't protest now, when?"

The fortification of the Indian capital came after the scale of the July protest over the exam scandals took the government by surprise, political experts said. The Cockroach party started as a viral online movement in response to the chief justice's comments comparing unemployed young people to cockroaches.

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