

Modi cannot silence India's disaffected youth

The BJP has to address young people's political and economic frustrations

India's youth-led Cockroach Janta Party began as a joke, but in just months has become a serious force. Over the weekend, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government deployed tens of thousands of security personnel to suppress protests in New Delhi called by the movement, cancelling many trains and metro services, locking down central neighbourhoods and detaining CJP leaders. The heavy-handed tactics prevented the "cockroaches", as they call themselves, from gathering in large numbers. But such methods only risk deepening the disaffection of many young Indians, and further undermine the democratic credentials of Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party.

The authorities have reason to be wary of the movement's growing

influence. Youth-led uprisings have in recent years toppled other governments in the region, most recently in Nepal. The CJP began in May as a satirical online campaign sparked by a top judge's comparison of some unemployed youths to "cockroaches", but it quickly snowballed. Protests called by the movement over an exam scandal forced the departure of Modi's education minister in July, a rare defeat for the BJP.

India has long prided itself on the strength of its democratic institutions, robust enough to withstand protests and the occasional ministerial resignation. But the handling of the demonstrations in New Delhi, which were called to demand the resignation of India's chief election commissioner, suggests an unedifying sense of insecurity.

The protesters have legitimate concerns about the election commission and its sweeping revision of electoral rolls, which has purged 130mn entries from the lists of those eligible to vote.

There is no direct evidence to support claims the revisions were designed to give the Hindu nationalist BJP an advantage. But many qualified citizens were stripped of their voting rights. Reports claim that election chief Gyanesh Kumar's colleagues repeatedly objected to aspects of the revision process. The BJP's insistence in 2023 that the government have the controlling say in the selection of the self-described autonomous commission's chief has raised suspicions.

Modi hails India as the "mother of democracy", but has been less enthusiastic about preserving free expression and the space for vigorous opposition. Authorities often harass government critics in the media, academia and civil society. The determination of so many young Indians to stand up for fair elections is admirable.

Even if he is confident the electoral roll revision was properly handled, the loss of confidence in Kumar among opposition parties and many voters

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raises questions about his fitness to be election chief. Either way, the BJP should allow independent scrutiny of the revision process. At the very least, Modi should break his silence on the New Delhi protests.

More broadly, the protests are a sign that more must be done to meet young people's rising expectations. Economic growth is currently the fastest of any large country and Modi has done much to widen access to welfare and make structural reforms, yet too many graduates still struggle to find good jobs. That frustration only heightens their anger at perceived abuses of power.

The police have announced that Jantar Mantar, an open-air observatory in New Delhi where the "cockroaches" had sought to gather, will no longer be an authorised protest site. Alternative venues have been offered further from the government district. But pushing youthful dissent out of politicians' line of sight will do nothing to ease the discontent that drives it.