

Modi struggles to calm student anger

Pressure grows on PM as protesters throng streets of several Indian cities

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Student protesters thronged the streets of Indian cities including Kolkata yesterday, increasing pressure on Prime Minister Narendra Modi as he tried to calm growing youth anger over education and joblessness.

One of the biggest demonstrations was in Kolkata, where a crowd estimated by witnesses to be more than 100,000-strong marched through the streets and later clashed with police, who used tear gas and batons.

"It was a massive protest [and] very spontaneous in nature," said Sayantan

Ghosh, an author who attended. "There were students there from very middle-class backgrounds, not politically active." Smaller protests were held in Mumbai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Delhi, among other cities.

The demonstrations have been organised by the upstart "Cockroach" movement, which started as a satirical online campaign but has evolved into a galvanising force for youth anger after questions from a national exam paper were leaked in May. Protests have grown this week as mainstream opposition parties joined the outcry.

The police response to Monday's protest in Delhi, when thousands of students were tear-gassed and beaten with sticks, has increased public anger.

Modi's government has made several concessions to protesters but has not yet met their central demand for the resig-

nation of the education minister, Dharmendra Pradhan. Two government ministers met protest representatives yesterday afternoon and asked for more time to consider their demands.

The prime minister, who has been in office for 12 years, addressed protesters directly for the first time in a video message late on Thursday. He pledged to set up fast-track courts to ensure swift justice and harsh punishment for those who had leaked the exam papers and removed the top civil servant in the education ministry.

"I know a[n exam] paper leak is not a small issue," Modi, 75, said. "For millions of students and parents it is deeply painful. That is why . . . we have taken several steps. Those guilty have been arrested and are in jail."

Protest leaders dismissed his gesture. "Modi had to shoot a video in selfie

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mode at 12am," Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) spokesperson Ashutosh Ranka told reporters at the main protest site in Delhi, the Jantar Mantar observatory. "This shows the immense pressure on him." As he spoke, protesters chanted: "Modi, shame, shame!"

The authorities shut down 17 metro stations in the capital yesterday and users reported disruption to mobile internet service near the protest. Fresh controversy erupted when police installed monitoring cameras using facial recognition software to identify protesters, something officials said was necessary to spot criminals.

"Students are no longer staying silent," the CJP posted on its X account. "This is not just a protest any more — it's a youth movement against a broken system."

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