

'My name's erased'

Anger at electoral roll changes under Modi government boils over in India

Hannah Ellis-Petersen
Shaikh Azizur Rahman

Born into a small village in West Bengal, Shahida Fakir had always taken her vote for granted. That was, until it was suddenly taken away. She presented officials with her Indian birth certificate and family land documents from the village going back to 1962.

Both her parents had been on the electoral roll for decades, so she showed proof of that too. But when the final revised voter list came out in April, Fakir was not on it.

The 38-year-old migrant worker, born into a poor Muslim family, was not alone. Since last year, 130m names - more than the population of Japan - have been removed from India's electoral roll through a process known as SIR, or special intensive revision. In the nearly eight decades since India's independence, never have the voter rolls shrunk by such a huge amount over such a short time.

The Narendra Modi government has called SIR a legitimate exercise to clean up the electoral rolls. Overseen by the election commission, tens of millions of dead and duplicate names have been removed. Yet so have the names of millions of living Indians.

Critics allege the pledge to "purify" India's voter roll of illegal immigrants has instead been used for more sinister purposes - disenfranchising tens of millions of Muslims, other minorities, and poor and lower caste communities, who are largely not BJP voters.

In a matter of weeks, nationwide anger at SIR has boiled up and spilled out on to the streets of India's biggest cities, presenting a formidable challenge to the government. Over the weekend, Delhi was transformed into a high-security fortress of barricades, roadblocks and tens of thousands of police and paramilitaries, who detained thousands of people as they attempted to stop youth-led

protests calling for the man who oversaw SIR, the chief election commissioner, Gyanesh Kumar, to step down immediately.

On Monday, opposition parties - who have decried SIR as a "weapon for vote theft" by the Modi government - drew tens of thousands of supporters as they marched through the capital and presented a petition to the supreme court, demanding Kumar's resignation. The youth-led Cockroach Janta party (CJP) movement, who were behind the call for Saturday's action, have vowed to "fight on" in their protests against SIR.

Opposition and civil society leaders allege that SIR has already given the BJP an electoral advantage in states such as Bihar and West Bengal, claims the party denied. Others say the exercise has had even more concerning implications: under changes to SIR unilaterally implemented by Kumar, the election commission has become the arbiter of Indian citizenship, a sweeping overreach of its remit.

The consequences are already playing out in West Bengal, where Modi's Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) recently came to power and began a crackdown on "illegal" immigrants, complete with several new detention centres. Civil society



Expelled citizen
Shahida Fakir



Cockroach leaders jailed

Two leaders of India's Cockroach movement have been sent to jail for five days for violating a protest ban.

A court ordered that Ashutosh Ranka and Saurav Das, leaders of the Cockroach Janta party (CJP) pressure group, spend five days in prison for jumping over police barricades and waving the Indian flag at Jantar Mantar in Delhi.

CJP leaders said the action was taken to demonstrate against the decision by police to shut down Jantar Mantar - a stretch of road surrounding an observatory in central Delhi - as the capital's designated protest site, a status it has held for more than 30 years.

"You cannot denotify the resistance," said Abhijeet Dipke, the CJP founder, in a social media post showing three of his fellow leaders entering Jantar Mantar on Tuesday. He accused Narendra Modi's government of "cowardly tactics" to "crush dissent".

The opposition leader, Rahul Gandhi, said the people of India would "reclaim Jantar Mantar".

"Waving the tricolour at Jantar Mantar in a peaceful protest is not a crime. Jailing youth for it is an act of cowardice," he said. **Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Kiran Stacey**

groups say Muslims excluded by SIR are being targeted.

Fakir was among them. Just three months after the voter list was published - and while her hearing to challenge her exclusion was pending - she was picked up by police and accused of being an illegal Bangladeshi immigrant.

In July she was pushed over the border to Bangladesh, a country she had never been to nor had any connection with, and remains stuck there. "I have all the documents to prove I am an Indian citizen," she said in a tearful phone call from the Bangladesh border village where she has been sheltering. "I fell on their feet and begged the police not to send me to Bangladesh but they pushed me over the border."

A Bangladesh border guard officer confirmed Fakir's account. "We checked all her documents and are convinced that she is an Indian citizen," they said. In September, her family submitted a petition to the supreme court challenging her deportation. The Indian government was given a month to respond.

"All I want is to return to my family and my home in India. I am waiting desperately for that day," she said. The backlog of millions of voters in West Bengal challenging their exclusion means it could be years before Fakir's case is heard.

Those across West Bengal who have been stripped of their votes speak of their terror of being accused of being an alien in their own land. Some have had benefits taken away. Mohammad Hedayet Ullah Siddiqui, 80, from the North 24 Parganas district, said his grandfather had been a freedom

▼ Mass protests, below, are fuelled by anger at the government excising 130m names from voter rolls

PHOTOGRAPH: ADNAN ABIDI/REUTERS





fighter for Indian independence and three generations of his family had the vote. Yet after SIR, Siddiqui described his “humiliation” on finding his name gone.

“With my name erased from the voter list, I am in constant terror. What if they send me to a detention camp?” he said. “I cannot bear to think about being separated from my children and grandchildren, especially when all my ancestors have been buried in India.”

Critics say the problems



◀ *Delhi police clear protesters demanding the resignation of the BJP-appointed election commission chief* PHOTOGRAPH: ADNAN ABIDI/REUTERS

began in 2023, when the Modi government changed the process for appointing the three-body election commission, giving majority control to the government for the first time. Within a matter of months, the Modi-led panel had appointed Kumar as the election commissioner in spite of opposition objections.

“For decades, the election commission was one of our more credible, independent bodies, but now that has been eroded,” said Ronojoy Sen, a senior fellow at the South Asian Studies Programme, National University of Singapore.

By the following year, the new election commission body had begun SIR, starting in Bihar, where it immediately raised concerns among human rights groups after more than 6 million names were removed. Not long after the revisions, the BJP won a landslide victory in the Bihar state elections.

Three former election commissioners have openly criticised SIR as a “hostile exercise” that has undermined the sanctity of the country’s electoral rolls by focusing on the exclusion - rather than inclusion - of voters.

None have been more vehement in their opposition than SY Quraishi, who was chief election commissioner between 2010 and 2012. “This is a national harassment exercise designed to throw Muslims off the electoral roll,” he claimed. “The only way to restore the credibility of India’s elections is to restore those deleted voters.”

The BJP has denied any political involvement in the SIR process, accusing the opposition Congress party of “jealousy” over its recent electoral victories and saying any deleted voters can simply re-enrol. The BJP spokesperson Sudhanshu Trivedi said the allegations were “disinformation” and part of an opposition campaign “orchestrated to create an atmosphere of division and anarchy”.

Nonetheless, the election commission has appeared to accept some flaws in the process. Late last week, it belatedly put a cap on the number of voter deletion forms - which allow people to submit objections on behalf of others - after incidents in which people submitted thousands of forms targeting legitimate Muslim voters.

Public anger, meanwhile, has continued to build. A Delhi resident for 30 years, Prashant Tandon, 60, said he could not believe it when he received notice questioning his life as a voter. “If someone doubts my citizenship, they should produce evidence against me,” he said furiously. “I should not have to prove that I am an Indian citizen.”

Additional reporting
Aakash Hassan