

Opposition leaders join Delhi march as pressure mounts on Modi's BJP

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Delhi

Delhi's police again obstructed protests in India's capital yesterday as thousands of people returned to the streets, led by opposition leaders, to demand the resignation of the election commissioner.

There was mass unrest in Delhi at the weekend, with thousands of people detained by police as they attempted to take part in a protest led by the *gen Z* Cockroach movement.

The leaders of India's main opposition parties led another procession through Delhi yesterday, this time to the supreme court.

The leader of India's opposition alliance, Rahul Gandhi, alongside other opposition figures and student groups, had declared an intention to march to the country's top court and submit a petition calling for the chief of India's election commission, Gyanesh Kumar, to step down.

Kumar has come under fire over his role in an exercise to verify and "purify" India's electoral rolls which saw more than 130 million names - more than the population of Japan - deleted from voter lists since last year.

Opposition parties and civil society groups allege that Kumar implemented this so-called Special Intensive Revision (SIR) to entrench the power of Narendra Modi's government and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata party (BJP). Muslim voters and other minorities who are less likely to be BJP voters have



allegedly been disproportionately affected by the deletions.

The Election Commission of India denied favouring any party and said voters who had been wrongly deleted could re-enrol, while the BJP has accused its rivals of trying to undermine the country's democracy by questioning what it says are legitimate electoral processes.

Multiple metro stations were closed in central Delhi yesterday, and police barricades halted thousands of protesters about 600 metres from the supreme court, forcing many to turn back.

However, a team of lawyers confirmed that they had submitted the petition on Gandhi's behalf. By late evening, Gandhi himself had broken through the barricades and reached the court gates.

In a press conference before yesterday's march, Gandhi reiterated his allegation that the Modi government was using Kumar and the election commission to commit "vote chori" - cheating - and accused the election commissioner of being a thief.

Gandhi expressed support for the mass uprising of young people, led by the Cockroach Janata party and student groups, which took to the streets over the weekend - to be met with police brutality and detentions.

"Till the constitution is upheld, till the chief election commissioner is removed, till the system of elections

▲ A woman is detained during the unrest. Police have been accused of trying to suppress political protest

PHOTOGRAPH: RAFIQ MAQBOOL/AP

is revamped, till justice is served for India, the youth won't stop," he said.

The issue of SIR and calls for the resignation of Kumar have galvanised support for India's opposition parties, which were previously seen as failing in the face of the BJP's considerable electoral success.

Gandhi was detained twice last week after the police refused to let him and other opposition leaders reach Jantar Mantar, the designated protest site in Delhi's centre.

Among the opposition politicians marching yesterday was Mahua Moitra, who was also detained last week. In her constituency in West Bengal she has alleged that more than 10,000 voters were unjustly removed from the electoral rolls.

"There's no going back now. People know that their votes have been stolen and this government is finished," said Moitra. "The police can detain us, they can use brute force and crack our skulls, but we are not going to get off the streets until Gyanesh Kumar resigns and this government is gone. If we don't stand up to this, then there will be nothing left of our country."

Moitra accused the supreme court of helping to validate the SIR process and helping to disenfranchise millions of Indians. "When the history of this dark chapter of India is written, the supreme court will be the most disgraced," she said. "It was the supreme court who put a stamp of approval on every illegality of this government."

Gandhi has spent months accusing the BJP of fraudulently influencing elections, but his claims have largely been ignored. However, the issue exploded last month after the Indian Express newspaper reported on multiple irregularities in the SIR process which had been unilaterally pushed through by Kumar.

The protests are likely to continue this week. Yesterday, leaders of the Cockroach Janata party approached the Delhi police to seek a date to be allowed to hold a protest in the capital without obstruction. They said that if the police refused to comply, their supporters would take to the streets of the capital anyway.

▼ Opposition supporters in Delhi. More than 130m names were removed from the electoral roll

PHOTOGRAPH: BHAWIKA CHHABRA/REUTERS

