

Police in India get tough with protesters

Young crowd angry at exam scandal, Modi

By Mujib Mashal
and Pragati K.B.

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NEW DELHI — Chaotic scenes played out on the streets of New Delhi Monday, as security forces used tear gas and batons to disperse tens of thousands of people marching on the Parliament in one of the largest protests against Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government in years.

The protest in the Indian capital, largely fueled by young people, was called to demand the resignation of the country's education minister after botched college entrance exams that have disrupted the lives of millions of students.

A smiling Modi, who arrived to open a session of the Parliament, tried to project an image of calm. He did not address the protesters' demands directly.

By day's end, the police crack-down, in which protesters were beaten up, appeared to have dispersed much of the crowd. Police officials told Indian news outlets that at least 50 of their personnel were also injured.

More than 60 protesters were arrested, according to lawyers who were rallying legal help for them.

Modi's response has so far remained consistent with his decade-old position that his ministers are not answerable to public pressure.

But the size and force of the protests may indicate that his ruling party has underestimated the raw anger among young people in India, particularly after recent student movements in neighboring Bangladesh and Nepal toppled governments.

His image as a strongman may also be showing cracks.

Television channels friendly to Modi, which had largely ignored the buildup to Monday's protest, broadcast footage of panic around the Parliament as



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People helped an injured protester in New Delhi Monday after police used tear gas and batons against the crowd.

security guards ran around holding the line with water cannons and tear gas. On social media, a space where Modi's ruling party has enjoyed outside influence, the Generation Z protesters appeared to be breaking through, with memes and livestreams of the protests and the police crack-down.

"The apathy the government is showing us is shameful," said Anshul Yadav, 20, who attended the protests Monday with two friends. "The government should come talk," he said. "Education is important."

The space for protest and dissent in India's traditionally raucous democracy has shrunk significantly during Modi's 12 years in office. His government has cracked down on dissent and put activists behind bars, creating a chilling effect on opposition.

The protest was started by the Cockroach Janta Party, a grass-roots movement founded just two months ago that has come to symbolize the anger among India's youth. It started in response to a rant by India's chief justice comparing the country's unemployed youth with cockroaches and parasites. In June, the party announced a sit-in demanding accountability over the exam leaks.

When the crowds filled the area around the protest site Monday morning, the movement's social media handles posted: "A flood of hundreds of thousands of cockroaches."

Public anger over the exam scandal has been simmering since May, when more than 2 million students who took India's biggest entrance exam for medical school found out that the results would be scrapped because the questions had been

leaked and that they would have to retake the test.

Such leaks have become a frequent problem in recent years, and news reports in India that some students have died by suicide because of the stress have intensified the outrage. The movement has since grown into broader discontent over the failings of the Indian education system and the lack of accountability in governance.

The movement gained momentum over the weekend after police forcibly removed Sonam Wangchuk, a prominent activist who had been on a hunger strike at the protest site for more than 20 days. Police said they had moved him to a hospital for court-ordered essential medical care, despite opposition from his family and fellow protesters.

On Monday morning, crowds chanting slogans against Modi poured into the Jantar Mantar area, a protest site not far from the Parliament. The streets were jammed with mostly young people, many saying they had come from other parts of India. They tried to push their way to the site through heavy barricades.

By Monday afternoon, a senior member of Modi's Cabinet, J.P. Nadda, met with representatives of the movement, the first such outreach since the protests began. The movement's leaders have issued three specific demands: the immediate resignation of the education minister, Dharmendra Pradhan; the discharge from the hospital of Wangchuk; and compensation for the families of those students who died by suicide.

The protesters accuse Pradhan of doing little to fix an education system that can be corrupt, lax, and inefficient.