

Prominent Modi critic held ahead of India general election

JOHN REED — NEW DELHI
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Authorities have arrested Arvind Kejriwal, chief minister of Delhi and one of India's most prominent opposition leaders, a move critics of Narendra Modi said was part of a pre-election crackdown by the premier.

Kejriwal was arrested after a team from the Enforcement Directorate, which is responsible for investigating and prosecuting economic crimes, questioned him at his home yesterday evening as part of a money-laundering case linked to excise policy in the capital region.

Kejriwal, 55, is head of the opposition Aam Admi party (AAP) and one of the most vocal critics of Modi, who is seeking a third five-year term in the general election which opens on April 19.

"Arvind Kejriwal's arrest is a political conspiracy by the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi," said Atishi Patel, a senior member of the AAP, which governs Delhi's capital region and also India's northern Punjab state.

Several AAP leaders have already been jailed over accusations of receiving kickbacks and offering special favours to companies awarded lucrative liquor licences. They deny the claims.

The BJP did not comment. The ANI news agency quoted Manjinder Singh Sirsa, a senior member of the ruling

party, as saying: "The utterly corrupt chief minister of Delhi is being punished for his bad deeds."

Opposition parties, united in a fragile electoral alliance called the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance, have accused the government of a crackdown on their activities in the run-up to the election. The Indian National Congress, the biggest opposition party, yesterday said it was unable to continue campaigning as all its bank accounts had been frozen in connection with an ongoing tax dispute.

"Our leaders cannot travel from one part of the country to the other," said Rahul Gandhi, a Congress MP and the party's most prominent figure. "We're unable to put out our ads."

Gandhi said there was "no democracy in India today", adding: "The people of India are being robbed of their constitution and democratic structure."

Opinion polls show Modi's Bharatiya Janata party, which has governed since 2014, is the strong favourite to win the election. The BJP has spoken of taking as many as 400 seats together with its National Democratic Alliance partners in the 543-seat lower house, up from the 353 seats they won in 2019.

Asim Ali, a political commentator, said: "The BJP is taking a big political risk and the idea is to derail the alliance of the Congress and AAP in Delhi."