



# 'We are not afraid any more' The 'cockroaches' and their fight for the soul of India's democracy

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Delhi



**A**s the poster bearing the face of the prime minister, Narendra Modi, was thrown to the floor, a cheer went up. Then came the feet, trampling the image into the ground with gleeful abandon. "Thief, thief," chanted the crowd.

Just a week earlier, such scenes in the heart of India's capital would have been almost unthinkable. For the 12 years Modi and his Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) have been in power it was widely acknowledged that you criticised the government at your peril. Dissent was swiftly, routinely and expertly crushed.

That was until the cockroaches came along. A movement that began as an online meme has swiftly escalated into one of the most unexpected and significant challenges to Modi's political power in years, instigated by a young generation who are fed up and startlingly unafraid of their government. Insults to Modi now abound online in the form of memes and Instagram reels.

The scandal over a leaked examination for medical colleges remains at the heart of the protest and the resignation of Modi's education minister, Dharmendra Pradhan, is the central demand. But after a peaceful protest held on Monday in Delhi was met with police batons, teargas, pellet guns and the alleged manhandling of

female protesters, it has escalated into something far bigger: a fight for the country's flailing democracy.

Among those who braved police batons to take part in the Delhi demonstrations this week was Aniruddh Gautam, a 21-year-old law student from Delhi. "I had a place to study at a UK university and I chose to stay in India because I believe in my country," he said. "But this government has taken away the hopes and dreams of young people. Young people have died because of their failures. I will die for this cause if I need to."

While protests have erupted in India under the Modi government before - first in 2019 against a divisive citizenship law and then in 2020 with a huge farmers' strike - analysts say the



▲ Saurav Das, spokesperson for the satirical youth-led Cockroach Janta party (CJP), after meeting government ministers PHOTOGRAPH: RAJAT GUPTA/EPA