

ENDLESS PROTESTS WITHOUT A CLEAR GOAL THREATEN INDIA'S DEMOCRACY

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Unless protesters have a viable political alternative to offer the country, these could lead to chaos and tyranny of the mob

As anti-government protests become a drumbeat of daily life in India, one question has been nagging me: What is the role of an ongoing popular protest movement in the context of a well-functioning representative democracy such as India? Protests representing "people power" and aimed against ruling elites proliferate in non-democratic, authoritarian regimes and, indeed, even on some occasions succeed in toppling such regimes—witness Bolivia, most recently, in which popular protests against an election widely seen as rigged toppled the long-serving and entrenched president, Evo Morales. Examples abound in the history of authoritarian regimes in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

In the context of democratic polities, protest movements without a specific political agenda have been relatively rare, and usually occur when it is widely believed that there has been an egregious failure of democratic representation. Thus, the suffragette movement earlier in the last century in Anglo-Saxon democracies such as the UK, the US and Canada protested against the obvious immorality of barring half the population from voting. Likewise, the civil rights movement in the US in the 1960s protested the obvious immorality of effectively disenfranchising most African-American voters through the so-called "Jim Crow" laws.

The most recent example of widespread and ongoing popular protests in India afford a useful counterpoint. India Against Corruption (IAC) rose up in the later days of the erstwhile Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, with sections of the urban middle and upper-middle classes rallying against endemic corruption in Indian polity. The diagnosis of the causes of that malaise and the proposed remedies were amorphous, misguided and probably wrong—my early readers will recall I was no particular fan of the IAC—but, crucially, the movement did succeed in transforming itself into a legitimate political party with an ostensible agenda to champion the anti-corruption cause through the normal electoral process. While it is fairly obvious that today's Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) bears little resemblance to the IAC that spawned it, it is also evident that whatever success the IAC eventually enjoyed was due to the rise of the AAP as a challenger to India's two major established parties, the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

In this light, and more than a month into ongoing protests, it is unclear what the political future of the current spate of anti-government protests will be in the context of the current configuration of Indian politics. It is noteworthy that mainstream opposition parties have largely remained aloof from the protests, occasionally joining them opportunistically, or to serve their own parochial political ends, but without any well-articulated alternative to the government's citizenship law and population registry proposals.

The protests have remained largely peaceful, even in the face of provocation from some of the government's rowdier supporters. While this is to be applauded, the ostensibly leaderless protest movement risks being captured by unsavoury elements with an ulterior agenda. The controversy over the widespread use of the "Azaadi" chant at protest gatherings typifies the problem. While the chant has a complex history, associated in part with an earlier feminist movement, it is also indelibly associated with Islamist separatism in Jammu and Kashmir, whose

stated goal is to rend the Indian Union. I am baffled that seemingly reasonable and educated middle class folk, including students, would wish to associate with such a problematic slogan. It seems implausible that they are unaware of its associations; the most sympathetic possibility that occurs to me is that they enjoy the "radical chic" frisson.

And therein lies the problem. Much like the infamous cocktail party that gave rise to Tom Wolfe's coinage of "radical chic", at which the musician Leonard Bernstein feted members of the Black Panther revolutionary party in his Manhattan apartment, it appears that at least some protesters are more interested in "épater la bourgeoisie" (shock the bourgeoisie) than in coming up with viable political alternatives to what they believe ails India.

In today's social media world, it is relatively easy to organize a protest, and those who believe in the cause, or those who have nothing better to do (or perhaps some students who prefer bunking classes instead of studying), may well show up. It is infinitely more difficult to craft a serious political platform that builds on the protest's underlying grievances and articulate them in a way that makes sense to average voters. In the absence of buy-in from existing mainstream opposition parties, the putative leaders of this protest would need to do the heavy lifting of building a legitimate political movement and attempting to influence outcomes at the ballot box. Again, for better or worse, this is how the IAC morphed into the AAP, and this is how it has to be done in the context of a representative democracy.

It must be reiterated that peaceful protests are entirely permissible in the context of a liberal, constitutional democracy such as India. Yet, a protest without end, and without a credible political goal in view, only threatens to undermine the legitimacy of Indian democracy: For, it offers no viable alternative, and only the chilling prospect of chaos or tyranny of the mob. This is surely not what the leaders of the current protest movement seek.

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