

PFI, A GROUP THAT HAS BEEN IN THE CROSS HAIRS OF SECURITY AND INTEL AGENCIES SINCE 2010

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Under arrest: Parvez, PFI Delhi unit chief, being brought to the ED office in New Delhi on Thursday. PTI-

The coordinated searches and the arrest of around 100 members of the Popular Front of India (PFI) on Thursday by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) were planned on the basis of documents and information collected by the Intelligence Bureau (IB), a senior government official said.

National Security Adviser (NSA) Ajit Doval monitored the searches that began in the early hours on Thursday. As it was a nationwide search, Central forces were kept on standby and minimal information was shared with the local police.

This is not the first time that the organisation, comprising mostly Muslim members, which describes itself as “neo-social movement which strives for the empowerment of marginalised sections of India” has been in the cross hairs of the security agencies. In 2010, some members of the PFI attacked T.J. Joseph, a professor in Ernakulam district of Kerala, chopping off his right palm. Mr. Joseph was targeted over a question paper he set for a college examination that had some references to the Prophet, which the attackers said were insulting.

The PFI was founded in 2007, a year after the merger of three Muslim groups — the National Democratic Front in Kerala, the Karnataka Forum for Dignity and the Manitha Neethi Pasarai in Tamil Nadu.

In 2017, the National Investigation Agency prepared a detailed dossier on the PFI but it could not be declared an “unlawful association” under the anti-terror Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) as officials were divided on the subject. In June 2022, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) accused the organisation of money laundering claiming that it had received over Rs. 60 crore since 2009, including cash deposit of more than Rs. 30 crore. The PFI said the funds were raised domestically. “It has won the trust of millions of people across the country who help the organisation through their donations. Due to this, it has been the policy of the organisation since its inception to make any small and large scale financial transactions transparent,” the PFI said.

In 2021, at the annual police meet organised by the IB and attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Lucknow, police officers from Assam, Telangana and Uttar Pradesh spoke of the alleged radical activities of the outfit in their presentations. Assam Director-General of Police (DGP) Bhaskar Jyoti Mahanta in his presentation on “Countering emerging security challenges in the neighborhood: Way forward” said that the “PFI has given an aggressive push to its propaganda campaign focusing majorly in Muslim majority districts of Assam”. He said that the PFI was successful in consolidating its position offline and online and has leveraged the polarisation that has taken place in Assam. “The PFI’s overt operations in Assam are in line with its *modus operandi* of supporting secular and mass movements. However, behind this garb of neo-liberal and secular mass-based organisation lies the sinister design of PFI,” the presentation said. It added that reports suggested that the PFI could be used by its political wing (Social Democratic Party of India) to make an entry into the political landscape of the State in the near future. The PFI has played an active role in the recent eviction-related violence in Assam’s Dholpur, the presentation said.

A presentation by the Uttar Pradesh police said the PFI reportedly collected funds from abroad through non-banking channels such as hawala and also indulged in money laundering. However, there was no material evidence yet to prove the clandestine transactions, it said. The Telangana police said that though the PFI described itself as a “neo-social movement”, in reality its members have been charged under offences which involves “possessing arms, kidnapping, murder, intimidation, hate campaign, rioting and love jihad.” The PFI has various wings like National Women’s Front (NWF), Campus Front of India (CFI) and the SDPI. The police said that most of the leaders of the PFI today were earlier members of the banned Students Islamic Movement of India. They flagged the SDPI’s alleged involvement in the 2020 Bangalore riots and the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act. The Tamil Nadu police, presenting a paper on left-wing extremism, said that frontal organisations of Maoists have formed various “tactical united fronts” with communal forces such as the PFI, the SDPI and linguistic extremists.

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