

The Summer of Discontent: How the ‘India Against Corruption’ Movement Unfolded

Case B: The Struggle for Change

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Synopsis: As a series of alleged corruption scandals came to light in 2010, Arvind Kejriwal saw an environment that was ripe for an anti-corruption movement. He formed a team under the leadership of Anna Hazare, known as India Against Corruption (IAC), to pressurize the government into enacting a strong Lokpal (Public Ombudsman) Bill. The hunger strike staged by Anna to flag this issue drew massive public support, to the surprise of IAC itself, and forced the government into creating a joint-drafting committee for the Lokpal Bill – the committee comprised of five representatives from the government and five from IAC, including Anna and Kejriwal.

Though IAC had been successful in getting representation in the official joint-drafting committee, the privilege came with the danger of constant media spotlight. The deliberations of the committee also proved to be tough as the government reportedly accepted less than a dozen items from IAC's 71-point agenda. The committee failed to reach consensus and IAC threatened to begin another hunger strike if a 'strong' Lokpal Bill was not introduced in Parliament. As the government formulated its strategy to deal with the second round of protests, the Prime Minister announced that he did not have a magic wand to deal with corruption.

This case narrates how the government's strategy of dealing with the second round of protests by IAC backfires. Anna and Kejriwal were arrested before they began their fast. IAC took full advantage of the situation and used the news and social media to mobilize public opinion against the government. Anna began his fast-unto-death inside prison while the government, on the back foot now, attempted to bring things under control. After days of negotiations, Anna ended his fast when the parliament passed a non-binding resolution to incorporate his key demands into the Lokpal Bill. In his speech, Anna called on his supporters to continue the struggle for change.

Own goal

In the absence of Sonia Gandhi, a strategy meeting of the Congress took place on August 15 to decide the next course of action. After the meeting, the Home Minister, a lawyer-turned-politician, took charge of the situation. Citing adequate legal justification, he authorized the arrest of Anna on the following day. "If the Prime Minister privately expressed any opposition to the decision to arrest [Anna] Hazare, he seems to have done nothing to prevent it," a magazine later said of Manmohan Singh.¹

On the morning of August 16, as Anna and Kejriwal prepared to leave for the hunger strike, a large group of policemen circled the compound. When a supporter alerted Kejriwal of the news, he filmed a video of Anna calling on supporters to calmly court arrest if confronted by the police.² Then, Anna and Kejriwal left the premises and surrendered to the police. Soon the video was all over the social media and national television. Several thousand protesters took to the streets of Delhi and other Indian cities and over 1200 of them were detained by

¹ Jose, Vinod K. "Falling Man," *The Caravan*, October 01, 2011.

<http://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/falling-man>.

² Jeelani, Mehboob. "The Insurgent," *The Caravan*, September 01, 2011.

<http://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/insurgent>.

the police.³ The government faced severe backlash from every quarter for its handling of the situation.⁴

Though the police passed an order to release Anna, he refused to leave without the permission to fast indefinitely. In the interim, he started his hunger strike for a 'strong' Lokpal Bill in prison itself.⁵ All along, the crowd outside the prison, where Anna was kept in custody, swelled and chanted slogans against the government. After three days of wrangling, Anna agreed to leave prison when the government yielded and allowed him to stage a 15-day fast. IAC's campaign to delegitimize the government in the public had possibly been lent the biggest helping hand by the Congress itself.^{6 7}

Once the situation went out of control, the 'professionals', as Singh and some of his ministers were referred to within party circles due to their non-political background, were cast aside in favour of Pranab Mukherjee, an adroit politician. Singh's reputation as a Prime Minister seemed to have reached a new low. "What was it, if it wasn't a public snub, that Manmohan Singh had to hand over the political leadership to Pranab because he wasn't capable of defending his own colleague's blunders?" a party functionary reportedly said.⁸

A view from the balcony

As the movement retained centre stage, the voices commentating on the Anna movement seemed to grow louder.

The New York Times reported that Anna and his advisers had proved to be adept politically: they had outsmarted the government, exploited the nonstop media coverage, and used the internet strategically to connect with the young population.⁹ In praise of the movement, the paper said, "For more than 40 years, reformers and other agitators have tried to cleanse India of corruption. They have staged demonstrations, candlelight vigils and protest marches... Different attempts have been made to approve such an agency [Lokpal] since a first effort in 1968, but these efforts have failed to capture the public imagination enough to bring pressure for change."¹⁰

A best-selling Indian author wrote that the movement had witnessed unprecedented support and a people who were used to saying "Nothing will ever change in this country" were now coming forward and saying "I am the change." Anna's *topi*, i.e. cap, had become a fashion statement and youth were seen openly sporting *topis* and T-shirts that said "I am Anna."^{11 12}

³ Yardley, Jim. "Leader of Corruption Protest Arrested in India," *The New York Times*, August 16, 2011.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/17/world/asia/17india.html>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Jeelani, Mehboob. "The Insurgent," *The Caravan*, September 01, 2011.

<http://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/insurgent>.

⁷ Yardley, Jim. "Deal Would Free Indian Activist and Allow Protests," *The New York Times*, August 17, 2011.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/18/world/asia/18india.html>.

⁸ Jose, Vinod K. "Falling Man," *The Caravan*, October 01, 2011.

<http://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/falling-man>.

⁹ Yardley, Jim. "Unlikely Echo of Gandhi Inspires Indians to Act," *The New York Times*, August 18, 2011.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/19/world/asia/19hazare.html>.

¹⁰ Yardley, Jim. "With Yoga and Fasting, Graft Fighters Shake India," *The New York Times*, June 02, 2011.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/03/world/asia/03india.html>.

¹¹ "Anna Hazare 'topi' becomes fashion statement," *The Economic Times*, August 27, 2011.

<http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/>.

He criticized the government for introducing “a lame, impotent bill of its own which covered only 0.5% of the government's officers, and disincentivised whistle-blowers.” The author opined that the contribution of the movement went beyond the Lokpal Bill itself, and included the mass infusion of morality in the youth.¹³

A renowned historian, while praising Anna for being “courageous, independent-minded, [and] willing to stake his life for a principle,” said that though the crowds in the movement never exceeded 50,000, the media was presenting a very different story. He also suggested that Anna’s understanding of corruption remained that of a village patriarch.¹⁴ In the 1990s, Anna had imposed a ban on liquor, tobacco, and even cable TV in his village, and encouraged public flogging of anyone found violating the rules. Referring to this, the historian remarked, “A benign patriarch can bring about improvements in a small community. But a nation’s problems cannot be solved by a Super-Cop.”¹⁵

Critics accused IAC of using political blackmail to insist on the enactment of their version of the bill.¹⁶ NCPRI once again rejected IAC’s version of the Lokpal and sent its own draft to a parliamentary committee that was examining the bill. NCPRI members said that setting deadlines for the passage of bills was undemocratic, whose essence was “holding wide-ranging consultations and discussions, allowing for dissent and evolving a consensus,” and that mobilising several thousand people did not “give anyone the right to appropriate Parliament’s functioning.”¹⁷

NCPRI clarified that it did not represent the government and described the official Lokpal Bill as “weak, inadequate and dangerous in places.” “The problem is Arvind is not in agreement with what the majority of us feel should be the profile of the Lokpal. So he feels that he’s the only one who has a clear idea of what it should be,” a senior member of NCPRI told a reporter.¹⁸

In a scathing article, a famous writer-turned-activist asked, “Who is he really, this new saint, this Voice of the People? Oddly enough we've heard him say nothing about things of urgent concern. Nothing about the farmer's suicides in his neighbourhood...”¹⁹ She went on to question his secular credentials and dismissed IAC’s version of the Lokpal, saying “Except for the fact that it won't have its own prisons, it will function as an independent

¹² Ghosal, Aniruddha. “Brand Anna is a rage: Youth wear him on T-shirts,” *The Times of India*, August 19, 2011.

http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-08-19/delhi/29904418_1_anna-hazare-t-shirts-tshirts.

¹³ Bhagat, Chetan. “Anna Hazare's fight for change has inspired millions of Indians,” *The Guardian*, August 17, 2011.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/aug/17/anna-hazare-arrest-inspired-indians?intcmp=239>.

¹⁴ Guha, Ramachandra. “A patriarch for the nation?,” *The Telegraph*, August 27, 2011.

http://www.telegraphindia.com/1110827/jsp/opinion/story_14423092.jsp.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ramaseshan, Radhika. “Hazare runs into civil society protest,” *The Telegraph*, August 20, 2011.

http://www.telegraphindia.com/1110821/jsp/nation/story_14404408.jsp.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Jeelani, Mehboob. “The Insurgent,” *The Caravan*, September 01, 2011.

<http://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/insurgent>.

¹⁹ “Anna Hazare is not secular: Arundhati Roy,” *The Times of India*, August 23, 2011.

<http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/>.

administration, meant to counter the bloated, unaccountable, corrupt one that we already have”²⁰ and described the movement as “copy book World Bank agenda.”²¹

Another possible shortcoming of the movement was its support base. IAC drew support largely from the middle-class and the youth, the demographic groups often dismissed as politically irrelevant. Muslims and lower-caste Hindus felt excluded and raised concerns about possible ties between the movement and right-wing Hindu groups.²² “By and large, there is a great deal of concern with the nature of the movement,” said Zoya Hasan, a political scientist at the Jawaharlal Nehru University. However, there was general consensus that the issue was important and the government had not done enough, she added.²³

Non-binding commitment

As Anna continued his fast outside prison, the support continued to increase. Over 100,000 protesters gathered at the venue on August 21, while over 50,000 marched in Mumbai to show their support for the movement.²⁴ Anna called on his supporters to surround the houses of ministers and parliamentarians to increase the pressure and set August 30 as the deadline for the government to pass the bill. Popular film celebrities openly backed Anna, as religious leaders engaged with the BJP to garner its support for the bill.²⁵

The Information and Broadcasting Minister asked the media to remain unbiased in its coverage. “I appeal to the media to try and realise its strength. If this strength is misused or utilised in propagating only one-sided views, then the nation may suffer,” she said.²⁶

As the fast reached its eighth day, the question of how to defuse the situation remained. In a private letter to Anna, the Prime Minister requested him to end the fast. Singh also offered to send IAC’s Lokpal Bill to the parliamentary committee for a more detailed examination. The next day, when Singh offered to debate all versions of the Lokpal Bill in Parliament,²⁷ Anna asked the PM to start the debate the following morning.²⁸ He also put forward three provisions in the bill to end his fast – inclusion of the complete bureaucracy under the

²⁰ Roy, Arundhati. “I’d rather not be Anna,” *The Hindu*, August 21, 2011.

<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/id-rather-not-be-anna/article2379704.ece>.

²¹ “Jan Lokpal Bill regressive: Arundhati Roy,” *The Hindu*, August 30, 2011.

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/jan-lokpal-bill-regressive-arundhati-roy/article2412518.ece>.

²² Yardley, Jim. “Victorious Hunger Striker Shakes a Political Status Quo,” *The New York Times*, August 28, 2011.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/29/world/asia/29india.html>.

²³ Yardley, Jim. “Many in India See Danger in Hunger Striker’s Anticorruption Plan,” *The New York Times*, August 23, 2011.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/24/world/asia/24india.html>.

²⁴ “Thousands march in Mumbai for Hazare,” *Zee News*, August 21, 2011.

http://zeenews.india.com/news/maharashtra/thousands-march-in-mumbai-for-hazare_727494.html.

²⁵ “Sri Sri Ravishankar meets NDA leaders, solicits support for Hazare’s demands,” *The Times of India*, August 22, 2011.

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/>.

²⁶ “Lokpal logjam: Ambika Soni asks media to be objective, impartial,” *The Times of India*, August 26, 2011.

<http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/>.

²⁷ “PM’s new offer to Anna Hazare: Let’s debate all versions of Lokpal bill,” *The Times of India*, August 25, 2011.

http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-08-25/india/29925998_1_lokpal-bill-team-anna-debate.

²⁸ “Lokpal Bill: Anna Hazare demands debate in Parliament from Friday,” *The Times of India*, August 25, 2011.

http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-08-25/india/29926447_1_anna-hazare-lokpal-bill-parliament.

purview of the Lokpal, mechanism for grievance redressal within the same bill, and establishment of Lokayuktas in all states along the lines of the Lokpal.

The breakthrough finally came when Parliament unanimously accepted some of his demands in a non-binding 'sense of the house' vote. The resolution was forwarded to the parliamentary panel examining the bill. The bill itself was to be taken up in the next session of Parliament. On August 28, Anna accepted juice from a 5-year old girl to symbolize the end of his fast.²⁹ In a clear message to the protesters, he said, "We have to continue to carry the torch of this struggle for change."³⁰ Political analysts, however, wondered whether the support could be marshalled into a sustained movement.

²⁹ Yardley, Jim. "Anna Hazare Ends Hunger Strike as Indian Parliament Agrees to His Demands," *The New York Times*, August 27, 2011.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/28/world/asia/28india.html>.

³⁰ Yardley, Jim. "Victorious Hunger Striker Shakes a Political Status Quo," *The New York Times*, August 28, 2011.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/29/world/asia/29india.html>.