

India parliament under pressure to end corruption stand-off

Reuters

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NEW DELHI, Aug 27 — India's parliament prepared for a special session today to debate anti-corruption proposals demanded by a self-styled Gandhian activist whose 12-day hunger strike has gained the support of millions and forced the hand of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's besieged government.

The campaign by 74-year-old Anna Hazare has struck a chord with millions of Indians tired of endemic corruption, sparking nationwide protests and exposing the ruling Congress party as out-of-touch with voters and bereft of political capital.

Lawmakers across party lines have pleaded with Hazare to end a fast that has seen tens of thousands flock to his protest site in the capital and paralysed a chamber slated to debate important economic reforms and tackle high inflation.

Parliament will debate Hazare's demand to create an anti-corruption agency from 11:00 a.m. (0530 GMT), but disagreements over the scope of its power mean a resolution that would see the activist end his fast may be unlikely as worries over his health grow.

India's lower chamber is under intense pressure to reach a consensus on his demands, which include bringing civil servants under the bill's ambit, ensuring similar agencies at a state level and the creation of a citizen's charter.

"I have a fervent hope that he does (cease his fast today). We have scheduled discussions today as a special day," parliamentary affairs minister Pawan Bansal told CNN-IBN.

"The concerns are being addressed ... (but) every law to be made has to be made in the parliament."

"It's the twelfth day of my fast, but I've been noticing that night and day all of you are supporting me here for the Janlokalpal bill, and the entire nation have stood up for this cause," Hazare, visibly weak, told thousands of supporters from a stage in the centre of New Delhi.

A decision to hospitalise the activist, whose blood pressure has fallen and pulse rate has increased, would be taken this afternoon, his doctor told reporters today.

The ruling Congress party is increasingly desperate to end a crisis that has tarnished the reputation of Singh, with a bellwether election in India's biggest state this year and a general election in 2014 to fight.

Singh and other senior ministers, taken by surprise by the scale of the public unrest, have abandoned a hardline approach to Hazare and in recent days have scrambled to appease the activist, who has lost over 7 kg (15.4 lbs) and appears increasingly frail.

Congress, seen by many in an increasingly youthful India as an aged party either incapable of or indifferent to tackling graft, wants a swift resolution as Hazare's diminishing health could force authorities to force-feed him, a move that would make them appear even more

disconnected from public opinion.

"We are all aware that corruption is pervasive. It operates at every level," Congress party scion Rahul Gandhi told parliament yesterday.

"In the last few months, Anna has helped the people to articulate this same sentiment (against corruption). I thank him for that."

But Hazare, who has stressed his intent to die in order to create an umbrella agency to investigate graft throughout politics, has come under growing criticism from some quarters that he is holding an elected parliament hostage.

Several scandals linked to the government, including a bribery scam involving the sale of telecom spectrum that may have cost the state up to \$39 billion in lost revenues, led to Hazare's latest protest. — Reuters

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