

**Indian activist Hazare to launch public fast**  
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NEW DELHI, Aug 18 — A popular Indian anti-graft campaigner won a bitter fight against Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to hold a two-week public fast from today, stepping up the pressure on the government to show a restive nation it can tackle rampant corruption.

Anna Hazare, a 74-year-old Gandhian-style campaigner, was arrested on Tuesday, hours ahead of a planned fast until death for tougher laws against graft, sparking nationwide protests and putting the government on the backfoot as he stayed in jail.

"None of us is looking at this as a victory," Kiran Bedi, a former police officer and widely respected figure for her anti-graft drive, told Times Now television after helping negotiate permission for Hazare's public fast in the capital.

"We are not playing games. We are doing this to move the country forward," Bedi, who had herself also been briefly arrested.

The government, facing spontaneous protests by tens of thousands of people across Indian cities and villages, was forced to release Hazare, but he refused to leave the Tihar jail until he won the right to lead an anti-corruption protest.

Crowds outside the jail erupted in joy at news of the deal, reached early today shouting his name "Anna" and "we are with you," singing, playing guitar and waving the Indian flag. He is expected to go to the protest ground at 3pm.

A medical team is on standby to monitor Hazare's health, and a sharp deterioration could further worsen the crisis for the government.

A beleaguered Singh and his government had appeared at a loss over how to end the standoff and failing to grasp the mounting anger from India's growing urban middle class.

"It exposes how far removed the Manmohan Singh-led government is from popular sentiment. Were elections to be held today, the UPA (Congress party-led coalition) would have struggled to hold on to power," The Times of India said in an editorial. The next national polls are in 2014.

The arrest and sudden about-turn to release Hazare appeared to confirm a widespread feeling Singh's government is cornered, clumsy and too riddled with scandal to govern Asia's third-largest economy effectively.

The focus now turns from the arrest to the fight against corruption, proving headaches for the government for weeks to come. Critics of Hazare say his fast amounts to blackmailing the government and is undemocratic.

A weak political opposition means that the government should still survive the crisis, but it could further dim the prospect for economic reforms that have already been held back by policy paralysis and a raft of corruption scandals.

The squat and slight rural social activist fasted in prison as tens of thousands of his followers yesterday gathered at key locations in Delhi, including outside the jail, and at the

symbolic India Gate.

His arrest, followed by the brief arrests of about 2,600 followers in the capital alone, shocked many in a country with strong memories of Gandhi's independence battles against colonial rule with fasts and non-violent protests.

Spurred on by messages on social networking sites, thousands of people held peaceful candle-light vigils through the night from the capital Delhi to the IT hub Hyderabad.

Singh, 78, who is widely criticised as out of touch, dismissed the fast by Hazare as "totally misconceived," sparking outrage as lawmakers cried "shame."

"We don't have faith in our government," said Sujeet, a young software engineer from the IT city of Gurgaon, as he protested at the tourist site of India Gate in the capital. "We are living in a democracy but only in letter, not in spirit."

Many of the crowd were young, with rucksacks on their backs, some with their faces painted. Others were older, decked out in outfits as worn by the bespectacled Hazare, with his trademark white cap and kurta, a long-time social activist who is often compared to independence leader Mahatma Gandhi.

Demonstrations are part of daily life in the towns and cities of India, a country of 1.2 billion people made up of a myriad of castes, religions and classes. But spontaneous and widespread protests are rare and the scale of this week's outpouring of public fury has taken the government by surprise.

Hazare became the unlikely thorn in the side of the Congress party-led coalition when he went on hunger strike in April. He called off that fast after the government promised to introduce a bill creating an anti-corruption ombudsman.

The so-called Lokpal legislation was presented in early August, but activists slammed the draft version as toothless because the prime minister and judges were exempt from probes.

Corruption plagues all walks of life but over the past year an increasing number of company executives, opposition politicians, judges and ministers have been brought down. Still, Transparency International rates India in 87 place on the most corruption countries according to a 2010 survey.

"Corruption is such an integral part of Indian society that the chief economic adviser to the government, Kaushik Basu, has suggested legalizing the payment of bribes. He received enthusiastic corporate support, which is to be expected since the largest bribe-payers in India are corporations," wrote Manu Joseph, editor of Indian news magazine Open, in a New York Times piece. — Reuters

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