What India's current protests mean, and what they do not



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For decades, successive Indian governments have answered external critics with a familiar claim: whatever their flaws, whether corruption, patronage, or communal tensions, India is the world's largest democracy where elections are free and fair, power changes hands legitimately, and so the government reflects the people's aspirations. The protests now brewing in Delhi and elsewhere strike at the heart of that claim by targeting the very man who oversees elections: Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar. Protesters want him to resign over a controversial voter-roll revision that has removed 13 crore names across the country, which critics say has benefitted the ruling BJP unfairly. The Election Commission, meanwhile, says it is removing only "duplicate and ineligible" entries.

The pressure grew after it was revealed that Kumar's two fellow commissioners had formally raised concerns at least 14 times in 10 months. The commission describes this as "a normal part of deliberation" and, like BJP, denies wrongdoing. The Supreme Court has sought the commission's response but has not suspended Kumar. Whatever the merits of the competing claims, the dispute has moved from a policy disagreement to a crisis of confidence in the election referee, and when millions doubt the impartiality of that referee, it is hard to fix. This is what makes this second phase of the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) protests seem far more significant than the first.

The first phase, which saw education minister Dharmendra Pradhan forced to resign over exam paper leaks, looks mild beside what is unfolding now. At that time, CJP founder Abhijeet Dipke distanced the movement from the uprisings in Nepal and Bangladesh, pledging to keep dissent within the bounds of India's constitution. The mood has since hardened, and the opposition has now moved from the sidelines to the front rows. Rahul Gandhi, the leader of the opposition, was detained three times in two days last week, once while leading nearly 300 INDIA bloc MPs towards Jantar Mantar. He has also called for the election chief to be tried for treason. Mamata Banerjee, who lost power in West Bengal in May, has vowed that her movement will continue until Kumar goes, while her Trinamool Congress (TMC) party is joining forces with its old rival, the CPM, against him. Even Bollywood, long wary of crossing the government, is showing up. Prakash Raj has emerged as a prominent figure in the movement, Imran Khan was among those detained, and Shabana Azmi, Naseeruddin Shah, and Vishal Dadlani joined the CJP's October 2 rally at Mumbai's Shivaji Park. A movement that began as a youth-led campaign is becoming a broader platform of resistance cutting across political, cultural, and generational lines.

The government's response has, perhaps unsurprisingly, increasingly echoed the playbook Bangladesh witnessed in July-August 2024. On Saturday, Delhi was effectively locked down. Dozens of metro stations were shut, and mobile internet was suspended in the central business district. According to an estimate, around 3,000 people have been detained so far, while Dipke and two colleagues were taken off a plane upon arrival. Popular YouTuber Dhruv Rathee was also picked up from his home in Gurgaon. They were later released. At a special sitting on Sunday, the Supreme Court directed that metro and rail services as well as internet access resume normal operation and that peaceful protesters not be illegally detained, subject to law-and-order conditions.

The political rhetoric has also followed the same pattern as Bangladesh. On October 2, BJP legislator Parinay Fuke alleged that Naxalites and leftist groups were behind the protests and wanted to create "Bangladesh-like chaos" to overthrow the government. Some commentators even dismissed the "cockroach" movement as a "farce", built on what they see as the myth of Gen Z revolutions in Bangladesh and Nepal. During Bangladesh's uprising, the UN human rights office documented internet shutdowns timed to prevent protesters from organising, and estimated that as many as 1,400 people were killed between July 1 and August 15, 2024. Nothing on that lethal scale has occurred in Delhi, of course. But the use of pre-emptive shutdowns, mass detentions, communication restrictions, and accusations of foreign-inspired subversion is recognisably similar.

Still, India is not Bangladesh or Nepal, and the parallel should not be pushed too far. Bangladesh's movement hardened into a one-point demand for the Awami League government's exit only after the state responded to protests over the quota system with live fire. Nothing comparable has happened in India. India's huge size and scale also factor in this: there is no single pressure point, as its federal structure disperses power, and BJP governs in so many states that turmoil in one or even a few cities would not bring its administrative machinery to a halt. But there is a "but," and it lies in the ballot box. In the 2024 general election, Narendra Modi's BJP lost its parliamentary majority and has since governed with the help of coalition partners. If the opposition sustains its protests, and doubts about voter rolls and other institutions keep gnawing at public confidence, BJP may find it much harder to retain power in 2029. The controversy has already cast a shadow over some of the party's recent electoral conquests.

In West Bengal, for example, where BJP won 207 of 294 seats in May and ended the Trinamool Congress's 15-year rule, more than 90 lakh names, disproportionately from TMC strongholds and Muslim-majority constituencies, were removed under the same revision. An analysis by Scroll found that in 105 BJP-won seats, the number of deleted voters exceeded the winning margin, suggesting that restoration of their votership could have delivered a different result. This, however, could not be the only deciding factor, with survey company C-Voter's Yashwant Deshmukh also attributing the swing to disillusionment with Banerjee's rule. Still, this is the kind of doubt that a credible election commission exists to prevent. Protesters are fighting to ensure that the election process remains fair and inclusive, and the government's attempt to cast them as agents of chaos only reinforces their argument.

This again brings us to the most curious part of Delhi's response: the attempt to use alleged foreign interference as a weapon against protesters. In Bangladesh, National Citizen Party Convener Nahid Islam has issued a statement expressing solidarity with India's youth, saying their struggle "is not yours alone" and urging the authorities to release detained protesters and respect peaceful assembly. NCP spokesperson Asif Mahmud has separately condemned the detention of YouTuber Dhruv Rathee and Dipke. Certain sections of the Indian media, along with some senior BJP leaders, have seized on this as proof of a "foreign hand." It is hard not to find this a little laughable. During Bangladesh's uprising, many Indians—including students, writers, and commentators—stood in solidarity with the protesters. Rathee, now one of the most recognisable faces of the Indian protests, made several videos in support of Bangladesh at the time. Solidarity between young people across borders is not a conspiracy. It is what happens when people recognise a familiar struggle.

The questions that brought thousands onto the streets in India are locally grounded: how voter rolls have been revised, why two commissioners voiced objections, whether the process has been thoroughly transparent, and whether the man at the centre of the controversy should remain in office. These questions will be answered, or not, by Indian courts, institutions and, eventually, voters. Pointing at outside influences is just a cynical attempt to discredit the protesters and evade accountability for the questions they are raising.



PHOTO: **AFP**

Supporters of India's opposition Congress party scuffle with security personnel during a protest march demanding the resignation of the country's chief election commissioner over alleged voter roll irregularities linked to the Special Intensive Revision (SIR), in New Delhi on October 12, 2026.

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Navi Pillay's Nobel win and the conveniently selective conscience of international law



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■ MIND THE GAP

■ NOSHIN NAWAL

A world that celebrates international justice while punishing the institutions entrusted with delivering it is profoundly dishonest. On October 9, South African jurist Navi Pillay was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for a lifetime devoted to human rights and international law. On that same day, the United States imposed sanctions on the International Criminal Court (ICC), where Pillay had once served as a judge. One institution was honouring the pursuit of accountability while one of the world's most powerful governments makes that pursuit considerably more difficult.

The contradiction is almost too convenient. But before US President Donald Trump occupies yet another international headline, it is worth considering the woman whose work has brought us to this moment. Navanethem Pillay was born in Durban in 1941, when South Africa was already governed by racial segregation, later formalised under Apartheid. As a woman of Indian descent, she entered a legal profession that was hardly designed to accommodate her. In 1967, she established her own practice in Natal, becoming the province's first woman to do so. She represented anti-Apartheid activists and fought for the rights of political prisoners, including challenging the conditions under which Nelson Mandela and others were held.

We find this chapter of her career particularly important because it complicates the comforting assumption that the law is inherently just. Apartheid was not simply a collection of prejudices enforced by violent men. It was a system sustained through legislation, courts, administrative decisions and the machinery of the state. Discrimination had paperwork. Oppression had statutory authority. A lawyer confronting Apartheid was therefore not merely fighting unlawful conduct. She was confronting laws that had made injustice perfectly legal. That distinction should trouble anyone who believes that legality alone confers legitimacy.

Pillay later became the first non-white woman appointed to South Africa's High Court in 1995. But her contribution to international jurisprudence became especially significant at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, where she served as a judge and subsequently president. In 1998, the tribunal delivered its landmark judgment in Prosecutor v Jean-Paul Akayesu. For the first time, an international tribunal recognised that rape and sexual violence could constitute acts of genocide when committed with the requisite intent to destroy a protected group. Pillay was one of the judges who decided the case.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of this development. For generations, the rape of women during armed conflict had been documented, condemned and then pushed to the periphery of legal accountability. The suffering was acknowledged, but its relationship to the destruction of entire communities was inadequately recognised. The Akayesu judgment helped change that. What makes this jurisprudence especially consequential is that it required international criminal law to recognise violence against women not as an incidental tragedy of war, but as conduct capable of forming part of genocide itself. It also exposed how supposedly universal legal systems had historically reflected deeply selective understandings of whose suffering mattered.

Pillay's subsequent appointments to the ICC and as United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights extended her influence beyond the courtroom. More recently, she chaired the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel. The Commission's findings concerning Gaza, including its conclusion that Israel has committed genocide, attracted fierce criticism and rejection from Israel. These conclusions must be distinguished from a final judicial determination by the International Court of Justice. A UN commission of inquiry is not a criminal court, and its findings do not establish individual criminal guilt. Yet the controversy surrounding its work raises a question that deserves a serious answer: should the willingness to investigate alleged international crimes depend upon the political identity of those accused?

The answer cannot change according to the flag. The United States has long maintained objections to aspects of the ICC's jurisdiction, particularly concerning nationals of countries that have not joined the Rome Statute. Those concerns are not automatically frivolous. International criminal jurisdiction raises difficult questions about consent, sovereignty and the limits of treaty-based institutions. Lawyers should engage with those arguments rather than dismiss them. But jurisdictional disagreement is one thing. Economic sanctions designed to constrain a judicial institution are quite another. If a government believes that a court has exceeded its authority, the appropriate response is to challenge its legal reasoning and jurisdiction. Punishing the institution, its personnel, or those who assist its work risks substituting economic coercion for legal argument.

The distinction matters because the ICC is already structurally vulnerable. It has no independent police force and depends on states to execute arrest warrants and cooperate with investigations. Its jurisdiction is limited, and its enforcement record reflects persistent inequalities in international power. Those weaknesses warrant reform and scrutiny. They do not make political interference by any country defensible.

On October 9, Canada, Denmark, Germany, France, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom issued a joint statement opposing American sanctions and reaffirming their support for the ICC. Their intervention was welcome, but statements are the easier part of defending the rule of law. The more demanding question is whether these governments will consistently support international accountability when investigations concern their own allies, military partnerships, or diplomatic interests.

This is where international law faces its most damaging credibility problem. States frequently insist upon universal principles while treating their application as negotiable. Sovereignty becomes sacred when scrutiny approaches home, but remarkably flexible when another country is under investigation. Accountability is celebrated as a civilisational achievement until it acquires inconvenient political consequences. Pillay's Nobel Peace Prize should therefore provoke more than admiration for an exceptional legal career. Her work, from Apartheid South Africa to Rwanda and the contemporary scrutiny of alleged atrocities, illustrates why international justice cannot be reduced to the preferences of governments. Courts and investigative bodies must be judged by their legal authority, evidence and procedures, not by whether their conclusions are diplomatically palatable.

We do not believe international law is beyond criticism. Its selective enforcement, dependence on state cooperation and limited ability to restrain powerful actors are serious defects. But the response to unequal justice cannot be to weaken the institutions that might eventually make justice more equal. The real question raised by Pillay's Nobel is not whether the world admires her commitment to accountability. It is whether that commitment survives when accountability becomes politically expensive. Because a legal order that prosecutes the powerless while negotiating exemptions for the powerful is not yet a universal system of justice. It is a hierarchy with a law degree.



An illustration of Peace Prize laureate Navanethem 'Navi' Pillay after the announcement of the Nobel Peace Prize for 2026 at the Norwegian Nobel Institute in Oslo, Norway on October 9. PHOTO: **REUTERS**