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Defying the Modus Operandi: Anna Hazare, Corruption and Politics in India

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CHRIS OGDEN, SEP 12 2011

Evoking the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi, Anna Hazare's anti-graft campaign has personified a core national concern in India against endemic corruption and its consequences. As his campaign has quickly amassed huge (and often spontaneous) popular nationwide support, India's government has been forced to confront an issue that has been an entrenched part of everyday life from the highest to lowest echelons of Indian society. Through mass rallies, his recent 12-day hunger strike and a head-on attack on India's politicians, Hazare's anti-corruption movement has highlighted a core concern that unites Indians across multiple social, religious, political, regional and linguistic divides.

The corruption debate has also increasingly gained an international angle, shedding a progressively negative light on the activities of (national and multinational) corporations in India, and their often bribery-fuelled relationships with politicians. So large is the problem of this confluence that it is now threatening India's economic growth, by concurrently denting foreign investor confidence and, most critically, slowly blackening the nation's international reputation and standing. How India's government at the centre has reacted to Hazare (changing from initial ignorance to co-option and then to arrest, followed by a mixture of prevarication and backtracking) is indicative of the centrality as well as complexity of the corruption issue.

India has recently become engulfed by a series of high profile corruption cases. Last November, the chief minister of Maharashtra (India's richest state) resigned after it became clear that he had allegedly allowed homes intended for India's war widows to be taken by retired generals and politicians. At the same time, senior officials involved in the organization of the Commonwealth Games held in Delhi in 2010 were arrested on charges of forging contracts. This followed the resignation of the Games Treasurer who had stepped down concerning charges of nepotism. In January 2011, the Games' organizing committee chief, Suresh Kalmadi, left his post also over corruption charges. In August, a government audit assessed that from an original budget of £166 million, the Games had finally cost £2.5 billion and raised a paltry £23 million in revenue.

Then, this February, Andimuthu Raja, India's Telecommunications Minister, was arrested on charges of selling national mobile licenses for a fraction of their real value. Said to have lost the government revenues somewhere in the region of £24 billion, the scandal quickly spread to other high-profile individuals. These included the Textile Minister Dayanidhi Madan, as well as several state ministers. Other scandals have also publically exploded – such as illegal mining in Karnataka that forced its chief minister, BS Yeddyurappa, to resign. Events reached their ludicrous nadir in March, when India's anti-corruption chief, PJ Thomas, was forced to resign due to corruption charges. Involving politicians of all hues (from the ruling Congress Party and their coalition partners, to the opposition BJP), corruption has emerged as the *modus operandi* of India's elites.

It was within this atmosphere that Hazare's movement began to gain ground. The confrontation began back in April, when Hazare, a long-time social activist and reformer, started a hunger strike to pressure the Indian government to discuss their proposed *Lokpal* (Ombudsman) Bill. Demanding a more equitable *Jan Lokpal* (Citizens' Ombudsman) Bill, Hazare broke his fast after four days and was drafted in to help in the Bill's discussion and formulation. However, despite a new draft of the *Lokpal* Bill being produced in August, Hazare and his supporters deemed it to be

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insubstantial (in particular, citing the inability of any new ombudsman to investigate or prosecute politicians or senior judges). This led to his promise of another hunger strike, and then his arrest, after he ignored police requests to not leave his home. It was the spark that set off a wave of protest across the country.

As support spread, what had began as a series of scandals at the top of the political system now personified the day-to-day realities of India's citizens. For the majority of the population, this meant being accustomed to having to bribe their way through the country's bureaucratic labyrinth from officials to police, no matter how lowly. Growing social inequalities courtesy of two decades of increasingly liberal economics only compounded these perspectives, as the gap between those benefiting and those left behind by reform has become much more visible. In these ways, Hazare had enunciated the widespread frustration felt across India, as evidenced by his huge popular following. However, the potency of the anti-corruption movement, although widely acknowledged and supported, has far from clear ramifications.

First, there is the issue of the power of any new bill, which has been criticized for being overtly authoritarian in that it gives a non-elected individual jurisdiction over elected officials and bureaucrats. Such powers are in part resultant from Hazare's protest. At the same time, while there will be (hoped for) powers to prosecute politicians, there will be no new regulatory powers to allow for the investigation or prosecution of corruption present at other societal levels; in particular lower level bureaucrats but also against those working in business, the media and NGOs. This dichotomy suggests underlying pro-capitalist and pro-corporatist leanings in both the original bill but also from Hazare himself whose *Jan Lokpal* bill and amendment demands have only focused upon politicians. Collectively, these observations raise the spectre of any bill failing to properly address the real issue of endemic corruption across India at all levels. At this point it is worth noting that while Hazare's protest has ended (for now), the bill has yet to be passed.

Second, the power of the bill and the need for an untainted and apolitical figure as the first ombudsman (if such a figure exists) raises important questions concerning some of Anna Hazare's main supporters, who in political terms have primarily come from the ranks of Hindu nationalism. Although they have not taken a central role in the campaign due to their own associations with corruption, the BJP (as the political wing of Hindu nationalism) has much to gain if the anti-graft movement can be steered into an anti-government movement. Following a big loss in the last general elections in 2009 (when the Congress Party nearly succeeded in getting an outright majority after two decades of coalition politics), the BJP as India's premier Opposition party stands to profit if the current wave of anti-corruption sentiment presages the fall of Manmohan Singh's government. In the 1970s, it was the prominence of several political scandals involving the then-ruling Congress Party (some of which were corruption-fuelled), which helped the BJP to emerge as a strong national political force. Although more nuanced and complex (and explicitly involving the BJP at the margins), the current climate does reflect a powerful precedent that points to their repeated resurgence. The BJP will make much of Congress' association with corruption in future elections.

Third, despite the rhetoric and posters, it is critical to recognize some intrinsic differences between Hazare and the much vaunted similarities with Mahatma Gandhi. While the fasting, non-violent and moral power of recent protests can resemble Gandhian campaigns, Hazare is not targeting an external, occupying and imperialist power but the democratically elected Indian government. By insisting upon his own *Jan Lokpal* Bill, Hazare has to a tried to supplant parliamentary debate and law-making. Such extra-constitutional behavior has led many commentators to argue that through fasting he is effectively blackmailing the government. His aggressive and provocative calls to surround the Prime Minister's residence only added to this feeling. Here India's politicians must balance between recognising the veracity of his claims but also acknowledging that no extra-political force can force through their demands. On one hand, if the government fails to respond adequately enough to calls for reform, it may presage further widespread protest and disruption. On the other, it cannot appear to give in to the demands of a mass movement, as this could erode its legitimacy and create a dangerous precedent.

Fourth, the current anti-corruption movement also reminds us of the powerful potential of civil society in India. If mobilized along a clear, succinct and common theme, the Indian population can respond in a formidable manner. Spontaneous nationwide protests point to this reality, as did the initial reaction of the Indian government in arresting Hazare and thousands of his supporters. The movement is greatly feared by the ruling classes, both for its scale but also the specificity of its target. An engrained historical legacy of mass communal and majoritarian politics in India

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underlines this significance. The government has been willing to act in a draconian manner but moreover their subsequent freeing of Hazare and the inclusion of his policies in the Bill also indicates weakness and indecision at the centre regarding the most appropriate response. Simply falling in with the most recent popular tide or trend is not a responsible or far-sighted way to govern, especially in a state that is undergoing significant and accelerating social and economic change.

Finally, there is the question of changing international perspectives concerning India. Billed as the world's largest democracy, the wave of corruption scandals has the potential to corrode this reputation. In another scandal, four MPs were recently charged with accepting bribes to vote in favour of India's controversial nuclear deal with the US in 2008. Earlier tension over the deal had led to Congress losing the support of their Communist partners, nearly ending in the downfall of their coalition government. This behavior hardly befits India's aspiration to become a responsible great power in the international system. Corruption also has further serious international implications, as it reduces the confidence of multinational corporations to invest in India, which could stall or reduce India's current high economic growth. In the short term, this may threaten the legitimacy of the current Congress-led government, leading to the possible return to power of the more radical politics of the BJP. In the long term, failing to deal with corruption could irrevocably derail India's passage from a developing to developed state and consign her second tier, rather than great power, status in the international system.

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Chris Ogden is Lecturer in Asian Security at the University of St Andrews. His research interests concern the relationship between national identity, security and domestic politics in East Asia (primarily China) and South Asia (primarily India), as well as the analytical uses of social psychology in International Relations.

About the author:

Chris Ogden is Senior Lecturer / Associate Professor in Asian Security at the School of International Relations, University of St Andrews. His latest book *Great Power Attributes: A Compendium of Historical Data* (Edinburgh: Fifth Hammer) can be downloaded for free [here](#).