

FROM NEET EXAM TO SIR CONTROVERSY: THE EMBOLDENING POLITICAL DISSENT IN INDIA

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do
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Introduction

After the successful July protests over NEET exam irregularities, India's capital New Delhi is in news for a fresh wave of protests. Students, political workers, civil society activists and common Indian citizens are demanding resignation of the country's Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar and an inquiry into the alleged partisan role of his office. Like the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP)-led movement of July 2026, the government authorities are using coercive means such as detentions, mass arrests, barricading popular protest sites, baton charge, and tear gas to dispel the protestors. This has yielded little results so far as the protests are growing; agitation is expanding across the country; and the opposition parties are gaining further strength to question the electoral transparency and challenge the Modi government more confidently.¹

The recent agitation is one of the most testing challenges the Modi government has faced since grabbing power in 2014. Whatever the outcomes, the movement is going to cast lasting impacts on the Indian democracy and politics.

¹ Yashraj Sharma, "Indian opposition defies lockdown, marches to demand Election Chief sacking," *Al Jazeera*, October 12, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2026/10/12/delhi-braces-for-more-protests-against-election-chief-amid-crackdown>.

How did the movement start?

The protestors, majority of them youths, are calling for the resignation of India's Chief Election Commissioner. The demand surfaced after a detailed report published in the Indian Express newspaper revealed that there was a rift among the three Election Commissioners primarily over the controversial Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls in several states.² The report reveals that, apart from Gyanesh Kumar, the two other Election Commissioners Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi had raised serious objections over SIR at various occasions. At 14 different times over 10 months, they questioned the decisions made and orders issued 'without their knowledge.' While complaining of being kept in dark on the voter list amendments, they labelled the whole practice as 'unauthorized and illegal.' Moreover, the two were also wary of New Delhi's direct involvement in controlling and manipulating the voter database while bypassing the state level ECI officials.

The story gives a perception that the Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar overstepped his constitutional role to work in cahoots with the BJP on SIR which disproportionately favored the party in various state elections such as in Bihar and West Bengal. While doing this, he kept his other two colleagues in total oblivion. This raised serious questions on neutrality and impartiality of the Election Commission, the already controversial exercise of the SIR, and transparency of the elections wherever SIR was conducted. The fresh protests are a reaction to these allegations.

What is SIR and why it matters?

The exercise of Special Intensive Revision in several Indian states was under scrutiny much before the Indian Express published this report. Starting from Bihar in June 2025, four months before legislative assembly elections in the state, the revision was aimed at refreshing voter lists by verifying the existing voters, removing names of the deceased or permanently shifted, while maintaining that no legitimate voter is left out.³ In November, this exercise was expanded to 12 states and regions across the country.⁴

² Ritika Chopra, "14 times in 10 months, two Election Commissioners objected on record to poll panel steps," *The Indian Express*, September 23, 2026, https://indianexpress.com/article/express-exclusive/election-commission-sir-14-objections-gyanesh-kumar-sukhbir-singh-sandhu-vivek-joshi-10889737/?ref=breaking_hp.

³ Rangarajan R, "Why has ECI initiated SIR of Bihar's electoral rolls?," *The Hindu*, July 8, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/bihar/why-are-bihars-electoral-rolls-being-revised-explained/article69779885.ece>.

⁴ "Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls begins in 12 states, Union Territories on November 4," *The Hindu*, November 4, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/special-intensive-revision-of-electoral-rolls-begins-in-12-states-union-territories-on-november-4/article70236552.ece>.

While at the hindsight the reasoning behind this process appears logical, the opposition parties and election watchdogs have long criticized it for several reasons. The number of deleted voters accumulatively touches approximately 130 million, with hundreds of thousand legitimate voters allegedly being left out. In West Bengal alone, roughly 9.1 million voters were struck off the list just weeks into the elections, not getting enough time to restore their voting right. The deletions were allegedly more intense in areas where communities were supposed to vote against the BJP candidates.⁵ The subsequent election results revealed narrow gap between the deleted votes and winning margins in several constituencies. A number of constituencies also witnessed the deletion ratio higher than winning margins.⁶ Media reports also suggest that those stripped off of voting rights in West Bengal state are being pressurized by the authorities to provide their citizenship proofs and thus living in constant fear.⁷ This raised eyebrows on the actual purpose behind SIR especially in the election-bound states where the BJP faced tough opposition. While there existed deserted voices and judicial appeals against the SIR irregularities, the investigative report by the Indian Express fueled the issue and protests erupted across the country.

The ECI Explanations

The Election Commission of India has multiple times attempted to distance itself from the allegations of SIR being weaponized in favor of the ruling party. The ECI's Press Release, issued immediately following the publication of the Indian Express investigation, claimed that the body had been functioning as per the Constitutional mandate, statutory rules, and institutional conventions, and that all its decisions including on SIR were taken unanimously.⁸ In its response, submitted to the Supreme Court in December 2025, the Commission had labelled the claims of mass voter deletion in West Bengal as 'exaggerated' and politically-motivated.⁹ While justifying the SIR as a constitutional

⁵ Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Aakash Hassan, "Millions in India stripped of vote before critical state election, as government seeks to 'purify' electoral roll," *The Guardian*, April 22, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/apr/22/india-west-bengal-state-elections-millions-stripped-of-vote>.

⁶ Dipu Rai, "The numbers behind Bengal's voter-roll cuts and election margins," *India Today*, May 7, 2026, <https://www.indiatoday.in/diu/story/west-bengal-voter-roll-deletions-exceeded-victory-margins-bjp-tmc-seats-2908321-2026-05-07>.

⁷ Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Shaikh Azizur Rahman, "'How do you explain the deletion of 130 million names?' Why Indian voters are on the streets," *The Guardian*, October 14, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/oct/14/india-protests-election-commission-gyanesh-kumar>.

⁸ "All decisions, including SIR, are the outcome of unanimous decisions of the full Commission: ECI," *Press Information Bureau*, September 23, 2026, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2313884®=48&lang=2>.

⁹ "ECI tells Supreme Court claims of mass voter deletion in Bengal are exaggerated," *Outlook India*, December 1, 2025, <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/eci-tells-supreme-court-claims-of-mass-voter-deletion-in-bengal-are-exaggerated>.

practice with decades-long history, this detailed response does not, however, address the question of mass deletion in certain constituencies of West Bengal.

Another clarification emerged in response to the recent protests, in which the ECI explained that 13.4 crore names were stripped of the voter rolls because they belonged to the person who come under ASDD category — *Absent, Shifted Permanently, Dead, Duplicate*. The ECI also claimed it was open to restore names of genuine voters using legal route.¹⁰

The ASDD formula, however, remains contested because, as media reports claim, hundreds of thousands of voters, especially in far of areas of West Bengal and Bihar, do not have substantial documentary proofs of their belonging. Similarly, those temporarily migrated to big cities and developed states for financial reasons complain of either not being given sufficient time to return to their hometowns for SIR or that they risk losing wages and jobs if they travel back home.¹¹

The political opposition, civil society, and youth groups, remain firm on their stance that the SIR was staged to disproportionately favor the ruling party. Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, while claiming the SIR to be a 'vote-theft' arrangement, accuses Prime Minister Modi of planning, Union Home Minister Amit Shah of implementing, and CEC Kumar of operationalizing it.¹² The brutal suppression of mass protests is further fueling public anger.

International Voices on the Issue

Prominent international media outlets have developed keen interest in the politics of electoral rolls since the SIR surfaced in the mid-2025. After the controversial results of SIR in West Bengal were out, media forums such as *The Guardian*, *Al Jazeera*, *BBC*, and *Reuters* published detailed reports covering various aspects of how it was seen as a threat for democracy and political inclusivity in the country; and how it targeted particular communities concentrated in constituencies historically known for anti-BJP vote bank.¹³ In the wake of anti-SIR protests, reputed media groups from all parts

¹⁰ "“13.39 crore voters deleted through SIR: EC says those eligible can get name added,” *Outlook India*, October 7, 2026, <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/1339-crore-voters-deleted-through-sir-ec-says-those-eligible-can-get-name-added>.

¹¹ Abhishek Dey, "“Can't afford lost wages': India's voter roll revision is worrying migrant workers,” *BBC*, November 24, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c8jrzn0nj9o>.

¹² "Modi, Shah, CEC Kumar will face justice and pay the price for *vote chori*: Rahul,” *The Hindu*, October 18, 2026, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/goa/rahul-gandhi-go-congress-anti-cec-protest-modi-shah-gyanesh-kumar/article71599732.ece>.

¹³ See, for example: Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Shaikh Azizur Rahman, "India's electoral roll revision threatens democracy and Muslims, say critics,” *The Guardian*, December 16, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/dec/16/india-electoral-roll-special-intensive-revision-threatens-democracy-muslims>; and

of the world have been publishing reports on protest rationale and demands, youth activism, the state suppression tactics, and where it might lead the country.

Moreover, human rights groups and international civil society organizations are also voicing concerns over arbitrary detentions, barricading of protest sites, and use of indiscriminate force against protestors, especially women. The UN human rights office (OHCHR) has reminded the Indian authorities of democratic right to peaceful assembly and expressed displeasure over 'arbitrary detention' of protestors while calling for their 'immediate and unconditional' release.¹⁴ A Special Report compiled by UN Special Rapporteur Gina Romero noted that young Indians had been facing retaliation or stigmatization for discussing mental health or gender justice. This comment is particularly important in context of the ongoing youth mobilization since the report also takes note of the rise of CJP as a satirical movement.¹⁵ The report was decried by India as 'hearsay'.¹⁶

The Role of Youth

Several interesting characteristics attached with these protests can be noticed. The phenomenon of youth activism under the umbrella of Cockroach Janta Party is gradually turning to be an inseparable ingredient of the Indian politics. While the last protest movement was originally for an educational cause, the youth and student activism at the pretext of electoral irregularities reflects the youth's commitment to reform governance and fair democratic practices. In fact, the role the young protestors have been playing is more pivotal as they are leading from the front while political parties are following the suit.

These two movements also point towards a drastic change in the contemporary Indian political culture. Celebrated as the world's largest democracy, democratic ethos in India have remained on a slide under the present rule. The last considerable political agitation had surfaced against the Citizen Amendment Act (CAA) in 2020 which was ruthlessly crushed by the authorities. Several protest

Arjumand Shaheen, "Millions in India's Bengal risk losing welfare benefits over voter deletion," *Al Jazeera*, June 30, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/6/30/food-security-fears-as-indias-bengal-links-welfare-schemes-to-voter-rolls>; and also

Snigdhendu Bhattacharya, "SIR in West Bengal: How exclusion of nine million voters could shape state politics," April 12, 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy51qg00dezo>.

¹⁴ "India: UN rights office urges release of 'arbitrarily detained' protestors," *UN News*, October 10, 2026, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/10/1168571>.

¹⁵ Gina Romero, "Youth activism: from systemic exclusion to real participation," Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association (United Nations, July 15, 2026), <https://undocs.org/A/81/186>.

¹⁶ "India rejects report by UN Human Rights expert that says Indian youth face retaliation, terms claims as 'hearsay'," *The Hindu*, October 17, 2026, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-rejects-report-by-un-human-rights-expert-that-says-indian-youth-face-retaliation-terms-claims-as-hearsay/article71595548.ece>.

leaders including Sharjeel Imam and Umar Khalid are behind bars for more than six years without their trial even initiated.¹⁷ This forceful treatment had arguably created an atmosphere of fear in which space for dissent and criticism gradually shrank. The role of the BJP-aligned popular media and ultranationalist mobs further amplifies such fears. The recent two waves of protest show that the Indian polity is now coming out of fear and political parties, youth, and civil society are gaining confidence to challenge malpractices. Daily Dawn's correspondent for India Jawed Naqvi writes that, unlike the Shaheen Bagh movement, using lethal force against the CJP protestors will not be easy for the Indian authorities as a majority of them hails from Hindu middle class, the core support base of Prime Minister Modi.¹⁸

Where the saga might lead India?

Despite successive victories in key state elections, the Modi government is in hot waters. The trouble started with the alleged irregularities in the Ayodhya temple funds and the NEET exam controversy which forced the resignation of the Education Minister of the Union Cabinet.¹⁹ Now the SIR controversy and alleged role of the Election Chief is once again testing the nerves of Prime Minister Modi. Critics believe that unlike the education minister, the Modi government would do anything to prevent Gyanesh Kumar's exit because such a scenario could lead to invalidation of election results especially in Bihar and West Bengal, that are already in doubts for the controversial SIR. The Modi government cannot afford to give in to any political pressure ahead of elections in crucial states like Uttar Pradesh and Punjab early next year.

The Bottomline

While the ongoing protests are unlikely to bring any immediate political change in India, they have nonetheless contributed to providing space for dissent and political opposition. For now, these scandals and the mass protests could keep pressure on the Modi government and may impact the upcoming state elections and the legislative processes. Yet the internal divisions among the opposition parties, such as between Congress and Aam Admi Party, could also hinder the unity and

¹⁷ "Six Years Without a Trial: The Umar Khalid Case and India's Criminal Justice System," Citizens for Justice and Peace, September 15, 2026, <https://cjp.org.in/six-years-without-a-trial-the-umar-khalid-case-and-indias-criminal-justice-system/>.

¹⁸ Jawed Naqvi, "A Juncture and a Moment," *Daily Dawn*, October 13, 2026, <https://www.dawn.com/news/2036812/a-juncture-and-a-moment>.

¹⁹ Sandeep Phukan and Nistula Hebbar, "Dharmendra Pradhan tenders resignation as Union education minister; CJP calls off protests," *The Hindu*, July 28, 2026, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/dharmendra-pradhan-quit-resign-as-union-education-minister-jantar-mantar-protest-july-25-2026/article71265711.ece>.

joint efforts of the Indian opposition and may not be able to effectively challenge BJP's political standing in the country.