

India: Combat Corruption, Protect Land, Defend Democracy

Wednesday 28 September 2011, by [CPI \(ML\) Liberation](#) (Date first published: 11 September 2011).

In a shameful assault on democracy, the very next day after Independence Day, the Congress-UPA Government launched an offensive on citizens' freedom, and arrested anti-corruption activist Anna Hazare and others. Subsequently, a massive countrywide upsurge against this arrest and crackdown on democratic protest forced the Government not only to release Hazare, but also to give him permission to hold his fast at Ramlila Grounds. People have shown that they have the will to resist repression and defend democracy, and in less than 24 hours, their determination forced a corrupt and repressive Congress-UPA Government to beat a retreat.

The PM's Independence Day speech had already shown the way for this crackdown, by warning against peaceful forms of protest, and branded democratic activists as 'people who are trying to create disturbances.' The President's Independence Eve speech also warned that people's movements could lead to 'erosion of credibility and authority' of Parliament. Earlier, the Home Minister P Chidambaram had argued that since the Lokpal Bill has been tabled in Parliament, any 'extra-parliamentary protests' on this issue would be 'unconstitutional.' The huge people's protest that greeted the arrest of Anna Hazare is a signal of how thoroughly the people have rejected such dishonest arguments. The people have made it clear that if anything is unconstitutional and a threat to democracy it is the government's attempts to muzzle protest, and not people's movements!

The countrywide resurrection of the anti-corruption movement in August has made it clear that the April 'upsurge' was no flash-in-the-pan media-created show. The degree of popular awakening and participation has only increased since April and the farcical way the government went about the whole process of drafting the Lokpal bill - virtually dismissing the joint panel - has only hardened the people's mood against the corrupt and treacherous powerlords of the discredited UPA regime. It is true that with the Baba Ramdev stream effectively pushed out of reckoning, the RSS network has started throwing its entire weight behind the Anna agitation, and the attitudes and views of many of Team Anna including Anna himself are often contradictory and inconsistent on many integral aspects of democracy or a progressive social vision. But that makes it all the more important for all in the progressive camp to step in with all their might and lead the popular anti-corruption awakening in a consistently democratic direction.

In April, it was the new idea of Lokpal which had captured the imagination of the popular anti-corruption campaign. Now the debate has clearly moved beyond Lokpal. With the government coming out with its own version of a farcical Lokpal bill, the anti-corruption movement has rightly called for its rejection even as debates continue about the preferred kind of Lokpal legislation. There are concerns over the prospect of concentration of too much power in the hands of the proposed 'Jan Lokpal', there are also concerns over the JLP bill's silence over corporate corruption given that corruption today thrives not just under the table in government offices but is fuelled most prominently by the private sector, whether thanks to outright privatisation or through the ubiquitous public-private partnership.

But beyond the specific content of Lokpal legislation, the government has made it into a people versus parliament debate and even some in the Left have fallen for the claim of saving parliament

from the people or saving parliamentary democracy from the whims of mobocracy as they would like us to believe. Thus the movement has already progressed from 'Lokpal' to 'Loktantra' - from the specific turf of an ombudsman to the domain of democracy, be it resisting state repression or asserting the rights of the people's movement.

Whether one focuses on the issue of corruption or the defence of people's movement in the face of an overbearing corporate-dominated state and government, it is necessary to emphasise the organic links between the anti-corruption movement and the anti-corporate thrust of a whole range of ongoing people's struggles. With the rural development ministry releasing the draft of the proposed land acquisition bill, it is also clear that the government is bent upon legalising and accelerating the ongoing corporate war on farmland and forest and tribal-inhabited land. The anti-corruption campaign must therefore seek closer unity with the anti-privatisation struggles of the working class and students as well as ongoing people's movement in defence of land and livelihood.

The CPI(ML) seeks precisely to emphasise and embody the linkage between the anti-corruption movement and the broader resistance against corporate plunder of productive resources and state-inflicted denial of people's rights. The August 9 jail bhara agitation and the August 9-12 student-youth day-and-night barricade at Jantar Mantar marked both the culmination of one phase and the beginning of the next phase with the battlecry "Combat Corruption, Protect Land, Defend Democracy." Let us take this message to every corner of the country and mobilise the masses in their millions to oust the corrupt and authoritarian UPA government and reject and reverse the pro-corporate policies that are daily ravaging the country and the people.

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P.S.

* Published as editorial in Liberation, September 11, 2011.