

India's farmers have won - but this doesn't mean Modi is softening

Thursday 25 November 2021, by [S Rukmini](#) (Date first published: 23 November 2021).

This is a rare climbdown from the prime minister. But the space for dissent is still diminishing under his government

It is not often that Narendra Modi gives a televised address to the nation and it is met with relief, not disarray. The Indian prime minister's previous frightening acts of decisiveness have included announcing a [complete lockdown](#) with just four hours' notice last year, and withdrawing [85% of the country's currency](#) overnight in 2016.

This most recent on-screen address went another way entirely. When Modi announced his government's intention to [withdraw three controversial farm laws](#) after one of the most prolonged periods of protest ever recorded in India, in which hundreds died in the face of state violence, it was met with mass jubilation. The laws – originally passed during a chaotic voice vote in parliament last year, when the television [broadcast was muted](#) so viewers could not hear the opposition – were seen as tools to encourage the corporatisation of agriculture and weaken state protections for farmers. Backed by the International Monetary Fund's chief economist [Gita Gopinath](#), the [US state department](#), rightwing economists and a large section of India's pro-Modi, pro-industry media, the laws faced mass opposition among Indians – almost half of whom, according to the most recent census, [work in farming](#).

This is a rare climbdown from Modi's government, and perhaps its most significant. But it would be overambitious to hold up the farmers' victory as a sign of things to come. The space for dissent in India has shrunk markedly over seven years as the Modi juggernaut has rolled on and emboldened Hindu nationalism; people have found themselves [jailed](#), journalists have [faced police action](#) and a Muslim comedian has had to [cancel gigs](#) in the face of threats. Despite promises from Modi early on in his term that he would protect freedom of speech, parts of the Indian media now resemble a propaganda wing.

The central issue of the farm protests – protection and fair prices for farmers – was one that enjoyed genuine mass support. While led from the front by farm leaders from Punjab's Sikh and Uttar Pradesh's Jat communities, the protesters had in their ranks women and men from across the country. Those too poor or elderly to make the trek to Delhi held demonstrations in solidarity locally, capturing the popular imagination with their fortitude, camping out on the streets for months and remaining firm in the face of state violence.

The number of protesters is a testament to the huge reach and deep roots of farm unions in India – more than 40 of them came together to organise. While led by the veteran farm organiser, Rakesh Tikait, the movement was not overshadowed by one personality; nor did factional differences split it, and consensus on the issues remained strong. When some protesters became violent, condemnation from the leadership was swift. While political support from opposition parties was cultivated and encouraged, the group held them at arm's length. The Sikh diaspora across the world, including in

the UK, marshalled significant support including, unexpectedly, [from Rihanna](#).

Once the protesters had demonstrated to Modi that public opinion was with them, and the time and effort his government had spent trying to discredit the protesters had not gone much further than Delhi TV studios, the spectre of a potential electoral defeat loomed large, as Modi saw his polling drop in states where elections are due to take place next year.

But this does not mean that every mass protest in India will have the same impact. In December 2019, Modi's government enacted the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) which could grant citizenship to illegal immigrants fleeing religious persecution from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh, but only if they were non-Muslim. Simultaneously, the government began work on a national register of citizens (NRC), a version of which it rolled out in the north-eastern state of Assam, forcing immense hardship and misery on people who were unable to produce documents proving their Indian ancestry. Taken together, the CAA and the NRC were widely perceived by Indian Muslims to be an attempt to force them into statelessness and triggered massive [nationwide protests](#).

The anti-CAA-NRC protests had some things in common with the farm protests: they blockaded a part of Delhi, were creative, energetic and sustained, and had satellite protest sites across the country. But there was a noticeable difference – this was a “Muslim issue” in a country that has demonstrated an increasingly muscular majoritarianism, and the Indian media was enormously spiteful in its coverage of the protests. Then, in March 2020, the country went into pandemic lockdown and the protests dispersed. If the government begins once again to move on the NRC, it is unclear if the farmers' victory will energise Muslim protesters and their non-Muslim allies, or if they will meet an angrier state machinery.

For now, India's farmers and their supporters will savour this victory. The broader democratic square remains hemmed in, but perhaps a crack has let some light in.

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