Chapter 46
The India against Corruption Movement

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ABSTRACT

Activists demanding the establishment of an anti-corruption watchdog or "Lok Pal," launched the India Against Corruption (IAC) movement. This chapter documents how IAC's leaders made astute use of mass media and social media to draw India's urban middle classes out onto the streets to protest against corruption in government. IAC succeeded in pressurising the Indian government to involve its activists in an effort to formulate an anti-corruption bill. A section of IAC has since launched the Aam Aadmi (Common Man) party, which has met with initial electoral success.

INTRODUCTION

On April 9, 2011, India witnessed a unique development. Its government announced the formation of a ten member committee, comprised equally of cabinet ministers and civil society activists, to draft a bill to establish a powerful anti-corruption ombudsman or Lok Pal. The government did not take this unprecedented step of granting unelected activists the same legitimacy as elected representatives voluntarily. It was forced to take this step in order to check a fast-spreading nationwide agitation—the India Against Corruption movement (IAC) led by Anna Hazare. The immediate trigger for the government's concession was its desire

to persuade Hazare to call off a hunger strike he had launched five days earlier demanding that the government take action to pass the Lok Pal bill.

The remarkable rise and success of the Hazare-led IAC movement to the point where it was able to dictate terms to the government was fuelled by five key factors: (1) A cascade of corruption scams affecting various institutions that came to light in a short period of time; (2) The decision of experienced civil society activists to come together under the IAC banner to fight for the establishment of a Lok Pal; (3) IAC's innovative use of symbols and rhetoric, and its masterly use of broadcast, print and new media; (4) the Indian media's willingness to actively cover, and even

advocate, IAC's demands; and (5) IAC's ability to politicize India's traditionally apathetic urban middle and upper classes and to get them out onto the streets. In this chapter, we describe how the IAC movement evolved and how it was able to shake up the Indian political establishment through deft use of traditional and new media.

THE BACKDROP: A CASCADE OF CORRUPTION CASES

India liberalized its economy in 1991, cutting taxes and reducing restrictions on market forces that had been in place for four decades. While well-intended, the earlier governmental control regime ("license-quota-permit-raj") had spawned a corrupt nexus between corporate actors and contractors on the one hand and bureaucrats and politicians on the other. Excessive bureaucratic controls also led to a decline in government efficiency and public service delivery. Liberalization was expected to end government corruption and inefficiency. Paradoxically, however the magnitude and extent of corruption seems to have increased after liberalization (Mohanty, 2011).

Corruption flourishes because the government still controls key aspects of the economy, e.g., the allocation of natural resources such as mines or electromagnetic spectrum. Preferential allocation of such resources can enable politicians and bureaucrats to generate substantial kickbacks. Political parties use such allocations to raise party and election funds because India's flawed system for party financing and electoral expenditure makes it difficult to raise and spend resources legally ("Its Anna vs Aruna as rift in civil society shows", 2011). The ensuing corruption has now become so widespread that the political class has seen a precipitous drop in its moral legitimacy. The year 2011 saw many instances of corruption coming to public notice. They revealed that a range of governmental institutions were compromised, thus creating an appropriate environment for the launch of an anti-corruption agitation.

The diversified portfolio of corruption cases included: (1) The revelation by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) that the Minister for Telecommunications had allocated 2G spectrum to companies in a manner that caused the government to forego $5 billion in revenue. The Minister was forced to resign and spent a year in jail while the case went to trial. (2) The resignation of a state high court chief justice accused of corruption to forestall impeachment proceedings in parliament. (3) The Supreme Court's rejection of the government's choice of Chief Vigilance Commissioner (the official charged with policing the bureaucracy) as he was facing corruption charges himself. (4) The resignation of the chief minister of Maharashtra state after he was accused of colluding with army and government officials to reallocate prime real estate meant for war widows to his family members and ineligible officials. (5) The arrest of the chief organizer of the Commonwealth Games, a Member of Parliament, on charges of misusing funds meant for the Games.

RISE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISM

As the corruption scandals mounted, the space was opened up for civil society activists to take a leadership position in demanding systemic reform. Many of them had been at the forefront of reform movements for more than a decade, and had the track record and network that helped to launch the IAC movement (Bawiskar, 2011). They enjoyed public trust, partly because many, e.g., Aruna Roy, Arvind Kejiriwal, and Nikhil Dey, were middle class professionals who had forsaken respectable careers to take up public causes. Their life

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