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Indian Farmers' Protests and the Risk of Internet Shutdowns

F-2024-02-15a

Classification: TLP:CLEAR

Criticality: Medium

Intelligence Requirements: Geopolitical, Protests, Elections

February 15, 2024

Scope Note

ZeroFox Intelligence is derived from a variety of sources, including—but not limited to—curated open-source accesses, vetted social media, proprietary data sources, and direct access to threat actors and groups through covert communication channels. Information relied upon to complete any report cannot always be independently verified. As such, ZeroFox applies rigorous analytic standards and tradecraft in accordance with best practices and includes caveat language and source citations to clearly identify the veracity of our Intelligence reporting and substantiate our assessments and recommendations. All sources used in this particular Intelligence product were **identified prior to 9:00 AM (EST) on February 15, 2024**; per cyber hygiene best practices, caution is advised when clicking on any third-party links.

Flash | India Farmers' Protests

› Key Findings

- Over 200 farming unions are attempting to march on India's capital, demanding agricultural reforms.
- Police have constructed numerous blockades on major highways and throughout New Delhi, severely impacting travel.
- An impending nationwide strike on February 16 will include slow-roll protests on major roadways and possible rallies in major cities.
- Organizers have voiced a willingness to continue the movement for months if needed.
- Internet shutdowns are frequently used by Indian security forces to halt the spread of protest-related news, but they have major economic consequences.

Details

Since February 13, 2024, thousands of farmers from India's northern states have taken to the highways in a drive on the national capital, New Delhi, demanding agricultural reforms. Over 200 farming unions from Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh are taking part, with additional unions in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh expected to join in the coming days.

- To support the protesters, unions are also calling for a nationwide strike and additional protests on February 16.
- Police have heavily blockaded approaches to New Delhi and have clashed with protesters in multiple locations, particularly at the Haryana-Punjab border crossings at Shambhu and Khanauri.¹

The timing of the protests indicates that Indian farmers may be inspired by farmers' protests in Europe, which, like those in India, are also occurring months before major elections.

- Indian farmers have likely taken notice of the concessions that European farmers have received from the European Union (EU) parliament and their local governments.²
- However, Indian farmers have their own set of demands that differ from those in Europe. Indian farmers staged other protests in 2020 and 2021 against legislation known as the farm bills, which they believed threatened their livelihood.³
- The farm bills were only lifted ahead of local elections in India in 2022,⁴ and farmers are likely keen to solidify those gains ahead of general elections in April and May 2024.

Chief among protesters' demands is the enactment of a Minimum Support Price (MSP) for agricultural goods, which would provide a price floor for produce purchased by the government.

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi created a committee to explore an MSP in 2021 after hundreds of thousands of farmers blockaded New Delhi for 16 months, but little progress has been made to date. Farming unions accuse the government of

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[hXXps://www.thestatesman\[.\]com/india/govt-to-hold-talks-with-farmers-tomorrow-as-stir-enters-day-2-1503269690.html](https://www.thestatesman.com/india/govt-to-hold-talks-with-farmers-tomorrow-as-stir-enters-day-2-1503269690.html)

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[hXXps://www.npr\[.\]org/2024/02/07/1229719323/european-union-scraps-pesticide-proposal-in-another-concession-to-farmers](https://www.npr.org/2024/02/07/1229719323/european-union-scraps-pesticide-proposal-in-another-concession-to-farmers)

³ [hXXps://www.nytimes\[.\]com/2021/01/27/world/asia/india-farmer-protest.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/27/world/asia/india-farmer-protest.html)

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[hXXps://www.reuters\[.\]com/markets/commodities/indias-parliament-passes-bill-repeal-controversial-farm-laws-2021-11-29/](https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/indias-parliament-passes-bill-repeal-controversial-farm-laws-2021-11-29/)

dragging its feet and are demanding the MSP be fixed at least 50 percent higher than the cost to produce any given crop.

- Farmers claim that inclement weather, market fluctuations, and a dwindling water supply have left them heavily indebted and unable to afford basic necessities, with thousands reportedly committing suicide every year.⁵

Organizers are also denouncing the planned privatization of India's electricity sector, which would end the subsidized power currently supplied to farmers by state governments. Additional demands include compensation for the roughly 750 farmers who died during a previous 2020–21 farmers movement and the dismissal of a federal minister whose son is accused of running over farmers with his car in 2021.⁶

To confront the protesters, many of whom are traveling in tractors and heavy-duty trucks, police have constructed multiple lines of barricades on major highways into New Delhi and have locked down most entrances into the city. This has severely impacted travel within the city and across state lines where fortifications exist, with residents forced to travel long distances on foot in some places.

- The blockades suggest security forces have adopted new tactics since the widespread protests of 2020–2021 and are seeking to blunt the impact of protests.
- In New Delhi and some state districts, police have banned large gatherings and public processions through March 12, with extensions possible.⁷

While police barricades have so far succeeded in keeping protesters away from New Delhi, farmers will likely continue attempts to break through, which could involve the use of heavy equipment to clear obstacles from roadways.

- Additional travel restrictions will likely come into effect if the movement expands into new states, as is expected when Rajasthan unions join on February 21.⁸ If

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[hXXps://www.aljazeera\[.\]com/news/2024/2/13/india-farmers-march-what-are-their-demands-why-is-govt-blocki
ng-roads](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/13/india-farmers-march-what-are-their-demands-why-is-govt-blocking-roads)

⁶ *Ibid.*

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[hXXps://timesofindia.indiatimes\[.\]com/city/delhi/dilli-chalo-2-0-section-144-in-delhi-till-march-12-whats-allowed
-whats-not-ahead-of-farmer-march/articleshow/107624210.cms](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/dilli-chalo-2-0-section-144-in-delhi-till-march-12-whats-allowed-whats-not-ahead-of-farmer-march/articleshow/107624210.cms)

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[hXXps://www.deccanherald\[.\]com/india/rajasthan/rajasthan-farmers-lend-support-plan-tractor-rally-to-delhi-on
-feb-21-2892756](https://www.deccanherald.com/india/rajasthan/rajasthan-farmers-lend-support-plan-tractor-rally-to-delhi-on-feb-21-2892756)

protesters reach New Delhi, they are expected to hold sit-ins and rallies that potentially last months. Negotiations between protest organizers and the government are ongoing; if a deal is struck, the protesters could return home with little notice.

Haryana's government has imposed internet and SMS messaging bans in seven districts: Ambala, Kurukshetra, Kaithal, Jind, Hisar, Fatehabad, and Sirsa. These restrictions will last until February 15, with extensions possible. Certain X profiles promoting the protests have also been suspended.⁹

- Internet shutdowns are a popular tactic the Indian government uses to restrict protest activity; India leads the world in internet shutdowns since 2018.¹⁰ Most of those shutdowns have been related to the disputed Muslim-majority region of Kashmir. However, a considerable number were attributable to the farm bill protests of 2020–2021, when the internet was shut down around New Delhi for days after viral images of police brutality enacted against protesters garnered international support for the movement.¹¹
- When India does institute internet shutdowns, it generally does so via more subtle methods, such as slowing speeds, restricting data, or blocking contentious sites like Facebook, X, or WhatsApp. This type of limited shutdown—where certain sites are restricted and others are slowed to the point of being unusable—is more likely than a complete shutdown, where no internet services are usable.
- Internet shutdowns have economic consequences, as popular mobile money and e-commerce sites are unable to operate, and Indian technology hubs like Bengaluru are immune for now. Internet shutdowns tied to the farm bill protests allegedly cost the Indian economy nearly USD 3 billion in 2020.¹²

⁹ [hXXps://thewire\[.\]in/rights/farmers-internet-haryana-twitter-accounts](https://thewire.in/rights/farmers-internet-haryana-twitter-accounts)

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[hXXps://www.hrw\[.\]org/report/2023/06/14/no-internet-means-no-work-no-pay-no-food/internet-shutdowns-deny-access-basic](https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/06/14/no-internet-means-no-work-no-pay-no-food/internet-shutdowns-deny-access-basic)

¹¹

[hXXps://www.business-humanrights\[.\]org/en/latest-news/india-government-orders-shutdown-of-internet-services-in-parts-of-new-delhi-as-farmers-protest-turns-violent/](https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/india-government-orders-shutdown-of-internet-services-in-parts-of-new-delhi-as-farmers-protest-turns-violent/)

¹²

[hXXps://www.technologyreview\[.\]com/2021/09/09/1035237/internet-shutdowns-censorship-exponential-jigsaw-google/](https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/09/09/1035237/internet-shutdowns-censorship-exponential-jigsaw-google/)

The February 16, 2024, strike is expected to attract the participation of farmers nationwide, as well as transportation workers and rural businesses, and will feature disruptive road protests in the afternoon.

- Participants will suspend work from 6:00 AM to 4:00 PM on February 16.
- Farmers will join chakka jams, or slow-roll protests, on main roads nationwide between 12:00 PM and 4:00 PM. In Punjab, many state and national highways will be completely shut down.
- Additional rallies and demonstrations are possible in major cities, as well as state and district capitals.
- Medical facilities, educational institutions, and other essential services are not expected to be impacted.¹³

Conclusion

If prolonged, the farmers' protests have the potential to cause significant long-term disruptions. This was previously seen during the 2020-21 protests, when demonstrators blocked multiple approaches to New Delhi, spurring large and sympathetic protests in major cities throughout the country. If unions remain stalled at highway blockades, they will likely explore other methods of exerting pressure on New Delhi. This includes blocking train service into and out of the city, which one group of protesters did on the afternoon of February 15.¹⁴

With only months left until national elections to select a new parliament, the government will likely seek to end the protests as quickly as possible through negotiations. Prime Minister Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party is expected to maintain its majority in the elections but could be hindered if the protests accelerate and Modi is perceived as not doing enough to quell them. The main opposition party, the Indian National Congress, and its allies could also seek to capitalize on the movement by portraying Modi as out of touch with the nation's workers.

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[hXXps://www.livemint\[.\]com/news/india/bharat-bandh-2024-skm-trade-unions-call-nationwide-strike-on-feb-16-all-you-need-to-know-11707836414525.html](https://www.livemint.com/news/india/bharat-bandh-2024-skm-trade-unions-call-nationwide-strike-on-feb-16-all-you-need-to-know-11707836414525.html)

¹⁴[hXXps://indianexpress\[.\]com/article/cities/chandigarh/rail-traffic-punjab-haryana-hit-tomorrow-9161449/](https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chandigarh/rail-traffic-punjab-haryana-hit-tomorrow-9161449/)

Appendix A: Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

	Red	Amber
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:RED when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.	Sources may use TLP:AMBER when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may NOT share TLP:RED with any parties outside of the specific exchange, meeting, or conversation in which it is originally disclosed.	Recipients may ONLY share TLP:AMBER information with members of their own organization and its clients, but only on a need-to-know basis to protect their organization and its clients and prevent further harm. Note that TLP:AMBER+STRICT restricts sharing to the organization only.
	Green	Clear
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:GREEN when information is useful for the awareness of all participating organizations, as well as with peers within the broader community or sector.	Sources may use TLP:CLEAR when information carries minimal or no risk of misuse in accordance with applicable rules and procedures for public release.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may share TLP:GREEN information with peers and partner organizations within their sector or community but not via publicly accessible channels.	Recipients may share TLP:CLEAR information without restriction, subject to copyright controls.

Appendix B: ZeroFox Intelligence Probability Scale

All ZeroFox intelligence products leverage probabilistic assessment language in analytic judgments. Qualitative statements used in these judgments refer to associated probability ranges, which state the likelihood of occurrence of an event or development. Ranges are used to avoid a false impression of accuracy. This scale is a standard that aligns with how readers should interpret such terms.

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Roughly Even Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%