

## Summary

Hundreds of demonstrators in India's capital took to the streets for a second day on Saturday, March 23, demanding the quick release of one of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's main rivals as the country prepares for a national election starting on April 19, 2024. Protesters accused Modi on Saturday of managing the country under a state of emergency—a charge the opposition has long professed—and of employing federal law enforcement agencies to crush opposition parties before the election. In the run-up to the general election, which begins on April 19, India's opposition parties have accused the government of abusing its authority to harass and damage its political opponents, citing a wave of raids, arrests, and corruption probes targeting prominent opposition individuals.

## Recent events and developments

In the lead-up to India's general elections in April, opposition groups and their followers have united in protest following the detention of a prominent opposition figure Arvind Kejriwal. Arvind, New Delhi's top elected official, was detained on March 22, by the federal Enforcement Directorate, which is overseen by Modi's administration. The agency charged his party and ministers with taking 1 billion rupees (\$12 million) in bribery from liquor contractors nearly two years ago. Known for his critical stance on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's governance, Kejriwal's arrest has been denounced by opposition parties as unjust and politically charged, aimed at swaying the upcoming elections. Since his arrest, significant demonstrations were held in New Delhi, including members and supporters of Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party, voicing their belief that Modi is undermining the nation's democratic foundation. Police, some wearing riot gear, stopped protesters and detained at least three dozen demonstrators on March 27. AAP activists also protested in Odisha, Gujarat, and Srinagar. Despite police intervention and the detention of some protestors, the dissenting voices continued their anti-government chants. The opposition has scheduled a large protest in New Delhi for March 31, insisting that the arrest of Kejriwal is an act of political repression. Meanwhile, Modi's governing party defends its actions as part of an anti-corruption effort and calls for Kejriwal's resignation.

## Impact assessment

The ongoing protests and the government's response to them could have a significant impact on the electoral landscape. The narrative of political repression versus anti-corruption could influence voter sentiment. If protests continue or escalate, they could dominate the political discourse and affect the strategies of both the ruling party and the opposition before and during the elections. With the upcoming general election, the stakes are high and the sustained demand for Kejriwal's release could evolve into a broader movement against the current government. This situation sets the stage for a prolonged period of political agitation that could extend well beyond the elections, especially if the opposition uses it as a unifying cause. While the protests have been peaceful so far, the involvement of law enforcement agencies and the detention of protesters point to a tense standoff between the government and opposition supporters. Further, security forces have used tear gas and water cannons in the past to disperse protesters, thus, clashes with demonstrators can be expected. Police banned assembly of four or more people in the area that houses almost all key government buildings, to prevent the possibility of civil unrest. Additionally, political rallies organized by Modi's party (BJP) will lead to traffic restrictions, vehicle and personnel checks and possible localized disruption of business.

## Advice from Forth Global

- Ensure that all employees travelling to India receive a three-day HEAT training prior to deployment.
- Ensure that contingency and security plans are up-to-date and that staff are aware of them.
- Closely monitor the local and international media for updates on the situation.

## Customized advice

Please contact us for specific advice:

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