

# [***Angry farmers once forced India's hardline leader into a rare retreat. As the election looms, they're back***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BDY-J341-JBSS-S4CY-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Byline:** Analysis by Rhea Mogul, CNN

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Just over two years after they strongarmed Prime Minister [*Narendra Modi*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/05/india/india-modi-ram-temple-analysis-intl-hnk/index.html) into an exceptional U-turn, [*India's*](https://www.cnn.com/world/india) protesting farmers are back on the streets - and this time the stakes are higher.

For about two weeks now, thousands of angry farmers have gathered at the borders of India's capital to demand higher fixed prices for their crops, just weeks before a nationwide election that is expected to see Modi clinch a rare third term in power.

A heavy security presence has so far prevented the farmers from marching on New Delhi and violent clashes have seen police fire tear gas and water cannons. Tensions rose further last week after the death of a protester near the Punjab border, according to the state's chief minister, who has [*ordered a probe*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oba8gIYCvv8) into the case.

The scene is reminiscent of 2021, when in a rare break from his uncompromising leadership style, Modi repealed controversial laws aimed at modernizing the agricultural sector following more than a year of mass farmers' protests.

Modi promised "a fresh start," agreeing to meet the farmers' demands and work with them to move forward.

But the farmers say those promises were broken, and this time, they will not return home until their demands are met.

The confrontation, analysts say, has sewn apprehension in the highest echelons of Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is wary of antagonizing the farmers - one of the country's most influential voting blocs - ahead of an expected May election.

With the BJP facing a fractured opposition that is yet to present a clear candidate for prime minister, the farmers have emerged as the strongest threat to the ruling party, some analysts say.

And if protests grow closer to the scale seen in 2021, it could become a bigger issue for Modi.

"Right now, it looks like there is only one opposition - the farmers," said economist Devinder Sharma. "***Politics*** is unpredictable, but it is very important for the unions and the government to come to a solution."

Same demands

Sangha Gurpreet remembers the day he abandoned his field for a protest site in November 2020, watching as it swelled in size over the next year.

"I was part of that struggle for 13 months," the activist and farmer said of the historic protests that jolted Indian society and started a nationwide discussion about the country's agriculture workers.

Those protests began after the BJP introduced three new laws it insisted would fix a system plagued with problems.

The farming laws aimed to loosen the rules around the sale, pricing and storage of farm produce that protected farmers from an unfettered free market for decades. But farmers said market forces could push prices even lower, and smaller farmers would find it hard to negotiate favorable deals with corporate giants.

Gurpreet was among hundreds of thousands of farmers from India's northern states - Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh - that demanded the dismissal of the laws. They stayed on the streets through a harsh winter, scorching summer and a global pandemic until Modi finally backed down and promised to work with them to come to an agreement.

It was a massive victory for the farmers, who pushed the Indian leader into a rare and uncharacteristic climbdown.

And Gurpreet says they are prepared to do it again.

"This is not about new demands. These were given to the government and have either already been agreed to in writing, promised in their election manifesto, or announced in public speeches," he said. "There was nothing left for us to do but come onto the roads and request the government to give us what we want."

CNN has contacted the BJP for comment but has yet to receive a response.

Agriculture Minister Arjun Munda, who has held talks with protest leaders, previously told reporters the government believes a "peaceful" solution will be found soon.

Farmers' plight

Agriculture is the primary source of livelihood for about 55% of India's 1.4 billion citizens, according to the India Brand Equity Foundation, a trust established by the country's Department of Commerce to promote Indian products and services.

Only China produces more rice, wheat, cotton, groundnuts, fruits and vegetables than India. Only Brazil produces more sugarcane.

But farming households made an average income of just 10,218 rupees ($137) per month in 2018-19, according to latest government statistics - 316 rupees below the nation's average salary that year.

Farmers are demanding a higher and guaranteed minimum support price (MSP) for all the crops they grow, to give them more financial stability and control over their income.

Sharma, the economist, says a guaranteed MSP is necessary to protect farmers against fluctuations in prices, adding most agricultural workers don't till enough land to yield a profit, leading to debilitating debts.

The abject poverty and debt faced by many of India's farmers has forced some to take extreme measures. In 2022, more than 11,000 people in the agricultural sector ended their own lives, according to government data.

"About 86% of Indian farmers are dependent on the markets. If the markets were so benevolent, I see no reason why farmers should be protesting every now and then," Sharma said. "It's very tragic that the people who feed the country have to sleep with hungry stomachs themselves."

BJP 'anxiety'

Modi must tread carefully to ensure the farmers are placated, analysts say, as he prepares to head to the polls in a few weeks' time.

The prime minister's 2021 reversal on the farming laws "came as quite a surprise to everybody," said Arati Jerath, a political commentator based in New Delhi, and proved the farmers can stand up to the government.

"It was actually a very, very big moment for the BJP," she said.

Throughout his decade in power, Modi has positioned himself as a leader capable of making strong decisions, impervious to critique.

For example, he stood by his decision to ban most of India's paper money in 2016, after deeming certain banknotes to be "worthless pieces of paper."

Three years later, he faced the fury of protesters after introducing the contentious Citizenship Amendment Act, which promised to fast-track Indian citizenship for all religious faiths from neighboring Muslim-majority Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan - except Islam.

Most recently in January, he [*inaugurated a Hindu temple*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/05/india/india-modi-ram-temple-analysis-intl-hnk/index.html) built on the ruins of a destroyed mosque in a move that polarized opinion in the country.

But as the farm protests spread across states in 2021, Jerath said Modi had no choice but to back down.

"Farmers are a large constituency in India, and I think no political party cannot afford to have debates," she said.

This time, Modi's government has engaged with farmers' unions much quicker, already holding multiple rounds of talks in an effort to reach an agreement to end the protests.

But there are signs of trepidation within the BJP. Roads leading to New Delhi are heavily guarded by security personnel to block farmers from entering the capital, while police have been accused by farmers' unions of being heavy handed with the protesters, accusations they deny.

The government has meanwhile ordered X, formerly Twitter, to block the social media handles of dozens of farmers, including Gurpreet.

"The Indian government has issued executive orders requiring X to act on specific accounts and posts, subject to potential penalties including significant fines and imprisonment," X said in a statement.

Jerath said while the protests have not yet swelled in size to 2021 levels, there is "anxiety" within the BJP about what might happen next.

"Right now, the farmers may not impact the election outcome," she said.

But the government "will not want these protests to spread," she added. "It's really a war of nerves going on between the farmers and the government."

Analysis by Rhea Mogul, CNN

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