

Modi Blinks in Farmer Feud as Biden Checks In

Some believe Indian government doesn't want a rights-related conflict with incoming US administration in the midst of other crises

By [Sumit Sharma](#)

Asia-Pacific Research, January 29, 2021

[Asia Times](#) 21 January 2021

Region: [South Asia, USA](#)

Theme: [Justice](#), [Politics](#)

*After an almost two-month deadlock with Indian farmers protesting against new farm laws, the **Narendra Modi** government finally blinked. Agriculture Minister Narendra Tomar on Wednesday offered to suspend the laws for 12 to 18 months pending discussions with farmers, offering a potential off-ramp to the crisis.*

Farmers' leaders did not respond immediately to the offer but were due to discuss it on Friday. However, they are unlikely to give up their demands that all three laws be repealed. Earlier, the Supreme Court offered to suspend the laws for a committee of experts to review them. The farmers rejected this overture.

Observers are speculating on the timing of the government's concessions, which came hours before the inauguration of US **President Joe Biden**.

"Is it a coincidence that Modi government blinks in talks over [farmers protests](#) the day Trump leaves and President Joe Biden is sworn in?" former senior diplomat **K C Singh** tweeted.

India can't afford any displeasure from a new administration that has said it will prioritize rights in its foreign policy. India depends critically on the US for defense equipment, technology, investment and its support at international forums, especially as it tries to block Chinese companies and investment.

Chinese forces have been occupying Indian territories in Ladakh since May, tying down its troops and using up resources amid the pandemic and an economic slowdown.

"They realize when irrational domestic policies start impacting your image abroad, especially in their parliaments," Singh responded to a query. "Democrats are much more attuned to values than an egotistical Trump."

Weighing heavy is also Modi's vocal support for **Donald Trump** in September 2019 at a gathering of 50,000 Indian-Americans at NRG Football Stadium in Houston, titled "Howdy Modi."

Several diplomats raised objections at the time to the perils of getting involved in another country's domestic politics.

Other US Democrats including new **Vice President Kamala Harris and Pramila Jayapal**, chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, have disapproved of the months-long curfew and Internet lockdown in Jammu & Kashmir after Modi's government withdrew the contested region's special status in August 2019.

Sikhs in the US, Canada and the UK, too, have been raising the issue of the farm laws in overseas forums. Sikh farmers from Punjab have been leading the protests in Delhi that have gathered tens of thousands.

Farmers say the laws would increase their vulnerability in getting fair prices for their produce and increase their risk of losing their land to corporates. The government has not been able to dispel their fears despite many rounds of talks between ministers and farmer unions over two months.

At least 70 farmers have died while blocked on highways outside Delhi, leaving them no choice but to live and sleep under their tractor trolleys in the freezing winter.

Adding more international pressure, a January 5 letter by Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi, a Sikh MP from Slough in the UK, and signed by 100 MPs addressed to Prime Minister Boris Johnson expressed concerns over the laws.

Last month, Canadian **Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau** expressed his solidarity with farmers and expressed his concern for them. Trudeau has two Sikhs in his government. In retaliation, New Delhi ordered a demarche on Canadian diplomats.

Besides the possibility of international pressure increasing with a new administration in Washington, the farmers have repeatedly said they will leave only after the laws are repealed, whether it takes months or years. The latest move by the National Investigative Agency naming 50 farmers with likely links with terrorists has been widely panned as trumped up.

A proposed rally of thousands of tractors from all neighboring states on January 26, when India celebrates its Republic Day in Delhi with a march-past of army, navy and air force and watched by Indians across the globe, may have also prompted the government to back off. Many protesting farmers are ex-soldiers.

As the protests drag on, the government is losing more support and face. Farmers from elsewhere in the country could also soon turn up to lend their numbers and support.

Also weighing on Modi's government are elections in five states by May. Modi's BJP party sees the elections as critical to its future growth and survival and wouldn't want its chances to get spoilt.

Incidents such as damage to telecom towers in Punjab also highlight farmers' allegations of the government's proximity to some top industrialists. Farmers are highlighting news of industrialists having built grain barns and other infrastructure even before the farm laws were passed.

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Featured image: Farmers' protest in India. (Source: Green Left Weekly)

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Articles by: **[Sumit Sharma](#)**

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