The world should be watching India’s ‘common man’ coup

Jantar Mantar Road, a short passageway through the administrative center of New Delhi, takes its name from a complex of gigantic red astronomical instruments at its north terminus, built by Maharaja Jai Singh II in 1724. The Jantar Mantar consists of a series of geometric jungle gyms that surround the all-important shadow of the Supreme Instrument, a four-story, right-triangular sundial surrounded by semi-circular wings. The complex reflects the style of politics practiced by its autocratic creator — one based on charting the positions of the sun and planets across the zodiac with maximum pomp and precision.

The road named after the Jantar Mantar, however, better reflects the aspirations of India’s past few decades as the world’s most populous democracy. In the space of several hundred yards between two sets of hand-painted red-and-yellow police barricades, an assortment of political and religious outfits have set up tents, encampments and shrines each dedicated to some particular cause — for the prosecution of a high-placed rapist, for the rights of migrant workers, for various flavors of spiritual-social awakening. Several tents contain men on hunger strikes, each reclining on a couch and nursed by supporters, on behalf of a petition like airline employee pensions or voting rights for Indians living abroad. Despite the amplified speeches and droning chants, Jantar Mantar Road is a respite from Delhi’s non-stop hustle; people slowly mill through to listen, strike up conversations and eat deep-fried snacks.

This style of politics received lavish validation in the latter months of 2013. After existing for only a little more than a year, the Aam Aadmi Party — aam aadmi means “common man” in Hindi — seized the New Delhi city government in an electoral coup in December. The party owes its quick ascent in large part to Anna Hazare, a stubborn septuagenarian who mounted a much-publicized series of hunger strikes at Jantar Mantar in 2011 to demand the passage of his proposal for combating corruption. (Both houses of the national parliament passed a version of it in December.) Hazare has remained aloof from the new party that arose from his movement, but just before New Year’s fellow hunger striker Arvind Kejriwal, a tax official turned activist in his mid-40s, became chief minister of India’s capital on the Aam Aadmi ticket.
The Aam Aadmi office on Hanuman Road, a few steps from the Jantar Mantar, has attracted a swarm of visitors from all over India intending to register for the party and learn about its local chapters. (Joining costs 10 rupees, or about 15 cents.) A hand-written sign over the entrance declares, “TRUTH & POLITICS CAN CO-EXIST.” One of the volunteers who has been helping out for a few hours each day is Nishant Harbola, a 24-year-old who works in marketing at a nearby Hilton hotel. His hair is artfully ruffled, and he wears a close-fitting blazer with a loose-fitting scarf that only partly disguises the Hebrew letters tattooed across the left side of his neck, which spell a name of God from medieval Kabbalah.

“I never used to vote,” he said. Hazare’s hunger strikes didn’t seem practical to him either. But almost immediately after Aam Aadmi appeared, Harbola became a volunteer. “Something was making sense for the first time.” He put off plans to go to business school in New Zealand. He gushed, “This has been such a life-changing experience for me.” Though skeptical by nature, regarding Aam Aadmi he’s not above using the word revolution.

It used to be that when Harbola wore his Aam Aadmi cap on the Metro, people would laugh at him. Now, celebrities and politicians and millions of Indians are clamoring to join. Television news trucks keep vigil outside the party’s offices. Less than a month after taking power in New Delhi, Aam Aadmi’s momentum seems unstoppable — with the emphasis on seems. “Now things are changing,” Harbola said, with a sense of foreboding. “It’s hard to sustain this kind of euphoria.”

India’s anti-corruption movement should inspire the envy of populist movements everywhere, especially its cousins from Tahrir Square to Zuccotti Park that also rose up in the explosive year of 2011. Most of the others have since dwindled or descended into chaos. But in India, what began as an act of individual self-denial swelled into mass protests and then propelled a startlingly effective political organization. After only a few months of widespread campaigning, the country’s longtime ruling parties are in retreat and the political map has a wholly different shape. This was supposed to be impossible.

For the past few decades two parties have dominated India’s political scene — the Indian National Congress party, first and foremost, and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP. Their rule has made graft a lucrative and widespread profession, propped up in each case by forms of anti-democratic stargazing that would befit the Jantar Mantar’s creator. Congress continues to be dominated by the dynastic family of India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, while the BJP relies on appeals to militant fundamentalism. There are other parties at work in India’s parliamentary system, but these two set the rules — and decide who benefits.

“Conventional wisdom has suggested that this system was so designed that only those with pot loads of money and some local goons at their command could break through,” said a December 30 editorial in The Pioneer, a conservative Indian newspaper. “But as Mr. Kejriwal led his Aam Aadmi Party to a stunning electoral victory in the Delhi Legislative Assembly earlier this month, he proved that if you have the right key to the door, you really don’t need all that money and muscle power to break it down.”

Tens of thousands thronged to Kejriwal’s swearing-in ceremony on December 28, many of them wearing the white cap associated with Gandhi’s independence campaigns, marked with the Aam Aadmi symbol of a straw broom. Kejriwal himself arrived by taking the subway with his family — in calculated contrast to New Delhi’s “VIP culture,” by which members of the political class travel with excessive security details as a symbol of status. He paid homage to various deities and led the crowd in an oath against paying or taking bribes. A city police officer had to be escorted away from the ceremony for shouting pro-Aam Aadmi slogans, unable to contain his excitement about the new regime.
"We didn’t see Gandhi and couldn’t be part of the independence movement,” a businessman in attendance told the *Times of India*. “We are lucky today to witness history in the making.”

The impossible coup’s success leaves Aam Aadmi with a new set of impossible expectations. The party promised a quota of free water for all Delhians, as well as drastic cuts in electricity prices. Within days it has begun setting up a new hotline and grievance system for combating bribery, together with plans for a strong anti-corruption law to follow. Aam Aadmi has taken pains to adopt India’s burgeoning movement opposing violence against women, too, so Kejriwal’s success will depend in part on his ability to confront this epidemic. It will also be measured by how well his organization upsets the national polls in the spring. If successful, the party proposes to overhaul the election system with more mechanisms for accountability and local control.

Hunger striking on Jantar Mantar Road against corruption is one thing; governing in the midst of it is another. Perhaps understandably, Kejriwal fell ill with a fever just before his first day in office.

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Populist reforms in Delhi only scratch the surface of the Aam Aadmi agenda. In 2012 Kejriwal published a manifesto titled *Swaraj*, meaning self-governance — an unmistakable nod to Gandhi’s early credo *Hind Swaraj*. Far beyond the title, the book revives some of the Father of India’s most radical and most neglected political proposals. “Our fight for independence was not only for liberation from the British,” Kejriwal reminds readers. “It was also for swaraj.”

For him as for Gandhi, this means something darn near anarchistic, with a conservative hue: strenuous direct democracy in which power emanates from open assemblies at the level of villages and neighborhoods. Ordinary people decide, while politicians and bureaucrats execute. Meanwhile he calls for people to reclaim an ethic of responsibility for themselves and their neighbors, rather than relying on development schemes from the capital. Kejriwal holds particular animosity toward such schemes and believes that local communities should have the power to decide how to use their own wealth — from tax revenues to natural resources — as they see fit. As a precedent he looks to the traditional assemblies in Indian villages that were powerful enough a century and a half ago that the British had to ban them.

For all the talk about villages, however, Aam Aadmi is largely an urban, middle-class undertaking among a tech-savvy generation of young people who feel left out of existing parties like Congress and BJP. A coup is in their interest. As in the campaigns against U.S.-based mechanisms of corruption like *Citizens United* and ALEC, the primary clientele for a clean-government movement is among those affluent enough to see for themselves some hope of upward mobility.
Ramesh Sharma, an organizer for the rural land-reform movement Ekta Parishad, has dealt with Aam Aadmi and is optimistic about its rise, but not about what it will do for the truly poor. “People in Delhi are very opportunistic,” he said. “They have appointed a new CEO so they can get what they want from the state.” As CEOs go, though, Kejriwal cuts an unusual figure — dressed in no better than an open-collared shirt and a scarf, plus some ideas normally associated with a Mohawk.

Above all, Kejriwal seems to have a mind for tinkering, for solutioneering. He was trained as a mechanical engineer before joining the tax bureau, and then founded a non-profit to help poor people confront the mechanics of India’s vicious bureaucracies. He was part of a successful campaign to pass India’s version of the Freedom of Information Act. He joined the fight against corruption because he came to consider it the ultimate hack — fix that bug, and the other ones become a whole lot easier. The all-pervasiveness of India’s bribe system, which is a feature of daily life for many Indians, means it’s a hack with a large political base that is ready for change. Leaning heavily on the government-sanctioned Gandhian legacy also helps to sneak Aam Aadmi’s code into the political mainframe.

Aam Aadmi shares its commitment to a deeper kind of democracy with popular movements around the world. Occupy Wall Street in the United States and 15M in Spain, for example, also envisioned local assemblies as their basic strategy for change. The Spanish slogan “Real democracy now!” would be a decent summary of the whole 2011 fever. Yet the nature of the corruption those movements faced — manifested, say, in Citizens United or E.U. austerity policies — stands farther from the reach of most people’s experience than India’s graft system. Occupy and 15M activists also judged elected office as too corrupting to aspire to directly, although the momentum of Occupy contributed to the rise of politicians like Elizabeth Warren and Bill de Blasio in the United States.

India’s anti-corruption movement didn’t start out with a political party either. Kejriwal told The New Yorker last summer that Aam Aadmi was a move of “last resort,” after protest, fasting and lobbying didn’t go far enough — and at the time of the article there seemed to be little chance of winning. But shifting its strategy to party politics has only strengthened the movement’s momentum. A few months ago, Aam Aadmi was a curiosity; now, it’s a force in India and a call for pro-democracy movements elsewhere to step up their game.

Inside one of the bare, dimly lit receiving rooms of Aam Aadmi’s Hanuman Street office, Ravi Kumar sat on a plastic chair behind a small table with a laptop on it. He wore a mustache and a few days’ stubble, marking him as of a generation older than Nishant Harbola, as well as the kind of common man that Aam Aadmi proposes to represent. His job was to meet with people coming from beyond Delhi, including celebrities and heavyweight politicians from establishment parties looking to change sides. (So far, defections have included a Congress party student leader and a former BJP legislator.) Like everyone in Aam Aadmi, Kumar is a volunteer.

“The framework of the party is free from hierarchical posts,” he explained. “It’s a very flat structure.”

As new supporters and potential officeholders flock to join Aam Aadmi’s ranks, each with their own motives, the party faces an ever-growing challenge of maintaining its image of incorruptibility and openness. “Political organizing is like a temple,” Kumar said. “You can’t restrict people. Even a thief can enter a temple.” He didn’t seem worried. “We have a mechanism, and that mechanism is groundwork.”
New recruits, whatever their backgrounds, are expected to hit the streets — to put up posters, register new members and take part in the party’s vast canvassing efforts. If they’re not serious about their commitment to Aam Aadmi’s revolution, presumably they won’t stick around. When a politician from another party came and asked to discuss defection with someone in Aam Aadmi of equivalent stature, Kumar paired him with a 25-year-old volunteer organizer who could help him get to work.

On his computer Kumar conjured a list, with phone numbers and email addresses, of Aam Aadmi’s 23-member National Executive committee, its highest decision-making body. The 320-member National Council, which includes representatives from across India, had yet to hold its first meeting. Though the council’s members are meant to be selected by local assemblies, for the time being they’re being appointed in a more ad hoc manner. Such informality feels to Kumar like an advantage. “We are not very structured, but that is our strength,” he said.

For now, participation is the best approximation of accountability. For later, there’s a constitution in place that outlines the party’s structure and governance, beginning at the local level and working its way upward. In the meantime the party is swelling and sweeping into power at the highest levels too quickly to be careful, its supporters rapt in a rush of momentum that can only be temporary.

When the dust settles, or after the first ugly scandal hits, will Nishant Harbola still want to volunteer when he gets off work? Will the party’s founding leadership really hand its new-found power off to village councils? This experiment in India matters not just for Indians, but for people all over the world who are agitating for more genuine democracy — for the tussle and debate of Jantar Mantar Road. Can a new party stay in power while taking its bearings from the streets rather than from the Jantar Mantars of today’s maharajas?

“There was a space for a movement like this and a party like this,” said Ravi Kumar, as new registrants surrounded his desk. “The people are ahead, and the party is trying to catch up from behind.”

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