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## 'An Act of Mass Surveillance': India's Use of Facial Recognition Tech Against Protesters Angers Privacy Advocates

Eoin Higgins, *Common Dreams*\*, 31<sup>st</sup> December 2019

Privacy advocates have raised concerns over reports that Indian security forces used facial recognition technology to identify dissidents at a political rally in December and warned that if left unchecked the government would continue to suppress dissent.

"The use of the system for profiling and surveillance at public congregations is illegal and unconstitutional," Internet Freedom Foundation director said. "It is an act of mass surveillance." He called for "a complete halt and recall" on police use of facial recognition.

The technology was reportedly used on December 22 to screen attendees at a rally for Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Each attendee at the rally was caught on camera at the metal detector gate and live feed from there was matched with the facial dataset within five seconds at the control room set up at the venue.

Such police use of facial recognition systems is not what the government ostensibly developed the resource for, a political theorist explained, though the news of police using the technology for targeting dissent is unsurprising:

"Automated facial recognition systems have been used to identify and to exclude protesters, based on earlier protest videos taped by police. The software used was originally developed to trace missing children. It is now being deployed to act against individuals, thereby not merely preventing them from protesting but doing so without any establishment of guilt. This year, the government issued a proposal for an automated facial recognition system on a nationwide basis. This is despite the absence of any clear legal framework to guide the use of such technology. The proposal explicitly notes the benefits of the technology for crime prevention but omits any reference to privacy or sensitisation."

Concerns over the application of India's National Automated Facial Recognition System to dissidents hinge on the centralization of information in the database.

India's crackdown on protest this month in the country over a citizenship bill stripping rights from the country's 200 million-strong Muslim minority has led observers to call the current moment "the biggest challenge since independence."

*Madras Courier* editor-in-chief warned that the country is becoming a "brutal authoritarian state":

"The world's largest democracy has been driven into an authoritarian state. India is no longer a liberal democracy. This regime has pushed through - bulldozed - legislation in an authoritarian manner, suppressed dissenting voices with brutal state force, and locked up political opponents. India's transformation into a police state becomes more real each day."

\**Common Dreams* is a nonprofit, U.S.-based, news website