

DEMOCRACY PROTESTS

In Sonam Wangchuk, the Centre finds a scapegoat for its failures in Ladakh

The ruling BJP never delivered on its promises of Sixth Schedule status as the region continued to simmer.

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Reuters

Ladakh, a region known for its peace-loving people, incredible landscapes and cultures that are guaranteed to soothe even the most troubled soul, has been thrown into a full-blooded crisis.

The Bharatiya Janata Party-led central government, which took control over the region in 2019

after separating it from Jammu and Kashmir and converting it into a Union territory, is seeking to divert attention from its failure to fulfill key promises. It has found a scapegoat in prominent educationist innovator, and climate activist Sonam Wangchuk.

Over the last five years, Wangchuk has become the most prominent face of a growing movement in Ladakh [urging Constitutional safeguards](#) to determine its own future. High on the list of demands are protections under the Constitution's Sixth Schedule, which allows regions with a Scheduled Tribe majority some degree of self-governance.

The BJP promised this to the region in 2019 and then again before the elections to the Ladakh Hill Council the next year. But it never followed through. Meanwhile, unemployment among the region's youth has steadily risen.

It is in this context that several people, including Wangchuk, began a fast on September 10. But 15 days into their fast, a call for a demonstration by the youth wings of the Leh Apex Body (a multi-institutional coordination committee of the movement) and of various religious associations, went awry.

A section of the participants resorted to violence (some say, on their own; others say provoked by the police firing teargas). Four people died, including a former serviceman.

The government immediately used the violence to paint the protestors – especially Wangchuk – as “anti-national”. On September 27, Wangchuk was detained under the draconian National Security Act. The day before, the authorities withdrew permission to the educational institution he had set up, SECMOL or the Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh, to receive contributions from overseas.

Several dozen others were detained, though it was not immediately clear under what charges.

The hastily constructed narrative claiming that Wangchuk as anti-national is flimsy.

Consider the reasons cited for his detention under the National Security Act.

A [press release](#) by the Ladakh administration about Wangchuk's detention said, “Time and again it has been observed that Shri Sonam Wangchuk has been indulging in activities prejudicial to the security of the state and detrimental to maintenance of peace and public order and services essential to the community...”

It added that despite the government offering that a “high-powered committee” on the region

would meet with the protestors, “Wangchuk, with his ulterior motive, continued his hunger strike”.

The administration went on to blame the violence on Wangchuk’s “series of provocative speeches, references to Nepal agitations, Arab Spring etc. and misleading videos”.

HAPPY INDEPENDENCE DAY

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— Sonam Wangchuk (@Wangchuk66) August 15, 2025

If Wangchuk had been “time and again” conducting activities “prejudicial to the security of the state”, it seems odd that the authorities decided to move against him only now.

Besides, the context of his statements about the Nepal uprising and Arab Spring was not reported.

Wangchuk had actually contended that Ladakhis had been agitating peacefully for years and would continue to do so. He emphasised that he did not want a situation where out of frustration and anger, the situation in Ladakh would go the way of the Arab Spring or the Nepal youth movement. Never once has he made a statement inciting youth to take the path of those movements.

When the violence broke out on September 24, Wangchuk immediately expressed his sadness and disappointment and called off his fast.

Despite this, these allegations were repeated by Ladakh’s Director General of Police SD Singh Jamwal at a press conference on September 27. Jamwal also alleged that the Ladakh movement had links with foreign elements: he said that Wangchuk had visited Pakistan in February and that a Pakistani of Indian origin had been caught reporting about the Ladakh movement and sending information across the border.

Jamwal failed to mention why Wangchuk had gone to Islamabad: it was for a conference on pollution and climate organised by the media house *Dawn* and United Nations at which he actually praised Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his Mission LiFE campaign on sustainable lifestyles.

The senior police official did not explicitly say that the purported Pakistani was part of the Ladakh movement, deliberately leaving listeners to draw their own conclusions. He also said that “two or three” Nepalese nationals had been injured in the violence – again, without mentioning who they are.



Ladakh DGP SD Singh Jamwal speaks during a press conference in Leh on September 27. Credit: AFP.

Ladakh has many Nepalese workers and tourists, so the insinuation is that they were “foreign elements” aiming to create trouble.

These statements were unsceptically amplified by the pliant sections of the media.

It is strange that the authorities should claim that merely visiting Pakistan is cause for suspicion. After all, Modi visited Pakistan in 2018. Besides, if visiting Pakistan is a problem, Wangchuk could have been prevented from proceeding by Indian immigration authorities.

The logic of cancelling SECMOL’s permission to get funds from overseas under the Foreign Contributions Registration Act is also fuzzy. SECMOL had received a grant of Rs. 4.93 lakh for

“creating awareness amongst youth on issues such as migration, climate change, food security and sovereignty, and organic farming”.

The authorities have instead projected this as “study on national sovereignty”, claiming that this violates the terms of the FCRA. “Food sovereignty”, of course, simply refers to a process by which farmers have control over their seeds, land and other aspects of the farming process.

Sonam Wangchuk praised Modi’s environmental efforts at a UN climate conference that was hosted in Pakistan. Today, the very fact that he attended that conference is being used as evidence of his ‘anti-nationalism’. Even his false praise of Modi wasn’t enough to shield him. pic.twitter.com/sdaAHiT5jf

— Pratik Sinha (@free_thinker) September 29, 2025

Finally, one must also ask that if institutions like SECMOL and the Himalayan Institute of Alternative Studies (also set up by Wangchuk, and recently issued with a notice [cancelling its land lease](#)) are alleged to have been in violation for several years, why is action being taken only now?

No wonder this has caused many sceptics to claim that these actions have been taken merely to undermine Wangchuk’s credibility at a time when he has stood steadfast to demand that the government fulfil its responsibilities towards Ladakh.

It is worth reiterating that Wangchuk has received several awards from institutions and agencies (including governmental) both in India and abroad.

He has been lauded for the innovative education being imparted at SECMOL and the Himalayan Institute of Alternative Studies; for pioneering “[ice stupas](#)” to relieve water shortages and for devising [passive solar technologies](#) that even the armed forces are using in Ladakh.

The methods the government is using in Ladakh is a common toolkit of several authoritarian regimes. When confronted with dissent that refuses to be bought over or silenced, it builds a narrative painting the dissenters as security threats working against the interests of the nation.

On Monday, the Leh Apex Body decided not to engage in further talks with the Ministry of Home Affairs until Wangchuk is released, the protesters are not branded as “anti-national” and a judicial enquiry into the firing is established.

We can only hope that when Wangchuk's case comes to court (and that could take a while, considering that the National Security Act allows him to be held for a year without charges being filed), it will be heard by judges who apply their mind to its merits.

Meanwhile, there should be an independent judicial enquiry into the violence and why the police opened fire on unarmed protesters. The state should compensate the families of victims. Those detained should get a fair and immediate hearing.

Most important, attention must return to demanding action by the Central government to fulfil its promise of granting Sixth Schedule status to Ladakh, enabling its people to determine a future in keeping with the region's culture, ecology, economy and assuring the return of peace.

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