Outrage in India over arrest of 2 women for Facebook post criticizing Mumbai shutdown

NIRMALA GEORGE Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) -- As India's financial capital shut down for the weekend funeral of a powerful politician linked to waves of mob violence, a woman posted on Facebook that the closures in Mumbai were "due to fear, not due to respect." A friend of hers hit the "like" button.

For that, both women were arrested.

Analysts and the media are slamming the Maharashtra state government for what they said was a flagrant misuse of the law and an attempt to curb freedom of expression. The arrests were seen as a move by police to prevent any outbreak of violence by supporters of Bal Thackeray, a powerful Hindu fundamentalist politician who died Saturday.

"We are living in a democracy, not a fascist dictatorship," Markandey Katju, a former Supreme Court justice who now heads the Press Council of India, wrote in a protest letter to the chief minister of Maharashtra.

Katju demanded that the state government suspend the police officers who had ordered the arrests and prosecute them.

The women withdrew the comment and apologized, but angry Thackeray supporters ransacked an orthopedic clinic run by the uncle of one woman.

A lawyer representing the women, Sudheer Gupta, said police arrested them Sunday, the day of the funeral, on charges of creating enmity and hatred. They were released on bail Monday.

Shaheen Dhada, the 21-year-old who posted the comment appeared on television Tuesday, her face covered by a scarf so that only her eyes were visible.

Clearly terrified by her arrest and the attack on her uncle's clinic, Dhada told NDTV television she would never again make comments on a social networking site. Both women said they have deactivated their Facebook accounts.

Dhada described her arrest as "unfair."

"It was not a crime," Renu Srinivas, Dhada's friend who also was arrested, told NDTV.

India's Information Technology Minister Kapil Sibal said he was "deeply saddened" by the arrests of the two women.

"Freedom of speech is a very important right, and we need to protect it," Sibal told reporters. He said the government would re-examine the laws governing information technology to prevent its misuse by the police.

"We want to make sure that this law is not meant to prevent people from stating their point of view on any issue," Sibal said Tuesday.

Shops and offices were closed Sunday as more than 1.5 million people attended Thackeray's funeral.

He was never elected to office but was seen for decades as Mumbai's most powerful man. He created an army of supporters by weaving Hindu fundamentalism with ardent defense of Marathis, Mumbai's dominant ethnic group.

Thackeray founded his political party, the Shiv Sena - which means Shiva's Army - with the sole aim of keeping people who are not from Maharashtra out of the state and stemming the spread of Islam and Western values.

Spurred by Thackeray's rabble-rousing speeches, his supporters routinely resorted to violence against Muslims and migrant workers who had come to Mumbai in search of work. He is among those blamed for a wave of religious violence in 1992 that left nearly 1,000 people dead in Mumbai alone.

Analysts say it was as sense of fear that kept millions of people off the streets of the bustling city on Sunday. Nearly 20,000 policemen patrolled the deserted streets, mainly because of the violent history of the Shiv Sena.

No violence occurred Sunday. A day later, a relieved Mumbai police chief, Satyapal Singh, praised the "unexpectedly orderly behavior" of Thackeray's supporters.

But the thuggish behavior was in evidence Monday when a mob of Thackeray's supporters stormed the orthopedic clinic, destroying its operating rooms and much of its equipment. Nurses and patients fled but no one was hurt.

On Tuesday, police said they had detained nine men for their involvement in the attack of the clinic. It was not immediately clear if the men belonged to the Shiv Sena.

The Mumbai arrests came barely two months after the Maharashtra police arrested a political cartoonist on sedition charges for drawings that mocked corruption in the Indian government. The charges were dropped and the cartoonist is out on bail. Earlier this year, a university professor was arrested in the state of West Bengal for forwarding an email cartoon that caricatured the chief minister there.

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