MAHARASHTRA

Drought, an Exam Leak and Protest Policing: Maharashtra's Three Tests Come Down to Trust

What the government, the opposition, the people affected and the officials in between have each said and done, as of 17 October 2026.

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In the first half of October, Maharashtra's government faced three tests at once: a widening drought, a protest in Pune by candidates for state government jobs that ran from 1 to 12 October, and a continuing argument about law and order. Coverage of each tends to quote one camp. This piece sets out what each group has said and done, where they disagree on the facts, and what would settle those disagreements.

The drought: a relief package, and an argument about its size

The scale is not in dispute. The state declared drought in 265 of its 358 talukas (sub-districts), and on 14 October the cabinet added 40 more, taking the total to 305. On 8 October the state's dams held 73.5 per cent of their live storage, against 90.6 per cent a year earlier; in Marathwada the figure was 43.6 per cent, against 85.9 per cent. Tankers supplying drinking water rose from 611 on 9 October to 783 by 15 October, by one regional count. Water Resources Minister Girish Mahajan ordered a minimum 10 per cent water cut in every municipal corporation, municipality and gram panchayat from 16 October: "Drinking water will be given the highest priority." Water for drinking is reserved until 31 August 2027. Pune has added a weekly day without supply; Nagpur fines residents Rs 5,000 for wasting water.

The government's main answer came on 14 October. Each affected farmer is to receive Rs 5,000 in their bank account before Diwali, paid from state funds. Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis explained why the state was not waiting for the Centre: "Central government relief protocols involve procedures and timelines that cannot be finalised before Diwali. Understanding this urgency, the state cabinet decided to step in immediately." It also announced a finalised loan-waiver list of 3.5 lakh (350,000) farmers, GPS trackers on tankers, more than 16,000 illegal water connections cut, educational fee waivers, and instructions to lenders not to force repayments. Deputy Chief Minister Sunetra Pawar said the state would add assistance once the central inspection team, which toured eight districts from 9 October, made its recommendations. That report is not yet public.

The opposition and farmer groups said the package falls short. Congress MLA Vijay Wadettiwar called Rs 5,000 "rubbing salt into the wounds" and asked why money could

be found for the Kumbh Mela and the Shaktipeeth Expressway, a planned state highway: “Gaining the blessings of farmers is far more important than funding the Kumbh Mela.” Kailas Patil, an MLA of the Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray), called it an “insult and mockery”. Anil Deshmukh of the Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar) said the government had first promised help to all affected farmers and then scaled it back. I found no government reply to either point. The All India Kisan Sabha, a farmers’ union, called the package a “cruel joke” and wants compensation matched to the sums insured under the national crop insurance scheme. It has announced vehicle convoys from Akole towards Mumbai from 26 October and an indefinite sit-in at Azad Maidan from 27 October.

The government calls the Rs 5,000 an advance; the criticisms concern its size and what was promised. Judging either depends on information that is not yet public: what the package costs in total, how many farmers it reaches, and what the central team recommends. I have not found an official figure for either of the first two.

The MPSC protest: a settlement, not yet a resolution

The protest has a long fuse. The Maharashtra Public Service Commission (MPSC), which recruits for state government posts, held a screening exam for Food and Drug Administration drug inspectors on 22 March. In July, candidates complained that the paper had leaked; the commission asked Mumbai Police to investigate, and in late August it cancelled the whole recruitment. From 1 October, candidates sat in at three sites in Pune. Their main demand was the resignation of the commission’s chairman, Vivek Bhimanwar, but the sites did not agree on everything: one group wanted the objective exam pattern kept, another wanted the descriptive one.

The Chief Minister set out the government’s position on 9 October. He said the chairman “joined after the leak took place”, that only the President can remove a commission member under Article 317 of the Constitution, and that the government would recommend removal if an inquiry found wrongdoing by anyone, past or present. He also said: “It is no longer a student agitation; it has turned entirely political.” IANS reported him saying the High Court had declared the sit-in illegal and that, despite its directions, the protesters remained “in contempt of court”.

The Bombay High Court had heard a petition on 7 October, after residents complained of blocked roads. As reported by Sabrang India (I could not check the order itself), a bench of Chief Justice Mahesh Chandra Tripathi and Justice Advait Sethna said “They are students and not anti-socials,” and that students who suspect malpractice have every right to agitate. It also said “Public inconvenience shouldn’t happen,” asked protesters to seek permission and move off public roads, and gave the State three weeks to file its recruitment plan and the vacancies in each department, noting that more than 70,000 posts had been shown as vacant. The reports I found of the hearing do not show the bench declaring the protest unlawful.

The opposition stood with the students, though not with one voice. The NCP (SP)'s Rohit Pawar joined the sit-in, and the Shiv Sena (UBT)'s Aaditya Thackeray backed the demand for resignation. Raj Thackeray, whose Maharashtra Navnirman Sena sits outside the opposition alliance, shared the students' anger but told them plainly that their demand for recruitment to 70,000 posts would not be met: "Even if another government comes, this demand will not be fulfilled."

A settlement came after midnight on 12 October. The chairman did not resign; he went on leave until an inquiry is completed, saying "The autonomy, credibility, and interests of students of the MPSC have always been my priority." A five-member committee headed by a retired judge, with the IAS officer Tukaram Mundhe as its secretary, is to report on structural flaws in the commission within two months (the 5 October proposal had said three). Minister Shivendraraje Bhosale announced that cases against protesters would be withdrawn and that 70,000 posts would be filled over three years. Rohit Pawar called it a win for the students: "The children took one step back, but the government took ten steps back." Reports say some protesters would accept nothing short of resignation.

One point of fact remains open. The public record shows Mr Bhimanwar was sworn in on 18 February 2026, and the exam was held on 22 March. The Chief Minister's statement that he joined after the leak would fit if the paper left the system before mid-February, or if he was referring to earlier alleged leaks; I found no clarification. Nothing on the public record suggests wrongdoing by Mr Bhimanwar. When and where the paper leaked is for the inquiry to establish, and its answer will matter to both sides.

Law and order: crime and protest policing

No single crime has dominated this month's debate. The argument has two strands.

The first is about crime and the Home Department, which the Chief Minister also holds. In September, after relatives of a state minister were assaulted in a land dispute in Paithan, Congress state president Harshwardhan Sapkal asked, in Marathi, whether Maharashtra had become "Taliban" (my translation) and demanded that Mr Fadnavis give up the Home portfolio. Congress made a similar demand in May, after the rape and murder of a young child in Pune district; the government's response then was to send the case to a fast-track court and seek a special public prosecutor. I found no government reply to the September remark.

The second is about how protests are policed. Pune Police refused permission for the MPSC sit-in, citing prohibitory orders, issued notices to 51 students and 29 coaching-class operators, and registered cases against protesters. Rohit Pawar alleged the cases were false; I found no police reply to that allegation. Withdrawing the cases became part of the 12 October settlement. In a 6 October statement on student protests, the Chief Minister accused "certain political factions" of using student agitations for their own ends. The opposition raised the issue before: in July, Congress objected to a video of a Mumbai

police driver threatening detained student protesters; the driver was removed and the Chief Minister ordered a probe.

The data will not settle the argument by itself. The National Crime Records Bureau's figures for 2024, published this year, show Maharashtra registering 24,171 crimes against children, the highest number of any state. By rate, one secondary report places it behind Madhya Pradesh among the states with the highest counts (66.9 against 76.2 per lakh children). Raw counts also reflect population, Maharashtra being India's second most populous state, and how readily police register complaints. Crime rates and conviction rates are the fairer test; I found no statement from either side that puts them at the centre of its case.

What connects the three

In each dispute, the figures that would settle it are not yet public, and each side is arguing without them: the total cost and reach of the drought package; when the MPSC paper leaked, and how many posts are vacant department by department; and whether Maharashtra is becoming less safe per person, or only more visible.

Some of those figures are due soon: the High Court's three weeks for vacancy figures run out around 28 October, and the MPSC committee reports around mid-December. A government that publishes the totals, dates and rates as each deadline arrives will have answered many of its critics. An opposition that engages with those numbers will have done its job too.

Self-directed writing sample, not commissioned. Every fact is attributed to a dated source in the accompanying source sheet. Allegations are reported as allegations, and where the sides disagree on a fact, both versions are given.