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Indian politicians use cell phones to campaign from their cells

Biswajeet Banerjee
Associated Press

Sunday, April 29, 2007

LUCKNOW, India Six politicians awaiting trial on murder or abduction charges in lawless northern Uttar Pradesh state have been using cellphones to campaign for re-election from prison, police said Sunday.

The politicians call their supporters who broadcast the speeches live to rallies from their mobile phones, using a microphone hooked up to a public address system, police spokesman Surendra Srivastava said.

It is not a hush-hush affair. The meetings are well organized and at the stipulated time the leaders address their supporters using mobiles, Srivastava said.

Indian law only bans people from serving in public office if they have been convicted of an offence.

Among the imprisoned suspects campaigning by phone is independent candidate Mukhtar Ansari, who is accused of murdering a Hindu nationalist legislator, Srivastava said.

Others to use the tactic include Sujit Singh for the opposition Bhartiya Samaj Party also arrested on murder charges and Amarmani Tripathi, an independent candidate who is suspected of killing his girlfriend.

Saroj Singh, Ajai Singh and Satish Singh, all standing as independent candidates, are awaiting trial on abduction and murder charges, Srivastava said.

All six will be moved to prisons with equipment to jam mobile phone calls, said Mahesh Chand Sinha, a deputy inspector-general of state police.

The suspects and their lawyers could not be immediately reached for comment. Inmates are not allowed to keep mobile phones.

An inquiry has been ordered into how these politicians got access to mobile phones, Sinha told The Associated Press, adding that police were looking into allegations that prison guards had accepted bribes for the phones.

Uttar Pradesh is considered one of Indias most lawless provinces. According to the independent poll monitoring group Uttar Pradesh Election Watch, at least 100 members of the outgoing legislature are facing criminal charges 73 of them facing trial on murder and kidnapping charges.

Many of those are seeking re-election, said I. G. Dikshit who runs Uttar Pradesh Election Watch.

Staggered voting in elections for the state legislature began earlier this month and will be completed May 8. Results will be announced May 11.

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