

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

State Brutality, People's Uprising, and Government Downfall: The Quota Reform Movement in Bangladesh

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Introduction

It was the worst example of state brutality against unarmed students that happened in Bangladesh from July 15 to August 5, 2024. Over 300 people, including 32 children, were killed by the state-forces and ruling-party frontiers together (Ethirajan and Ritchie 2024; Mishra 2024). Additionally, more than 20,000 people injured and 11,000 were detained by Police. In order to suppress the student's legitimate protest demanding "reform of the discriminatory quota system in the job", the government has deployed all its state forces, equipped with deadly weapons, vehicles, helicopters, and applied water cannons, tear gas, rubber bullets, sound grenades, and others. The party cadres attacked the protesters with guns arms. The government has suspended all social media and internet and declared a nationwide curfew. Furthermore, a shoot-on-sight policy has been declared for quitting the mob. Intelligence picked up students from their home creating block-raid in the area during the nighttime. The detective police abducted the student coordinators and tortured them. The situation bore resemblance to an invasion by occupying forces. As evidenced by numerous reports, Bangladeshi authorities have been committing serious human rights violations with impunity during the recent protests (Corea and Erum 2024).

People from all social classes supported and involved in the movement. The demand for quota reform turns to a demand for justice. With the withdrawal of military support, the 15-year tenure of authoritarian rule by Prime Minister (PM) Sheikh Hasina had ended dramatically with her exile to India.

Background of the Quota Reform Movement

The original quota was designed in 1972, immediately after the country's independence. This quota system was designed as an interim arrangement to acknowledge the contributions of the freedom fighters, and no one had any question about that. The issue emerged when the Awami League assumed a second term in office. They allocated 56% of government, semi-government, and autonomous institution jobs to designated groups, leaving the remaining 44% for merit-based placements. The 56% allocation was distributed among various categories: 30% for Freedom Fighters and their descendants, including grandchildren; 10% for women; 10% for districts based on population; 5% for ethnic minorities; and later 1% for people with disabilities. The circular also mentioned that a separate merit

list would be established for quota candidates. If any positions remained vacant due to a lack of candidates in a particular district, they would be filled from the central candidates enlisted for quota.

This was not the first instance of student protests against discriminatory hiring practices in the Bangladesh government. Previously, in 2008, 2013, and 2018, protests had been held on the same issue. The protest gained momentum in 2018 as the quota movement. Protests and counter-violence erupted at various public universities. However, when the government's use of repressive measures failed in quelling the unrest, the PM, in a moment of rage, overstepped her authority and cancelled the entire quota system, which had never been a demand of the protesters. Subsequently, a circular was issued by the Cabinet outlining the proposed revisions to the quota system.

Anti-Discrimination Student Movement 2024

On June 5, 2024, the High Court (HC) ruled on a writ petition filed by the descendant of a freedom fighter and six others. The HC declared that the 2018 circular was illegal, thereby reinstating the 56% quota for government recruitment. The students immediately initiated a protest movement, and the government appealed the verdict to the Supreme Court, with the initial hearing set for July 4. However, when the court postponed the hearing for another month, the student activists intensified their agitation. On July 6, anti-quota activists launched a nationwide “Bangla Blockade,” which called for road and highway blockades, exam boycotts, and a general student strike. Meanwhile, students persistently requested a dialogue with government representatives. However, the government did not take their proposals seriously.

On July 11, Mr. Obaidul Quader, Member of the Parliament (MP) and the Minister of Road Transport, and the General Secretary of the ruling party, stated that the actions of the anti-quota demonstrators against the Supreme Court were illegal. The Home Minister added, "Students are crossing the limit."

Until this time, the movement remained peaceful although it has spread to nearly all educational institutions, including universities, colleges, Madrashas, and schools in both urban and rural areas. On July 14, PM Hasina held a press conference broadcasted by social and electronic media. The students, teachers, and parents eagerly awaited her response to their demands. Instead, she claimed the matter was within the purview of the Court and mocked the protesters as "Razakars" in her speech, which fuelled student agitation.¹ The protesting students chanted, “Who am I? Who are you? Razakar, Razakar.” “Who said that? Who said that? Autocrat. Autocrat.” “Seeking our right, we became Razakar.”

On July 15, Dhaka University students engaged in a peaceful demonstration to advocate for quota reform, using placards and national flags. Suddenly, they were attacked by the Bangladesh Chatra League (BCL), the student front of the Awami league, armed with rods, sticks, and clubs, with a few even brandishing revolvers. Subsequent to this incident, similar attacks occurred nationwide

¹ The Persian word “Razakar” means 'volunteers'. During the liberation war in 1971, Razakar was a para-militia force formed by native Bengalis and Biharies. They assisted the Pak-Army to reach in the localities, to identify and kill the freedom fighters and their families, the writers, poets, journalists, teachers, even individuals who supported the liberation war. They forcibly seized food, livestock, and other resources from local people to supply the army camps. Furthermore, they trafficked girls and women to these camps which underscore the brutality of their actions. For these reasons, the term ‘Razakar’ is a poignant word that is commonly intolerable to the Bangladeshi people.

within hours. The images of BCL assaulting female students, which have been disseminated through media outlets, are unprecedented.

The protests culminated in fatalities on Tuesday, a day after students at Dhaka University faced clashing with police. Violence continued to escalate as police fired tear gas and rubber bullets, and hurled smoke grenades to scatter stone-throwing protesters. On the afternoon of July 16, police fired tear gas and charged with batons at protesters in front of Begum Rokeya University in Rangpur. As the police advanced, protest coordinator Abu Sayed extended his arms in a gesture of defiance. In a seemingly intentional and unjustifiable attack, the police fired directly at his chest. At least two police officers discharged 12-gauge shotguns directly towards him from across the street, a distance of merely 15 meters. Sayed clutched his chest as officers fired at least two more times using birdshot, an ammunition designed for hunting that is extremely dangerous, inaccurate, and unlawful for use in policing protests. The news of his death has incited outrage among protesters nationwide, with many hailing him as a martyr.

On July 18, tensions peaked as the students called for a nationwide shutdown. Police attacked protesters, resulting in the deaths of numerous individuals, primarily young men, and the dissemination of images of the violence across various social media platforms. In an effort to prevent the organization of protesters via online platforms, particularly via Facebook groups, the government initiated a nationwide internet shutdown that night, leaving 170 million people without online access for the next 11 days. The information minister and the ICT minister asserted that the protesters, in association with Zamat-Shibir, an Islamist political party and its student front, had burned the broadband cables, causing internet outage. Additionally, they were accused of vandalizing state establishments and setting fire to the metro rail station, the Setu Bhaban, and the BTV office, among other locations.

Faced with the momentum of the anti-discrimination movement and the de facto shutdown of the entire country, the Supreme Court, with the persuasion of government, decided to advance the hearing. On July 21, the quotas were significantly reduced from 56 to 7 percent, with 5 percent allocated for the relatives of freedom fighters, 2 percent for ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and people of non-binary genders. However, this was already a belated response, as numerous students and people had been killed, wounded, and arrested in the interim. The demonstrators demanded the implementation of nine specific measures, including the arrest of police officers involved in the shooting incident, the resignation of the ministers, and a public apology from PM. However, the government opted to adopt a more stringent stance. Fourteen foreign missions in Dhaka urged the government to hold law enforcement personnel accountable for their wrongdoings (*Dhaka Tribune* 2024-07-28).

On July 31, the anti-discrimination student movement observed a “March for Justice” program against the “killings, mass arrests, attacks, cases, and disappearances” linked to the quota reform movement. The government has banned the opposition party Jamaat-e-Islami, and its student wing Islami Chhatra Shibir, blaming that they are involved in the recent unrest and the undermining of the government’s development initiatives (*The Daily Star* 2024-08-01).

The support of the quota reform movement from civil society is quite visible. From the outset, teachers supported their students. In some instances, journalists, lawyers, professors, artists, and actors are now at the front line of the processions. Some individuals are attempting to retrieve their students from police custody. Lawyers suited a writ against safe custody of the six student coordinators at the Detective Branch (DB) police office. Advocate Z. I. Khan Panna inquired as to

the authority by which the police were permitted to check mobile and personal belongings without a warrant. Also, a significant number of immigrants from Bangladesh participated in the demonstrations in support of the students. Notable Bangladeshi and foreign online influencers, including Ayman Sadiq, Salman Muqtadir, Daud Kim, the Deshbhakt, and George Galloway, have articulated their support for the student movement.

On August 1, six organizers were released from DB custody after having been held for three days. Protesters participated in a mass processions and prayed for those who had lost their lives. The organizers refuted the claim that the movement had been postponed, while they had been in police custody (*Daily Observer* 2024-08-03).

The movement originated as a protest against quotas but evolved into a broader movement against discrimination, encompassing a nine-point demand. At a certain point, the movement began to focus on a single demand, namely the resignation of the “fascist and killer government.” The student coordinators announced a new program schedule, including a countrywide demonstration non-cooperation movement, and a march to Dhaka and PM’s residence. In response, the government once again blocked internet access, issued a shoot-on-sight order, and imposed a curfew for an unspecified time. Additionally, it declared a forced public holiday from August 5 to August 7. Local civil society and international organizations have expressed fear about the further repressive actions by the government. However, the movement intensified, demonstrated remarkable resilience, and spread across the country.

Meanwhile, on August 4, the first day of the non-cooperation program, 98 people were killed in various locations across the country including Dhaka, due to violent clashes between movement supporters and pro-government activists backed by police. Pictures of the pro-government activists, supported by police, in action with open guns, pistols, and other deadly weapons in many places have been published in newspapers. “This popular uprising was the bloodiest in history. This bloodshed could have been avoided. But Hasina’s absolute power was not only covered by corruption, but also blind to the reality. As a result, Hasina has to flee from the state. Her government no longer have public support.” (*Daily Manab Zamin* 2024-08-06) The protesters said, “We can’t go back to university when our friends and fellows are in jail ... and hundreds were killed in front of our eyes.” (Bali et al. 2024)

On August 5, millions of people disregarded the curfew and open fire, and joined the ‘March to Dhaka’ program from various districts. They started marching to PM’s residence as directed by the movement leaders. Meanwhile, PM Hasina convened a meeting with the heads of all forces and directed them to reinforce the curfew to disperse the crowds from the streets. However, the army chief refuted the PM’s instructions, stating that his generals and troops were no longer willing to open fire on civilians.

The sequence of events unfolded rapidly. Hasina resigned and fled to India via an army helicopter. At 4 pm, the Army Chief General Waqar-uz-Zaman delivered an address that an interim government would be formed shortly. He also added that all activities of the country would be continued under the interim government. On August 8, Muhammad Yunus, the economist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, has been sworn in as the head of interim government.

Additional Factors Contributing to the Students Movement

The lack of government's political prudence in dealing with protesters was a primary reason that sparked widespread movement. The party's central leaders and ministers further exacerbated the situation by humiliating the agitators. Arrogance and intimidations by the Prime Minister had intensified the situation already heightened by long existing political and economic problems.

First of all, over the past 15 years, Bangladesh has witnessed a notable shift towards autocracy. Since 2009, Hasina has been in uninterrupted power, winning her fourth consecutive election in January 2024. During this period, allegations of electoral malpractice have been made, including the misuse of state institutions, vote manipulation, and the extrajudicial killing of opposition activists. The repressive use of legislation, such as the Digital Security Act 2018, suppressed press freedom, civil society, and dissent. Individuals and groups have been subjected to harassment and arrest for their social media activities, with accusations being made that they are associated with Jamaat-Shibir.

Arbitrary arrests by police, often conducted in civilian dress and without official acknowledgment, have become a common occurrence, contributing to widespread fear and resentment among citizens. This further substantiates the assertion that there is a dearth of accountability and transparency within the law enforcement and democratic principles. Corruption is pervasive across sectors, and the government's failure to prosecute high-profile corruption cases indicates a lack of governance and accountability. The recent leakage of information has implicated numerous high-profile individuals, including former officials, in a series of significant financial scandals. These includes the previous Army Chief, the previous police chief, and even the housekeeper of the Prime Minister who owns four billion taka (equivalent to 35 million USD), and question leakage of public service commission exams. These cases have contributed to a growing sense of public discontent.

Secondly, the deterioration of the Bangladeshi economy over the past decade due to misguided economic policies and corruption will culminate in a future being plundered through the accumulation of uncontrollable debt, suggesting a grim outlook for the country's youth.

Thirdly, it is estimated that 20-22 million young people enter the labor market each year, yet only a small proportion are able to secure employment. Due to this domestic job shortage, over ten million people work abroad. However, the government has yet to implement any measures to address this issue. Instead, government officials have exploited the unemployment situation to collect bribes and charge excessive costs for work permits.

A fourth factor contributing to the emergence of reform movement was the expression of student grievances against the BCL. The BCL exerts control over university administration, misuses dormitory spaces, promotes a culture of authoritarianism, and even maintains torture cells in the halls. They attacked student protesters even for non-political matters. The BCL has a history of violence, including the murder of Abrar Fahad, a promising student who criticized Indian hegemony on social media. The students were also subjected to physical abuse and intimidation during the Safe Street movement in 2018.

These factors collectively illustrate how the consolidation of power and the dismantling of democratic institutions by the government have resulted in a situation where the nation is increasingly becoming victim to autocratic rule, largely due to the government's unchecked authority.

Conclusion

It is now evident that the government bears sole responsibility for this undesirable and tragic situation. Had the government had promptly recognized that no unjust decision can be justified by wasting time, there would not have been the extensive loss of life, oppression, and destruction? The International Crisis Group states that Hasina “sealed her fate” when she responded to the protests with brutality and arrogance rather than pursuing serious dialogue with the protest leaders. They state that Hasina “pushed Bangladeshis over the edge.” (International Crisis Group 2024) The anti-discrimination student movement achieved its ultimate objective of forcing the resignation of the authoritarian government. This movement has established a new benchmark in the history of mass uprisings, comparable to the 1952 movement to establish Bangla as the state language and the 1990 uprising that led to the fall of the despotic ruler. In its editorial, *The Daily Star* wrote that “This is a day that will be remembered for generations to come. A day when a 15-year-long authoritarian rule finally came to an end. A day when people truly rose to power, putting aside their differences and uniting in their desire for freedom and a better tomorrow.” (*The Daily Star* 2024-08-06) The interim government has assumed office, and the nation now expects not only reforms to the recruitment process but also reforms to state institutions and governance structures. ■

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