



EXPLAINER

News | Protests

What's behind Bangladesh's violent quota protests?

Students demanding reforms in the quota system say they have come under attack from the government and its allies.



Student protests over Bangladesh job quota leave at least 100 injured

By Al Jazeera Staff

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The two-week-long [anti-quota protests](#) in Bangladesh have [turned violent](#) after groups linked to the ruling party attacked student protesters in the capital, Dhaka.

More than 400 people were injured on Monday and Tuesday during [attacks on protesters](#) who are against the government job quota system amid rising unemployment in the South Asian nation.

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The protests began on July 1 after the High Court reinstated the job quota that reserves one-third of civil service posts for children of fighters who participated in the country's liberation movement in 1971.

So what triggered the current protests and why is the quota system facing opposition?

Who is protesting against job quotas in Bangladesh?

Students from government and private universities across Bangladesh are demanding reform in the conventional job quota system, under which more than half of much sought-after government jobs are reserved.

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The protesters said they are not aligned with any political group and they want a merit-based system that is fair to all.

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Fahim Faruki, a protester and third-year international relations student at Dhaka University, said the students organised the protests through a Facebook group and were not backed by any political organisation.

The protest movement has come to be known as the Students Against Discrimination movement. Thousands of students from Dhaka University in the capital as well as Chittagong University have staged sit-ins against the quota system.

What triggered the recent protests?

On June 5, the High Court ordered the reinstatement of the 30 percent quota for children of freedom fighters, deeming the 2018 abolition of quotas illegal. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League had abolished the quota system after massive protests.

On Wednesday, students from Dhaka University blocked major intersections and the police precinct in Shahbagh, a popular square in Dhaka. The student-led blockade of Shahbagh square continued for days.

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What is the quota system in Bangladesh?

In 1972, the country's founding father, Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, introduced a quota system, reserving a percentage of government jobs for children and grandchildren of people who fought in the 1971 war of independence from Pakistan.

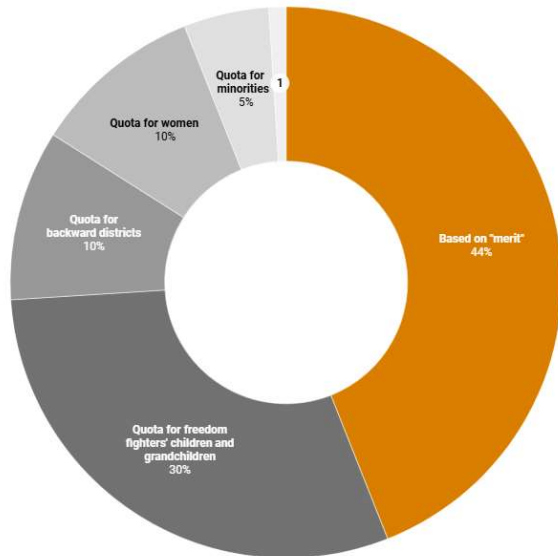
Under the system, 44 percent of first- and second-class government jobs are "merit" based.

The remaining 56 percent are reserved for specific communities:

- 30 percent for the children and grandchildren of freedom fighters
- 10 percent for women
- 10 percent "zila quota" for "backward" districts
- 5 percent for ethnic minorities
- 1 percent for people with physical disabilities

Bangladesh's job quota system

Bangladesh's quota system reserves more than half of well-paid civil service posts, totalling hundreds of thousands of government jobs, for specific groups, including children of fighters in the country's 1971 war of independence from Pakistan.



1 Quota for physically challenged

Source: Bangladesh government | 2018

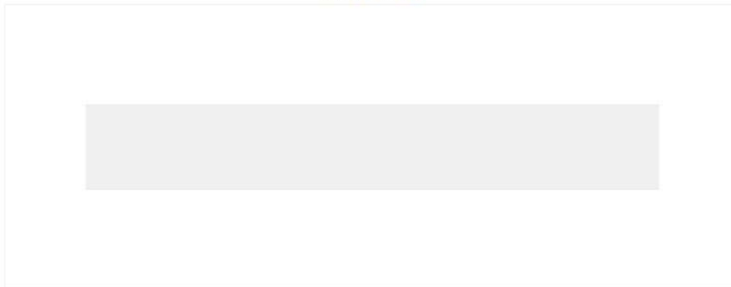


What do the anti-quota protesters want?

The anti-quota protesters are demanding the 30 percent quota for children of freedom fighters be abolished.

They support reserving jobs for ethnic minorities and people with disabilities.

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"Our protest is not against the quota system. It is instead for the reformation of the system," Faruki said.

Another protester, Ayan*, 23, who is also an international relations major at Dhaka University, concurred, saying they do not want the quota system to be abolished altogether but want the percentage of jobs reserved to be lowered.

How has the government responded?

The government has deployed riot police who fired tear gas and charged with batons on Tuesday during violent clashes between the protesters and a pro-government student group. Paramilitary troops were also deployed across several districts amid heightened tensions.

On Thursday, student protesters from the public Comilla University, southeast of Dhaka, clashed with police, who opened fire, local media reported. Twenty people, including students and three policemen, were injured as a result, local media reported.

Ruling party leaders and ministers have tried to paint the protesters as anti-nationals and against the government after Hasina, who has been in power since 2009, referred to them as "Razakars".

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In Bangladesh, Razakar is an offensive term that refers to those who betrayed Bangladesh in the 1971 war by collaborating with Pakistan.

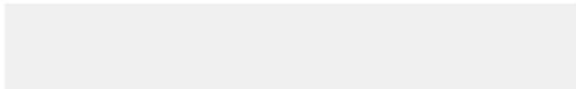
“Why do they have so much resentment towards freedom fighters? If the grandchildren of the freedom fighters don’t get quota benefits, should the grandchildren of Razakars get the benefit?” she asked at a news conference on Sunday.

In response, protesters chanted the slogan, “Who are you? Who am I? Razakar, Razakar,” during a protest at Dhaka University.

A student leader quoted in a local media outlet said the slogan was chosen by students in response to the government’s efforts to discredit their movement.

Asif Nazrul, a law professor at Dhaka University, told Al Jazeera that the message the students intended to convey through their slogans was clear. “I doubt any student at Dhaka University would identify themselves as Razakar,” he said.

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Nazrul also criticised the government’s response, suggesting it was eager to suppress the protests and had found a convenient pretext to do so.



The image shows a screenshot of a tweet from Mehedi Hasan Marof (@MehediMarof). The tweet text reads: "Students across Bangladesh took to the streets with mass procession in response to PM Hasina's framing of quota reform protesters as heirs of Rajakar (Collaborators who aided Pakistan in '71) Chant 'Who are you, who am I? Rajakar, Rajakar' filling the air nationwide. #Bangladesh". Below the text is a video player showing a large group of people in a procession at night. The tweet has 1.5K likes and 49 replies.

How many people have been killed and injured in the protests?

At least [five people have been killed](#), police officials said.

As of Tuesday, more than 400 people were injured, and 297 were treated at the Dhaka

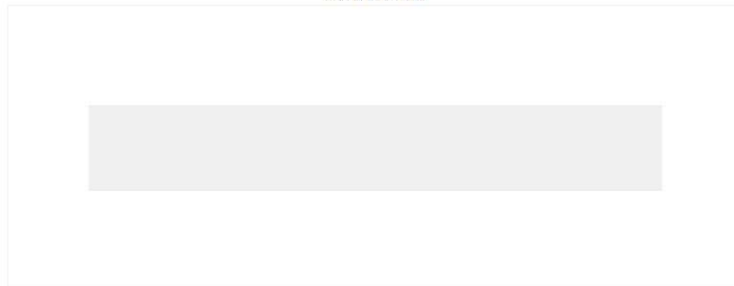
Medical College Hospital, the AFP news agency reported.

Were there clashes between protesters and Chhatra League?

The protesters have blamed the ruling party's student wing, the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), for the violence. Faruki said BCL members summoned protesters inside the university hostel before the attack.

"They surrounded us from the high buildings and pelted us with stones and small brick parts. Many students were injured."

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Faruki added that the BCL was armed, leaving the protesters helpless against them.

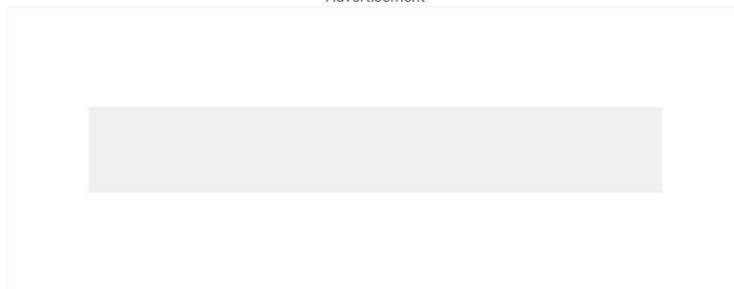
"We were unarmed. How will we get arms?"

The student protesters said they were not safe from the BCL in hospitals either. "The student league went inside the [Dhaka Medical College] Hospital and attacked there," Faruki alleged.

Ayan was at the hospital's emergency ward after several of his friends were injured and said no security or police protected the protesters from the BCL.

On the other hand, BCL President Saddam Hossain said more than 100 of its leaders and activists were injured in the violence, the Anadolu Agency reported. Hossain insisted that the student body had been provoked.

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"Those who openly identify as 'Razakar' must face consequences. Such individuals have no place in this country, and we have decided to politically confront the students protesting quota reforms," he said during a media briefing on Monday.

Protests continued on Tuesday, disrupting traffic in Dhaka.

"We are not going to leave the protests until our demands are fulfilled," Ayan said.

**Name changed for privacy.*

SOURCE: AL JAZEERA

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