

What's Behind Bangladesh's Student Protests?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Bangladesh's quota system sparked the unrest, which signifies deeper political and economic problems.
- The government's heavy-handed response has changed the political dynamics.
- While the government appears ready to concede on quotas, broader political issues will be much harder to tackle.

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Bangladesh's streets have again erupted with political violence. In early July, a university student protest began over Bangladesh's job quota system that disproportionately benefits the descendants of Bangladesh's 1971 liberation war fighters, which many students view as unfair and outdated. Early last week, peaceful protests turned violent as police and ruling party supporters violently dispersed crowds. At least a **half-dozen** people died in early violence, including one man apparently shot by police with his **hands raised**, while pro- and anti-government students **clashed** around the country.

With unrest and violence spiraling out of control on July 18, the **government** shut down internet and mobile networks, deployed the military and imposed a curfew, which all remained in place through the weekend. As of Sunday evening, news outlets reported that the protest's death toll **exceeded 130** and is likely to rise.

USIP's Geoffrey Macdonald discusses the drivers of the protests, why they are turning violent and what this tells us about the state of Bangladesh's politics.

What is driving these protests?

Macdonald: Bangladesh's quota system was the spark for these protests. Shortly after Bangladesh's independence in 1971, the government established a system of **quotas** for government jobs that mandated 30 percent of positions go to liberation war fighters. Over the decades, the benefit was modified to include the children and grandchildren of freedom fighters, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities and others, totaling 56 percent of government jobs. In 2018, a similar student movement successfully compelled the government to scrap the quota system altogether. The issue was mostly settled until this June when Bangladesh's **high court** ruled that ending the quota system was unconstitutional, effectively reinstating it.

The government appealed the high court's decision, but the prospect of the quota system's return drove students to the street. The initial protests in early July were **small** but **persistent** and met with occasional **violence** from pro-government Awami League (AL) supporters, namely its student wing Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL). The confrontation escalated when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina equated the protesters to "razakars," a derogatory term (translated as "volunteer") referring to those who collaborated with Pakistani forces to fight against Bangladesh's independence in the 1971 war. In response, the protesters adopted the term as their own, **declaring**, "We are razakars" and calling the prime minister an autocrat.

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This highly inflammatory rhetorical shift portended violence. The AL's secretary general said that its student wing would give the protesters a "[fitting response](#)." Heeding the call, BCL members, the police and other government supporters descended on student protesters, precipitating clashes on July 17 that [killed](#) at least six people in Dhaka, Chattogram and Rangpur. On Thursday, the protesters attempted a "[complete shutdown](#)," which was met with [deadlier violence](#). By the end of the weekend, the military was deployed around the country with a "[shoot on sight](#)" order to stem the unrest.

The steady escalation of tension, mobilization and violence belies the protest movement's narrowly stated goal. The quota issue is the tip of the iceberg of economic and political discontent that lies underneath the surface. The perceived unfairness of guaranteeing jobs to the grandchildren of freedom fighters — seen by many as a giveaway to loyalists of the AL, the party that led the independence fight — is exacerbated by rising inflation, a poor job market for university graduates and instances of egregious [corruption](#) that inevitably benefit government officials.

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Additionally, Bangladesh has not held a transparent and participatory election that establishes the AL's public support since 2008, leaving many to question its legitimacy. Bangladesh's university students have essentially only known AL rule and are consequently directing their frustrations at a ruling party for which elections are no longer an accountability mechanism. The opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and other allies have seized on this youth discontent to revive their own anti-government movement. BNP leaders declared [solidarity](#) with the protesters and opposition student wings have [joined](#) the streets, morphing an issue-based protest into a broader challenge to the government's authority.

What can be done to resolve tensions?

Macdonald: On the narrow issue of job quotas, the government and protesters are not far apart. After weeks dismissing the seriousness of protests, the government shifted tact. With turmoil mounting last week, the government called for a dialogue with protest coordinators and [announced](#) that the hearing to appeal the court decision on quotas had been moved up to July 21 from August 7, signaling an eagerness to resolve the issue. On Sunday, the court finally [ruled](#) that quotas favoring liberation war veterans' descendants cannot exceed 5 percent, which mostly addresses the original student concerns. The government also announced the creation of a judicial commission to investigate the deaths of protesters. But over the weekend, the protesters' demands expanded, with one faction [asking](#) not only for quota reform but also the release of jailed protesters, trials for police officers who killed citizens, and the resignation of prominent government ministers.

Other hardline student factions are reportedly calling for a "[revolt](#)" against the government. Even before the internet shutdown, the media's [withering coverage](#) of the government's actions had galvanized negative public opinion. Moreover, the newly rejuvenated opposition will surely push its movement against the AL government despite the resolution of the quota issue. The court case alone is unlikely to substantially reduce tensions.

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The first iteration of quota protests in April 2018 could provide a roadmap for solving the crisis, but, at this point, is a poor analogy to the present. The 2018 quota movement also saw significant street mobilization, BCL violence against protesters and rhetoric targeting the protesters as traitors. After persistent protests, Prime Minister Hasina ultimately agreed to remove the quota system and protests died out. However, the current situation has several important differences. In April 2018, the AL was going into an election year in which the opposition ultimately participated in the polls, the economy

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was strong, and the protesters mostly avoided politics. Today's protests are occurring seven months after a widely boycotted election and amid economic challenges, a hostile opposition and politically awakened youth, which augers a more resilient protest movement.

What are the political implications of this protest movement and surrounding violence?

Macdonald: Political forecasts are difficult in these rapidly evolving conditions with little available information. Up until these protests, Bangladesh appeared politically fragile but stable in the immediate post-election period. Despite clear public frustration over the state of the economy and politics, few citizens turned out to protest the outcome of January's parliamentary elections and the political opposition was marginalized. Although Bangladesh's de facto single-party state was likely to face [structural problems](#) with corruption and lack of accountability, these looked like medium-term problems.

The government's response to the protest movement has shaken the status quo. A previously quiescent populace is now roused and the opposition, which had been struggling to mobilize supporters after the election, is revived. Perhaps most importantly, Bangladesh's university students, who have been at the forefront of nearly every successful political movement, are activated. The informal federation of government critics appears deeper and wider than before the election, which presents a serious challenge to the ruling party.

What should we watch for moving forward?

Macdonald: The government has moved quickly to address the matter of quotas, but the broader political issues will be much harder to tackle. Three factors will be important to watch when the internet is restored and the full scope of the situation emerges: the protest's momentum, the government's actions moving forward and the international response.

The streets of Bangladesh's major cities are reportedly in a [tenuous calm](#). Additional acts of government contrition and accountability would likely satisfy some segment of the student protesters, but other hardline factions are likely to push on. Over the weekend, reports of protesters staging a [jailbreak](#) and setting [fire](#) to a metro station suggest many are committed for further confrontation. The opposition likely hopes to use this wave of popular anger to expand its anti-government movement, but the public's appetite for a clash with the government is not yet apparent. It seems certain that the protests will continue, but their size and composition are difficult to predict.

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The government's response is a critical variable. It is unclear if the ruling party is willing to meet the protest movement's expanding demands for accountability or would rather choose a path of further crackdown. Historically, Bangladesh's political parties often embrace the politics of strength, eschewing accommodation in favor of force. In the coming days and weeks, one could easily imagine an escalatory dynamic of violence in which neither side gives in. Government officials have so far issued few public statements. At a press conference on Sunday, the state minister for information and broadcasting sounded [undaunted](#), reportedly asserting the government's ability to quell the protests quickly. His ministry later distributed a statement that emphasized the government's compromises but blamed the opposition for the violence. The prime minister's son posted on [social media](#) that he mourned the loss of innocent of life, insisting that the government is “sincere” in investigating protester deaths, but he also diverted blame for the violence onto the BNP and the Islamist party Jamaat-i-Islami.

The international reaction will also play a role in how the situation evolves. India, the AL government's key ally, shows no signs of wavering, with some Indian media [outlets](#) pinning the violence on the opposition. Western governments have been more willing in recent years to criticize the government in Dhaka. But during Bangladesh's [controversial](#) election period, international pressure often caused the ruling party to [dig in](#). Since January's polls, most Western governments have emphasized mutual interests and positive engagement with Bangladesh. As the protests and violence grew this weekend, foreign governments' statements were limited to calls for “[all sides to end the violence](#)”