

Why students are risking their lives to take on the Bangladeshi government

By Max Walden and Julia Bergin with wires

World Politics

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A local media report says as many as 174 people have died due to the Bangladeshi government's brutal repression of street protests. (AFP: Ishara S. Kodikara)

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Mass death, 2,500 arrests and almost 170 million people without internet for almost a week.

That's the dramatic fallout of student demonstrations in Bangladesh that kicked off in early July.

Public anger at the government is boiling over. Protest leaders have given authorities an ultimatum to stop its crackdown and restore internet connectivity within 48 hours.

The government on Wednesday partially restored communications though connectivity is slow and social media remains suspended.

So, what are the protests really about? Why don't we know exactly how many people have died?

And when will the bloodshed end?

What sparked the protests in Bangladesh?



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina recently won re-election in polls widely described as a sham. (AP: Anupam Nath)

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At the heart of the protests is a quota system that had reserved up to 30 per cent of government jobs for family members of veterans who fought in Bangladesh's 1971 war of independence against Pakistan.

Protesters want to abolish this system, which they say is discriminatory and benefits supporters of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League Party, which led the independence movement.

They want it replaced with a merit-based system.

Even though job opportunities have grown in some parts of the private sector, many people prefer government jobs because they are seen as more stable and lucrative.

But there are not enough to go around. Each year, some 400,000 graduates compete for about 3,000 jobs in the civil service exam.

"Many students go through the bitter experience of not finding the jobs they deserve after completing their education," wrote Anu Muhammad, a former economics professor and analyst, in the Dhaka-based Daily Star newspaper.

"Rampant corruption and irregularities in government job recruitment exams and selection processes have created immense frustration and anger."



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Bangladeshi students on 'brutal crackdown'



Students at universities and colleges in Bangladesh say they were "brutally attacked" in clashes with the authorities.



Solidarity protests have spread around the Bangladeshi diaspora, from the Middle East to India, Melbourne to New York's Times Square. (Reuters: Kent J. Edwards)

Last Sunday, Bangladesh's Supreme Court [scrapped most of the quotas](#) and ordered 93 per cent of the government jobs to be allocated on merit.

But according to Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, an expert on Bangladesh from the Australian National University, "the demon has been unleashed already".

Is the quota system the only cause for anger?

No.

Public protests reflect broader frustration about the economy, corruption and the authoritarian turn under Ms Hasina's government.

"She has been ruling for far too long. There isn't a succession plan within her party and there isn't a strong, secular face in the other party," Professor Lahiri-Dutt said.

"There is so much anger now, it has burst out. It will be very difficult to contain."

The current unrest came months



after Ms Hasina won a fifth term in Bangladesh in what the opposition party said was a "sham election" that included opposition members being jailed ahead of the polls.



Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt says the protests will be hard to contain now the people's anger has been unleashed. (Supplied: Jamie Kidston/ANU)

Bangladesh's \$416 billion economy had been one of the fastest growing in the world for years, but it has faced struggles since the COVID-19 pandemic.

"There are many graduates, many PhD holders in Bangladesh who are there looking for a job," exiled Bangladeshi investigative journalist Zulkarnain Saer Khan told the ABC's The World.

"But there's a serious scarcity of solid or proper employment in the country.

"The country's GDP might have gone up, but again if you look at the inflation, inflation has gone drastically high."

Nearly 800,000 graduates were unemployed in Bangladesh in 2022, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

Inflation hovers at about 10 per cent.



Security personnel walk past government vehicles set alight by protesters. (Reuters: Mohammad Ponir Hossain)

How has the government responded to demonstrations?

With mass arrests, violence and internet blackouts.

The protests initially turned violent following clashes between thousands of anti-quota demonstrators and members of the student wing of Ms Hasina's Awami League Party.



Police patrol the streets during a curfew in Dhaka, Bangladesh. (AP: Mahmud Hossain Opu)

Ms Hasina blamed the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the right-wing Jamaat-e-Islami Party and its student wing for the violence

The army has been deployed to quell the unrest, and a curfew remains in place.

Dhaka newspaper The Daily Prothom Alo reported this week that as many as 174 people had died due to the Bangladeshi government's brutal repression of street protests.



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Bangladeshi police attempt to disperse crowds and enforce a nationwide curfew amid unrest over a lack of job opportunities.

Hospital data showed at least 147 people had been killed, according to the Reuters news agency.

In a statement, Human Rights Watch's deputy Asia director Meenakshi Ganguly said Bangladesh had been "troubled for a long time due to unfettered security force abuses against anyone who opposes the Sheikh Hasina government".

"And we are witnessing that same playbook again, this time to attack unarmed student protesters," she said.

"Now is the time for influential governments to press Sheikh Hasina to stop her forces from brutalising students and other protesters."

The AFP news agency has tallied more than 2,500 arrests.



Nizam Uddin stands in front of his shop which was set on fire during clashes in Dhaka. (AP: Rajib Dhar)

Why don't we know more about the death toll?

Bangladesh has been under a nationwide communications blackout since last Thursday, with the government only starting to restore services on Wednesday.

Simon Angus is the director of the Monash IP Observatory, which monitors internet-connected devices globally.

BGD // Update: ●
#Bangladesh has been almost completely without #ICT connectivity since c. 9pm #18 Jul. Here we compare

He said the Bangladesh government had taken the "nuclear" option by launching a communications blackout, with current connectivity in the country a mere 2 per cent of its pre-shutdown level.

"There are no signs in the data we have that the internet has been, or will, be online soon. There are no 'blips' of life as of yet," he said.

#Bangladesh (BGD) to #India (IND) and #Myanmar (MMR) from our active measurements. ... this is not a regional outage. @TheRealSodaLabs @MonashUni pic.twitter.com/q6ixQWdmb8

— Monash IP Observatory (@IP_Observatory) July 23, 2024

Bangladesh Telecommunications Minister Zunaid Ahmed Palak was quoted by the United News of Bangladesh news agency as saying: "Groups with vested interest have been spreading false information on social media, contributing to the instability.

"The decision to shut down mobile internet services was made without prior notice, based on the evolving situation."

Mr Palak said social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and TikTok had not responded adequately to the government's demands to remove "controversial content".

Professor Angus added that autocratic-leaning regimes had developed more sophisticated approaches to internet suppression over time.

"For example, Iran's most recent episode of shutdowns was not nationwide, but very targeted, and most likely coordinated to local cities or regions to provide cover for government police and military to crack down on protesters with physical violence," he said.

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The government has blamed the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the right-wing Jamaat-Islami Party for the violence. (AP: Bikas Das)

UN human rights chief Volker Türk said shutting down the internet "disproportionately restricts the enjoyment of the right to freedom of expression, including freedom to seek, receive and impart information — particularly in the midst of a crisis".

"Bangladesh's political leaders must work with the country's young population to find solutions to the ongoing challenges and focus on the country's growth and development," he said.

"Dialogue is the best and only way forward."

