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Q&A / ASIA 25 JULY 2024 16 MINUTES

## Bangladesh on Edge after Crushing Quota Protests

*Mass unrest has rocked Bangladesh in July, as students and others demonstrate against quotas for state jobs, and the government responds with deadly repression. In this Q&A, Crisis Group Asia Director Pierre Prakash explains what is behind the turmoil.*

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### What is happening?

At least 200 people have been killed and thousands wounded throughout Bangladesh since 16 July, when security forces launched a crackdown on students protesting the country’s quota system for state jobs. Since the demonstrations began at the start of July, hundreds of thousands of students and sympathisers have marched to express their anger at a court decision reinstating employment quotas for “underrepresented” groups, in particular the allocation of 30 per cent of public-sector jobs to descendants of “freedom fighters” who took part in the 1971 Liberation War with Pakistan, which led to the creation of independent Bangladesh. Despite a court ruling that scaled down the size of these quotas, the government’s violent response to the protests has galvanised the movement, turning it into the largest political mobilisation in Bangladesh in at least a decade and probably the most serious challenge to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her party, the Awami League, since they took office in 2009. The protests **come at a time** when Bangladesh’s economy is struggling, largely due to mismanagement and corruption, leading to fewer job opportunities for young people in the private sector. But there is also growing frustration at the government’s authoritarianism, which enabled it to secure a fourth consecutive term in a **stage-managed election** in January.

The crisis is largely of the government’s making. The brutality of its initial crackdown and the disparaging remarks of top officials about the protesting students and their motives have only served to inflame tensions, swell the size of demonstrations and prompt student leaders to broaden their demands. On 18 July, tensions came to a head as the students called for a nationwide shutdown and police attacked protesters, killing dozens of mainly young men and causing images of the bloodshed to flood social media platforms. Claiming that it was taking emergency steps to stop protesters from organising – particularly via Facebook groups – the government that night took the impromptu decision to switch off the internet nationwide, leaving 170 million people without online access. But the damage was already done: the next day, the protests grew larger, particularly in the capital Dhaka, where many outraged citizens joined the student marches. Hasina

announced a strict curfew that has seen Bangladeshis confined to their homes for all but a few hours a day. She also sent the army into the streets, giving the soldiers shoot-on-sight orders. Well over 100 people were killed from 19 to 21 July, while several protest leaders were also abducted.

Authorities also moved to placate the protesters. The Appellate Division of the Supreme Court brought forward an appeal hearing against the High Court decision that reinstated the job quotas, ruling on 21 July that they should be lowered. The government has also promised an independent inquiry, and a minister has **claimed** that “anyone and everyone” responsible for the violence will be held accountable.

Yet it is the harshness of the government’s repressive response, rather than the legal process or promises of justice, that appears to have silenced the protests. On 22 July, student leaders issued new demands but also announced a 48-hour pause in their demonstrations, which they have since extended by a further 48 hours. Fewer bullet-ridden bodies have been turning up at hospitals in Dhaka, and a modicum of normality has returned: the government has restored limited internet access, the curfew has gradually been relaxed and business activity has partly resumed, with the capital witnessing its familiar traffic jams once again on 24 July.

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The full fallout from the unrest is still emerging, however. Although the government insists that only a few dozen have died, credible reports put the confirmed death toll at between 190 and 202, and the real figure is likely to be much higher; the internet shutdown has made it much harder to assemble a complete picture of the turmoil throughout the country.

Top officials, for their part, have blamed opposition parties, particularly the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami, for stirring up violent disturbances. Security forces have reportedly arrested more than 3,000 people – including some student leaders but mainly BNP and Jamaat officials – and charges have been filed against more than 60,000 people. The government has nevertheless provided little evidence to support its claim that the BNP and Jamaat were driving the protests. Although the BNP offered public support to the students and some of its followers joined them on the streets, the party was not directly involved in organising the marches while few, if any, of those killed appear to have been from the BNP, Jamaat or other opposition parties.

### **How did tensions escalate so quickly?**

The protests began at Dhaka University on 1 July, after a High Court ruling the previous month reinstated the job quotas. Led by a group called Students against Discrimination, they grew steadily larger each day, spreading to other public institutions and trickling down to smaller cities and districts. They were mostly peaceful and, at first, the government seemed not to take them seriously – officials were dismissive of the movement and made no real attempt to engage its leaders. A turning point came in mid-July. Instead of seeking to defuse the unrest peacefully, Prime Minister Hasina stoked outrage in a 14 July press conference when she **mocked the protesters**, insinuating they were razakars – a reference to Bangladeshis who collaborated with the Pakistani military during the 1971 war and were implicated in massive human rights abuses against civilians in what was then East Pakistan. Her words incensed the students. Later that night, they began chanting, “Who am I? Who are you? Razakar, razakar. Who said that? Who said that? Autocrat. Autocrat”.

The day after Hasina’s remarks, protesters returned to the streets in far greater numbers. On 16 July, the government resorted to deadly violence for the first time, deploying not only the police and the Border Guard Bangladesh paramilitary force, but also members of the ruling party’s student wing, the Chhatra League, which is notorious for its brutal methods. Six protesters were killed, including a young man in Rangpur, Abu Sayed, who stood alone and unarmed in front of the police **with his arms outstretched**, seemingly prepared for martyrdom. Videos of his death and images of Chhatra League members attacking protesters, including **young women**, spread at great speed on social media. More people, including many non-students, joined the marches, prompting Hasina’s government to order the closure of state schools and universities. The security forces then raided and shuttered dormitories, which have long been a hotbed of activism, forcing many student residents to return to their hometowns.

Initial signs that these steps might quash the movement were dispelled two days later. When protests rekindled on 18 July, levels of violence from both sides rose



steeply. Police increasingly switched from rubber bullets to live ammunition, while photos captured protesters beating officers with sticks. In Dhaka protesters set fire to Bangladesh's state broadcasting facility and a train station in the city's new metro system, both symbols of the Hasina government's fifteen years in power. By the end of the day, dozens more protesters had been killed, and the government ordered the internet shut down.

## **What are the quotas that triggered the protests?**

The reserved quotas for state jobs were introduced in 1972, shortly after independence. At first, 80 per cent of government jobs were assigned to freedom fighters, women affected by the 1971 war and people from poorer areas of the country. The overall percentage and composition have evolved over the years, with categories added for people with disabilities and those from minority backgrounds; since 2012, the quota has stood at 56 per cent, including 30 per cent for descendants of freedom fighters, 10 per cent for women, 10 per cent for residents of "backward districts" (meaning poorer areas of the country), 5 per cent for ethnic minorities and 1 per cent for people with physical disabilities.

It is not the first time that students have mobilised against the quota system, which many in Bangladesh consider obsolete and unfair. Following similar – though smaller – protests in 2018, the Awami League government abolished the quotas for some grades of government jobs, seemingly in an effort to mollify students in the run-up to that year's polls, which the opposition had agreed to contest. Several descendants of freedom fighters later appealed the government's decision in the courts, claiming the order was unconstitutional. It was the High Court's decision in favour of the freedom fighters in early June that reinstated the quotas and provided the trigger for this latest wave of protests.

For many government critics, the ruling squarely reflected the government's wishes as well as its sway over the judicial system. Prime Minister Hasina's support for the quotas – she recently said the country **should** "show the highest honour to the freedom fighters" – stems both from the country's hyper-partisan politics and her own part therein. Her father was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who co-founded the Awami League and led the struggle for independence before his assassination in 1975; the League still defines itself as the party of national liberation. Lieutenant General Ziaur Rahman, a military ruler who eventually gained power after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's killing, formed the BNP in 1978 as a centrist force, although it later allied with Islamists who had opposed independence. For Hasina and the Awami League, the link between the BNP and those who resisted separation from Pakistan is a sin that taints the opposition – a point they seek to drive home at every opportunity. Preserving the freedom fighter quota, which was created by her father, is a way of reinforcing these divisions. Freedom fighters and their descendants also remain an important constituency for the Awami League, making the quota a means of dispensing patronage and inserting allies into the state bureaucracy.

When the demonstrations began to gain momentum, however, the government asked the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court to overturn the High Court decision, and a hearing was set for 7 August. With protests reaching a crescendo and the country under de facto lockdown, the Supreme Court decided to bring the hearing forward. As noted above, on 21 July it drastically scaled back the quotas from 56 to 7 per cent, including 5 per cent for the relatives of freedom fighters, and 2 per cent for ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and people of non-binary genders. Importantly, these apply to all grades of jobs, widening the scope beyond the 2018 government order. The scrapping of quotas for women, on the other hand, was a surprise move, given that students had wanted these and others to be retained, in recognition of the barriers to representation faced by women and other groups.

The government's appeal and the eventual Supreme Court verdict should in many ways have represented victory for the protesters. But coming as it did in the wake of the government's crackdown, aggrieved demonstrators had already moved their sights to a larger target: the Awami League government's authoritarianism, its meddling with the judicial system and its intolerance of dissent. Student leaders are now not only demanding that the government implement the new quota levels set by the Supreme Court, but they have also aired demands for an apology from Prime Minister Hasina, the resignation of government figures deemed responsible for the violence – particularly the minister for home affairs, who oversees the police – the lifting of the curfew, restoration of internet and mobile services, the reopening of universities and the release of detained protest leaders.

## **Are there other causes behind the protest movement?**

The anti-quota protests drew their size and strength from a **deep economic and political malaise** festering in Bangladesh. Until fairly recently, the country's economy had grown rapidly for many years – particularly since the end of military rule in 1990 – pulling tens of millions out of poverty. But since emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has struggled to manage inflation, in particular high food prices, and found its efforts hampered by economic mismanagement, corruption and cronyism. Several high-profile **corruption scandals** have surfaced in recent months, stirring widespread anger at a time of deep economic pain for many Bangladeshis. At a 14 July press conference, Sheikh Hasina **admitted** that one of her household staff had amassed a fortune equivalent to tens of millions of dollars. She claimed not to understand how he had become so rich. But to many Bangladeshis it comes as no surprise that a person so close to power could accumulate such wealth.

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*The quotas are just the most tangible element of what many Bangladeshis consider a rotten system of preferential state employment.*

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Corruption also reportedly **permeates** recruitment for government jobs, meaning the quotas are just the most tangible element of what many Bangladeshis consider a rotten system of preferential state employment. Students perceive that many supposedly merit-based positions go to those with money or connections to the ruling party. At the same time, graduates also face much higher levels of unemployment than the broader population, making competition for these posts fierce.

Meanwhile, opinion polls and anecdotal evidence suggest that authoritarian drift under the Awami League government has made it increasingly unpopular. Since 2013, authorities have charged tens of thousands of opposition members with various offences, while enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, including of activists, have become an increasingly regular occurrence (in December 2021, the U.S. **slapped sanctions** on the Rapid Action Battalion, an anti-crime force that was allegedly responsible for many of the killings, along with several senior officials). Draconian censorship laws have seen more than a thousand people arrested in recent years, mainly for social media posts.

Furthermore, since Hasina won the 2008 election, Bangladesh has not had a genuinely competitive national poll. In January, the government oversaw a third stage-managed election, in which the ruling party won about 75 per cent of seats despite doing the utmost to make the vote look competitive – for example, around 20 per cent of the seats it lost were to “independent candidates” who were, in reality, members of the ruling party. But the low turnout – officially 42 per cent, but widely thought to be **much lower** – showed that Bangladeshis were not fooled. The main opposition party, the BNP, had earlier launched a mass movement to pressure the government into accepting its demands for fairer electoral conditions in the run-up to the vote. Police and the Chhatra League eventually broke up a major rally in October 2023, and numerous BNP leaders were jailed, persuading the party to boycott the vote.

With no real alternative at the ballot box, discontented Bangladeshis have few options besides street protests to make their voices heard. But the anti-quota protests have also transformed the political landscape, harnessing public discontent in a way that the BNP was unable to, while also being led by a younger generation that had been widely perceived as unmoved by politics. It has even included students from private universities, who tend to come from wealthier families than those attending public institutions, and are more interested in migrating abroad than securing jobs under the quota system. The involvement of many young women in the protest movement has also come in stark contrast to traditional parties, which are mainly the preserve of men.

## **What are the biggest tests that Dhaka faces now?**

The biggest challenge facing the government is how to pivot from its heavy-handed response to the protest wave to a more sustainable approach. After fifteen years in office, Prime Minister Hasina is facing her most serious crisis yet. The Awami League government probably has the coercive tools to hold onto power, and the events of the past week have shown that it is willing to go to great lengths to crush challenges to its authority. But if it survives through brute force alone, its legitimacy will be greatly diminished, particularly among the students who led the demonstrations. Some of the student leaders who had been abducted have now been released but any official move to reopen public universities risks inviting a



resurgence of protests now that the Chhatra League has been forced out of residential halls following mounting fury at its actions.

Relations with the armed forces are also a matter of great sensitivity. The army is a major power centre that has the capacity to upend elected and non-elected leaders alike. Hasina has spent years showering largesse on the military to maintain its allegiance, and she recently appointed a distant relative as the new army chief. Even so, the army would recoil at being drawn into any mass killing of civilians, which would cause irreparable damage to its domestic and international reputation. The Bangladeshi army is consistently one of the largest contributors to UN peacekeeping operations – it currently accounts for around 10 per cent of the troops serving in such missions – and these assignments are a key source of prestige and income. Although it has been sent out to enforce the curfew and restore order, the military, unlike the police, seems largely to be avoiding targeting protesters. If it gets drawn into imposing order by deadly force, the army could be tempted to turn on the government.

Government officials are also struggling with the chaos caused by the internet shutdown. At the behest of business, Dhaka has restored limited access, enabling banks to reopen and foreign trade to resume, albeit on a much-reduced scale. But authorities appear reluctant to restore mobile data, which is how most Bangladeshis use the internet. People have been unable to get access to their bank accounts or pre-pay their gas and electricity bills, which means that some households are now without power. Panic buying has been reported in Dhaka and other major cities, with supermarkets and other stores starting to run low on essential goods. Many businesses are simply unable to operate, from food delivery services and e-commerce to the nascent outsourcing sector. It also remains to be seen how the protests and the internet outage will affect Bangladesh's booming garment sector, which produces about 85 per cent of the country's exports; some insiders worry that instability will see the country lose orders to competitors elsewhere in the region. Either way, the impact of the protests will place further stress on an economy that was already ailing.

The government is nevertheless hesitant to restore full internet services nationally. Even the limited restoration of recent days has resulted in fresh videos of state-backed violence emerging online, bring with them the risk of further outrage and protests. They could also ratchet up international repudiation. While human rights groups have denounced the violence, calling it "a shocking indictment of the absolute intolerance shown by the Bangladeshi authorities to protest and dissent", criticism from foreign governments has so far been muted. This in part prompted Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus, whom the government has targeted with numerous criminal charges, to make a rare foray into politics, calling on "world leaders and the United Nations to do everything within their powers to end the violence against those who are exercising their rights to protest". Regardless of the political challenges the government is facing, it cannot win by keeping the internet shut down because the costs are simply too high.

## **What should Dhaka do now?**

To restore its domestic credibility and bring calm to the streets, the Awami League government should take steps to bring the country back from the brink, both in the short and long term. It should lift martial law, restore internet access and ensure that those responsible for killings during the protests are held to account. It also needs to manage the peaceful reopening of universities and free the scores of students arrested over the last week. Foreign partners should urge the government – including through the threat of targeted individual sanctions of the sort imposed by the U.S. in 2021 – to restore respect for civil rights immediately and pursue talks with those leading the anti-quota movement.

Once the immediate crisis has been tempered, the government should assume the hard work of political reform. It should take steps to restore the multi-party system that it has undermined over the past fifteen years. The Awami League's dominance of the political landscape has helped create the conditions for a popular upheaval. Dialogue with opposition groups, including the BNP, would enable the country to return to more peaceful, stable political competition. While the onus to initiate such dialogue lies with the ruling party, the opposition will also need to relax some of its hardline positions, such as demanding Prime Minister Hasina's resignation. A unity government or even a new national election are potential means of helping restore confidence in the political system and reaping the benefits in terms of domestic stability. In considering these options, state and party leaders should take care to encourage the emergence of new political forces that could channel the demands of younger generations; many in the student movement see the current opposition as little better than the Awami League.

*The rise of anti-quota protests has illustrated just how fragile one-party rule is in Bangladesh.*

India, a staunch supporter of Hasina's government, should also use its leverage to help Bangladesh back on a path to stability by restoring multi-party democracy, good governance and respect for civil rights. New Delhi's backing for the Awami League is longstanding, and the Indian government has tended to overlook (and in some ways, empower) Hasina's increasingly iron-fisted rule. But the resulting anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh makes continuing that support a risky **strategy** – one that neither benefits neighbourly relations nor the people of Bangladesh. The rise of anti-quota protests has illustrated just how fragile one-party rule is in Bangladesh. Doubling down on authoritarian methods to quell demonstrations without serious efforts at dialogue and political reform is unlikely to bring more than temporary calm.

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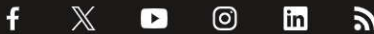
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