

Student Protests in Bangladesh: Implications for the Hasina Government

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Summary

Bangladesh is currently grappling with widespread student protests, calling for the abolition of the quota system for public sector job recruitment. These protests have led to massive violence, outcry and attention to fairness in the job market and employment sector, and its governance. While the Sheikh Hasina government has taken steps to address the protesters' demands, the violent response has led to the deaths of over a hundred students. The political violence, oppression and instability may persist, potentially causing significant long-term effects on trust, policy reform, political stability and electoral outcomes. Addressing these challenges requires a careful balance of responsiveness, transparency and inclusivity to ensure that the government can effectively navigate the complexities of public sentiment and maintain its legitimacy.

Background of the Quota System

In June 2024, student protests erupted in Bangladesh, calling for the abolition of the quota system for job recruitment in the public sector. The country is currently confronted with massive violent clashes between protesters, security personnel and pro-government student activists.

The quota system, established post-independence in 1971, reserved a significant portion of government jobs for various groups – 30 per cent for descendants of freedom fighters, 10 per cent for women, 10 per cent for underprivileged districts, five per cent for ethnic minorities and one per cent for people with disabilities. While originally intended to promote inclusivity and address historical injustices, it has faced criticism for being outdated and unfair due to its extensive misuse by the ruling party.

These protests have brought attention to underlying issues within the country's employment system and raised questions about the government's approach to governance and responsiveness to public sentiment.

Development of the Protests

The protests, initially started in early 2018, were mainly led by students from different universities. The University of Dhaka became a focal point, with thousands of students taking to the streets, demanding reforms to the quota system. The demonstrations quickly spread to other parts of the country, with both students and job seekers joining the movement.

The government initially responded with a mix of repression and concession. In April 2018, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced that the quota system would be abolished. This

declaration was met with both scepticism and cautious optimism. While it temporarily calmed the protests, many demanded concrete steps and a clear timeline for implementation. The government's subsequent actions, including the formation of committees to review the quota system, were closely scrutinised by the public.

On 5 June 2024, the High Court verdict declared the quota abolition decision invalid. Students started protesting against the court verdict and called for a '[Bangla Blockade](#)' on 9 July 2024 and a massive student movement began.

Latest Update

The [British Broadcasting Corporation](#) reported that at least 166 people have been killed and thousands have been injured during the violence. The army has been deployed to support the civil administration and an indefinite curfew was imposed on 20 July 2024. Internet services have been completely shut down since 18 July 2024.

On 21 July 2024, the Appellate Division cancelled the High Court's order to reinstate the quota in government jobs. The [Appellate Division](#) directed the government to keep a 93 per cent quota for merit, five per cent for freedom fighters and their families, one per cent for the minorities and one per cent for the disabled and third gender.

Causes of the Latest Protests

The protests were primarily triggered by the perception of unfairness within the quota system. Many students and job seekers argued that the system favoured certain groups aligned with the government. This was particularly felt by the general candidates, who faced stiff competition for a limited number of open positions.

As Bangladesh's population has grown and educational standards have improved, more qualified candidates have emerged, leading to increased competition for employment in the public sector. There are about 46 million people in the 15-29 age group, and most of them are unemployed. The fixed quota percentages have failed to adapt to the changing demographics and economic conditions, leading to widespread frustration.

The volatile political situation and perpetual oppression of the opposition have also led to significant frustration in the political spectrum due to the lack of inclusivity in the last two general elections.

The country is faced with high food prices, widespread corruption and income inequality. These have also fueled the mass protests.

The initial response from the government was seen as dismissive, especially when Hasina neglected the students' frustration and criticised them, further inflaming the protesters. The issue gained significant momentum through social media when the police shot dead a young student.

Implications for the Government

The protests and the government's handling of the fallout have significant implications for the credibility of the Hasina administration. The current government has been in power for the last 15 years and concluded a general election about six months ago. The election was highly contentious because the main opposition party chose not to participate in it. There is unhappiness within segments of the Bangladesh society with the Hasina government's rule. The initial delay in addressing the protests and the heavy-handed response have further damaged the government's image and reputation.

The protests also brought to the surface underlying social tensions and the potential for unrest in response to perceived injustices. For the Hasina government, maintaining political stability will require addressing these issues proactively and ensuring that reforms are inclusive and transparent.

The government's handling of the quota protests could influence voter sentiment, particularly the youth and educated classes. As these groups form a significant portion of the electorate, their support or opposition could be pivotal in future elections.

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