



Quota Protests in Bangladesh: Causes and Consequences

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Summary

The outbreak of student protests in Bangladesh last month over the abolition of the quota system for job recruitment in the public sector turned ugly with deadly clashes between the students and the security personnel. This paper traces the causes of the protests and the consequences for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government.

Background

The debate over quotas in recruitment to jobs in Bangladesh has been around since soon after Bangladesh's independence in 1971. In the initial years, almost 80 per cent of vacancies were reserved for freedom fighters. After 1976, and until 2018, 44 per cent government jobs were merit-based, 30 per cent reserved for freedom fighters' children and grandchildren, 10 per cent for districts, 10 per cent for women, five per cent for ethnic minorities and one per cent for persons with disability.

However, with rising unemployment, quotas were increasingly viewed as militating against swelling numbers of meritorious candidates, who increasingly viewed the quota system as a political litmus test for selection or elimination. In October 2018, a massively swelling movement by students at several universities forced the government to cancel the entire quota system for 9-13 grades (known as Class I and Class II government jobs).

In 2024, [seven children of freedom fighters](#) challenged the government's decision in the High Court. In response, on 5 June 2024, the High Court declared the decision illegal, and, in effect, reinstated a 56 per cent quota for freedom fighters. This verdict triggered student protests on public university campuses, first in Dhaka, and then in other parts of the country.

The Supreme Court decision on 4 July 2024 to not issue a stay on the High Court's verdict triggered a massive one-point movement for quota reform. Thousands of students from private universities, colleges and schools joined the nationwide movement. The government, at this stage, fearing increasing escalation, filed an appeal with the Supreme Court to review the High Court's ruling. The Supreme Court set 7 August 2024 to hear the appeal.

On 17 July 2024, Obaidul Quader, the Awami League General Secretary (also Minister for Roads, Highways and Bridges Ministry), made an [incendiary public statement](#), blaming "anti-liberation" forces of the country, particularly the Bangladesh Nationalist Party-Jamaate Islami Bangladesh, and asserting that the government party's student wing, the Chhatro League, would give the students a "befitting reply". These party-linked civilian youth, joining the ranks of the police and the Rapid Action Battalion of the Home Ministry, unleashed mayhem on the students on 19 July 2024 that infuriated the protesting students.

Anti-government demonstrations spread like wildfire rapidly across the country. The law and order situation, spiralling out of control, forced the government to call in the Armed Forces in aid of civil authority. In the meantime, since 18 July 2024, all broadband internet and mobile data services were totally shut down to prevent communication within society. Clashes between law-enforcing authorities and demonstrators reportedly [resulted in at least 150 deaths](#) while the number of people injured is said to be in several thousands.

The Supreme Court's full bench presided over by the Chief Justice gave its ruling on 22 July 2024, overturning the High Court's earlier ruling and recommended the following quota allocation: 93 per cent for merit, five per cent for freedom fighters or their children, one per cent for disabled/differently abled/third gender, and one per cent for indigenous people. However, it said that the government would have full discretion to adjust these quotas in future as needed. Within two days, the government approved the recommendation and officially notified the public.

Consequences

The self-inflicted economic loss to the nation is estimated by some at [over US\\$1.2 billion \(S\\$1.6 billion\) across the first five days](#). Of course, a proper evaluation needs to be done for a more precise picture, from the cumulative damage done to property, infrastructure, shut down of road and rail communication and disruption to all movement, the complete shutdown of broadband internet on which and increasingly digitised economy was being built to become robustly dependent. In this process, the hardest hit are the vast struggling middle class and the large swathe of people hovering below or just above the poverty line or subsistence level.

This is Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's fourth consecutive term, and so her incumbency quotient is extremely high. A small spark can explode into a fireball with massive self-immolative power. When the country is divided with one party claiming sole proprietary ownership over patriotism and labels, the other as enemies of the state, in a society that is otherwise quite homogenous in composition, then this divisive politics can be disastrous for the nation. The harsh measures in place to quell the demonstrators into submission have already wreaked a fair degree of psychological trauma to the nation.

The students' organisers stated that they never wanted a complete abolition of the quotas, only its reformation and increasing the space for fair competition by meritorious candidates. However, after the scope of the confrontation expanded, the students tabled a nine-point demand which included, inter alia, Quader's resignation/removal, inquiry against excessive use of force by the law enforcing authorities and deaths of students, freeing all arrested students and dropping all government cases filed to intimidate the students.

Much will depend on how Hasina herself acts in the following days and weeks. Will she continue the purge of corrupt people in her party and administration that she had started immediately after commencement of her fourth term? Will she sideline, if not actually sack, the irresponsible ministers directly seen by most as exacerbating the current situation? Will she have a perceptibly fair inquiry into police excesses? Will she leash and muzzle her party's attack dogs? Will she adequately compensate those students injured or compensate the

families of those who lost their lives? Will she come forward with a contrite face and take sympathetic reassuring stewardship of the students?

How Hasina behaves going forward in the next few days and weeks will decide whether she can ride out the current storm, like the smaller ones earlier, or whether she will galvanise all diverse elements to coalesce into an overpowering perfect storm. That could have grave consequences for Bangladesh and the larger region.

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