

THE BANGLADESH PROTESTS OVER GOVERNMENT JOB QUOTAS

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The Bangladesh Protests over Government Job Quotas

Background

In July 2024, Bangladesh demonstrators over the civil service law experienced widespread demonstrations primarily centered on reforming the government job quota system. Major protests have occurred in Dhaka, including violent clashes that resulted in deaths and injuries.

The controversial law dates to the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, which resulted in the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan. The law employs a quota system designed to ensure representation of descendants of freedom fighters and other various segments of society.

The quota system has been a topic of debate with advocates argue that it ensures diversity and addresses historical injustices, while critics claim that the system which offers only 44% of the positions open to merit-based competition is outdated and unfair, limiting opportunities for the majority and promoting nepotism and corruption.

Though the law was abolished by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina administration in April 2018 following violent protests, a Supreme Court reinstated the controversial law in June 2024.

Here's an overview of the quota system as it has been applied:

- 1. **Freedom Fighter Quota (30%):** This quota is reserved for the children and grandchildren of freedom fighters, acknowledging the contributions of those who fought for the country's independence in 1971.
- 2. **District Quota (10%):** Jobs are allocated based on the candidate's district of origin to ensure equitable geographic representation across the nation.
- 3. **Women Quota (10%):** This allocation is intended to promote gender equality and empower women by enhancing their opportunities in government roles.
- 4. **Indigenous People Quota (5%):** This quota supports the representation of indigenous ethnic groups, ensuring their participation in government employment.
- 5. **Disabled Quota (1%):** Reserved for people with disabilities, this quota aims to provide equal employment opportunities and facilitate their integration into the public workforce.

Severity, Locations and Scale

The restoration of the law led to massive student-led protests, particularly centered in major educational institutions across the country including the University of Dhaka, Jahangirnagar University, and in metropolitan areas in Dhaka, Chattogram, and Khulna. The protestors argued that the quota system was discriminatory and favored political allies of the ruling Awami League party.

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The protests rapidly escalated into the worst political violence the country had seen in over a decade, with unprecedented levels of deaths and injuries.

According to various reports, over 224 people died, including protesters and a few police officers, and more than 20,000 were injured. The violence peaked with confrontations between students, police, and pro-government activists, involving tear gas, baton charges, and the destruction of property.

Specific locations for demonstrations in Dhaka included:

- 1. Shahbagh Square
- 2. BNP headquarters in Naya Paltan
- 3. Baitul Mukarram National Mosque
- 4. Tejgaon and Malibagh Junction
- 5. National Press Club

Government Response

In response to escalating violence, the government closed all educational institutions to prevent student gatherings. A nationwide curfew was declared, accompanied by a shoot-to-kill order aimed at deterring protests and controlling the violence. The government deployed the army, police, Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), and Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) to enforce these measures. Security forces were reported to have used excessive force against protestors, including rubber bullets, tear gas, and live ammunition.

The government also interrupted cell phones services enforced a complete internet blackout, cutting off social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp to prevent the organization and spread of protests, and shut down television channels that were broadcasting the unrest. These measures aimed to suppress information flow, control the situation, and isolate Bangladesh from international scrutiny.

The government's initial reaction included a temporary suspension of the quota system and a promise for further review by the Supreme Court, which later suspended the law, pending a definitive ruling.

Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, also promised a judicial investigation into the deaths and appealed for calm while awaiting a further ruling from the Supreme Court, scheduled for early August 2024.

Predictions of Future Protests

The ongoing dissatisfaction among the student body, exacerbated by the government's forceful response and the continued political tension between the ruling party and opposition groups, suggests a high likelihood of renewed protests. Students have widened their demands to include broader democratic reforms and accountability for the violence during the protests. The situation remains highly volatile, with potential for further unrest depending on the Supreme Court's upcoming decisions and the government's subsequent actions.

Conclusion

The 2024 student protests in Bangladesh represent a significant moment in the country's recent history, highlighting deep-seated frustrations with systemic issues in government recruitment practices and broader governance. The government's handling of the crisis and the Supreme Court's pending decisions will be crucial in shaping the country's political landscape moving forward.

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