

Bangladesh: Police and government thugs attack protesting students and teachers

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Bangladesh's Awami League-led government has deployed police and young thugs to suppress students, unemployed graduates and teachers who are demanding changes to the civil service jobs quota system. The "quota reform movement" wants the 56 percent quota for civil jobs reduced to 10 percent.

More than half the 56 percent quota is reserved for the children and grandchildren of veterans of the 1971 fight against Pakistan. The remainder is reserved for disadvantaged groups, such as ethnic minorities, residents of socially deprived districts and physically challenged people.

Demonstrators also want the remaining civil service jobs awarded according to merit, the abolition of special exams for those on quotas and age-limit uniformity in government recruitment processes.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina initially ignored students' demands, but when demonstrations spread across the country in April, she promised to abolish the quota system. Her government, however, has mobilised police to suppress the protests and encouraged the notoriously violent Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the ruling party's youth organisation, to attack students and teachers involved in the protests.

On July 15, at Dhaka University, BCL members assaulted hundreds of students as they demonstrated to demand a safe campus and the immediate release of detained leaders of the quota reform movement.

When Professor Fahmidul Haq, Associate Professor Abdur Razzaque Khan of the Mass Communication and Journalism faculty and Associate Professor Mohammad Tanzimuddin Khan of International Relations intervened to protect the students, they were also assaulted. Photos published on social media show BCL members attacking female students and tearing their clothes, while male students were hit with poles and

steel rods. X-rays published on social media show broken leg bones and serious spinal injuries.

Ain o Salish Kendra, a Bangladeshi human rights organisation, denounced the "the reckless behavior of BCL, as revealed in the media," describing it as "highly unacceptable and condemnable." It demanded immediate government action against the perpetrators. Other NGOs, including Gonoforum and Pahari Chhatra Parishad, also spoke out against the attacks.

Professor Fahmidul Haq contacted Dhaka University proctor Professor A.K.M. Golam to register his concern about the assaults. The proctor blamed him for joining the protest. "Those who were involved in the chaos, even if he or she was a teacher, would be punished as per the university rules," Golam said.

Government authorities are continuing efforts to intimidate and frame-up quota reform movement members on bogus charges. Students say they have received death threats by phone and on social media.

On July 15, Dhaka metropolitan court magistrate Sadbir Chowdhury rejected a bail petition for quota reform leader Faruk Hassan. Police have filed frame-up charges against Hassan, a joint convener of the Bangladesh General Students Rights Protection Council, along with Jashim Akash and Moshir Rahman, who have been charged for their involvement in April's demonstrations.

Foreign Minister Mahmood Ali justified the BCL violence, declaring that the quota reform movement was a "ploy" by the opposition Bangladesh National Party and the Islamic fundamentalist Jammāt-e-Islām to undermine "stability" and "progress."

Public outrage over the thugs' attacks, has grown, however. On July 18, over 70 academics and teachers from several universities, including Dhaka University, joined in solidarity with 300 students to protest.

Demonstrators denounced the BCL assaults and called for punishment of those responsible. They also demanded the release of the quota reform leaders.

On Tuesday this week, over 400 students and teachers demonstrated again over the same demands.

While job quotas are divisive and retrogressive, quota reform leaders are not challenging the capitalist system, which is the source of endemic joblessness and social misery. Instead, they are appealing to the ruling elite for a more “equitable” distribution of mass unemployment.

The student protests are driven by worsening joblessness. Although the economy recorded 7.28 percent growth for the 2017-18 financial year, this has failed to boost employment opportunities. According to *trendingeconomics.com*, the official unemployment rate remained at 4.2 percent last year, unchanged from the previous year and almost double the rate of 2.2 percent in 1991.

With general elections due later this year, the government’s repression is an attempt to preempt an expansion of the protests into broader struggles involving the working class.



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