

# Rising death toll as Bangladeshi government unleashes military-police crackdown on protesting students

Sakuna Jayawardena  
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On Friday, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina imposed a nationwide curfew and deployed troops with “shoot on sight” orders to suppress the widespread student protests that have erupted over job quotas and rising social inequality.

An estimated 139 people have been killed and several thousand injured over the past week in violent attacks by police and thugs from the ruling Awami League. The majority of those killed are students. While police claim that they have only fired rubber bullets, hospitals report that many of the bodies have gunshot wounds to their heads.

Fearing more unrest, the government declared that yesterday and today were public holidays and that the curfew would continue. Heavily armed military troops and police have been patrolling the streets, with helicopters circling overhead in Dhaka, the national capital.

The student protests, which began on July 1, are demanding the scrapping of Bangladesh’s retrogressive and divisive government jobs quota system. The quota system is used to benefit political supporters of Hasina’s Awami League.

Under this system, 30 percent of government jobs are allocated to the relatives of “freedom fighters” involved in the struggle to establish Bangladesh in 1971, 10 percent to women and those from underdeveloped parts of the country, 5 percent for ethnic minorities and 1 percent to physically challenged people. The remaining 44 percent is for those chosen under the current merit system.

Hoping to quell the mass anti-government unrest, Bangladesh’s Supreme Court ruled yesterday that the quota for relatives of “freedom fighters” should be reduced to 5 percent from the existing 30 percent and each of the other categories should be reduced to 1 percent. The student protesters, who are being supported by wide sections of the population, however, are demanding abolition of the quota system.

The Students Against Discrimination movement have called for a nationwide shutdown today. One student leader told the AFP yesterday: “We won’t call off our protests until the government issues an order reflecting our demands.” *Al Jazeera* has reported that the students are also demanding the immediate release of all those detained during the crackdown and the resignation of the officials who ordered the repression.

Nahid Islam, a student protest coordinator, declared in a Facebook post, “The government would have to take full responsibility if law enforcement agencies were still not removed from the streets, if the dormitories, campuses, and educational institutions were not opened, and if the firing continued.”

The Students Against Discrimination movement emerged on July 1 with demonstrations by students from universities in Dhaka and Chittagong. They were in response to a June 5 High Court call for the restoration of the job quota system. The system was scrapped in 2018, after a wave of student protests.

The latest protests quickly spread throughout the country after the Hasina government refused to hold any discussions with the students and declared that the matter had been settled by the court. In a television broadcast Hasina said that the students were “wasting their time,” and that there was “no justification for the anti-quota movement.”

Attempting to dissipate the protests, the Supreme Court suspended the High Court judgement on July 10, declaring that it would review the verdict and announce its ruling on August 7. This date, however, was brought forward to July 21, following a request from the government.

The student demonstrations, which had been largely peaceful, took a bloody turn last week when the Awami League’s student organisation, the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), violently attacked protesters on July 15. When students refused to be intimidated by BCL members, the police began attacking Students Against Discrimination

members with sticks and firing rubber bullets.

Angered by the police killings, ordinary people began joining the protests. According to media reports, hundreds of thousands of people have battled with police and government goons in Dhaka. Others have joined the demonstrations and clashed with police in other cities.

As Dr Samina Luthfa, assistant professor of sociology in the University of Dhaka told the BBC: “It’s not students anymore, it seems that people from all walks of life have joined the protest movement.” She added: “The anger against the government and the ruling party have been accumulating for a long time.”

The Hasina government has responded by ordering the closure of all state and private universities, schools and other education institutions. On Thursday, it shut down the internet and blocked mobile phone connections and short messaging systems. All Bangladeshi media web sites, including the *Daily Star* and *Dhaka Tribune*, were also blocked and on Friday it mobilised the military against the demonstrations.

The Hasina regime blames the opposition Bangladesh National Party (BNP) for the anti-government unrest, but this is a lie. The Students Against Discrimination has specifically distanced itself from affiliation with any political party.

The government ordered police to raid BNP’s headquarters and claimed that it had found explosives. Police also arrested Ruhul Kabir Rizvi Ahmed, the joint secretary of the BNP. While the BNP opportunistically backed the protests on Thursday, this right-wing party has no sympathy for students, workers and the poor, and when in power unleashed brutal anti-democratic attacks on the masses.

While Hasina was declared the winner of the January national election and is now in her fourth consecutive term, only 41.8 percent of voters participated in the election. The student protests and the wide support they are winning demonstrate the deep hostility to her regime.

Hasina’s government, which first came to power in 2009, has taken an increasingly autocratic direction, curbing democratic rights, suppressing her political opponents and freedom of expression. Last November, her government deployed police against garment workers protesting for a living wage. Four workers were killed in the clash.

Hasina boasts that the country has a 5.8 percent economic growth rate, and achieved a \$US2,528 per-capita income in 2023, but in 2018 its growth rate was 7.9 percent and its foreign reserves have dropped to \$26.5 billion, half the amount in 2018. Inflation is currently running at 9.7 percent. Last year, her government was forced to obtain a \$4.7 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund to cover declines

of foreign reserve and a widening balance of payment gap.

Poverty and unemployment are rapidly rising, with around 18 million young people, including university graduates, currently without work. According to the latest Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics figures, approximately 40 percent of youth in Bangladesh do not have jobs and are not receiving education or job training. An estimated 400,000 university graduates are competing for the 3,000 civil service jobs that become available each year. In 2022, 18.7 percent of the population lived below the national poverty line, according to the Asian Development Bank.

The government job quota system, which was established in 1972 by Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, has been modified several times by consecutive administrations to build up pro-government groups against the working class.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in 2018, during previous demonstrations opposing this system: “The quota reservation is divisive, retrogressive and used to divert mass opposition from challenging the existing social order and the capitalist system, the source of unemployment and mass poverty.”

While the Bangladeshi media has presented the Supreme Court ruling as a “partial victory,” the reactionary system remains, allowing the ruling elites to manipulate it in future. The Bangladeshi bourgeoisie, like its counterparts in Pakistan and India, are incapable of resolving any of the basic social or democratic issues facing the working class and the oppressed masses.

The brutal crackdown against students is a warning to the working class and youth and another indicator that the Hasina regime is turning towards dictatorial forms of rule in order to suppress the rising opposition to its social attacks.

The only way forward for Bangladeshi students and workers is in the struggle against capitalist rule and for a workers’ and peasants’ government as a part of a Union of Socialist Republics in South Asia. We urge workers and students to study the revolutionary socialist program of the International Committee of the Fourth International to develop this struggle.



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