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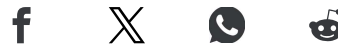
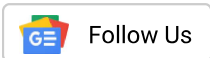
Why are students protesting in Bangladesh?

More than 50 people have been killed in protests by students opposed to the return of a 30% quota in government employment for those who fought for the freedom of Bangladesh from Pakistan, as well as their children and grandchildren.

Written by [Anagha Jayakumar](#)

New Delhi | Updated: July 20, 2024 07:38 IST





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Anti-quota protesters march with Bangladeshi flags and sticks as they engage in a clash with Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student wing of the ruling party Bangladesh Awami League, at the University of Dhaka, in Dhaka, Bangladesh, July 16, 2024. (Photo - REUTERS/Mohammad Ponir Hossain)

Four people were reported killed as police fired at protesters in Bangladesh on Friday, a day after at least 27 died and more than 1,500 were injured in violence that swept across 47 of the country's 64 districts.

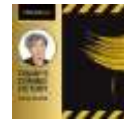
AFP, quoting a police spokesman, said 32 people were killed on Thursday. The protests by students against reservation in government jobs began on June 1, spiked after June 5, and escalated sharply on July 15. As of Friday morning, **total deaths were estimated to have crossed 50.**

All gatherings were banned in Dhaka, Internet and mobile services were shut down, and news TV was ordered off air. Several government websites, including those of the Prime Minister's office, the central bank, and police appeared to have been hacked.

Protesters set a district jail on fire and freed hundreds of inmates, AFP reported. Trains have stopped across the country, though Dhaka airport remained open on Friday.

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The protests are led by youths opposed to the return of a 30% quota in government employment at all levels for those who fought for the freedom of Bangladesh and Pakistan, as well as their children and grandchildren.

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The situation was inflamed by a statement from Prime Minister [Sheikh Hasina](#) on July 14, appearing to equate the protesters with the descendants of razakars, mercenary collaborators of the Pakistan military who led a brutal campaign of murder and rape in which up to 3 million Bangladeshis are estimated to have been killed in the space of a few months in 1971.

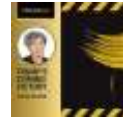
A Reuters report cited some analysts as saying the violence was now being driven by wider economic discontent, including high [inflation](#), growing unemployment, and shrinking foreign exchange reserves.

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Sparked by a court order

On June 5, the High Court Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh (commonly known as “High Court”; the other division is the Appellate Division) ruled on a suit filed by the “children of nationally recognised freedom fighters”, restoring the 30% reservation and striking down a circular issued by the government in October 2018, which had scrapped the freedom-fighter and other quotas.

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The 2018 decision had been announced by Prime Minister Hasina ahead of the national elections that took place in December that year. Students and teachers had been protesting since April, demanding that quotas be capped at 10%. There had been violence, though at a smaller scale than this week, and protesters had clashed with police and members of Bangladesh Chhatra League, the students' wing of Hasina's ruling Awami League party.

This time too, the government has said it agrees with the students. It has appealed to the Supreme Court, which has suspended the High Court's order and will hear the matter on August 7. Hasina has asked the protesters to be patient until then.

Constitution and quotas

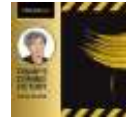
Article 29(1) of Bangladesh's 1972 Constitution says "there shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in respect of employment or office in the service of the Republic". However, under Article 29(3)(a), the state can make "special provisions in favour of any backward section...for the purpose of securing their adequate representation in the service of the Republic".

The High Court's June 5 order provides a summary of how the country's reservation policy has worked. The system was notified on September 5, 1972, reserving 30% of government and semi-government posts for freedom fighters, and 10% for women. After the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of

Bangladesh, in August 1975, however, the quotas were effectively frozen until 1996 — when Hasina became Prime Minister for the first time. Benefits of the freedom fighters' quota were subsequently extended to their sons and daughters.

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After the Awami League lost power in 2001, the process of implementation of the quota slowed down again. But Hasina returned as Prime Minister in 2009 and, two years later, the quota benefits were also made available to the grandchildren of freedom fighters.

The withdrawal of the quota in 2018 was challenged in court. In its June 5 order, the High Court ruled the government's decision was arbitrary — and that the freedom fighters and their progeny remained one of the most backward sections of the country's citizens.

Economy and employment

More than two-thirds of Bangladesh's 170 million population is the working age group of 15-64, and more than 25% are between the ages of 15 and 29 according to data from the International Labour Organization (ILO).

Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics data quoted by the Bangladeshi daily Prothom Alo say 1.8 million to 1.9 million young people join the job market every year.

(Bangladesh government websites were not accessible on Thursday evening.)

Besides the 30% quota for freedom fighters, there are 10% quotas each for women and backward districts, 5% for members of tribal communities, and 1% for persons with disabilities, taking the total reservation to 56%.

Government jobs are highly coveted due to their promise of stability and a guaranteed income. Many of Bangladesh's export oriented enterprises are yet to recover from the disruption caused by [Covid-19](#) and the war in [Ukraine](#).

However, only 3.5 lakh appointments were made to government posts in the 2019-23 period, Bangladesh Sangbad Sanstha quoted Public Administration Minister

Farhad Hossain as telling Parliament in February. More than 5 lakh posts remain vacant, Hossain said.

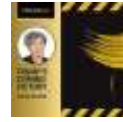
A fraught national history

In an early reaction to the violence, Hasina asked rhetorically why the protesters resented the freedom fighters' quota, and whether they believed that the benefits should instead go to the "grandchildren of razakars", using a derogatory word that carries grim historical baggage.

The razakars, literally "volunteers", were a paramilitary force set up by Pakistan's General Tikka Khan in 1971 to facilitate Islamabad's control over East Pakistan, and to crush the liberation movement that the Bangabandhu was leading at the time. The collaborationist razakars, working alongside Pakistan's armed forces, were behind some of the worst atrocities perpetrated on the Bangladeshi people.

In the popular Bangladeshi memory, razakars are often remembered with greater resentment than even the Pakistani army and bureaucracy. Over the years, the Awami League has often referred to its critics and dissidents — constituted in large measure by Islamists and pro-Pakistan elements — as razakars.

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In response to Hasina's jibe, student protesters called her an autocrat — raising slogans that translate as "Who am I? Who am I? Razakar, razakar. Who said that? Who said that? Autocrat, autocrat." Among those clashing with the protesters are members of the Awami League's youth wing, media reports from Bangladesh have said. The government has said that the protests have been infiltrated by cadres of