

Bangladesh

Bangladesh student protests turn into 'mass movement against a dictator'

Strength of PM's crackdown shows her nervousness and that climate of fear is breaking down, say critics



Protesters clash with guards and police as violence erupts across Bangladesh after anti-quota protests by students in Dhaka. Photograph: Mohammad Ponir Hossain/Reuters

Redwan Ahmed in Dhaka and Hannah Ellis-Petersen in Delhi

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Hasan still has the metal pellets **Bangladesh** police fired at him lodged deep in his bones. Fearful he will join the growing ranks of those thrown behind bars by the state for participating in protests that have swept Bangladesh this month, Hasan has been in hiding for a week and described his state as one of “constant panic and trauma”.

“Whenever I hear the sound of a car or a motorbike, I think it might be the police coming for me,” he said.

When the 33-year-old telecommunications graduate joined the protests in Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka, at the beginning of July, they were a peaceful affair. Students across the country had mobilised to oppose the **reintroduction of quotas** for all government jobs, meaning 30% would go to descendants of those who fought in the 1971 war of independence.

While it was a decision made by the courts, it was seen by many as a thinly veiled political manoeuvre by the prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, who has a tight grip over the judiciary. The reintroduction of the quotas was widely considered to be a move to appease those in her Awami League - a party born out of Bangladesh's independence fight - who are much more likely to benefit and ensure Hasina could fill the government with allies.



📹 Smoke rises from burning vehicles in Dhaka on 18 July. Photograph: AFP/Getty

The move prompted widespread outrage on campuses as students already grappling with an economic downturn and high youth unemployment saw one of their few chances of landing a stable job being stolen from them, with thousands of civil service placements to be appointed through patronage rather than merit. But as more support for the protests grew, a violent, state-led crackdown began in response and campuses descended into bloody battlefields, leaving about 200 people dead and thousands injured.

The Guardian witnessed the Rapid Action Battalion, the elite unit of Bangladesh's police forces, fire teargas from a helicopter on crowds below and army forces fire at protesters with what appeared to be light machine guns. Analysis of footage from protest scenes by Amnesty International confirmed the use of teargas and lethal firearms - including shotguns, assault rifles and grenade launchers - by police and paramilitary forces against the unarmed protesters. On Thursday, the UN human rights chief, Volker Türk, called on the government of Bangladesh to carry out an independent investigation into the "horrific violence".

The strength of the state-led crackdown has galvanised many on the ground to see the protest movement as no longer an issue of quotas, which were scaled back by the court on Sunday, but a growing civilian-led movement to bring down Hasina, who has ruled with an increasingly tyrannical grip since 2009.

"This has become a mass movement against a dictator," said Hasan, who would only give his middle name to protect his identity. "The prime minister has been ruling for 15 years and has spent so much time strengthening her grip over state mechanisms that she thinks she has become invincible. She has become a monster."



📺 Bangladesh overturns job quota ruling after violent protests - video

Hasan was among those who witnessed government-backed student groups and armed riot police, who were given “shoot to kill orders”, use violence and deadly weapons against the peaceful protesters, stirring up some of the worst clashes in Bangladesh in more than a decade.

He was participating in a protest at a university in Dhaka last week when armed men from the pro-government student groups Chhatra League and Youth League and riot police officers violently descended. “They launched a combined attack on us,” he said. “We tried to defend ourselves with whatever we could find, but we were mostly unarmed. At one point, the police and the thugs sandwiched us on a road. We were in the middle of a street and they attacked from both sides. The police fired stun grenades, teargas, rubber bullets and pellets from shotguns.”

Hasan described how protesters around him began to fall to the ground as they were hit with rubber bullets and metal pellets fired directly at them. He was hit on his face, back and neck and had to be rushed to hospital and needs surgery to remove the pellets that penetrated his bones.



📷 Bangladesh border guards in Dhaka. Photograph: Monirul Alam/EPA

Faria, 23, an economics student at a public university in Bangladesh, witnessed similar scenes as she took part in a protest in Dhaka. She alleged she was set upon by groups of men from Chhatra League, who began beating her with sticks and pulling her hair. Riot police then began to fire teargas and she could hear gunshots.

Faria said: “There were loud bangs from sound grenades and our eyes burned from the teargas. We heard continuous rifle shots and we started to pull back and run towards safety.

“Suddenly, a guy fell in front of me, clutching his throat with blood gushing out. He was hit by some type of bullet and was in shock, unable to scream. I don’t know what happened to him after that. I still wake up to the nightmares of that scene.”

In statements this week, widely derided by protesters, Hasina said the violence was stirred up by political opposition and Islamist groups who were against Bangladesh as a nation and that she had deployed paramilitary and police forces to “protect” the students. More than 2,500 members of the political opposition party have been arrested.

The exiled Bangladeshi political analyst Mubashar Hasan said, however, that “violent crackdowns on dissent have been the key trademark of Sheikh Hasina’s government for over a decade”, including thousands of killings and hundreds of enforced disappearances, allegedly by state forces, and mass incarceration of her critics.

He said that amid the growing authoritarianism of Hasina’s rule, including the past three elections widely documented as rigged, a civilian “outburst”

had been brewing. “These protests are a sign of the struggle between democracy and Hasina’s move towards complete totalitarianism. There has been a huge trust deficit between Hasina and the people for a while but this is the first time we’re seeing defiant calls for her to go on this scale.”



Relatives of those arrested in connection with the violence wait outside the magistrates court in Dhaka. Photograph: Monirul Alam/EPA

He added that while it was difficult to predict what the outcome would be, the mass mobilisation had left Hasina in a weakened position and was the greatest challenge to her rule since she took power in 2009. “The strength of the crackdown displayed her nervousness. We are seeing a breakdown of the climate of fear and it’s difficult to see how she will continue with business as usual.”

An uneasy calm descended on Bangladesh after the court ruling on Sunday scaled back the quotas to just 5%. Student leaders temporarily called off all demonstrations, saying they wanted no more bloodshed, and presented Hasina with a set of demands, including an apology and justice for those killed in the violence.

But the ultimatum expired on Thursday night with no response from Hasina. Student activists said further action was planned but was hindered because many of the organisers were in hospital or had been detained by police, with some **alleging torture**. Others confirmed they had been put under de facto house arrest, with all forms of communication cut off, and under constant surveillance from a counter-terrorism police unit notorious for being involved in enforced disappearances.

Bangladesh, meanwhile, remains under an indefinite curfew, causing devastation to livelihoods. “The protest is not finished yet,” said Hasan the protester. “The government may think it has won, but they haven’t. It’s in a resting phase and it will only come back stronger. The prime minister is getting weaker day by day. Next time, a curfew or even the army won’t be able to suppress the people.”

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