

After Protest Crackdown, Bangladesh Accuses Tens of Thousands of Crimes

Charges include vandalism, arson, theft, trespassing and damage to state property. A rights group called it a witch hunt, following an initial crackdown during which more than 200 people were killed.

By Mujib Mashal and Saif Hasnat

Mujib Mashal reported from New Delhi and Saif Hasnat from Dhaka, Bangladesh.

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The authorities in Bangladesh have opened investigations into tens of thousands of people in recent weeks as security forces combed through neighborhoods as part of their deadly crackdown on a student protest that had spiraled into violence.

The widening legal net, confirmed in interviews with police officials and a review of records, comes as arrests surpassed 10,000 since the crackdown on protesters began two weeks ago. Charges range from vandalism and arson to theft, trespassing and damage of state property. In many of the cases, sections of the law that allow long-term detention were invoked.

“This is a witch hunt,” said Smriti Singh, the regional director for South Asia at Amnesty International.

The government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has blamed opposition parties, mainly the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Jamaat-e-Islami, for the deadly turn in a previously peaceful protest against a quota-based system for distributing sought-after government jobs. Conservative estimates put the death toll at more than 200, mostly students and youths.

Activists, analysts and diplomats say the movement escalated into chaos after the ruling party, having dismissed the students’ demands, unleashed its violent youth wing and a wide array of security forces.

The new detentions and the sweep for more arrests are meant to prevent any regrouping. Many of the student leaders have been detained, some repeatedly. But the crackdown also follows a well-established tactic under Ms. Hasina's 15-year rule: using every opportunity to crush her political opponents by rounding up their leaders and dismantling their mobilization.



Smoke rising from burning vehicles after protesters set them on fire near the Disaster Management Directorate office in Dhaka in mid-July. -/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

“We see ‘block raids,’ knocking on doors in the dead of night, asking if there are students inside. If there are, they check their phones. They do this on the streets, too,” Z.I. Khan Panna, a veteran supreme court lawyer and rights activist, told reporters on Monday. “In Bangladesh, in this age of information technology, anyone can check my phone, my diary, my pants. No one should have this right.”

Tallies by Bangladeshi newspapers have put the number of arrested at more than 10,000 and the number of accused of various crimes around the country at more than 200,000. More than 2,800 people had been arrested in the past two weeks in

Dhaka alone as of Monday, police officials confirmed to The New York Times.

Many of the more than 240 cases filed in Dhaka also have a feature used often in Bangladesh in recent years: large numbers of unidentified people, accused en masse.

In Badda, a township in the north of Dhaka home to many universities, the police said they had filed 10 cases, with 8,000 to 10,000 people accused in each case. In the Mohammadpur area, the police had filed 12 cases, each with 3,000 to 4,000 people being accused. In Lalbagh, the number of accused was 9,000-10,000 and in Mirpur 8,000-9,000, according to police files.

The opening of such cases, coupled with flimsy evidence and an overzealous police force, are practices widely used in recent years by Ms. Hasina's government, activists and analysts say. As she tried to cripple her opposition ahead of elections last year, in which she steamrolled to a fourth consecutive term, thousands were arrested in similar cases. The tactic was also used to quell protests seeking better pay from the garment industry, a key driver of the Bangladesh economy.

In many of the cases, the courts provide the accused some relief later, with the accusations falling apart because of a lack of evidence. But the accused still end up spending weeks, if not months, in jail, and long remain entangled in legal requirements and hearings that effectively sideline them from political work.

In recent days, as the communication blackout and curfew have been relaxed, Ms. Hasina's administration has mixed optics of reconciliation with promises of punishment.

She announced Tuesday as a day of mourning, and met with families of victims of the protest violence. But the universities remain shut and the student leaders and political opponents are being detained around the country. The government has also announced that it would ban Jamaat-e-Islami, the country's largest Islamist party.

“Instead of taking steps like ordering investigations into violations by the security forces to end the violence,” Ms. Singh said, “the Bangladesh government seems to be going to extreme extents to suppress dissent with a complete disregard to rule of law and due process.”

Shayeza Walid contributed reporting.

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