

Bangladesh students demonstrate over job quota system

By Wimal Perera
19 May 2018

Thousands of Bangladesh university students began a nationwide boycott of classes on Monday over the failure of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government to reform the country's decades-old quota system for the recruitment of civil servants.

Some 3,000 students from Dhaka University and other colleges in the capital marched through the city, blocking traffic for six hours. Thousands of students at universities and colleges across the country held demonstrations in solidarity. About 1,000 students from Chittagong University staged a sit-down protest on rail tracks, preventing trains from leaving the port city throughout the morning.

The demonstrations ended that night after Nurul Huq Nur, a joint convener of the Bangladesh Council for Protecting Rights of General Students, told protestors that Prime Minister Hasina had given another assurance that the job quota system would be reformed. No details have been released about how Hasina, who has made similar promises before, will address the issue.

University and college students and unemployed graduates began protesting over the quota system in mid-February, with rallies and demonstrations intensifying between April 8 and 11. Their main demand is for the 56 percent quota for state jobs reserved for different social layers to be reduced to 10 percent.

Only 44 percent of the jobs are currently allocated on merit. The remaining positions are apportioned according to strict quotas—30 percent for the children and grandchildren of “freedom fighters,” 10 percent for women, 10 percent for underdeveloped districts, 5 percent for ethnic minorities and 1 percent for physically challenged people. The quota system was first introduced in 1972 and has been amended on several occasions.

The students are also demanding the filling of vacant positions according to merit if eligible candidates are not found within the quota categories; the abolition of the special examination for quotas; and age-limit uniformity in the recruitment process.

In April the government mobilised hundreds of police to brutally suppress the student demonstrations, using tear gas, batons and water cannons. Police officers were joined by members of the Bangladesh Chhatra League, the notoriously violent student wing of Hasina's ruling Awami League.

The massive April protests forced Hasina to promise to reform the current quota system, but once the protests ended the government began hunting down student activists on bogus charges. Dhaka University authorities have filed cases with the police alleging violence and vandalism by students.

Students have received death threats and three student leaders—Nurul Huq Nur, Muhammad Rashed Khan and Faruk Hasan—were kidnapped by a group of individuals claiming to be detectives. According to press reports, the three students, who were later released, were dragged into a white microbus.

Monday's demonstrations erupted after Cabinet Secretary Mohammad Shafiul Alam admitted that the government had made no progress on changing job quotas. Hasina declared: “Implementation of anything takes some time.”

Hasina's reform promises reflect nervousness concerns within the ruling party over growing anti-government sentiment.

Students face severe unemployment, lack of facilities at the universities and other onerous social conditions. As a result of the government's privatisation of education, there are now 86 private universities as against 42 public universities.

According to an April 22 column in the *Daily Star* by Professor Ahmed Abdullah Azad, “almost a third (about 2.5 million) of college and university leavers” are unemployed. He noted that Bangladesh’s youth workforce constitutes about 70 percent of the country’s 160 million people, with about 45 million unemployed youth.

Suicide is increasing among unemployed university students. On April 13, the *Daily Star* reported that a Dhaka University graduate took his own life due to “depression stemming from not getting a government job even after trying several times.” The newspaper admitted that most students are living “under emotionally, psychologically and financially stressful situations.”

The job quota for the children and grandchildren of “freedom fighters”—i.e., those involved from the war to separate from Pakistan in 1971—was initiated in 1972 by the first prime minister, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, then leader of Awami League.

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. Bangladesh student organisations are not fighting for the abolition of the quota system but for its reform, in other words the “equitable” distribution of unemployment.

Government job quota systems were also established in India, on the pretext of providing employment for various caste groupings and tribes. In Sri Lanka, Tamils were discriminated against via a “standardised” university entrance system.

The Bangladeshi bourgeoisie, like its counterparts in Pakistan and India, has proven incapable of resolving any of the basic social or democratic issues facing the population. Since Bangladesh’s formation as a nation-state in 1972, its ruling elite has lurched from one crisis to another, responding to mass social unrest with long periods of military rule.

Today, faced with growing opposition by workers and students, the Hasina government is extending its autocratic powers, attacking basic democratic rights and implementing “free market” reforms. It is moving to privatise a range of state utilities, including education, and cut social spending.

The measures are part the government’s attempt to obtain a \$750 million loan from the World Bank for the

2018–19 financial year.

Social inequality is widening in Bangladesh, with the share of income by the poorest 5 percent at just 0.23 percent, down from 0.78 percent in 2010. By contrast, the richest 5 percent of the country have 27.89 percent of the total income, up from 24.61 percent in 2010.

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