

Dispatch from Dhaka: Bangladesh's students are bruised and battered but will not bow

Monday 29 July 2024, by [ALAM Shahidul](#) (Date first published: 25 July 2024).

The carrot-and-stick method of Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian regime worked with others but not with the students, who would not be scared off or bought off

Editor's note: Bangladesh has been burning through July. Peaceful protests on university campuses early in the month, by students opposing a quota system for government jobs, spiralled into unrest across the country after the prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, insulted the protesters and dismissed their concerns. Violence exploded when the student and youth wings of the ruling Awami League attacked protesters, with police action following on. On 20 July the government deployed the army and imposed a country-wide curfew to try and maintain order. As protests have continued in the streets, large numbers of people have been reported killed and thousands have been injured.

Shahidul Alam, a renowned photojournalist, educator and activist based in Dhaka, has been documenting the protests and the government's brutal reprisal. Alam has managed to get his dispatches out to the media despite an internet shutdown imposed to try and contain the protests, which has since been partially lifted. Himal Southasian is republishing these dispatches, which offer a picture of the situation inside Bangladesh even as the internet shutdown has severely restricted the outflow of information.

The events and circumstances described in the dispatches have been changing rapidly and there have been several developments since Alam penned each of them. The curfew has been partially lifted and internet connectivity has been partially restored, although it remains patchy and communication with many parts of the country remains difficult. The dispatches reflect the extent of violence and repression unleashed by the Sheikh Hasina government against its people. They have been lightly edited for clarity.

Click [here](#) to read all dispatches.

Alam sent his third dispatch on 22 July 2024.

A bruised face would not have worked for the government-staged press conference. Mohammad Nahid Islam was lucky he had passed out. There were no marks on his face, and at first sight one wouldn't have known the extent of the torture. It was only in hospital that the full extent of the damage could be gauged. It was no random beating, or people venting anger. It was very professionally done. Intense, localised, repeated and of course incredibly painful. No outwardly visible signs in normal situations. No broken bones. No long term scar tissue or tell tale signs. Their mistake had been in not stopping before he became unconscious. A miscalculation on their part.

Nahid was one of the coordinators of the quota protest movement who had not agreed to the deal. Three others, who had been coerced into doing so, had repeatedly asked him to change his stance.

The government had provided the script. “They are going to give us what we had asked for (the removal of quota). The violence was by outsiders. We need to distance ourselves from it.” The government had [arranged for the ‘independent’ court to give an appropriate judgement](#). The students would be happy. The opposition would get the blame for the killings. Nahid’s rejection of this grand narrative had become a problem.

Nahid and scores of the other coordinators knew full well who the outsiders were. The Bangladesh Chhatra League (pro-government student wing, which provides muscle power to control campuses) had the full backing of the security forces when they attacked the protesters. Goons had also been bussed in. Things had been carefully planned. Bangladeshis could see through the spin, but it worked with the international community. Or at least they were content with the version.

The problem was with the journalists, particularly the photographers. Some were loyal and reported what they’d been instructed to. But there were others, particularly the ones working for the wire services, who reported what they saw. Even killing a few journalists hadn’t helped. Yes they were wary, but they still got the story out. Something more needed to be done.

Sarjis and Hasnat, coordinators in government custody, had been calling Nahid to get him to agree to the amended demands, but Nahid wouldn’t budge. So the pick up had become necessary. Meanwhile the curfew and a few more deaths would quieten things down. The abduction had worked well enough. Yes, people saw he had been taken, but it was still within the range of plausible deniability. Nahid not agreeing despite the torture had been unexpected. Passing out meant there was no more information to be had and no more persuasion. Ending up with a corpse on their hands would have been an added complication, so dumping him on the streets in the outskirts of Dhaka was the answer. Nahid is a brave young man. Having survived, he decided it was no more about quotas.

‘They’ve laid hands on women and sexually harassed them’

Akhtaruzzaman Samrat lay in the general ward of the hospital. An ordinary bystander, he had come out in support of the students. He had been shot from above from a helicopter. “He was extremely lucky” said the doctor. “The platinum tipped bullet, which we recovered, had lodged into muscle tissue, narrowly missing vital organs. It will be a painful recovery, but he’ll survive and will eventually recover.”

Fatema Tasnim was a senior and had taken Nahid under her care. The calmness with which she laid out their collective position made it clear to me, that these students were no pushovers. The carrot and stick method this authoritarian regime had used on the Bangladeshi urban middle class had largely worked. They had gotten away with things not just because of fear, but also because there were enough who were prepared to pick up some of the crumbs of the regime’s vast illegal earnings, and would stay quiet for the privilege. The students were neither to be scared off, nor bought. One of the few groups who could still make that claim.

In the quiet of the hospital cabin, I had to spell out the danger.

“Isn’t it risky for you to go on record? This could go to international media. Do you feel safe?”

"You can record me" she calmly replied. "It's OK to video."

"Are you sure"

"I'm sure".

"We had campaigned for quota reforms in 2018. It had been resolved. Using the court as a scapegoat the government has revived the controversy. Deprived ordinary students from their democratic rights. Then the PM came up with that derogatory remark [we were called 'razakars,' much hated word for 'collaborators' during the 1971 liberation movement]. No one. Not our guardians, our seniors, the student community at large, could accept it. We are enraged by this insult. That is what led to our peaceful movement."

They have broken the rules of war, she went on, "women and children are not targeted during war. They have broken this rule too. You've seen them tear away the ornas [scarves], and clothes of women at Dhaka University, Jahangirnagar University and Eden Girl's College. They've laid hands on women and sexually harassed them. They've attempted to kill students by hitting them on the head. We seniors decided, as a consequence, since they were attacking our juniors and trying to kill them, even in the emergency ward at Dhaka Medical College, that we would take to the streets. Since then they've lodged cases against us, using our Facebook IDs and links. We've faced police harassment."

'Devoured by vultures'

"It was a simple movement, not tied to any political party, by ordinary students. They've steered it into a completely different direction. I think they've deliberately set these false flag attacks to blame the students. To take them to the docks. I feel the General Secretary of the Awami League has to take the blame. I also feel the language used by the PM should be expunged and she should apologise to the students and the nation. I don't think, after the death of thousands of Bangladeshis, that the public will settle for just quota reforms any more. This is no longer just a students' movement. It is now a people's movement. It is now a question of state reform. That is what the person in the street is demanding.

"You've also seen that they've been directly shooting at ordinary students from the verandas of buildings. This is a despicable act."

Fatima continued, "The Bangladeshi map is being devoured by vultures. Who are these vultures? Who are hiding behind the mask of liberation and devouring the public. Who are these bloodsucking animals? The people want to see them. The new generation wants to see them. It is clear to us that they are bathing in the blood of ordinary students. This Awami League, in order to cling on to power, is resorting to all sorts of propaganda. But they will not be able to stop this new generation, this new society. This is what we hope and we fully endorse the actions of our new generation of students. It is in solidarity with them that we have come out onto the streets. As long as blood flows through our veins we will continue this struggle. This new generation wants the taste of true freedom."

As I turned off the video camera Fatema added. "Now we know why 1975 (the killing of 17 members of the Prime Minister's family, including her father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman) took place."

Reports of the army firing into crowds brought in a new dimension. The killings and the disappearances by RAB and the police had already placed a giant question mark on the lucrative peace keeping opportunities for the defence forces. Turning guns on unarmed public is a serious accusation that will be incredibly difficult to defend. The corruption charges against the outgoing army chief has resulted in the army's reputation being at an all time low. Should they really risk their future careers to save her skin?

Only one way out

On Sunday, the Appellate Division delivered the expected verdict, the high court verdict was scrapped. It set a lowered 7% quota for government jobs - 5% for the children of freedom fighters, 1% for marginal minorities, and 1% for people with disabilities and third gender people. The protesters find the judgement "unclear." They say, "It allows for the government to amend it at will." They've demanded that the parliament pass a permanent law within a week.

Alongside the physical curfew, we also effectively have a digital curfew. There is no Internet, so the normal mode of getting news through WhatsApp groups and Facebook no longer works. Banks are closed. Credit and debit cards don't work either and we are rapidly running out of cash as ATMs are also kaput. Millions who have pre-paid connections have lost or are about to lose electricity. Phone connections often fail. Only the shortest text messages get through. Sending this article will involve waiting for a break in curfew and relying on the generosity of one wire service which has its own VSAT and finding a short slot to pass it on to friends requesting them to relay it to destination. We are on the verge of a complete system shutdown. Government sanctioned news, through local television, is the only news that filters through. Only print versions of newspapers can come out.

Several protesters have been disappeared. The protesters want the full restoration of internet so news of the repression cannot be suppressed. Through TV we learn of a 48 hour ultimatum to open halls of residence and the curfew to be lifted.

One would be hard pressed to find a better descriptor for the expression 'between a rock and a hard place'. Blaming the Internet outage on 'technical damage' does not hold. The Internet was designed to withstand nuclear attacks. Everyone knows the real reason for blocking the Internet is to suppress the real news from spreading. The avalanche of photos of bodies all across the country. Of Chhatra League goons supported by police, on the rampage. The clear evidence of public anger, is going to overwhelm social media. The PR campaign is simply not going to hold up. Business has ground to a halt. The economy, already in shambles, is at a breaking point.

There are no easy options.

Except one.

Stepping down. Handing over to a neutral caretaker government in the interim. Holding finally, a

free and fair election without 'neighbourly' interference. It would result in a painful post-mortem with dire consequences, but it might save the nation. Whether the PM will put her personal survival over that of the nation is the question.

Read the fourth dispatch [here](#).△

Shahidul Alam

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