

Beyond the Uprising in Bangladesh

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After weeks of protests in July and August during which the security forces killed hundreds of protesters, Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned and fled the country on August 5. Sparked by a deep resentment toward a discriminatory government job quota system that denies young people secure job opportunities, university students spearheaded the protests that were fuelled by a grim economic future compounded by authoritarianism.

While a new interim government has been formed, led by an economist Muhammad Yunus, the crisis may be far from over. For ALR, Manoranjan Pegu spoke with Anu Muhammad, a Bangladeshi writer and activist, to understand what has driven the protesters' anger, why the protest movement is so significant, and how we may situate it against the country's neoliberal authoritarian development that has led to sharpening inequality and undermined the life chances of millions of workers and students.

Asian Labour Review (ALR): Can you tell us about the recent protests in Bangladesh? What led to it, and what were the students demanding?

Anu Muhammad (AM): What is happening in Bangladesh right now is really unprecedented. Nearly 300 were killed between 15 July and 24 July by police, armed thugs and other forces in association with the ruling party. And, on 4 August, nearly 100 more people were killed in a fresh clash. We have not seen this level of brutality, this number of killings and this much bloodshed in the past except the liberation war in 1971.

We also see extraordinary resistance and creativity from the people. Anger, passion and sadness, mixed with determination among the youth, have led to a kind of movement we haven't seen in decades. There are specific reasons behind their grievances, like continuous price hikes, employment crises, repression by state and ruling party men, massive corruption in the employment process, destruction of institutions to rely upon, etc. But the government ultimately failed to understand them. And that failure and authoritarian attitude led the previous government to make one mistake after another. How intolerance, concentration of power and audacity can take a country to disaster is very evident now in Bangladesh,

In the beginning, the student's demand was simple: to give preference to merit and not have an arbitrary quota system in government jobs. In 1998, Sheikh Hasina showed her authoritarian anger toward the student's demands by declaring the total removal of the quota, but that was not legally sustainable. Therefore, the court ordered the reinstatement of the old quota system in June 2023 that kept 56 per cent of government jobs for quota again. Under this quota system, 30 per cent of government jobs have been kept for children and grandchildren of the freedom fighters (*note: those who fought for the Bangladesh's independence war in 1971*), 10 per cent each for women and ethnic minorities, and 6 per cent for regions. We did not hear any objection to the 30% quota for the children of freedom fighters in the past, but when it comes to their grandchildren, it created

disquiet.

Instead of listening to the logic of the movement, the government started using its killing machine against students indiscriminately, which resulted in the death of many youths on the street and also women and children inside their own homes. This unprecedented killing and repression took the movement to a new level, and is now wanting justice, demanding the trial of the killers and the fall of the 'killer regime'! Now, talking about accepting old demands becomes a farce for the students.

ALR: Can you provide a historical context to these protests? Why is a 30% quota for descendants of freedom fighters inherently problematic?

AM: Three main reasons were behind the original quota movement in 2018. The first is jobless growth. The government has been celebrating high GDP growth for years, but that has not produced enough jobs for the youth. The way the economy operates and the developmental model that this government has adopted is widely glorifying—the youth cannot see any future for themselves in this neoliberal model and do not see any hope of getting the jobs they deserve.

The second problem is that thousands of positions in these institutions are left vacant, regardless of employment opportunities in the public sector—be it at government schools, colleges, universities, hospitals, or other essential services. Why? Privatisation is central to its development model, which is against making public bodies efficient. Other important areas are also weakened because the government's neoliberal economic policies have closed many public sector jute and sugar factories in the last five years.

The third issue is that young people don't believe they will get access to whatever few employment opportunities exist. That's because all opportunities nowadays must be bought; they are not granted according to merit. To get a job anywhere, you either have to spend money or have connections with the ruling party—in other words, it is really a "ruling-party-affiliated quota". Moreover, even outside of that, a host of other corrupt practices are taking place in the appointment procedure.

All our young people, in university, college or even school, see a dark future for themselves. Many young people are desperately trying to leave the country. In the process, sometimes they are betrayed by cheats and human export agents; that is how some end up dying at sea while criminal brokers and syndicates exploit others.

They see the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) as the most decent and secure job. However, they face a quota system that limits their chances, question leaks, and other forms of corruption in the examination process.

Therefore, young people saw no possibility of fixing the larger economic causes of massive unemployment and underemployment problems. The only possibility they see is if they can get some reforms of the quota system. That is what led to the 2018 quota reform movement.

ALR: Are these quotas anti-working class? Can you contextualise it in the Bangladesh economy and the job crisis?

AM: Growth and deprivation have simultaneously existed in Bangladesh and resulted in increasing inequality. The fast growth of a small group of billionaires can be contrasted with most people's financial hardship, unemployment, hunger, malnutrition, and financial insecurity. Over the last decade, we have seen a construction boom and the highest rate of deforestation, air and water pollution, and land and river grabbing. All these added to the suffering and vulnerability of working people.

If we consider the level of workers' rights and the prevalent minimum wage in Bangladesh, they are among the most deprived compared to many other countries.

Many mega projects have been undertaken with huge foreign loans during the last decade. Still, a good number of these megaprojects will be environmentally disastrous and financially big liabilities for Bangladesh in the long term. All these projects have contributed to the accumulation of huge foreign debts, weakened the value of the taka, and increased taxes and prices of gas and electricity. All these put working-class people in a more difficult situation and financial hardship.

The fastest-growing super-rich oligarchy is the direct beneficiary of irrational megaprojects and continuous authoritarian rule. Along with the fast growth of affluence among few, inequality has also widened fast. In 2010, the income ratio between the top 5% of the income groups and the lowest earning 5% of the population was nearly 30 times. In 2016, this ratio increased to 60 times. In 2022, it reached more than 80 times. This does not give the real picture because we know the declared income of the rich group is only a small part of their real wealth accumulated at home and abroad.

So, growth and deprivation, affluence and poverty, propaganda of dazzling growth, and harsh reality all go together. The majority of people do not have any relief in the current development model. Job crises, corruption, and quotas in government jobs affected them.

ALR: Many claim these protests should not be seen in isolation and should be understood as people's deep anger and distrust against the Hasina Regime and their quest for genuine democracy. What are your views on it?

AM: Yes, that is a valid point. The authoritarian rule by this government has continued for more than a decade. This government has created a semi-military rule by imposing a repressive system and destroying the election and judicial system, accountability and transparency. The concentration of power, militarisation of civil rule, and autocratic behaviour—that it can do whatever it wants have created a helpless situation in society. That is why young people across the country have reached such an agitated state. When we look at their lives closely, we see most of them and their families are struggling financially to survive. Moreover, they have been constantly facing torture, intimidation, and insults from those affiliated with the ruling party.

To find some relief, they were looking up to the Prime Minister to take some steps to reform the quota system. Unfortunately, she decided to take the matter completely in another direction. A demeaning comment, 'grandchildren of Rajakar', i.e., grandchildren of Pakistan collaborator' in 1971, aimed at the protesting students, which further triggered the movement. After that, instead of talking to the protesters, the ruling party unleashed its student wing on them. The Awami League General Secretary himself nakedly declared to deploy the ruling party student organisation, and they launched a vicious attack on protesting students with rods, sticks and even guns. In places where the ruling party student wing Bangladesh Chatra League (BCL) couldn't wholly run over the students, they hired armed men and brought them in on trucks and buses to attack the students. After that, we saw police and Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) being brought in.

All these government decisions have increased anger among the students. At Rangpur University, a student named Abu Sayed was killed as he stood unarmed, with his arms stretched out when the police shot him. Sayed belonged to a poor working family. The people in his village collected money to try and pay for his education. This cold-blooded murder spread anger like fire.

All the protesters asked for was a chance to participate in a fair competition. They were not asking for any handouts or any unwarranted favours. Police and the ruling party's private army have opened an all-out attack on them that killed nearly 400 and injured nearly 5,000, with more than

10,000 arrested. This is unacceptable.

ALR: How do you characterise the protests? Were they decentralised or organised through specific key networks and organisations?

AM: The movement did not have a centralised organisational structure. Under the name 'Students Movement against Inequality,' students were organised mainly through online groups. The movement spread very fast in different public universities because the quota reform was a common interest of many. No political student organisation was at the forefront, although left-wing student activists played a significant role in the movement.

ALR: How did the trade unions react to this struggle? Have these issues been raised as a working-class struggle?

AM: The main force of the student agitators are from working-class or low-income families in the informal sectors or from the countryside. However, the country's trade union movement is weak and under constant surveillance and repressive measures from employers and the government. The trade union movement was mostly concentrated in big public sector enterprises. During the 1980s, military rule and structural adjustment programmes almost eliminated large public sector enterprises and workers' organisational base. That destroyed the support base of left-wing trade unions.

Furthermore, the fall of the Soviet Union badly affected the left-wing parties in Bangladesh, further weakening the trade union movement. Trade unions were initially allowed in export-oriented industries like garments, but they emerged in the late 1980s and were allowed only on a limited scale. Despite this weakness, the garment workers had significant struggles, especially on wage issues, but they were mostly spontaneous. Consequently, many workers' struggles could not be sustained for long.

ALR: You have written extensively on neoliberalism in Bangladesh. Could you explain its nature and characteristics and how it has functioned to undermine workers?

AM: The essence of neoliberal policy is about turning everything public into a private company to make a profit for the few. In that process, all job-creating public enterprises in Bangladesh were either privatised or closed to distribute their assets to private businesses. These were done in the name of job creation. But the opposite happened; hundreds of thousands lost jobs, and the informal sector expanded.

Education and healthcare were privatised and commercialised, which made education and healthcare very expensive. Energy and power sectors were privatised and commercialised, increasing the cost of energy and power. All these made lives more insecure and unprotected, and living costs were high for most people.

ALR: Given the Prime Minister's resignation, her fleeing the country, and the formation of an interim government, what do you think lies in Bangladesh's future now?

AM: An interim government will run the country and organise a credible election. But beyond the election, the mass uprising has put forward the aspiration to build a new democratic Bangladesh without discrimination, plunder and repression. The spirit of this mass uprising and the passion and determination of young activists and leader have the potential to create pressure and the possibility of making a radical change in the political landscape. The role of left-wing organisations, trade unions, women's organisations, writers, artists, and intellectuals will be crucial to ensure this

happens.

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