

Bangladesh's youth job crisis at heart of bloody street protests

Toxic politics combined with an estimated 18 million young Bangladeshis out of work make the South Asian nation a powder keg waiting to explode.

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Student politics in Bangladesh has been known to be virulent, but the kind of violence that engulfed the capital Dhaka and several other parts of the South Asian nation in July is unprecedented.

At least 200 people were killed and thousands of protesters and bystanders injured as security forces, working in tandem with members of the Chhatra League, the youth wing of the ruling party, cracked down on student demonstrations against job quotas for civil servant hires. Rights groups said the authorities used indiscriminate force, with hundreds of people grappling with severe eye injuries after being fired at with pellet guns.

The violence brought the economy to a halt as the government imposed a nationwide curfew and an 11-day near-complete mobile internet blackout that cut the nation off from the rest of the world.

As the curfew eased and the internet blackout was lifted, life in the South Asian nation slowly returned to normal after its worst episode of civil unrest in living memory. However, for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, there is no return to business as usual. The recent violence starkly exposes widespread public anger towards her leadership, demanding immediate attention.

The often-criticised autocratic tendencies of Ms Hasina's Awami League since it took power in 2009 partly explain the recent public disaffection. However, economic duress among the nation's young people arguably ignited the latest unrest. Despite a decade of stellar economic growth averaging 6.5 per cent annually, driven by the garments sector and remittances, job shortages persist for young people.

In 2023, around 40 per cent of Bangladeshis aged 15 to 24 were not studying, working or in training. In total, 18 million young

Bangladeshis are out of work, according to government figures. High inflation, driven by the Ukraine war and pandemic-induced supply chain disruptions, is straining the economy and slowing private-sector job growth. In January 2023, the government secured a US\$4.7 billion (S\$6.3 billion) bailout from the International Monetary Fund to shore up declining foreign exchange reserves.

Given this backdrop of an acute youth unemployment problem and broader economic woes, the latest protests triggered by a decades-old quota system for government jobs viewed as more stable and better paid than private-sector roles were a long time coming. Under the system, some 400,000 graduates would vie annually for just 3,000 of these positions.

The quota system was introduced by the Prime Minister's late father, independence hero Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in 1971, following a war of liberation against Pakistan that year. The system reserved 56 per cent of government jobs for various categories of citizens including women, backward groups and the disabled. Of the reserved jobs, 30 per cent were reserved for descendants of freedom fighters from 1971 who are estimated to make up about 0.2 per cent of the population and widely perceived as Awami League loyalists.

The system was abolished for some grades of civil servant jobs in 2018 following student protests, but was reinstated in June following a ruling by Dhaka's High Court. In the aftermath of the street violence, the country's apex Supreme Court in a ruling on July 21 stepped in to drastically reduce the reserved quota to 7 per cent, with 93 per cent of jobs to be allocated on merit.

TOUGH NEXT STEPS

The scaling back of the reservation has pulled the country back from the brink, but



Protesters and students backing the ruling Awami League party clashing in Dhaka on July 16. The violence in July over job quotas for civil servant hires brought the economy to a halt. It exposed widespread public anger towards Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's leadership, demanding immediate attention. PHOTO: AFP



Rights groups said the authorities used indiscriminate force, with hundreds of people grappling with severe eye injuries after being fired at with pellet guns. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

what happens next will determine the impact on Ms Hasina and her government.

In the first instance, there have been widespread calls for the government to apologise for the brutality it unleashed on protesters, and for the role it played in indirectly escalating peaceful protests into clashes between demonstrators and security forces. It was after all Ms Hasina's labelling of the protesters as "razakars" on July 14, two weeks after the street protests began, which allegedly caused the situation to escalate. The term refers to those who collaborated with the Pakistani army in the 1971 war of liberation and is viewed as deeply incendiary. Protesters came out in far larger numbers after that remark, triggering the security apparatus' violent crackdown between July 18 and 21.

Apart from the calls for an apology, there have been calls for

Ms Hasina to open dialogue with the protest's youth leaders and consider setting up a commission to examine the quota system. These proposals must be considered seriously and the government should shed the perception that the violence was orchestrated by its political opponents. Dialogue with the relevant parties is the easiest of the steps available to the government in the coming weeks.

The more challenging task is to heal the deep divisions in the country exposed during the protests, spanning political allegiance and economic status. The Awami League's relentless castigation of its political opponents as anti-national forces fuels this polarisation. Among its rivals is the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), formed in 1978 by Lieutenant-General Ziaur Rahman, a military ruler who gained power after Sheikh Mujibur was killed in 1975. His

wife, who is former prime minister Khaleda Zia, now runs the party. Following mass arrests of its leaders and supporters, the BNP boycotted January's election, in which the Awami League and its allies won 225 of 300 seats.

Officials in Ms Hasina's government have consistently blamed the latest violence on the BNP and the Jamaat-e-Islami party, another opposition group. This stance has persisted even after the violence subsided in the days following the Supreme Court's ruling on July 21. Unless such over-politicised rhetoric is toned down, achieving long-term social peace will remain elusive.

SEARCH FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

Given the intransigence the Awami League has shown, perhaps it is far-fetched to hope for accountability surrounding the recent brutality – but at some point it will be required.

On the ground, reports of the bloody crackdown are suggestive of the wanton brutality that was unleashed, with cellphone footage reportedly showing security personnel aiming and firing at unarmed protesters, and bodies being dumped on roads.

It is important to note that while the protesters have temporarily dispersed, they have pledged to regroup if their demands remain unmet. Some factions assert that the movement has shifted beyond the issue of quotas and is now focused on seeking justice for those who lost their lives. One group has issued a list of nine demands, including an apology from Ms Hasina and the resignation of several of her deputies.

With the Jamaat-e-Islami and BNP not viewed as viable alternatives at the ballot box, street protests are the only way for discontented Bangladeshis to make their views known. If Ms Hasina makes no effort to change her tack, there is a good chance the protests could become a wider movement against her that may prove difficult to quell even with brute force.

More significant is what a failure to act would mean for a country that has strived for years, making impressive strides to break out of Asia's "basket case" league to be recognised as among the region's rising stars. The recent political violence, relentless antagonism among major political players, youth job crisis and other multifaceted economic woes threaten to derail this progress entirely.

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