

Bangladeshi government launches witch hunt after police kill hundreds of student protesters

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According to the latest media reports, at least 201 people have been killed and over 4,500 others arrested during the Hasina government-ordered state attacks on student protesters over the past eight days. The mass demonstrations, which were led by the Students Against Discrimination, began on July 1, after a Bangladesh high court re-instituted a discriminatory quota system for public sector jobs which had been scrapped in 2018.

Under this divisive system 30 percent of public service jobs were allocated for the relatives of “freedom fighters”—those who fought for the establishment of Bangladesh in 1971—10 percent for women and those from underdeveloped areas of the country, 5 percent for ethnic minorities and 1 percent for physically challenged people. The remaining positions would be chosen according to the current merit system.

The largely peaceful protests took a violent turn when thugs from Hasina’s Awami League-controlled Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), assisted by police, attacked Dhaka University students.

As students intensified their campaign across the country, police stepped up the violence, firing tear gas, rubber bullets and live ammunition at the students, killing dozens and injuring thousands more. On July 19, Hasina ordered a curfew, deployed the military with “shoot on sight” orders and shut down the internet.

Hoping to quell the escalating nationwide unrest, the Hasina government on Monday issued a gazette changing its quota system so that 93 percent of new public sector recruits would be based on merit. Quotas for “freedom fighters” and their relatives would be reduced to 5 percent and 2 percent for other designated groups.

While the government eased its curfew to a few hours daily this week, allowing banks, government offices and garment factories to begin operating on Wednesday, the internet is not yet fully restored while police raids and arrests are ongoing.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina continues to threaten student activists, falsely accusing them of being aligned with

the opposition Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami.

Addressing an Editors Guild meeting on Wednesday, Hasina accused the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami of being behind last week’s violence. According to the *Daily Star*, she told the meeting that “the recent mayhem [was] designed to cripple the country’s advancement and prosperity.”

The right-wing BNP and the Jamaat e-Islami, a communalist organisation which opposed the establishment of Bangladesh, had nothing to do with the student protest movement. Hoping to capitalise on the mass support for the protesting students, the BNP did not decide to “support” the students until July 18. BNP governments, which came to power twice in the 1990s and in 2001, were just as hostile as Hasina’s Awami League administration to workers and the poor during their rule.

Last week, Hasina toured parts of Dhaka, observing property destruction, including at the Television Bhaban studios in Rampura and the Mirpur-10 metro rail station, which she blamed on the protesters. The people of Bangladesh, she declared, “have to expose them [those involved] and bring them to justice.”

Hasina’s comments have been widely denounced on social media. A BBC report quoted one X/Twitter user who said: “We lost [hundreds of] students. But PM Sheikh Hasina had the time to go ‘cry’ for a metro rail, not for the people who won’t return ever again.” Another denounced the prime minister for “shedding crocodile tears for a railway track” but remaining silent about those killed by the police. Others observed that she had not visited any of the families of the students shot dead by police.

Journalists for the UK-based *Guardian* witnessed Rapid Action Battalion police forces using a helicopter to fire teargas at crowds and the army using light machine guns against unarmed demonstrators. Amnesty International has confirmed that police and paramilitary forces also used shotguns, assault rifles and grenade launchers.

A July 25 editorial in the Dhaka-based *New Age* reported “indiscriminate firing by law enforcement personnel” with

scores killed and several thousand wounded. Many, it said, were “still in a critical condition,” including those who had lost their eyesight.

While Students Against Discrimination paused its protests twice this week, first on Monday and later Wednesday, it held a press conference on Tuesday, making eight demands of the government.

These included restoration of internet services, a withdrawal of the curfew, security for all coordinators of the student movement, the reopening of residential halls at education institutions and the withdrawal of all police from campuses. The organisation also wants an “apology to the nation” from Hasina “for the mass murder of students” and the sacking of the home minister and education minister.

There are ongoing reports on abduction and torture of student activists by police with many others going into hiding, fearing persecution and police raids. Nahid Islam, a Students Against Discrimination coordinator, told the *Guardian* on July 23 that he was seized by more than 20 police officers. “They took me somewhere I couldn’t recognise and then put me in a room where they started to question me and later torture me, first mentally and then physically,” he said.

Abdul Hannan Masud, another protest coordinator, told the media that the organisation was planning to form emergency health forces to “ensure proper treatments to around 15,000 protesters who were injured across the country.”

Responding to calls this week by United Nations Human Rights chief Volker Turk for an “independent investigation” into the government attacks, Bangladesh State Minister for Broadcasting and Information Mohammad Arafat cynically told Al Jazeera that the government had tried to “de-escalate the tension.”

Arafat declared that “third-party” actors, including “extremists and terrorists,” had fuelled the student protests and that the government had formed an independent judicial committee that would ensure “everyone responsible for any of these casualties can be brought to book.”

These are patent lies. The Hasina regime responded to a wave of student protests against the public sector job quota system from April to July in 2018 by unleashing terror by police and the BCL. While it was forced to scrap the quota system it systematically witch-hunted and persecuted the student activists.

As a Frontline Defenders report on June 2020 noted: “Long after the protests stopped, many student activists, their friends and family members continue to face surveillance, intimidation and harassment, effectively silencing future dissent.” Citing several instances, it noted: “A prominent activist was attacked eight times after the

protest movement ended. Another protest organiser has been routinely stalked by members of the National Security Intelligence.”

Key props of the Hasina government during the latest student protests have been various Stalinist parties who align themselves with one or another section of the ruling elite in Bangladesh.

The Communist Party of Bangladesh, the Socialist Party of Bangladesh and the Revolutionary Communist League, which are organised under the so-called Left Democratic Alliance, have denounced the government while telling students it is possible to pressure the Hasina government.

Another Stalinist formation, the Workers Party of Bangladesh is a coalition partner of the Hasina government. Confronted with mass anger at the murderous police and military attacks on students, it desperately attempted to distance itself from the government atrocities. Workers Party of Bangladesh parliamentarian Rashed Khan Menon addressed its youth wing feigning concern while politely calling on the government to “address the concerns” of students.

The social problems facing Bangladeshi students—poverty, endemic unemployment, a government assault on education and basic democratic rights—are products of the capitalist system and cannot be resolved through appeals to the Hasina regime or possible future BNP regime.

These attacks can only be defeated by students turning to the working class and fighting for its mobilisation, independently of every faction of the ruling class and their Stalinist political props, for an internationalist and socialist perspective that puts an end to capitalism and reorganises production and society according to human need, not private profit.



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