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Bangladesh

# Protesters in Bangladesh Want an End to State Repression

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**For Jacobin, Promise Li spoke to Lydia Silva, a Bangladeshi activist with the Bangladesh Krishok Federation and Bangladesh Chhatra Shava, about the origins of the protest movement, its likely impact on politics in Bangladesh, and the state of the left-wing forces in the country.**

**Promise Li: Can you describe why the mass protests erupted against the government of Sheikh Hasina? What has been the government's response?**

Lydia Silva: The protests began when the Supreme Court of Bangladesh revived a quota reserving 30 percent of government jobs for descendants of freedom fighters who participated in Bangladesh's war of independence, reversing a reform to the quota system the people won in 2018.

This quota system started in 1972 when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the key leader of the independence movement, introduced it to a war-torn country to recognize those who fought in the independence struggle. However, there was discontent against it from the start, and there have been movements against the quota system on and off ever since, like the mass protests in 2008 and 2013 that were unsuccessful.

In 2018, the quota remained at 56 percent: 30 percent for the descendants of freedom fighters, 10 percent for women, 5 percent for ethnic minorities, 10 percent for specific districts, and 1 percent for people with disabilities, leaving 44 percent for merit-based candidates. This meant that working-class students with high scores could be deprived of jobs and opportunities by those privileged by the quota.

Students led a massive antiquota movement that year and gained substantial public support. They successfully compelled the government to reduce the quota for government jobs. But problems remained regarding the fair implementation of the quota system.

In June this year, the Supreme Court reversed the 2018 reforms, which renewed the students' antiquota movement. Initially, the movement was confined to public universities. Sheikh Hasina's government responded with violence and refused to engage in dialogue with the student leaders, which could have spared the country the atrocities we have seen in recent weeks. The government instead waited in silence for the court's verdict and ignored the campus movement.

Moreover, Hasina further incensed student protestors by asking on national television, "If the grandchildren of the freedom fighters don't get quota benefits, should the grandchildren of Razakars get the benefit?" "Razakar" is a derogatory term that refers to those who assisted the Pakistani army's murderous suppression of the Bangladesh freedom fighters during the 1971 war.

Students took Hasina to be smearing their movement as traitorous, responding with the slogan: "Ami ke? Tumi ke? Razakar! Razakar! Ke bolechhe? Ke bolechhe? Shwoirachar! Shwoirachar!" ("Who am I? Who are you? Razakar! Razakar! Who says so? Who says so? Who says so? Dictator! Dictator!"). Though, in my opinion, the movement could have used more strategic slogans that distanced us from those traitors in 1971 and gave less space for criticism; pro-government forces weaponized this to further degrade the movement's demands.

The Chhatra League, the student wing of Hasina's ruling Awami League, has a long history of attacking critics and

movements. Its members were given the green light by an Awami League minister on national television to “silence the protestors.” We saw many students shot dead in videos that circulated on social media, though the same minister denied such killings had taken place.

Whether the murders were done by the Chhatra League, or by other groups in the opposition that took advantage of these provocations in the time of despair, still remains to be confirmed. All we know now is that many are dead and injured, after the protests quickly escalated and spread across the country, from private university students to other civilians.

The government first attempted to suppress the protests by closing all educational institutions while torturing and brutalizing the protestors. Military and border guards were deployed, and they declared a nationwide shoot-on-sight curfew and shut off internet and telephone communications across the country. The government now registers over two hundred protestors killed and thousands injured.

**Promise Li: What is unique about this year’s protests against the quota system? Can you say more about the student leaders’ relationship with other opposition groups? How would you characterize the political composition of the broad opposition against Hasina?**

Lydia Silva: This time, the quota reform protests express the prolonged frustrations that the youth and other working-class people have felt toward the government. Our national elections are increasingly unfair, and the government is becoming more autocratic than ever before.

There are tens of thousands of graduates each year roaming the streets unemployed, and many hope to secure civil service jobs. There is also widespread corruption in every possible government sector. In addition, Bangladesh has other economic grievances like rising inflation and the cost of living, alongside government mismanagement and human rights abuses.

These are all triggers that contributed to the quota reform protests. There may have been new developmental projects like the Padma Bridge, Karnaphuli Tunnel, and the Dhaka Metro Rail in recent years, but more is needed to make up for the day-to-day exploitation faced by the lower classes that struggle to keep up with minimum living standards. What was a movement to fight for a fair chance for working people to obtain government jobs without discrimination in 2018 has become a broader mobilization that speaks to widespread systemic issues.

Since Bangladesh’s independence, the youth and student movements have been the backbone of mass struggles against our ruling governments. A broad coalition of opposition parties and civil society organizations, including left-wing and progressive groups, support the students today. Student leaders have been clear from the beginning that students should be prioritized for participation in the movement, no matter which political student wing they belong to. Participants are encouraged to keep aside their political differences in this broad movement.

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However, the main opposition parties and their student wings — the right-wing Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami (also known as “Jamaat-Shibir” when referred together with its student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir) — are instrumentalizing the broad student movement, benefiting from the political instability to mobilize their own agendas against the Awami League.

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The BNP's policies have not been favorable to the working class, just as their youth wing has not addressed young people's needs around unemployment and educational reform. They focus on supporting large infrastructural projects but with little attention to grassroots economic development. Their rule in the past had also seen widespread corruption and instability.

For its part, Jamaat-Shibir has tried to push fundamentalist Islamic policies, with ministers comparing women to consumer goods and threatening women's right to work for not wearing a burqa. Their founders were the actual Razakars who opposed the Bangladesh independence struggle and committed many crimes during the war.

In the past, the BNP allied with Jamaat-Shibir, even appointing some of these war criminals as ministers. Jamaat-Shibir infiltrated the movement to irresponsibly carry out armed attacks against state assets and personnel to create more misunderstandings between the government and student protestors. I participated in the mass protests in 2013 as a secondary school student demanding justice against Abdul Quader Mollah and other unprosecuted Jamaat-Shibir war criminals, and witnessed the violence and havoc Jamaat-Shibir supporters caused in their countermobilizations.

### **Promise Li: What is the state of the Left in Bangladesh, and what is the role of left-wing and socialist organizations in the opposition and this student-led movement?**

Lydia Silva: Unfortunately, the Bangladeshi left has lost significance in recent years due to ideological divisions or the alliances of certain groups with the ruling party. The two largest left parties — the Workers' Party and Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JASAD) — have affiliated with the Awami League, which has helped to divide the Left.

The Workers' Party is a Marxist-Leninist formation that formed from a broad coalition of left groups in the 1980s and still has links to some labor, peasant, and marginalized groups' struggles. JASAD is a social democratic party that advocates for reforms within the bourgeois system, emphasizing their promotion of welfare policies and other social justice causes.

Though the Awami League has always been ideologically centrist and nationalist, they attempted to strategically ally with parts of the Left to address issues like right-wing fundamentalism, especially with the growth of al-Qaeda-linked terrorist activities. Because there has been little prospect for building a popular left alternative, the Workers' Party and JASAD have built alliances with the Awami League to counter the BNP and fundamentalist groups.

Outside of the parliamentary left, other left organizations add a critical voice in the opposition by focusing on issues of economic inequality and peasant and workers' rights. The Left Democratic Alliance is a coalition of a few smaller left groups. While each is active in social movements, like the Socialist Party of Bangladesh, it's unclear how effective the coalition is in terms of the bigger picture. The oldest standing left party in Bangladesh, the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), is still actively opposing the ruling government, but it suffers from weak leadership and also internal divisions.

The Left in Bangladesh has weakened itself over time as the parties continue to produce splits rather than unifying. This is unfortunate because the Bangladeshi left has shown that when united, we can be a pivotal voice. Left groups have joined together with labor, peasant, and minority movements for wage increases and better working conditions. Many of us have collaborated to apply pressure against the government's leasing of our natural resources, like oil and gas, to foreign countries.

Bangladesh is largely financially dependent on the garment industry, and left parties have been a vital presence among garment workers and unions. Along with labor leaders and organizations, left-wing groups demanded the

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government to raise garment workers' wages. Last year, garment workers won a minimum wage increase from 8,000 to 12,500 BDT (though this was far less than their original demand).

**Promise Li: Your organization, the Bangladesh Krishok Federation, has been a key force in organizing landless peasants and other marginalized groups for decades. Can you say more about your group's work, and how it relates to youth and student organizing?**

Lydia Silva: The Bangladesh Krishok Federation (BKF) has 1.6 million members across forty-nine districts in Bangladesh. Our medium-term program is to mobilize farmers and landless people to fight for genuine and comprehensive agrarian reform in the country, so that they can have access to cultivable land and food sovereignty and can live with dignity.

We also support small farmers in their efforts to obtain fairer prices for their agricultural products, organize quality seed banks for exchange among peasants, and connect poor peasants with public services. The BKF provides legal and medical services as well for our members, especially those attacked by petty bourgeois land grabbers and those who face charges for their participation in khas (unused, government-owned) land occupation movements. Through agitation, we successfully won the redistribution of lands across the country to landless peasants.

The BKF is affiliated with other mass organizations, like the Bangladesh Kishani Sabha (for women peasants), Bangladesh Adivasi Samity (for ethnic minorities), and the Bangladesh Chhatra Shava (for students). I am on the central committees of both the BKF and Bangladesh Chhatra Shava. Bangladesh Chhatra Shava originated from a large student unity forum emerging from the BKF, which now organizes independently from us.

In 2022, Chhatra Shava was formed and now has almost three thousand members across the country, mostly active in the Dhaka, Barishal, and Dinajpur districts. It has been campaigning over issues like gender equality and educational reform: for example, holding the government accountable for not having fulfilled its promise to make one public school free of cost in each district, and advocating for the supply of affordable textbooks for underprivileged students in rural areas. It also seeks to promote political education through lectures and book clubs, including reading Marxist texts.

I also belong to the Communist Party of Bangladesh (Marxist-Leninist), along with other party cadres who are active members of the BKF. Our group endorses Leon Trotsky's belief in permanent revolution — the idea that the socialist revolution must be international, with the working class leading it in a continuous process. This contrasts with other left groups in Bangladesh that come from a more traditional Stalinist or Marxist-Leninist approach, like the Workers' Party.

We also adhere to Antonio Gramsci's principle that Marxists must establish a counterhegemony of workers, peasants, and other toiling masses across society, from the economic to the cultural spheres, against bourgeois hegemony. Creating this counterhegemony is a precondition for revolution, which we can achieve by strengthening the struggles of the subaltern classes across the country, while developing organic intellectuals among rural indigenous communities.

Most of the youth in Chhatra Shava and CPB (ML) are children of farmers and informal sector workers who also organize around demands for peasant rights, land reform, access to wastelands, climate justice, agroecological farming, and so on. We are already hearing about and supporting the children of our peasant members who have been injured while participating in the movement in their districts.

**Promise Li: What do you see as the next stages of the struggle?**

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Lydia Silva: The fight is not over. The government has reformed the quota system again, but there are still more than six thousand protestors under arrest from the nationwide crackdown. Student leaders are still being arrested and taken away from their homes and hospitals. Some are persecuted for their affiliation with opposition parties, while many are innocent civilians who may remain imprisoned indefinitely.

The police are conducting random searches on people's phones on the streets to look for any affiliation with the movement. I know of a seventeen-year-old who was granted a seven-day sentence, which was only canceled upon mass pressure. Nonetheless, he was sent to a juvenile correctional facility until further investigation.

Among the students' list of demands, only the one about the quota reform has been won. The government has still not taken any responsibility for the killings and tortures, bringing the guilty to justice, and publicly apologizing to families whose children were massacred just for trying to find decent jobs to end the generational poverty they have experienced, or the toddler who has been shot in the head on the balcony of her own home.

There was also someone who was shot dead for simply delivering food and water to the protestors in solidarity, and this footage has gone viral. Though the arrested students called off the protests in a public statement, some other student leaders who have not been arrested are still trying to carry on the protests. We must continue to build momentum and call for international solidarity. We hope that justice prevails for the students as they push for further reform.

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