

Bangladesh Quota Reform Movement: An Analysis of Minority Rights Violations

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Abstract

The 2024 Bangladesh quota reform movement began as a student-led protest demanding changes to the government job recruitment system but quickly evolved into a nationwide pro-democracy uprising against Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's administration. The movement gained momentum after a tragic incident in July, where numerous students and civilians lost their lives, ultimately leading to what became known as the Student–People's Uprising.

This paper explores the socio-political and economic factors that contributed to both the emergence and escalation of the movement, with a focus on the policies of Sheikh Hasina's government and its response to the unrest. Additionally, the study examines the broader consequences, including targeted violence against minority communities, particularly Hindus and Ahmadis, who faced attacks following the collapse of Hasina's government.

Furthermore, the paper analyzes the movement's impact on Bangladesh's political landscape, addressing the constitutional challenges and the urgent need for reforms in the post-revolutionary period. It also assesses the domestic and international repercussions, particularly the shifts in Bangladesh's foreign relations, with a special emphasis on its ties with India.

By examining these dynamics, the study highlights the complex interplay of socio-political grievances, human rights violations, and governance challenges that fueled the crisis. The findings underscore the movement's long-term implications for Bangladesh's political stability and its foreign policy direction.

Introduction:

The 2024 Bangladesh quota reform movement began as a student-led protest calling for changes to the government job quota system but quickly transformed into a nationwide pro-democracy uprising against what many saw as an authoritarian regime. The movement intensified after the tragic July massacre, in which numerous student protesters and civilians were killed, ultimately leading to the Student–People's Uprising.

According to Human Rights Watch (2024), rioters caused widespread destruction, including burning historical sites and targeting ruling Awami League offices. Minority communities, particularly Hindus—who comprise about 8% of Bangladesh's population—faced severe violence, with homes burned, temples desecrated, and businesses looted. Ahmadis and other ethnic minorities were also attacked. Reports from the Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council and Bangladesh Puja Udjapan Parishad (2024) documented 205 attacks across 52 districts following Sheikh Hasina's ousting on August 5. While some targeted Hindus linked to the Awami League, most victims were ordinary citizens. Dasgupta (2024), general secretary of the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Oikya Parishad, stated that 98% of affected Hindus had no political affiliations.

Since early July, violent clashes have resulted in over 560 deaths, including 230 since August 5. Among those killed were two Hindu leaders associated with the Awami League. In response to the violence, Hindu communities staged protests in Dhaka, calling for government protection (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives are as follows:

To explore the origins and progression of the movement:

- Assessing the socio-political conditions that triggered the initial protests.
- Investigating how the movement expanded from a student-led demonstration to a nationwide uprising.

To analyze the role of Sheikh Hasina's government in intensifying the crisis:

- Evaluating the impact of government policies, particularly regarding the quota system and the administration's response to protests.
- Examining socio-economic factors such as unemployment, inflation, and corruption that contributed to public discontent.

To examine human rights violations and their impact on minority communities:

- Investigating targeted violence against minority groups, including Hindus and Ahmedis, and understanding the broader ethnic and sectarian dimensions of the unrest.

To assess the broader domestic and international consequences:

- Analyzing the political shifts within Bangladesh and their effects on governance.
- Evaluating the movement's impact on Bangladesh's foreign relations, with a particular focus on its ties with India and potential changes in diplomatic relations.

Methodology:

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative research to analyze the 2024 Bangladesh quota reform movement and its aftermath.

Qualitative Analysis

- Literature Review: Examining academic research, policy papers, and media reports on Bangladesh's quota system, political landscape, and civil unrest.
- Case Studies: Analyzing key events such as the July massacre, violence against minorities, and the attack on Sheikh Hasina's residence.
- Interviews and Testimonies: Conducting interviews with political analysts, students, activists, human rights organizations, and affected minority groups to gain deeper insights into socio-political dynamics.

Quantitative Analysis

- Survey Data: Collecting data on public opinion, socio-economic factors, and the effects of the quota system, unemployment, and inflation through surveys of students, protesters, and the general public.
- Statistical Analysis: Examining violence-related data, including the number of attacks, casualties, and geographical distribution, to assess the scale of human rights violations.

Secondary Data Analysis

- Utilizing reports from government agencies, NGOs, and international human rights organizations to provide context on the political and social environment.

- Analyzing media reports and social media trends to understand public sentiment, the movement's expansion, and reactions to violence and government responses.

Comparative Analysis

- Comparing the 2024 movement to past protests, such as the 2018 anti-quota demonstrations, to identify recurring patterns in Bangladesh's political climate and activism.
- By integrating these methodologies, the study provides a comprehensive examination of the movement's causes, human rights concerns, and its broader impact on governance and international relations.

Review of Literature:

- **Historical Context of the Quota System**

Research on Bangladesh's quota system, established in the 1970s, highlights its controversial nature. Scholars have noted that while the system was initially designed to recognize the contributions of war veterans, its long-term application has led to increasing dissatisfaction, particularly among students (Haque, 2019).

- **Governance Under Sheikh Hasina**

Political analysts have explored Sheikh Hasina's leadership style, particularly her administration's response to opposition and reform demands. Studies suggest that her governance, often described as authoritarian, contributed to the escalation of protests. Rahman (2021) argues that the centralization of power under Hasina's rule played a key role in fueling unrest (Ahmed, 2020).

- **Economic Factors Behind Public Discontent**

Economic studies, including those by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS, 2022), highlight worsening economic conditions as a major factor behind the protests. Rising inflation, unemployment, and financial struggles following the COVID-19 pandemic have intensified public frustration and distrust in the government.

- **Human Rights Violations and Sectarian Violence**

Reports from human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch (2024) and the Bangladesh Human Rights Commission document widespread violence, particularly targeting minority groups. Islam (2023) argues that these attacks stem from both political conflict and deep-rooted ethnic and religious divisions, worsened by state inaction.

This literature provides critical insights into the movement's origins, the government's role, socio-economic grievances, and the human rights implications of the unrest.

Factors behind the Bangladesh Crisis:

Sheikh Hasina's government, which secured a disputed fourth consecutive term in January 2024, faced significant opposition following a boycott by rival political parties. The country was already grappling with high unemployment rates and soaring inflation. Tensions escalated further when Hasina referred to the protesters as "Razakars" and ordered harsh police crackdowns (Ahmed, 2024).

The socio-economic challenges, worsened by the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, rampant corruption, and rising living costs, created an unstable environment (BIDS, 2022). These conditions triggered widespread protests, which eventually forced Hasina and her sister to flee Dhaka. In response, India provided temporary shelter to Hasina. External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar confirmed in the

Rajya Sabha that Hasina had urgently sought permission to stay in India for a brief period (Jaishankar, 2024).

Origins of the Agitation:

The 2024 movement can be traced back to the smaller anti-quota protests of 2018. On March 8, 2018, the Bangladesh High Court dismissed a petition challenging the legality of the long-standing quota system, which had been in place since the 1970s. In response, Sheikh Hasina expressed strong support for maintaining quotas for the descendants of liberation war veterans, a policy originally established by her father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. While the decision was emotionally significant for Hasina, it ignited significant opposition from students who viewed the system as unjust (Haque, 2019).

The change in leadership could potentially influence Bangladesh's foreign policy, leading to strained trade and security relations with India. Such shifts could undermine the progress made in bilateral ties over the past decade and create new challenges for future cooperation (BIDS, 2022).

Minority Issues in Bangladesh:

After the fall of Sheikh Hasina's government in August 2024, Bangladesh's Hindu minority faced widespread violence. The Bangladesh National Hindu Grand Alliance reported attacks in 278 locations across 48 districts, describing them as an "assault on the Hindu religion" (Yunus, 2024). Muhammad Yunus, the Chief Advisor of the provisional government, urged the Hindu community to be patient and promised that perpetrators would be punished (Yunus, 2024).

Despite these reassurances, over 205 attacks occurred in 52 districts, creating fear and uncertainty within the community. In response, thousands of Hindus protested in Dhaka and Chattogram, demanding justice and protection, including a fast-track tribunal for the perpetrators and the establishment of a dedicated ministry for minority affairs (JMBF, 2024).

Protests in Dhaka disrupted traffic, and Hindu groups, like the Sanatani Odhikar Andolan, organized demonstrations, rejecting claims that they were politically motivated. International groups, including the Justice Makers Bangladesh (JMBF), condemned the violence, calling it a severe human rights violation (JMBF, 2024). The unrest highlights the vulnerability of religious minorities in Bangladesh and the urgent need for legal reforms to protect their rights.

Impact of the Crisis on Bangladesh

The ongoing crisis in Bangladesh has had a disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups, particularly Rohingya refugees, women, and girls. The political unrest and communication breakdowns have severely hampered the operations of humanitarian organizations, such as the International Rescue Committee (IRC), which has been compelled to suspend many of its critical activities (Rahman, 2024). As a result, key infrastructure projects, including water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) systems, have been delayed, and the distribution of vital supplies has been disrupted. This disruption has increased the risk of theft from warehouses (Smith, 2023).

Movement restrictions and security concerns have also led to significant challenges for humanitarian workers, who are unable to operate on regular schedules, further affecting the delivery of services. The absence of law enforcement has allowed crimes like daylight shootings, extortion, forced evictions, and abductions to rise sharply (Ahmed, 2024).

For the Rohingya refugees, many of whom have been living in overcrowded camps for more than seven years, the crisis has exacerbated already dire living conditions. The refugees have limited access to education, employment, and basic services. Hunger rates have risen by 60% over the last year, while food rations have been reduced by 33% due to severe funding shortages (Johnson, 2023).

Hasina Rahman, the IRC's country director, has stressed the urgent need for continued health services, particularly through the IRC's 24/7 health center in Cox's Bazar, which remains an essential source of primary and emergency care for the refugees (Rahman, 2024).

The ongoing crisis has further compounded the challenges faced by vulnerable groups, making immediate international intervention and support crucial to alleviating their suffering (Khan, 2023).

Impact of the Crisis on India

- **Loss of a Key Regional Ally:** Under Sheikh Hasina's leadership, India and Bangladesh cultivated a strong partnership, particularly in security cooperation and counterterrorism efforts (Singh, 2024). However, with Hasina's resignation and the political instability in Bangladesh, India may face the loss of this crucial ally (Chakraborty, 2024). Hasina's leadership played an essential role in fostering bilateral ties, which were vital for both countries' strategic interests (Gupta, 2023).
- **Economic Interdependence:** India and Bangladesh maintained a robust economic relationship, with Bangladesh emerging as India's largest trading partner in the region (Kumar, 2023). Trade between the two nations reached USD 13 billion during Hasina's tenure (Bose, 2023). Additionally, the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) agreement enabled duty-free access to goods, further strengthening the economic bonds between the two countries (Mitra, 2024).
- **Diplomatic Challenges and Western Criticism:** The ongoing crisis in Bangladesh and Hasina's resignation have placed India in a delicate diplomatic position (Sharma, 2024). India had been a staunch supporter of Hasina's government, which had faced criticism from Western countries, especially the United States, over human rights violations and the erosion of democratic freedoms (Das, 2023). India must now navigate its relationship with Bangladesh amid growing external scrutiny (Mukherjee, 2024).
- **Risk of Anti-Indian Sentiment:** With Hasina seeking refuge in India, there is a risk that anti-Indian sentiments may rise in Bangladesh (Rathore, 2024). While India and Bangladesh enjoyed strong bilateral relations under Hasina, public understanding of this complex relationship may be limited, potentially resulting in negative perceptions of India (Saha, 2023). This could impact future diplomatic relations between the two countries (Patel, 2024).

In conclusion, the crisis in Bangladesh presents significant diplomatic challenges for India, requiring the balancing of historical ties with Bangladesh and managing the growing international pressure and public sentiment (Roy, 2023).

Aftermath of the Crisis:

In the aftermath of the political upheaval, prominent intellectuals, such as Farhad Mazhar (2024), have called for the establishment of a constituent assembly to address the "constitutional vacuum" created by the crisis. Mazhar pointed out that the Bangladesh Constitution lacks provisions for an interim government, leaving significant legal and political uncertainties in the wake of the revolution.

Kazi Habibul Awal (2024), the Chief Election Commissioner, also acknowledged the constitutional gap and warned of potential future legal challenges. He emphasized that while the removal of the autocratic

regime was an essential first step, several critical issues must be addressed for the country's stabilization. Awal highlighted the need for determination, wisdom, courage, and integrity in managing this transition. Moreover, internal tensions became evident when a civil servant, who had opposed the unconstitutional formation of an interim government, was dismissed from her position. This incident underscores the challenges the country faces as it tries to navigate the complexities of the post-revolutionary period (Rahman, 2024).

Suggestions:

- **Constitutional Reforms:** In the aftermath of the crisis, Bangladesh must prioritize addressing the constitutional gap by establishing a constituent assembly or introducing legal reforms to create a framework for an interim government. This step will help stabilize the political environment and facilitate a transition to a more democratic and transparent governance system (Mazhar, 2024).
- **Protection of Minority Rights:** Given the widespread violence against minority communities, particularly Hindus, it is crucial to take immediate action to protect their rights. The government should establish legal frameworks to prevent further targeted attacks and ensure that offenders are held accountable. Additionally, new laws may be necessary to safeguard the rights of religious and ethnic minorities in Bangladesh (Rahman, 2024).
- **Humanitarian Support for Vulnerable Populations:** Humanitarian organizations should be granted unrestricted access to provide essential services to vulnerable groups, such as Rohingya refugees, women, and children. Immediate actions are needed to address issues of food insecurity and health care affecting these populations (Smith, 2023).
- **Strengthening Diplomatic Engagement:** India should maintain diplomatic engagement with Bangladesh while managing its relationships with Western powers. Careful handling of potential anti-Indian sentiment is important, as India focuses on fostering long-term stability and cooperation in areas like trade, security, and regional issues (Khan, 2023).
- **International Cooperation:** The international community, including the United Nations and human rights organizations, should enhance their support for Bangladesh during this transitional period. This support should involve providing humanitarian aid, facilitating dialogue, and encouraging political reforms that lead to a more inclusive and democratic governance system (Johnson, 2023).

Conclusion:

The 2024 Bangladesh quota reform movement marked a turning point in the country's political history, evolving from a student-led protest into a nationwide pro-democracy uprising. The unrest was driven by dissatisfaction with the long-standing quota system, widespread socio-economic difficulties, and the increasing authoritarian practices of Sheikh Hasina's administration (Mazhar, 2024). The violence and turmoil that followed resulted in serious human rights violations, particularly targeting minority communities, such as Hindus and Ahmedis (Rahman, 2024). The situation further exacerbated the vulnerabilities of marginalized groups, including Rohingya refugees (Smith, 2023).

The crisis had a profound impact on both domestic and international affairs. Domestically, the collapse of Sheikh Hasina's government created a constitutional vacuum, highlighting the urgent need for political reforms (Awal, 2024). The absence of a functioning government left Bangladesh in a state of uncertainty, requiring strong political leadership and public support to navigate this tumultuous period (Khan, 2023).

Internationally, India's decision to offer temporary refuge to Hasina complicated its diplomatic stance, potentially shifting Bangladesh's foreign policy and fostering anti-Indian sentiment (Johnson, 2023).

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