



Anti-Quota Protests in Bangladesh

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Summary

Following a recent High Court decision reinstating a quota system for allocating civil service jobs, protests have broken out in several cities across Bangladesh. Though the protests initially began peacefully, in recent weeks they have descended into violence. This report examines the background of the quota system, the current situation on the protests and violence, as well as the potential impact to the private sector.

Background

Following Bangladesh's declaration of independence and the subsequent war with West Pakistan (present-day Pakistan) in 1971, the ruling Awami League [introduced](#) a quota system for the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) in 1972. As part of that system, 30% of BCS jobs were reserved for freedom fighters of the year prior's war, 10% were set aside for affected women from the war, and an additional 40% were allocated to people from a variety of districts. The remaining 20% were allotted to merit-based candidates.

While several aspects of the quota system were amended in the following decades, the 30% allocation for freedom fighters was expanded slightly. In 1997, the quota for freedom fighters was opened for their children. Thirteen years later, grandchildren of freedom fighters were included in the quota.

Finally, in 2018, after protests took place nationwide against the quota system, incumbent prime minister Sheikh Hasina's government [issued](#) a circular scrapping the scheme for first- and second-class jobs. In 2020, the quota system was [abolished](#).

2024 High Court Decision

In early June, seven individuals—including one descendent of a freedom fighter—[brought](#) a petition before the High Court asking for a reinstatement of the quota system. The High Court [ruled](#) in their favor, determining that the abolition of the quota system was illegal. The government has appealed the ruling, and on July 10, the Supreme Court [paused](#) the return of the quotas for four weeks.

Recent Protests & Outbreak of Violence

Several days after the High Court's ruling, thousands of students began to [protest](#) in Dhaka, with at least three straight days of more than 2,000 participating; some students even blockaded a highway in the capital, with more than 500 reported staging demonstrations there.

While these protests seemingly passed off peacefully, they eventually descended into violence in mid-July.

Unrest initially [broke out](#) on July 16 at Dhaka University, as more than 100 students were injured in clashes. The following day, five people were killed and dozens of others injured, after anti-quota students clashed both with the police and pro-government student activists.

Clashes have since continued, with the police [utilizing](#) tear gas, sound grenades, and rubber bullets to disperse protesters, while riot police have been [deployed](#) to university campuses nationwide. After the deaths of six people on July 17, the country [announced](#) that all public and private universities would be closed indefinitely beginning the following day; on July 19, Dhaka police [noted](#) they were banning all demonstrations and gatherings in the city.

As of the time of publication, at least 197 people have been [killed](#) and more than 1,000 [injured](#) from clashes; a majority of the deaths were in Dhaka while [others](#) were killed in Narayanganj and Chittagong. Internet and mobile services were [reportedly](#) cut off, with outage monitor NetBlocks [noting](#) that the country was “plunged into a ‘near-total’ blackout.” The state broadcaster was also [set](#) on fire. On July 18, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) [reported](#) that more than 25 journalists were attacked and injured while covering the protests.

Private-Sector Impact

Leaders of the quota reform have [said](#) they will continue protesting until their demands are met, while concurrently stating they will not negotiate with the government. Therefore, barring a near-term solution to the impasse, protests and associated violence may continue. As such, OSAC members are advised to avoid all demonstrations as a precaution. Stay attuned to local media as well as [alerts](#) issued by the U.S. Embassy in Dhaka; to date, the Embassy has issued a series of alerts related to this round of demonstrations. The most recent of these was issued on July [24](#).

As noted in the most recent alert, “protests continue to affect local transportation services with travel in, out, and around Dhaka difficult.” OSAC members operating in Dhaka should ensure staff have secured means of transportation.

As of the time of publication, several areas around Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (DAC) have previously faced [roadblocks](#); nearly 40 flights at DAC were delayed on July 16 as passengers were stuck in traffic after students blocked several major roads. However, flights are [departing](#) from and [arriving](#) to DAC as of publication, contrary to a debunked [rumor](#) about the airport’s planned closure. If traveling to the airport on days of protests and/or roadblocks, consider allotting additional travel time to arrive prior to flight departure.

Travelers to Bangladesh are also encouraged to enroll in [STEP](#).

Additional Information

For more information on the security environment in Bangladesh and across Asia, contact [OSAC's Asia team](#).

- OSAC Country Page: [Bangladesh](#)
- OSAC Country Security Report: [Bangladesh](#)
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