

Bangladesh's Broken Education System Was Behind its Job Quota Reform Movement

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The collapse of Sheikh Hasina's government was the culmination of years of frustration over an economy that failed to deliver adequate jobs, exacerbated by an education system that poorly prepared students for the demands of the modern workforce.

Once celebrated as an emerging economic success story, Bangladesh is now grappling with a crisis rooted in its flawed education system, lack of employment opportunities and deeply entrenched political corruption. The July 2024 quota reform movement, initially sparked by dissatisfaction with the skewed job reservation system, became a defining moment for the country's youth.

This movement, which eventually led to the fall of Sheikh Hasina's long-standing regime, also exposed deeper issues with Bangladesh's educational institutions, job market and governance. The collapse of her government was the culmination of years of frustration over an economy that failed to deliver adequate jobs, exacerbated by an education system that poorly prepared students for the demands of the modern workforce.

The quota reform movement, which began in June, started as a call for changes to Bangladesh's job reservation system, which allocated 56% of government jobs to specific groups, including a controversial 30% reserved for the families of freedom fighters.

Unlike India's job reservation system, which aims to support historically marginalised castes, Bangladesh's quota system became increasingly viewed as a political tool manipulated by the ruling party to favour its affiliates, particularly those aligned with its student wing. Students saw the quota system as an additional barrier to merit-based employment, further frustrating an already disenfranchised youth.

Youth unemployment in Bangladesh remains alarmingly high, with the rate standing at 12-14%. Worse still, [nearly 40%](#) of young people (aged 15-24) are classified as NEET (not in education, employment or training), reflecting the economic exclusion and lack of opportunities that drove students to protest.

While the quota reform movement initially focused on changing the government job reservation system, the government's refusal to reform the quota - citing the contributions of the country's freedom fighters in the 1971 war, despite most of them and their descendants having aged out of eligibility for public sector jobs - shifted the movement into a broader critique of economic policies and political cronyism that had long plagued the job market.

The government's violent response, which resulted in hundreds of deaths and mass detentions, further fuelled public outrage, transforming the movement into a larger demand for democratic governance and economic justice.

Despite Bangladesh's impressive economic growth - with GDP increasing by more than 6% annually

over the past two decades - this growth has not translated into sufficient job creation. The employment-to-population ratio has stagnated over the last 15 years, and the fact that 40% of youth aged 15-24 are NEET underscores the economy's failure to generate enough jobs, particularly for educated youth.

While the ready-made garments (RMG) sector expanded, providing low-wage, labour-intensive jobs, it did little to absorb the increasing number of university graduates. Job creation outside the RMG sector, especially for females, remains very limited.

Female labour force participation [remains](#) strikingly low at 37%, compared to 80.2% for males. Most of the increase in female employment comes from the RMG sector, where women make up 61% of the workforce. Outside of this sector, women's representation in industries is very low and limited. The small and medium enterprises sector, which contributes 22.4% to Bangladesh's economy and employs many women, largely offers low-wage jobs with limited upward mobility.

The job quota movement saw an unprecedented number of female students participate on the streets - something that Bangladesh had not witnessed since its independence.

Thus, the public sector remains the most coveted source of employment for young Bangladeshis. It offers job security, better wages and social prestige. Although some private sector jobs offer competitive salaries, they lack job security, demand longer working hours and provide less flexibility. Many high-skilled jobs in the private sector are being filled by foreign nationals, highlighting critical skill shortages and underlying problems in the higher education sector.

The intense competition for Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) positions also points to a flawed educational system that emphasises rote learning rather than equipping students with the necessary technical and vocational skills during their time at university. When more than half of these jobs are reserved for quota beneficiaries, it is natural for frustration among graduates to grow.

Bangladesh's education system is also a key factor in the country's youth unemployment crisis. The skills mismatch between what universities teach and what the private sector demands is stark. Universities churn out thousands of graduates each year, but many - around 40% - are unemployed or underemployed, unable to find jobs that match their education, reflecting an education system that fails to prepare students for modern industries such as technology, engineering and manufacturing.

Meanwhile, the number of public sector jobs is limited, particularly for students who cannot provide proof that their parents or grandparents were freedom fighters - a group that constitutes less than 0.001% of the population but is eligible for 30% of public jobs.

The education system in Bangladesh is heavily reliant on rote learning, stifling critical thinking, problem-solving and practical skills. Students are often ill-prepared for the technical demands of modern industries, contrasting sharply with India, where the education system has much better aligned itself with industry needs.

Bangladesh has failed to implement vocational and technical education programs at scale. This lack of focus on technical education has resulted in a generation of graduates who are ill-equipped to compete in both domestic and international job markets.

The brain drain problem exacerbates this issue, as many of Bangladesh's brightest students seek education and work opportunities abroad, seeing no future in a system that offers little hope.

The problem is also rooted in the lack of public investment in education. Bangladesh's education

sector has long been underfunded, with budgetary allocations far below international standards. While UNESCO [recommends](#) that countries allocate 4-6% of GDP to education, Bangladesh has consistently allocated only 2-2.5%. This chronic underfunding has resulted in poor infrastructure, insufficient teacher training and outdated curricula that fail to meet the needs of the modern economy. By comparison, [India allocates 3-4% of GDP to education](#).

The country's higher education system is further undermined by the politicisation of teaching and administration. Many university teachers are appointed based on their affiliation with the ruling party rather than their qualifications or achievements. These politically appointed teachers often lack motivation to focus on academic excellence, research or innovation. Instead, they prioritise loyalty to the party, leading to an education system rife with favouritism and political interference.

The lack of performance-based promotions means many teachers advance based on political connections, not teaching ability or research output. As a result, research productivity remains low, with few publications in internationally recognised journals.

This focus on political loyalty over academic merit also demotivates students, who see little value in their education. Many university students shift their focus to preparing for BCS exams as soon as they enter university, viewing a public sector job as their only viable career option.

The fall of Sheikh Hasina's government in the wake of the quota reform movement has opened a window for reform, but the challenges are immense. The new government, led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, faces the monumental task of overhauling the education system, improving job creation and restoring faith in democratic governance. Key reforms in education to promote jobs must include:

- Depoliticising higher education by ensuring that teachers and administrators are appointed based on merit, not political loyalty.
- Increasing budgetary allocation to education to at least 4% of GDP and focusing on improving the education system through better teacher training, infrastructure and vocational education.
- Aligning curricula with labour market needs by promoting STEM education, technical training and industry partnerships.
- Introducing performance-based promotions for teachers to ensure that academic merit and research output are prioritised.

Bangladesh stands at a crossroads. The quota reform movement was not just about jobs - it was a demand for justice, fairness and opportunity. The new government has the chance to address these grievances and set the country on a path to inclusive growth, but it must act decisively to reform its education system and job market. The future of Bangladesh's youth - and the nation itself - depends on it.

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