

## PERSPECTIVE

Tanvir Ahmed was a student of University of Dhaka. He committed suicide at the very beginning of this month. According to his family, of the depression stemmed from not getting a government job even after trying several times. Despair drove him to that stage. Like Tanvir, thousands of young people have been trying in vain to land government jobs. Most of the students are living in extreme precarity—under emotionally, psychologically and financially stressful situations. The Liberation War promised a country of fairness and equality, but the state, education system and professional sector have been consistently failing the youth of this country in recent times. It is from this pent-up frustration, despair, anger and want that students are protesting and demanding change. They do not want change in a distant future; they want it now.

Even though the movement to reform quotas started in University of Dhaka, it has spread to universities all over the country. Students from Rajshahi, Khulna, Kushtia, Chattogram, Cumilla, Mymensingh, Barisal, etc. are also mobilising for quota reform. Today, even private universities have joined their peers from public universities in the struggle. Apparently, the central decisions are coming from the organisers at DU, allowing for coordinated action around the capital and the country. Students everywhere have been facing police brutality and attacks from students of ruling party groups. We heard from friends that there were physical attacks, sexual assault and rape threats by BCL goons in the student halls.

The most interesting thing about this

movement is that it does not demand that the quota system be abolished, but instead demands for reform, particularly of the 30-percent quota for the descendants of the freedom fighters. This movement is even more justified because the protesters understand that women, ethnic minorities and disabled people are protected by the quotas. Quotas are meant to protect the marginalised, not create a new privileged class. In the current clientelist system, business as usual includes holding onto civil positions and giving access to positions through bribery and filial connections of people in power. The quotas are

therefore serving the privileged class.

In the past few years all sorts of violence, murders and displacement have been justified by the state by citing the 'spirit of 1971' and the cause of progress. This is one more instance that has been covered up with this type of Bengali nationalism. Even in the parliament, the Agriculture Minister made obscene and unfair comments addressing protesters, one of which was: "Razakar's children would then exploit and use this quota".

But, we ask, isn't it an affront to the true spirit of liberation to exploit people's sentiments to drive forth anti-people agendas?

# SOLIDARITY

## QUOTA REFORM MOVEMENT

MOHYMEEN LAYES AND HIYA ISLAM



Female protesters turned out in droves to join the protests

PHOTO: STAR FILE

The reform movement has gained acceptance in an extremely short time among the general public precisely because it uses the same consciousness, spirit and values of the Liberation War. The values which guided the Liberation War and the Declaration of Independence were equality, human dignity and social justice. These are the same values that have propelled the quota reform movement. For example, from the very beginning, women students from the DU halls, who are beneficiaries of the quota system, came out to join the movement by breaking the lock on the main gate. For the uninformed, at night the gates are locked from inside for 'security'. Many children of freedom fighters have been speaking up in support of this movement, demanding change and explaining how this particular quota category is furthering inequality and unemployment in the country.

The movement has proved its fairness and that the anger of the students is absolutely justified. The protesters have faced extreme police brutality and attacks from the students. Instead of deploying the paramilitary, police or BCL goons, the government has to form a commission to deeply investigate and resolve this issue. This movement has raised many questions about the existing socio-political structure. This movement is not just about inequality in the civil service sector but about inequality and power in all phases of society.

In solidarity with this movement we are demanding justice for the protesters.

*Mohymeen Layes is a student of DU and an Assistant Coordinator, Center for Bangladesh Studies. Hiya Islam is a Fellow, Center for Bangladesh Studies.*



A protestor bloodied in the conflict with the police on the night of April 8, 2018.



PHOTOS: ISTIAK KARIM

Police brutally crack down on the protestors at Shahbagh.

## HEADING TO THE HOTTEST PLACE IN HELL?

After page 6

One of the most trending quotes shared by the activists of the ongoing quota system reformation movement is Italian poet Dante Alighieri's "The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in times of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality".

An interesting aspect of the social media posts of the quota reformists—mostly students of different universities—is that many of them think the country is going through a moral crisis where no one cares about elections, good governance is a far cry, the media is influenced by the government and thus rendered inept and the rule of law is a luxury.

A mandatory course for students enrolled in the University of Dhaka is 'Introduction to Bangladesh'—usually taught in the very first semester. The course is about the emergence of Bangladesh as a nation-state, the liberation movement, and the current political scenario of the country.

In 2013, when I was attending the course, the teacher said: "No other university in the world has ever given birth to a nation. It is only Dhaka University that ignited the fire of liberation and emancipation that led us to independence."

From the Language Movement of 1952, the 1969 mass uprising, to the Liberation War of 1971, when it comes to defending rights, Dhaka University's students and teachers were the ones who leveraged popular support and sentiment.

When it came to the anti-quota movement of 2013 and the quota reform movement of 2018 demanding reforms in the existing quota system in public services, it was once again mostly Dhaka University students who poured onto the streets, but the results were very different in spite of popular support.

### Divide and rule

The last successful student protest was the 1990 mass uprising against Hussain Muhammad Ershad who, according to a High Court verdict, was a usurper who came to power by force. The final blow of the movement started following the death of Chhatra Dal activist Naziruddin Jihad who was shot in front of Ershad's Jatiya Party office.

To protest his death, pro-democracy activists decided to unite against the autocratic rule of Ershad on October 10, 1990, and fight until his fall. Sarbadaliya Chhatra Oikya Parishad was formed comprising all the student organisations except Jamaat's Shibir, and Ershad lost power within two months.

The recipe for success for this student movement was the unity of all forces, which is largely absent today thanks to the non-performing Dhaka University Central Students Union (DUCSU) on one hand and the ruling party student groups on the other.

The Bangladesh Chhatra League has avidly opposed the quota reform movement from the very beginning. In July 2013, when a group of protesters tried to occupy the Shahbagh intersection to demonstrate, they were brutally beaten by the Awami League's students' wing in front of police.

The same happened in 2018, when a large number of protesters rallied inside the Dhaka University campus demanding reforms to the quota system. According to media reports, a group of BCL men in the presence of DU unit General Secretary Motahar Hossain Prince swooped on the protesters on April 8.

However, at least three DU unit BCL leaders have resigned from their posts

during the movement to protest their organisation's excesses towards the students.

### The 'Guardians'

This January, when a student movement was launched in the university campus demanding the university to disassociate itself from affiliated colleges, one of the coordinators was beaten up by BCL men, handed over to the university proctor who later handed him to the police. This was a completely unprecedented incident.

In the meantime, female activists of the movement were sexually harassed by the BCL men under the very nose of the university's Vice-Chancellor while protesting outside his office. The victims even demanded safety from their teachers, but to no avail.

Instead of justice, they were rewarded with criminal cases because university property was destroyed during the scuffle. The DU Teachers' Association held a human chain to demand 'formidable' punishment for the protesters.

This time, when protesters—mostly DU students—were assaulted by the police during a sit-in demanding reform of the quota system, the DU Teachers' Association initially did not come forward to save the students, let alone listen to their demands. As I write this article (on April 11), the Association has issued a statement in support of the student movement, and one can only hope that this support is not only on paper.

### Fourth estate

Shahbagh intersection has been the center of protests since the 2013 Gono Jagaran Mancha movement. But one thing among many that made Gono Jagaran Mancha so widely accepted was the fulsome media coverage it received.

Media, which is considered to be the fourth estate in the modern world, has been a decisive factor both for creating awareness and running propaganda. In almost all the 20th century 'successful' coups, a common feature was the commandeering of radio and television stations, because of the media's influence over people.

On the contrary, the 2013 anti-quota protests and the ongoing quota reform protests have received conflicting coverage in the media.

Words like 'clashes' and 'violence' have been used even as most eyewitnesses suggest that the protesters were brutally attacked by police and ruling party hooligans, and in almost all the cases the 'clashes' were seemingly one-sided.

On the first day of the protests, there were plenty of instances when the media failed to penetrate the police barricade. As for the second day, many journalists themselves walked out on the protests when certain factions assaulted them or 'behaved badly' with them, as suggested by multiple social media posts made by journalists on the spot.

The quota reform movement is gaining momentum among the youth because it is closely linked to many of the existing problems, more precisely unemployment, livelihood and shrinking freedom of expression. Even the classic divide between public and private university students is fading away before the problems and they are uniting to fight it out. It is wise to try to understand the demands of the people instead of blaming them.

*Anqib Md Shatil is a Joy Bangla Youth awardee, currently working at BRAC*