

A timely verdict

Court grants 93 percent quota for talent-based recruitment

We welcome the Appellate Division's decision on Sunday to guide quota reforms by reserving 93 percent of quota for merit-based recruitment in civil service, overturning the High Court verdict on retaining the quota system as it was before the 2018 annulment. The decision from a full bench of the court, sitting under extraordinary circumstances with a nationwide curfew in place, ends weeks of speculations in this regard. It also comes against a backdrop of unprecedented violence that really needed the highest court of the country to intervene judiciously, and we congratulate it for doing just that. While the legal implications of the judgement will be discussed in depth in the coming days, we feel certain issues need to be highlighted.

Beside the 93 percent quota for general candidates, the court stipulates 5 percent for children of freedom fighters and biranganas (women tortured and raped by Pakistani army during the 1971 Liberation War), one percent for ethnic minorities, and one for persons with disabilities and those belonging to third gender. While the court's provision of quotas may be amended by the government in future, if needed, we feel the ruling should be implemented soonest. We are told that a circular based on the judgement may be published as early as Tuesday. The law minister has clarified to the press that the government will follow the directives of the court in full. Without the official circular, it will not be clear as to how the government will implement those directives.

That said, the quota reform, as things stand, is but part of the demands forwarded by the protesting students to the government recently. Those remaining issues also need to be resolved quickly. Students are right to demand answers and accountability for what happened during the last few days of their movement. And without a proper response, their confidence in the sincerity of government efforts will not be restored. In its observation, the court stressed the importance of students returning to classrooms. Now that the legal hurdle has been cleared, students too should be motivated to ensure their swift return—and the country's—to normalcy.

Finally, what happened over the last few days, with the death toll from violent clashes reaching 127 as confirmed by this paper as of Saturday, has left a deep mark in the minds of the public, not just the students. The wounds that have been afflicted would need healing and resolving, too. Once the dust is settled and quieter times return, we will need to start reflecting on those unresolved issues and grievances that found a potent expression under the shadow of the quota movement, effectively plunging the whole country into an unbelievable crisis.

Nation under curfew

Sufferings of mass people are becoming dire

As the nationwide curfew continued into its second day, the immense socioeconomic cost it caused the ordinary citizens, businesses, and the nation in general, is deeply concerning. Some of the damage could have been mitigated had the government not shut down the nationwide internet service for such a prolonged period. Businesses, for example, could have continued their operations online and with their foreign counterparts; citizens could have availed medical services or purchased essentials online. Media outlets have not been able to publish news through their online platforms since Thursday night. And the uncertainty that comes from not receiving timely information on what's happening across the country—and from being cut off from the rest of the world—imposes its own psychological toll.

While we acknowledge the necessity of a curfew to prevent violence, the harm being done to the economy as a result cannot be emphasised enough. According to a report in this daily, consumers are suffering immensely as prices of essentials—which were already skyrocketing, with inflation hitting a record 12-year high earlier—have shot through the roof. With the transportation of perishable commodities to the capital remaining scarce, and supply chains being disrupted across the country, traders are hiking prices of nearly all goods. And yet, some consumers are still having to return home empty-handed, with markets and stores closing early having run out of supplies. The impact of all these on the poor and low-income groups will be devastating. Even before tensions escalated across the country, the ongoing economic crisis was creating scores of new poor and forcing many to cut back on their meals and nutritional intake. What will happen to them now, we simply shudder to ask.

Meanwhile, emergency services across the country, including at hospitals, have collapsed, as many services that are dependent on the internet have become non-functional, and the number of injured patients flooding in remain high.

Reportedly, at least 24 people were killed on Saturday and hundreds more were injured in clashes with security forces, whose use of excessive force we strongly condemn. For how long can such violence and curfews continue? And who will answer for the massive damage all these are doing to the nation? The government needs to be more aware of the ground realities and sufferings that the general public are having to endure, and pursue a path of de-escalation. It needs to answer for the use of excessive force against citizens by security forces, investigate all such incidents, and ensure they are not repeated. Moreover, it needs to urgently restore the internet service so that people can avail some essential services online, and look for a way to withdraw the curfew without further violence breaking out, so that some semblance of normalcy can return to the lives of ordinary people.

Did we have to pay such a heavy price for this verdict?



THE SOUND & THE FURY

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The verdict is in. The Appellate Division through its observations has recommended that quotas be restricted to seven percent: five percent for freedom fighters' descendants, one percent for ethnic minorities, and one percent for people with disabilities.

For all practical purposes, it is a win for the protesters. Or so it would have been, had the morgues not been brimming with dead bodies, hospitals inundated with those critically injured, and public establishments set on fire around the country. Everyone is anxious, afraid, angry, and agitated—a state of despair exacerbated manifold by the internet blackout imposed by the government to control the free flow of information. How many will be picked up, how many tortured, how many killed, how many maimed for life before all this is over?

Each new day has brought with it ever-more shocking revelations of the cruelty of state apparatuses. The events of Tuesday (when BCL cadres viciously attacked protesters) and Wednesday (when law enforcement agencies stormed the public universities to drive off students from the campuses) already seem like distant memories. And talk as we must about the brutality in the days since, it's worth revisiting why law enforcers would have the right or the audacity to march into campuses of autonomous institutions, firing shotguns and sound grenades aimed at students in their late teens and early 20s. What does it say about our university authorities, VCs and provosts, except what we have known all along—that they are mere puppets to the whims of the ruling party? What mockery they have all made of the sanctity of the university campus(es), whose walls are witness to some of the biggest uprisings against injustice in our history! If the students are now asking for the resignation of the VCs and provosts, it is the least they can demand for being betrayed time and time again.

Then came Thursday, which brought with it state-sponsored violence, the scale of which none of us were prepared for, despite living through the brutal squashing of the road safety movement in 2018 and every dissenting movement since. Areas in Dhaka turned into zones



The violence unleashed on students over the past week cannot be so easily erased from public memory.

FILE PHOTO: KHALID NAZRUL

of unimaginable violence, with law enforcers charging upon and firing on students armed at most with sticks and brickbats, without provocation in most cases. The clips shared by countless students on social media, followed by eye-witness reports in the media, provide chilling accounts of the atrocities conducted by the police and BGB in the name of maintaining law and order. What law and whose order can justify the use of lethal weapons to disperse protesters, some not even old enough to vote? At least 25 people were killed, 11 of them students, including a 17-year-old, and over 3,000 were injured—that we know of. Predictably, the government's heavy-handedness only served to amplify the anger of the masses, and we began to see protesters—or motivated elements infiltrating the movement—turn to increasingly destructive measures to resist.

What did the government really



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FILE PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

think—that they could shoot the young students into submission after their trusted helmet *bahini* had failed to get the job done? That they could dangle the carrot of dialogue and concession, all the while opening fire upon the students, including those from private universities who had taken to the streets simply to express solidarity with their public university counterparts? The movement might have started on the issue of the reform of quota system, but underneath simmered discontent accumulated over the years about the culture of repression, conduct of law enforcement and actions of the ruling party's student wing. The outpouring on the streets over the past week is the manifestation of a long and deeply felt sense of injustice that has only been fanned by virulent rhetoric and violent tactics of the powers that be. By resorting to its tried-and-tested

that should the government want, it could simply issue a new circular? Why did government high-ups vilify the protesters and resort to their age-old strategy of "othering" to justify unlawful attacks by the student wing? Why did it unleash the BCL on protesting students, and then, when the protesters fought back and drove them out of the campuses, close down all educational institutions and halls? And most infuriatingly, why

student movement, was picked up by "plainclothes persons" in the early morning yesterday, allegedly because he refused to agree with the government's proposal for a dialogue ahead of the Supreme Court's hearing. Nahid has since been found by his family and taken to the hospital to tend to injuries allegedly inflicted during the hours he was "missing." After the quota reform and road safety movements of 2018,

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did it pour fuel in the fire by shooting young students and civilians? Why did it fail so miserably at containing the situation without resorting to lethal means? Why did it serve chaos on a platter for the so-called *durbrittokaris* to take advantage of?

The death toll has continued to rise, with at least 66 killed on Friday alone—that we could confirm—and at least 21 on Saturday, even amid a curfew. In only four days, the death toll has crossed 127, as per data collected directly from the hospitals as of Saturday (the real count could be much higher), and includes law enforcers, journalists, pedestrians, rickshaw pullers and even children. It is truly inconceivable that so many lives have needlessly been lost, simply because the government was too obstinate to "give in" to the students' demands. And that political elements are now trying to create anarchy using the momentum of the movement will only endanger further the lives of

we saw how students were tracked down, detained, arrested, surveilled upon and threatened, and their lives irrevocably altered, with the state showing no mercy for those who had dared challenge it.

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The outpouring on the streets over the past week is the manifestation of a long and deeply felt sense of injustice. This photo was taken in Sylhet on July 18, 2024.

FILE PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR