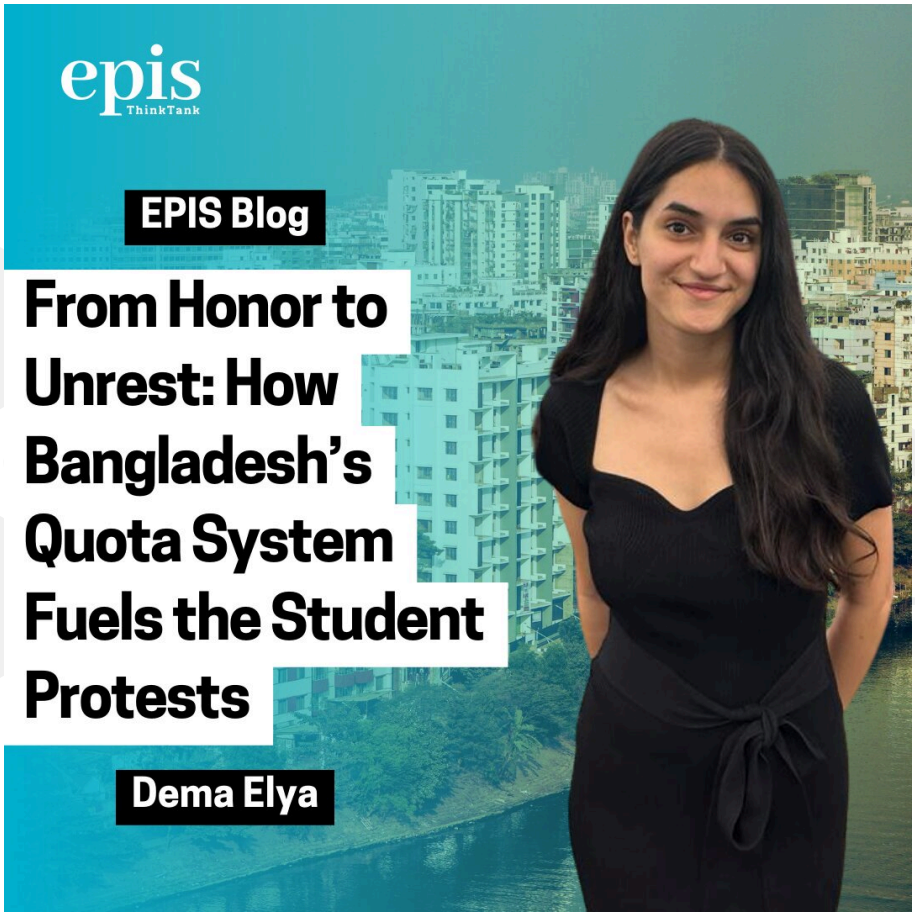
From Honor to Unrest

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The recent wave of protests by Bangladeshi students has brought the nation's deep-seated issues with inequality and unemployment into sharp relief. At the heart of these protests lies the contentious quota system for government jobs, initially introduced to honour the freedom fighters of the 1971 independence war. However, what began as a noble measure to ensure honour (and later equality) has backfired, becoming a significant source of inequality and unrest. The quota system, coupled with high youth unemployment, has fueled the current protests, highlighting the urgent need for reforms.

The current quota system reserves approximately 10 % for women, 10% for backward districts, 5 % for minorities, 1 % for the disabled and lastly 30%

of public sector jobs for the children and grandchildren of freedom fighters who fought for Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971. While the latter 30 % policy was intended to honour their sacrifices, it has gradually become a point of contention. This system is discriminatory, as it prioritizes family connections over merit and unjustly favours a select group, limiting the opportunities for the broader population. This exact sentiment has sparked widespread protests, initially peaceful, but now marked by violent clashes and tragic loss of life. The situation turned violent on July 15th when members of the Bangladesh Chatra League (BCL), the student wing of the ruling Awami League party, allegedly attacked the protesters, further escalating the crisis.

Furthermore, the government has labelled the protesters as traitors, with the Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina using the loaded term "Razakar" to describe students, which is a reference to the anti-independence collaborators. This term is deeply inflammatory and historically charged, evoking memories of the 1971 independence struggle. By using this derogatory label, the government not only dismisses the legitimate concerns of the students but also stigmatizes them as the enemies of the state. This rhetoric further undermines the students' calls as it frames their actions as disloyal and subversive, rather than a struggle for fair and equitable treatment. Such language is counterproductive, escalating tensions and making constructive dialogue and resolution more difficult.

The protests have gained momentum due to the high youth unemployment rate in Bangladesh, which is over 15.7 % according to World Bank data. Despite impressive economic growth, the benefits have not sufficiently translated into job opportunities for university graduates. An estimated 18 million young Bangladeshis are currently seeking employment, with university graduates facing higher unemployment rates compared to their less-educated peers. This situation is particularly dire considering Bangladesh's significant economic achievements, including an average annual growth rate of around 6 % over the past two decades and a marked decline in poverty.

The economic growth narrative contrasts sharply with the reality faced by many young Bangladeshis. While the country has become a powerhouse in ready-to-wear clothing exports, employing over four million people, these jobs do not meet the aspirations of the educated youth. The high rate of youth unemployment, with about a fifth of the country's 170 million population out of work or education, underscores the urgency of addressing this issue. The student protests reflect a broader demand for stable, well-paying jobs that align with their educational qualifications. The protests therefore starkly highlight the disparity and frustration among job-seeking graduates.

The government's response to the protests has further exacerbated the situation. The shutdown of all public and private universities, the deployment of riot police and paramilitary forces, the imposition of curfews and

the near-total shutdown of the nation's internet to prevent the spread of information have intensified the unrest. The violent clashes between student protesters, police, and pro-government activists have resulted in significant destruction and loss of life. The heavy-handed approach of the government not only fails to address the underlying issues but also fosters a climate of hostility. Volker Turk, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, has emphasized the need for an independent investigation into the suspected human rights violations. An international independent investigation into the violent attacks by groups linked to the government is essential to ensure justice and accountability. Without international oversight, the investigation risks being biased and ineffective, perpetuating the cycle of violence and injustice. Moreover, increased global pressure for accountability would compel the authorities to implement meaningful reforms, addressing the root causes of the unrest and restoring public trust.

Following the protests, the major breakthrough came when The Supreme Court ruled the abolition of most of the job quotas that sparked the fatal protests. The court of Bangladesh decided that the quota for the descendants shall be reduced from 30 to 5 %, with 93 % of the employment being granted on merit. The remaining shall be set aside for members of ethnic minorities, transgender persons, and the disabled. This landmark ruling is crucial as it addresses one of the core needs of the protestors, namely merit-based employment. Moreover, it highlights the judiciary's recognition of the inherent unfairness of the current quota system, the need for immediate reforms, and the importance of the inclusion of minorities. Nevertheless, the removal of the 10 % quota for women is concerning as it raises the fundamental question about the potential hindrance of the progress that was made by Bangladesh in women's employment and representation in the public sector.

In conclusion, the quota system, while initially well-intentioned, has become a symbol of inequality and nepotism, highlighting the disconnect between the government's policies and the aspirations of the younger generation. The students' demand for merit-based recruitment reflects a desire for a fairer system that values individual achievement over family background. This shift is crucial for addressing the broader issues of inequality and unemployment that plague the nation. The anti-quota protests in Bangladesh underscore the urgent need for systemic reforms to address inequality and unemployment. By prioritizing merit-based recruitment and creating more job opportunities, Bangladesh can harness the potential of its youth and ensure a more equitable and prosperous future. The protests are a clear call for change, demanding that the government listen to the voices of its young citizens and take meaningful action to address their concerns.