Please cite as: EUAA, '1.1. Background of the protests ' in *COI Report - Bangladesh: Country Focus*, August 2025.

1.1. Background of the protests

Bangladesh introduced a quota system for public service jobs in 1972,6 soon after winning the war of independence from Pakistan.7 Some positions were earmarked, inter alia for 'freedom fighters' of the war for whom 30 % of positions were reserved. Quotas were also introduced for 'marginalised communities',8 including women, ethnic minorities, individuals with disabilities, and people from underrepresented districts.9 As the number of people claiming positions for 'freedom fighters' started to dwindle with time,10 this quota was extended to include their children in 1997, and their grandchildren in 2010.11 In summer 2018, students took the streets to protest against the quota system,12 which grew into nationwide protests.13 As a result, the government cancelled the quota for first- and second class posts.14 Almost six years later, on 5 June 2024, the High Court overturned the decision,15 meaning that the quotas were to be re-established.16 This provoked new student protests in July 2024,17 calling for a merit-based recruitment system.18

Critics have been describing the quota system as discriminatory,19 in practice benefitting individuals loyal to Hasina's government, and even functioning as a form of political patronage to consolidate power.20 Frustration over the increasingly autocratic rule under Hasina also underpinned the protests.21 By summer 2024, Hasina and her party, the Awami League, had been in consecutive power for 15 years,22 and had won a new five-year term in January 2024 – in elections that were boycotted by the main opposition, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).23

The protests were also underpinned by an economic frustration,24 as there have been limited economic opportunities, in particular for youth to secure adequate jobs.25 Chaumtoli Huq, Professor of Law at the CUNY School of Law in New York, who specialise in human rights and labour rights and has carried out research in Bangladesh, likened the reintroduction of the quota system with a 'match that lit' the frustration over longstanding political repression, economy, corruption, and non-independence of the judiciary.26

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