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Endangered Scholars Worldwide

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Endangered Scholars Worldwide

Attacks on higher education communities are occurring at an alarming rate worldwide, threatening the safety and well-being of scholars, students, and academic staff, as well as the autonomy of higher education institutions. While we continue to publish regular updates in *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, in response to a global increase in threats to academic freedom, Endangered Scholars Worldwide (ESW) has expanded its presence as an online publication under the auspices of the New University in Exile Consortium (www.newuniversityinexileconsortium.org), sharing frequent updates on news and developing cases in contribution to the Consortium's efforts to create a supportive intellectual community for threatened, exiled scholars.



For the most current information and ways in which you can be involved in our efforts to defend academic freedom and free expression, we invite you to visit our website www.endangeredscholarsworldwide.net or follow us at twitter.com/ESWNEWSCHOOL.

If you are aware of a scholar or student whose case you believe we should investigate, please get in touch with us at esw@newschool.edu.

Thank you for your unwavering support.

SPECIAL DELIVERY

The 2023/24 academic year has been yet another one marked by student and faculty activism around the globe. In Greece students took to the streets to protest an education reform opening the way for the

privatization of higher education, while in Georgia students joined a broader movement against a bill proposed by the government that would restrict free speech and academic freedom. In Kenya public-sector teachers went on strike in order to improve working conditions and wages. On the other side of the African continent, in Mauritania, students protested for four months demanding improvement of educational and campus services. In Europe and the United States, among other regions, students and faculty participating in demonstrations and erecting encampments protesting Israel's ongoing invasion of Gaza faced violent police and state repression in response. However, the recent student protest movement in Bangladesh stands apart from these examples in the scale and intensity of the violence unleashed upon protesting students and faculty.

In early June 2024, Bangladeshi students started protesting against the quota system that is applied in the Bangladeshi Civil Service examination, under which 30 percent of the placements are reserved for the descendants of people who participated in the 1971 Bangladeshi War of Independence and which is therefore an obstacle to merit-based allocation of government jobs. Protests followed the June 5 declaration by the High Court Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh that a 2018 government directive to eliminate the quota system was unconstitutional. Following the launch of mass protests by students on July 1, the scale of both mobilization and repression multiplied. Two weeks later, citing "violent protests" as the reason, the government-run University Grants Commission announced that all higher education institutions would be closed indefinitely, affecting some 4.4 million students. Human rights groups like Amnesty International reported that the ensuing police crackdown has left nearly 200 dead and thousands injured; the government estimated at the time that 147 people had been killed. Police have reportedly fired tear gas, rubber bullets, and smoke grenades directly on groups of protesters. A student leader from Dhaka University recounted being subjected to physical and mental torture after being detained by a group of police officers. Reporting

around human rights has been especially challenging considering that Bangladeshi authorities imposed a complete shutdown of internet and text messaging services on July 18, followed by the implementation of a nationwide curfew from July 19 to 23, during which the military was deployed on the streets with a shoot-on-sight order for groups of protesters.

Repression of student protesters reached campus grounds as well. In one instance, police stationed inside the Canadian University of Bangladesh fired rubber bullets and tear gas on student protesters gathered outside. Bangladeshi police regularly entered student housing in search for student protesters to interrogate. Many international students left the country fearing potential police violence.

A rarer threat to academic freedom that can nevertheless be observed in the case of Bangladesh is the usage of government-linked student groups to violently repress student protests. The Bangladesh Chhatra League (BSL) is the student wing of the governing party, the Awami League. The BSL has been involved in repressing this recent student protest movement, adding to its similar actions in the past. For example, members of BSL's Jahangirnagar University chapter attacked student protestors gathered on campus for a scheduled event, severely injuring a faculty member who tried to intervene. Earlier in 2023, an academic from Chittagong University was made the target of an online harassment campaign instigated by members of the BSL for his Facebook posts critical of the government. The campaign accusing him of "defaming" the then-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resulted in other faculty members from the same university demanding disciplinary action against him and a show cause letter from the government.

In the four weeks after the student protests escalated on July 1, more than 10,000 individuals including students were arrested, and tens of thousands were charged with the likes of vandalism, damage to property, and arson. The nationwide curfew has been lifted alongside the full restriction on internet and messaging services, which was relaxed on July 29. Access to social media and messaging platforms including Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp remains restricted.

Despite such violence and restrictions, the student movement not only persisted but had an effect on the decision of the Bangladeshi Supreme Court to overturn the verdict of the High Court and mandate the government to reform the quota system. Furthermore, in early August the student movement turned into a series of mass anti-government protests, which resulted in the dissolution of the Hasina government. In a historic first for the country, two student leaders are now part of the interim government lead by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and former economics professor Muhammad Yunus. Although there has been a change in government and schools have been instructed to open, operational difficulties remain as many universities still lack vice-chancellors and other key administrative personnel after a wave of resignation by supporters of the previous government.

Endangered Scholars Worldwide (ESW) strongly condemns the serious human rights violations perpetrated by the former Hasina government and armed forces against students, faculty, and other groups taking part in protests. We call on the Bangladeshi government to immediately stop any ongoing violations of academic freedom and other human rights and hold those responsible to account. Protecting academic freedom around the world is conditional upon the protection of free student and faculty speech, especially through protests. We invite the international community to join our call.

Visit www.endangeredscholarsworldwide.net for more information.

—By Özgür Kazaklı