Bangladesh students embrace bullets to voice protest against injustice

A mass upsurge has stirred neighbouring Bangladesh and shaken the ruling class and its servitor party in power. For long, the common people devastated by the anti-people policies of the Awami League government, had been seething in anger. Under the garb of democracy and continuing to appropriate the credit of leading the freedom struggle in 1971, Sheikh Hasina-led government has been brutally suppressing voice of protest. Public wrath assumed so high a proportion that the general election held in January last was boycotted not only by the opposition but the masses at large. It is claimed that of the 11 elections held in Bangladesh since it emerged as a sovereign bourgeois national state after breaking away from Pakistan, only four could be considered to be relatively "free and fair". The rest have frequently been mired in violence, protests and allegations of rigging. During the last election, the opposition demanded a neutral caretaker government to conduct the polls. But the ruling Awami League which has the electoral system largely under its control refused to accept that. This infuriated aggrieved people and most of them stayed away from casting votes. The turnout was only 28 percent, So, in an essentially uncontested election on 7 January 2024, the incumbent Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and her party returned to power for a fourth consecutive term. The result was not a surprise, but events around the election and the fault lines that were revealed were poised for ramifications for Bangladesh in the days to come. The record of democratic backsliding under Hasina and the country's ongoing economic crisis, which forced it to seek huge loans from the International Monetary Fund, were the central issues of discussion in the international media in the run-up to the election and immediately after. People's growing sufferings in every walk of life also featured in a section of global media. Hasina's election victories in 2014 and 2018 were one-sided, as the ruling party, civil administration, and law enforcement agencies acted in unison to deliver a victory for her and her party. The 2024 election has virtually transformed Bangladesh into a one-party state. Over and above, peaceful opposition movements in 2022 and 2023 faced a violent crackdown and thousands of opposition leaders and activists were arrested. More than 1,500 have been convicted, and the offices of the opposition were put under lock and key by law enforcement agencies. Human Rights groups also say more than 80 people, many of them government critics, have disappeared in the past 15 years, and that their families have no information on them.

In this backdrop, the present upsurge has sprouted centering a controversial court ruling over reservation in jobs. Estimates suggest that around 18 million young Bangladeshis are unemployed. (BBC 24-07-24) University graduates face higher rates of unemployment than their less-educated peers. To make the situation worse, the government, shortly after Bangladesh's independence in 1971, established a system of quotas for government jobs that mandated 30 percent of positions to go to liberation war fighters. Over the decades, the benefit was modified to include the children and grandchildren of freedom fighters, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities and others, totalling 56 percent of government jobs. Students and youths as well as right-thinking Bangladeshi people at large hold that the job quota system disproportionately benefits the descendants of Bangladesh's 1971 liberation war fighters. Jobs ought to be awarded based on merit. The perceived unfairness of guaranteeing jobs to the grandchildren of freedom fighters— is seen by many as a giveaway to loyalists of the Awami League, the party which is held to have led the independence struggle. It is strange that the descendants of the freedom fighters just because of their lineage would be entitled to government jobs even if they lack all requisite criteria. It is akin to the old feudal system where a monarch's son or a progeny of the feudal lord was the obvious claimant to the throne. Rightly commented an observer: *"The quota system was nothing but the governing Awami League rewarding their supporters and a ploy for entrenching the party's influence in the future administration".*

In 2018, a similar student movement successfully compelled the government to scrap the quota system altogether. The issue was mostly settled until this June when Bangladesh's High Court ruled that ending the quota system was unconstitutional and effectively reinstated it. This added fuel to the fire and the accumulated grievances of the people, particularly young generation burst forth in the form of a near upheaval. The initial protests in early July were small but persistent and met with occasional violence from pro-government Awami League (AL) supporters, namely its student wing Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL). The confrontation escalated when PM Sheikh Hasina equated the protesters to "razakars," a derogatory term (translated as "volunteer") referring to those who collaborated with Pakistani forces to fight against Bangladesh's independence in the 1971 war.

The initial protests in early July which were small but persistent and met with occasional violence from armed pro-government Awami League supporters, namely its student wing Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL). But such violence by the ruling dispensation turned the peaceful protests into militant movements. Lakhs of college, university and even school students, both male and female and from both government and private sector, came out and thronged the streets of capital Dhaka, other main cities and adjacent areas showing a resolute unbending mindset. With unrest and violence spiraling out of control on 18 July last, the government shut down internet and mobile networks, deployed the military and imposed a curfew, which all remained in place through the weekend.

All student hostels were closed down. The police also imposed a 'shoot-on-sight' order across the country. Going beyond all limits of civility and least democratic conduct, the government resorted to worst form of brutality to silence the protesters by not hesitating to kill even a student of class IX. It is reported that firing was resorted to even from helicopters.

Abu Sayeed, a star student of Begum Rokeya University, Rangpur, who aspired to be a civil servant, was at the forefront of the protesters when a clash broke out between police and quota reform protesters on 16 July. He bared his chest and dared the police to puncture him with bullet (the photo on the front page depicts his martyrdom). And in no time, his bullet-ridden body fell on the spot. Once Sayeed fell to the ground, other protesters rushed him to the Rangpur Medical College Hospital where the doctors on duty declared him dead on arrival. His death had sparked anger among all, and he was rightly hailed as a brave martyr symbolizing the death-defying youthful valour and courage of the historic students' movement against injustice. As of date, news outlets reported that the protest's death toll has exceeded 300 and is likely to rise. Doctors in the hospitals also said that those brought to them for treatment had not only bullet injury but clear signs of chopping by sharp weapons. Many people have been detained by the authorities. Glaringly, the anti-quota movement further galvanized by rising inflation, a poor job market for university graduates and instances of egregious corruption that inevitably benefit government officials. Evidently, the quota issue is the tip of the iceberg of economic and political discontent that lies underneath the surface. With turmoil mounting last week, the government was forced under pressure of movement to call for a dialogue with protest coordinators and announced that the hearing of appeal to the court decision on quotas had been moved up to 21 July from 7 August, signalling an eagerness to resolve the issue. On Sunday, 21 July, the Court had to finally accede to people's demand and reversed its own verdict. It now ordered that 93% of public sector jobs should be recruited on merit, leaving 5% for the family members of the veterans of the country's independence war. A remaining 2% is reserved for people from ethnic minorities or specially challenged people.

The Hasina government has also announced setting up a judicial commission to investigate deaths of the protesters. But over the weekend, the protesters' demands expanded to include not only quota reform but also release of jailed protesters, trials for police officers who killed citizens, resignation of prominent government ministers and open apology to the people by the Prime Minister admitting all responsibility of the bestial killings. They have also demanded resignation of the Vice-chancellors and Proctors of Dhaka, Jahangir Nagar and Rajshahi universities, and ban the culprit Bangladesh Chhatra League goons wherever they had pounced

upon the protesting students with lethal arms and backing of the government, mete out exemplary punishment to them and provide adequate compensation to the families of dead and injured. Masud Rana, Coordinator of the left alliance, has demanded resignation of PM Hasina.

It bears recall that the first iteration of quota protests in April 2018 could provide a roadmap for solving the crisis, but, at this point, is a poor analogy to the present. The 2018 quota movement also saw significant street mobilization. The Awami League government resorted to violence against protesters and rhetoric targeting the protesters as traitors. After persistent protests, PM Hasina ultimately agreed to remove the quota system and protests died out. However, the current situation has several important differences. In April 2018, the Awami League was going into an election year in which the opposition ultimately participated in the polls and the economy was relatively better. Today's protests have occurred six months after a widely boycotted election and amid far greater economic challenges, hostile people and politically awakened students and youths, marking augury of a more resilient protest movement.

In fact, the protesters have decided to continue the movement as they hold the latest Court judgment not free from bias leaving scope for the government to interpret as suited to it. So, the shutdown would continue.

In solidarity with the fighting students of Bangladesh, AIDSO and some other leftist students' organizations (except SFI) have been organizing demonstrations and rallies. While they were staging protest in front of the Bangladesh High Commission Office, they faced police atrocities and many student leaders and activists including AIDSO Kolkata District Secretary were arrested. Many other students' organizations of South-East Asia issued a joint statement expressing solidarity with struggling Bangladeshi students. Though the RSS-BJP are branding this movement of Bangladeshi students as anti-India, there is no basis for that. The movement in Bangladesh has found support in other countries as well like the UK, US, Saudi Arabia and UAE. In UAE, those who took part in solidarity demonstration have been sentenced to life term.

This glorious militant movement of Bangladesh students and youths have shown that if people rise up in united protest overcoming all threats and intimidation, no autocratic regime can suppress it with their coercive machinery, bullets and batons. Only one point needs to be emphasized upon. No movement, whether sporadic or crystallized over a period of time, can be led to its logical culmination unless there is a genuine revolutionary leadership to guide and conduct it. It is high time that the fighting students of Bangladesh whose courageous resistance is a font of inspiration to all round the world, also imbibed this truth.

Let all be reminded of what Comrade Shibdas Ghosh, Founder General Secretary, SUCI(C) and an outstanding Marxist thinker of the era, had once observed: *"Out of discontent of workers, peasants and all exploited masses, revolution will again and again try to surge ahead in waves after waves. In waves after waves it will try to burst forth. The contradiction within society will deepen and sharpen many times more, calling for radical transformation of this order. It will beseech our consciousness, it will appeal to humanity that revolution is the necessity. Still, revolution will not come, again and again it will recede, it will go astray, and reaction will again and again gain by that —revolution will not see the light until the revolutionary party emerges, capable enough to lead revolution."* (SW Vol III)

We hope that the grit, determination, courage, bloodshed and sacrifice of life by the students and youths of Bangladesh will not go in vain but spur them on along correct path. With that confidence, we offer our revolutionary salute to them.