



**Lemkin Institute**  
*for Genocide Prevention  
and Human Security*

## **Statement on Threats to Democracy in Bangladesh**

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The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention stands in solidarity with the people of Bangladesh. We wish to recognize the remarkable courage of young people, especially university students, who took to the streets over the past months to voice their frustrations. We also wish to express concern about the current political instability in Bangladesh in the wake of the terrible loss of life due to state and mob violence and the recent resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The Prime Minister's resignation, which came on the heels of mounting pressure from protesters and the military, speaks to the deep roots of the current political conflict and also to the uncertainty of Bangladesh's future. We commend the swift creation of an interim government under the Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus. We further call on the military leadership and the interim government to remain true to Bangladesh's humanist cultural traditions and history, to protect human rights, to investigate the recent state violence against protesters, and to uphold the constitution.

The current political instability in Bangladesh is directly related to the events of the 1971 genocide and its aftermath. Former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the leader of the 1971 Liberation War, who is widely considered to be the "Father of the Nation" and who secured Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan. Rahman, who became Prime Minister after liberation, was murdered along with most of his family during a 1975 coup. Former Prime Minister Hasina is one of only two family members who survived the coup. She has been elected as Prime Minister five times since the restoration of democracy in 1990 — in 1996, 2009, 2014, 2018, and 2024. Her leadership has been an important continuity

within a difficult and still ongoing democratic transition. Her resignation is an enormous watershed moment in Bangladesh's history. The stakes of this moment are high, as one of the consistent efforts of the post-1990 government in Bangladesh has been the trials of Bangladeshis who collaborated with West Pakistan in 1971 and supported a genocide of over 3 million Bengalis. If things in Bangladesh continue on the current track the country risks returning to the political configurations that committed, and then denied, the 1971 genocide.

Recent appointees to the interim government positions have signaled that they are attempting to turn the country's history on its head. Targeting the country's judiciary, and specifically the International Crimes Tribunal (ICTB) that tried perpetrators of the 1971 genocide, this group is arresting judges, prosecutors, human rights workers, journalists and others involved in the ICTB process and slapping them with false [charges](#) of murder and genocide in retribution for their past participation in a genocidal accountability process. This inversion of Bangladesh's history is an assault on truth and justice and constitutes a dangerous precedent for societies seeking peace, stability, and democracy after genocide. If members of parties and movements tied to the perpetration of genocide in the past can retake power, rewrite history, and target survivors as well as persons involved in post-genocide accountability processes without international censure, no survivors are truly safe anywhere, even decades after the fact. Furthermore, some actions of members of the interim government, as well as mobs aligned with their anti-Liberation War ideology, show ominous [signs](#) of genocidal intent towards the Awami League, towards Hindu Bangladeshis, and towards other religious minorities.

Originally, the student protesters who took to the streets last June were calling for fairness and equality in public sector jobs, focusing on the demand for the elimination of all preferential hiring quotas, apart from those reserved for indigenous populations and individuals with disabilities. Across Bangladesh's political spectrum there had been a growing sense that Bangladesh's Awami League (AL), which came to power sixteen years ago with a sweeping political mandate, had been in power for too long and had maintained that power through a series of questionable electoral victories. This perceived lack of democratic legitimacy was leveraged by the quota movement.

The movement was also reflective of the wider socio economic difficulties confronting the youth population. With approximately [30 million young Bangladeshis either unemployed or excluded from the educational system](#), and the national economy grappling with stagnation, high inflation, and dwindling foreign exchange reserves, the anger and frustration expressed by the student protesters is understandable. The courage they demonstrated in continuing to protest over the past months despite the lethal state crackdown demonstrates the immense power that ordinary people still have in the world.

The outbreak of violence during the anti-quota movement stemmed from violent attacks on members and suspected members of the ruling Awami League political party as well as attacks

on anti-quota demonstrators. As the protests spread across the country, authorities, which included the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), and the Bangladesh Army, responded with birdshot, rubber projectiles, stun grenades, and tear gas in an effort to disperse the protestors who had blocked universities, railway lines, and major thoroughfares. During the height of the protests, the government imposed a communications blackout and placed the country under a curfew, giving the army 'shoot at sight' orders.

The situation worsened due to misinformation, particularly around Prime Minister Hasina's remarks. Misinterpretations claimed she called protesters "Razakars," a term used to identify collaborators in the 1971 genocide. In reality, she questioned why there was so much resentment toward freedom fighters, asking if the grandchildren of Razakars should receive benefits instead. Such disinformation incited violence, leading to tragic casualties and widespread property damage. The recent attack on the jailhouse in Narsingdi, which resulted in the escape of prisoners, including militants, underscores the severity of the situation.

By the time the government offered to meet with student protesters about their grievances, the student movement, having experienced so many deaths and injuries at the hands of the state, refused the offer. When Prime Minister Hasina resigned and fled Bangladesh on 5 August 2024, the crackdown had resulted in at least 440 fatalities as well as violent attacks on members of the ruling Awami League. At this time it is still unclear who is responsible for many of these deaths while the targeted harassment of Awami League members and members of religious minorities continues.

The Lemkin Institute is deeply concerned about the future of Bangladesh, given the history of genocide in the country. There are indications that the anti-quota movement may have been commandeered, at least in part, by political actors with ulterior motives. Analysts have suggested that groups such as Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and its student wing, Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS), along with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and various leftist parties, may be using this movement as a pretext to destabilize the government as part of a broader anti-incumbency politics targeting Hasina and the ruling Awami League. In addition, the JI, ICS, and BNP, with their historical ties to anti-liberation forces, have a vested interest in challenging the Awami League-led government, particularly in light of the latter's commitment to delivering justice for 1971 genocide through the International Crimes Tribunal. The role of the Left Alliance, particularly the CPB, is also concerning. Despite their historical association with the liberation movement, their recent actions suggest a departure from their ideological roots. By aligning with the BNP-JI alliance, they may be contributing to a broader revisionist agenda.

We are deeply concerned by recent reports of targeted harassment against freedom fighters and their families, who have been subjected to threats and derogatory remarks. This concern is further intensified by the vandalizing, burning and looting of cultural institutions in Bangladesh, including the Genocide and Torture Museum of (Khulna), the Metropolitan Liberation War

Museum (Chittagong), the Bangabandhu Memorial Museum (Dhaka), and the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre. The emergence of “neo-Razakar elements,” akin to neo-Nazis and neo-fascists in the West, poses a grave threat to the values of justice and freedom. This disturbing mirroring trend underscores the need for vigilance against revisionist narratives and the importance of preserving the historical truth of the liberation struggle.

In light of these challenges, the Lemkin Institute notes the Supreme Court's recent decision to uphold a modified quota system. The court's ruling, which maintains a reduced quota for the children of martyrs and introduces provisions for ethnic minorities, transgender individuals, and persons with disabilities, strikes some balance between meritocracy and historical justice. However, it is unfortunate that amid all these political and legal wranglings the quotas that were once reserved for women and citizens from peripheral districts, a constitutionally mandated policy of affirmative action, was completely abolished as a consequence.

As Bangladesh navigates this tumultuous period, it is crucial that the legitimate grievances of the population are not manipulated for violent political purposes. The original intentions of the quota movement, rooted in calls for justice and equity, must not be overshadowed by the agendas of those seeking to undermine the secular and democratic government.

The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention and Human Security calls for dialogue, peaceful protest, and a collective effort to address the root causes of discontent. We urge the international community to closely monitor the situation and support efforts to uphold justice, human rights, and democratic principles. The legacy of the 1971 genocide must not be forgotten, and the pursuit of justice must remain a priority. The Lemkin Institute stands in solidarity with the people of Bangladesh and calls for unity against forces that seek to destabilize the nation and erode the hard-won freedoms of its citizens.