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Students arrested over protests must be freed

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It is sad that most leaders of the Bangladesh General Students' Rights Protection Council are now on the run fearing arrest for supporting the latest student protests for road safety and their movement for reforms in public service recruitment quota. At least 100 people, mostly students, were arrested in at least 52 cases filed in July 29–August 15 with police stations against more than 5,000 unnamed people over the violence during road safety protests. Many quota reforms protesters said that they were not living in their halls fearing torture by the ruling Awami League-backed student wing Chhatra League and they were also not staying in their houses fearing arrest as eight of their leaders had been arrested since July. What one finds disconcerting is that after accepting the demands of the students for road safety and quota reforms, the incumbents have begun arresting students for pressing home their legitimate demands, which is unacceptable. Instead of arresting students, the government was expected to embark on befitting steps to fulfil their genuine demands.

Students, mostly of schools and colleges, rightly took to the streets, demanding trial of the killers of two of their fellows in a road accident and protesting at chaos in the road transport sector. Because of lack of traffic law enforcement, most of the traffic-related directives have remained unheeded for years, resulting in this kind of tragic death in road accidents on a regular basis. This, needless to say, called for easing traffic chaos and minimising the risk of road accidents with sustained round-the-year actions and surveillance by the authorities concerned. Students demanding road safety did exactly the same thing. But the police have arrested 81 people in 43 cases filed under the Penal Code and the Special Powers Act between July 29 and August 11 while 16 individuals were arrested in eight cases filed under Section 57 of the Information and Communications Technology Act and two students arrested under the controversial Section 57 of the ICT act are remanded in police custody. As for students who rose up in protest seeking reforms in the quota system, the government is yet to do anything significant to effect reforms in the system. But it has begun to arrest students for their legitimate demand instead of arresting the people who attacked the student protesters. In the latest incident, the police arrested the joint convener of the quota reforms platform Bangladesh General Students' Rights Protection Council at her uncle's house in Sirajganj. Many quota reform protesters have reportedly been targeted while the police are also looking for people whose social media accounts were marked by pro-government activists. These students sought reforms in or rationalisation of the quota in public service recruitment out of uncertainty created by the faulty development process.

At the moment, the government should free all the students arrested for their rightful demand dropping all the charges and act in consultation with all concerned to fulfil their demands in earnest.



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