

The July that rocked Bangladesh

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July 3, 2024: Anti-quota protests spill beyond campuses

Thu Jul 3, 2025 12:23 AM

Last update on: Thu Jul 3, 2025 09:35 AM



Thousands of university students gathered at Dhaka's Shahbagh intersection on July 3, 2024, for a second straight day, protesting the reinstatement of the quota system in government recruitment. Photo: File/Anisur Rahman

The student movement against the reinstatement of the quota system in public service recruitment escalated on July 3, 2024, as demonstrations expanded beyond university campuses to major highways and key city intersections, mounting pressure on the government.

At Dhaka University, students began gathering in front of the Central Library from around 1:30pm. By 2:30pm, under the banner of Boishommo Birodhi Chhatra Andolon (Anti-Discrimination Student Movement), they launched their protest march, chanting slogans like "Jegechhe re jegechhe, chhatrasamaj jegechhe" and "Quota na medha, medha medha." The procession passed through Shikha Chirantan, TSC, and Doyel Chattar before reaching the Shahbagh intersection at 3:45pm. There, they blocked the key junction for the second straight day. A heavy police presence was observed in and around Shahbagh ahead of the protesters' arrival, though no clashes were reported.

Hasib Al Islam, one of the protest organisers, stated, "The High Court recently declared the 2018 circular cancelling the quota system illegal. The government has filed a writ petition, and a verdict is expected tomorrow. If the quota system is reinstated, we will escalate our movement."

Elsewhere in the capital, students of Jagannath University held a procession from their campus to the Taantibazar intersection, blocking the road towards Jatrabari and halting incoming vehicles for about an hour.

At Jahangirnagar University, several hundred students marched from the Central Library to the Dhaka-Aricha highway, blocking it at around 3:15pm. The blockade lasted until they were persuaded to withdraw by university authorities and the police.

Protests were not confined to Dhaka. In Chattogram, students of Chittagong University began demonstrating at their Shaheed Minar at 11:00am before marching to the main gate. There, they blocked the Chattogram-Khagrachhari highway for around 40 minutes. Similar demonstrations occurred across the country: Students of Barisal University blocked the Barisal-Kuakata highway, bringing passenger and cargo vehicles to a standstill. In Mymensingh, students of Bangladesh Agricultural University stopped train services along the Dhaka-Mymensingh route for over an hour. In Rangpur, students of Begum Rokeya University barricaded the Dhaka-Rangpur highway, joining the nationwide chorus against what they deemed a discriminatory recruitment system. In Rajshahi, protests continued for the third day at the University of Rajshahi.

Across campuses, protesters issued chants such as "Atharor hathiyar, gorje uthho arekbar," "Kota beboztha nipat jak, medhabira mukti pak," and "Medhabider kanna, ar na, ar na," reflecting their demand for a merit-based system and their frustration with the perceived injustice of reinstating quotas.

Meanwhile, the student platform Muktiyoddha Quota Reinstatement Movement held a rally in support of the quota system at Shahbagh, before marching to the Raju Memorial Sculpture at DU. They demanded the enforcement of the High Court verdict and the issuance of a new circular reflecting it. Their seven-point demand included preserving the quotas for the descendants of freedom fighters.

In Rajshahi, members of Muktiyoddha Sontan O Projonmo formed a human chain at Rajshahi University, condemning what they called disrespectful remarks about the Liberation War and families of freedom fighters. Their placards read: "Those who made the country independent -- why should they be insulted?" and "Quota system does not create discrimination, it ensures equality."

Adding to the political resonance of the protests, GM Quader, then opposition leader and chairman of the Jatiya Party, sharply criticised the reinstatement of the quota system during his closing speech in the 2024-25 national budget session. He remarked, "Creating a permanent and disproportionate quota in the name of the spirit of the Liberation War destroys the original objective of our independence -- to build a society based on justice and free from discrimination."

As the day drew to a close, it became clear that the movement was beginning to extend beyond campus boundaries, with signs that it could soon evolve into a broader, nationwide mobilisation. With a crucial court verdict expected the next day, the stage was set for the agitation to enter a new phase.