

Social Media as a Catalyst for Mobilizing Mass Protests During the July Movement in Bangladesh

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Introduction

A miracle has happened in Bangladesh within a period of just 36 days – from July 1 to August 5. And the heroes of this people’s revolution that took place on August 5 were undoubtedly the segment of population known as Generation-Z or the Zoomers, more specifically the students who were born between 1995 and 2010.² The internet and social media have become indispensable to the modern generation. In today’s world, social media platforms can be used as a weapon to combat injustice everywhere.



Source – Daily Star

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² Issue-I, Th Anniversary. “A People’s Revolution in BD Led by Generation-Z.” The Financial Express, August 22, 2024. <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/a-peoples-revolution-in-bd-led-by-generation-z>.

In modern protest movements, social media has proven to be an indispensable tool for mobilization. Globally, 4.9 billion people are active on social media, and platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are increasingly leveraged to organize protests, share information, and coordinate efforts in real-time.³ Though Bangladesh is a Third World country, it facilitates internet connection for the general people. It is estimated that 55.1 million people in Bangladesh will be using Facebook in 2024, making it the eighth most popular country worldwide and the second most popular in South Asia after India. This interaction has a significant bearing on the July student movement, which resulted in Sheikh Hasina's downfall. Social media platforms were utilized by the students as a communication tool, as an alternative to traditional media, and ultimately as a weapon to defeat the government.⁴

Background of the July Movement

In August 2024, Bangladesh witnessed a significant shift in its political landscape with the overthrow of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, following a student-led movement primarily sparked by the reinstatement of a controversial quota system for public sector jobs. The movement, which began in July, was characterized by widespread protests fueled by social media platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok, which played a crucial role in mobilizing and disseminating information among protesters.⁵

The backdrop to this uprising includes a long-standing quota system favoring descendants of freedom fighters, which had been abolished in 2018 due to student protests. However, a 2024 High Court ruling reinstated these quotas, igniting immediate backlash from students who demanded their removal once again. Tensions escalated when Prime Minister Hasina dismissed student concerns and labeled them as “Razakar” collaborators of Pakistani regimes, leading to violent confrontations between students and pro-government groups.

The protests gained momentum after police violence on peaceful student protestors resulted in the deaths of several unarmed students. Videos of these incidents circulated widely on social media,

³ “Role of Facebook in Quota Reform Movement | Global Journal of Human-Social Science,” n.d. https://socialscienceresearch.org/index.php/GJHSS/article/view/3368/4-The-Role-of-Facebook_JATS_NLM_xml#info.

⁴ Md Ayon Parvez Turzo. “the Impact of Digital Platforms on Bangladesh’s 2024 Student-Led Revolution: Analysing the Role of Social Media as a Catalyst,” 2022.

⁵ Issue-I, Th Anniversary. “A People’s Revolution in BD Led by Generation-Z.” The Financial Express, August 22, 2024. <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/a-peoples-revolution-in-bd-led-by-generation-z>.

galvanizing public outrage and drawing national attention to the government's oppressive actions.⁶ Despite internet shutdowns imposed by the government to stifle communication, protesters utilized social media as an alternative means to organize and share their experiences.



Source - Manobjamin

The movement culminated in mass demonstrations on August 5, where millions took to the streets demanding justice and accountability. As public support swelled, the government faced increasing pressure, ultimately leading to Hasina's resignation. Reports indicated that nearly 33,000 people were injured during the protests, with varying estimates of fatalities ranging from 650 to over 1,000.⁷

This revolution underscored the transformative power of social media as a tool for activism in Bangladesh. It not only facilitated communication among protesters but also fostered a collective identity against governmental oppression. The July Movement is now seen as a pivotal moment in

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Tbs Report, "Govt Publishes List of 708 Martyrs Killed in July-August Uprising," *The Business Standard*, September 24, 2024, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/govt-publishes-list-708-martyrs-killed-july-august-uprising-949656>.

Bangladesh's history, reflecting the aspirations of a younger generation for a more equitable and just society.

Role of Social Media in Protest Mobilization

Activists utilized social media to communicate rapidly and organize events. Facebook and Telegram were particularly effective for sharing information about protest locations and timings. Students created groups to coordinate their actions, allowing them to respond quickly to developments on the ground. Even when the government attempted to shut down internet services, many continued to use alternate platforms to share updates and organize protests.⁸

Social media enabled swift communication among protesters, allowing them to share real-time updates about police actions and mobilize support. For instance, when police violence occurred, videos of the incidents quickly went viral, drawing national attention and outrage.⁹



Source - Facebook

⁸ Anjum, Samaya. "From Social Media to the Streets: How Bangladesh's Gen-Z Movement Overcame Internet Shutdowns to Overthrow an Autocrat." Tech Policy Press, August 12, 2024. <https://www.techpolicy.press/from-social-media-to-the-streets-how-bangladeshs-genz-movement-overcame-internet-shutdowns-to-overthrow-an-autocrat/>.

⁹ Ibid

This rapid dissemination of information helped unify various groups of students from different universities, creating a broad coalition against the government.

Hashtags played a significant role in the movement by creating a sense of solidarity among protesters. They helped categorize posts related to the protests, making it easier for people to find information and join discussions. Viral videos showing police brutality galvanized public support, as they highlighted the harsh realities faced by protesters. Live streaming allowed individuals to broadcast events as they unfolded, providing unfiltered views of the situation that traditional media often failed to capture.

The reliance on social media marked a departure from traditional media outlets, which were often controlled or influenced by the government. In Bangladesh, many newspapers were linked to political interests, limiting their ability to report freely on protests.¹⁰ Social media bridged this gap by providing an alternative platform for voices critical of the government. It empowered citizens to share their stories and experiences directly with a global audience, bypassing censorship.

Youth Engagement and Grassroots Activism

The youth engagement during the July Movement exemplified how social media can empower grassroots activism. By fostering online communities that translated into real-world action, young activists demonstrated the potential of digital platforms to challenge authority and mobilize collective action effectively. This movement highlighted the transformative power of youth-led initiatives in shaping political discourse in Bangladesh.

Young people were at the forefront of the protests, leveraging social media to communicate quickly and effectively. They created online communities, pages, and groups where they shared information about protest locations, timings, and strategies. Students established dedicated groups on platforms such as Facebook and Telegram, which served as hubs for coordination.¹¹ These platforms allowed students from various universities to connect and unify their efforts against the government's controversial quota system.

¹⁰ Md Ayon Parvez Turzo. “the Impact of Digital Platforms on Bangladesh’s 2024 Student-Led Revolution: Analysing the Role of Social Media as a Catalyst,” 2022.

¹¹ Ibid



Source - ProthomAlo

The connection between digital activism and street mobilization was particularly strong in urban areas. As videos of police brutality went viral, public outrage grew rapidly, prompting spontaneous gatherings and organized protests. The emotional resonance of these videos galvanized support from not just students but also citizens across different demographics. It created awareness among citizens of every class and generation, parents and their children participated in the protest together due to the acceptance of the issue.¹²

Digital Advocacy and Global Attention

Social media was instrumental in transforming local protests into a global movement. By facilitating communication and engagement across borders, it helped garner international support for the July Movement, highlighting the power of digital advocacy in contemporary activism.

International Attention and Solidarity: Social media allowed the movement to reach audiences far beyond Bangladesh's borders. As videos of police violence and protests circulated online, they captured the attention of international human rights organizations and foreign media outlets. This

¹² Anjum, "From Social Media to the Streets: How Bangladesh's Gen-Z Movement Overcame Internet Shutdowns to Overthrow an Autocrat."

global visibility helped raise awareness about the situation in Bangladesh, prompting calls for action from various quarters, including foreign governments.¹³

Role of Diaspora Communities: Bangladeshi diaspora communities played a vital role in amplifying the movement. Many expatriates used social media to organize online campaigns that highlighted the struggles of protesters back home. They shared updates, organized virtual rallies, and engaged with international media to ensure that the plight of their fellow citizens was not forgotten.¹⁴ This connection between those at home and abroad fostered a sense of unity and collective action against the government.



Source – BBC News

Engagement of Human Rights Organizations and Celebrities: The movement also attracted the attention of international human rights organizations, which began to monitor the situation closely. Organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch used social media to document abuses and call for accountability. Also, celebrities and influencers joined the

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Middle East Politics Studies Gcc, Iran, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Uae, Nuclear Deal, Yemen, Trump, Mena, Turkey, Gulf Crisis, Qatar, Future for Advanced Research &, “Analyzing the Motives Behind the Escalating Protests Against Job Quotas in Bangladesh,” Futureuae, n.d., <https://futureuae.com/en-US/Mainpage/Item/9507/student-fury-analyzing-the-motives-behind-the-escalating-protests-against-job-quotas-in-bang>.

conversation, using their platforms to advocate for justice in Bangladesh. Their involvement helped to further amplify the message and put pressure on the Bangladeshi government.¹⁵

Government Response to Social Media Mobilization

While the government employed various tactics to control social media during the July Movement, activists demonstrated resilience by utilizing technology creatively to continue their fight for justice. The interplay between state repression and grassroots resistance highlighted the vital role of digital platforms in modern activism.

Starting on July 15, 2024, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) initiated widespread internet shutdowns, cutting off 4G and 3G services across the country. This was followed by a complete blackout of mobile internet access at numerous universities as student unrest intensified. On July 18, the government ordered the blocking of major social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube, aiming to prevent protesters from organizing and sharing information about police brutality. These measures were intended to disrupt communication among activists and limit public awareness of the government's actions.¹⁶



Source – Al Jazeera

¹⁵ Issue-I, Th Anniversary. “A People’s Revolution in BD Led by Generation-Z.” The Financial Express, August 22, 2024. <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/a-peoples-revolution-in-bd-led-by-generation-z>.

¹⁶ Ibid

In response to these shutdowns, activists quickly adapted by using Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to bypass restrictions and regain access to social media platforms. They also turned to alternative messaging apps like Telegram, which provided a more secure means of communication. This adaptability allowed them to continue organizing protests and sharing updates despite government efforts to silence them.

The government also resorted to legal actions against online activists, journalists, and protesters. Many individuals faced arrests for their social media activities, with authorities targeting those who shared videos or messages critical of the government. High-profile cases included the detention of student activists and journalists who reported on police violence during protests.¹⁷ This crackdown on dissent not only aimed to intimidate individuals but also sought to create a chilling effect on free expression in digital spaces.

Youths in Bangladesh actively resisted government attempts to control social media during the July Movement by utilizing Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to bypass internet shutdowns and accessing alternative platforms like Telegram for communication. They organized protests and shared critical information despite censorship, demonstrating resilience and adaptability in their fight for justice.

Conclusion

The Bangladeshi people's "July Revolution" will go down in history. People want to see a post-corruption, post-tyranny, post-inequality Bangladesh where everything is done for the common man. Social media sites like Facebook, X, Telegram, YouTube, TikTok, and others were extremely helpful to the Bangladeshi people in overcoming oppression and injustice. Without a doubt, social media plays the function of "Alternative Media" to bring the country under one umbrella.

Despite severe government crackdowns, including internet shutdowns and violent suppression of protests, the resilience of the youth was evident. They adapted by using VPNs and alternative platforms to maintain their momentum, demonstrating their commitment to justice and accountability. The movement united various segments of society, transcending traditional media

¹⁷ Anjum, "From Social Media to the Streets: How Bangladesh's Gen-Z Movement Overcame Internet Shutdowns to Overthrow an Autocrat."

barriers that often stifled dissent. Ultimately, the July Movement led to the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, proving the potential for digital platforms to foster collective action and drive societal change, paving the way for a future where the voices of ordinary citizens can no longer be ignored. The legacy of this movement will resonate as a symbol of hope for democracy and justice in Bangladesh.