

Youth-Led Movements: The Impact of Student Protests in Making Political Change in Bangladesh

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Source: Reuters

Introduction

The history of political change in Bangladesh is deeply intertwined with the efforts of its youth, as student protests have consistently demonstrated their impact by reshaping the nation's political landscape and playing a crucial role in driving significant political change.² Starting with the Language Movement of 1952 and continuing through the Liberation War of 1971, as well as the student-led protests in 2018 advocating for road safety and quota system reforms, the young of

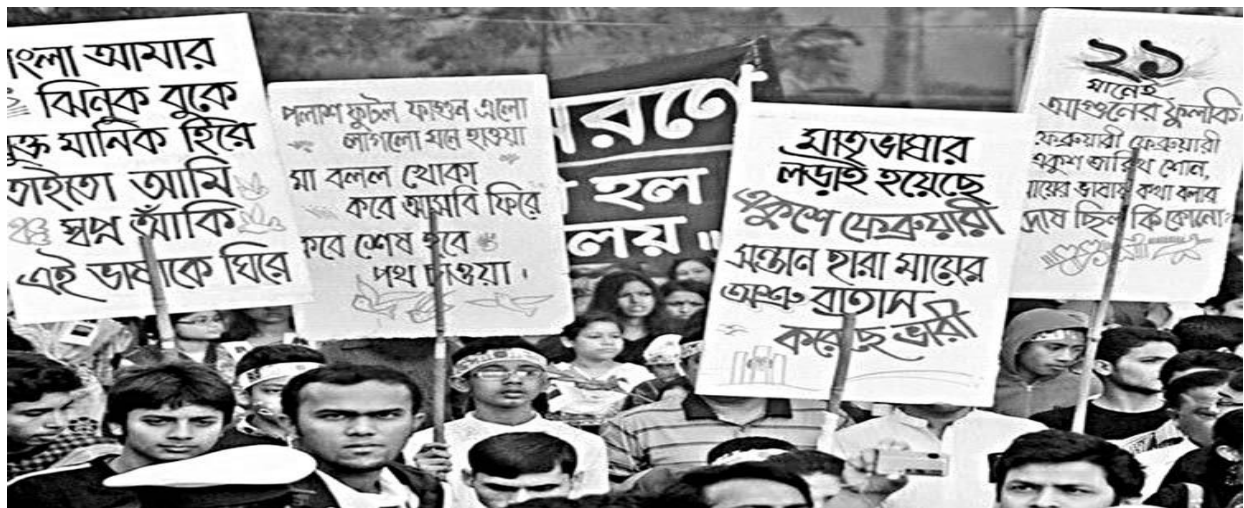
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² Roy, G., 2024. Quota Reform Movement, Internet Shutdown and Economic Shock: Bangladesh in July, 2024. *Internet Shutdown and Economic Shock: Bangladesh in July*.

Bangladesh have consistently demonstrated their capacity to organize and shape national policies.³ Furthermore the protest started in June 2024 and concluded on August 5th with the government's resignation. This Commentary seeks to examine the significant influence of student protests in Bangladesh, specifically highlighting their role in challenging and ultimately causing the downfall of government regimes.

This commentary will be offering valuable observations on the changing relationship between the younger generation, political power, and the pursuit of democratic government in Bangladesh.

Historical Context of Student Movements in Bangladesh



Source: Daily Asian

Case Studies :

The historical role of students as a vanguard for political change lends legitimacy and moral authority to modern movements. In 1952, students led protests demanding the recognition of Bengali as a state language, resulting in the tragic deaths of several students on February 21, a day now commemorated as International Mother Language Day.⁴ This spirit of resistance carried into

³ Talukdar, Shawon, Sania Akter, and Muhammad Miraj Mia. "Youth for democratic resilience: Prospects beyond the degeneration of youth politics in Bangladesh." *Scholars Journal of Research in Social Science (SJRSS)* 2, no. 1 (2022): 1-13.

⁴ Ahmed, Feroz. "The struggle in Bangladesh." *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 4, no. 1 (1972): 2-22.

the 1971 Liberation War, where students were at the forefront of the fight for independence, playing crucial roles in mobilizing public support, participating in guerrilla warfare, and contributing to the birth of Bangladesh.⁵

A. 2013 Shahbagh Movement

After the ICT sentenced Jamaat leader Abdul Quader Mollah to life imprisonment on February 5, 2013, the Shahbagh Movement commenced, as many believed the sentence was excessively lenient. In Dhaka, thousands of individuals, headed by bloggers and activists, convened at Shahbagh to demand the death penalty for war criminals and the prohibition of Jamaat-e-Islami. The movement reached its zenith with mass rallies; however, it began to lose momentum following the assassination of blogger Ahmed Rajib Haider on February 15.⁶ The movement achieved some success when Mollah's sentence was upgraded to the death penalty, and he was executed on December 12, 2013

B. The 2018 Road Safety Movement

The incident occurred after two teenagers were involved in a road accident, resulting in nine individuals sustaining injuries. Consequently, all the students gathered to stage a demonstration and advocate for improved road safety measures⁷. In 2018, there were 7,221 fatalities and 15,446 injuries resulting from vehicle accidents, as reported by The Daily Star in January 2019. The Road Safety Act of 2018 was implemented following the protest.

C. The 2018 Quota Reform Movement

The students claimed that the current 56% quota in government positions was unfair and limited opportunities for meritorious candidates, and they called for a reduction to 10%. The quota system in government positions was to be abolished, as Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced in the Parliament in April 2018. On the other hand, she also stated that the decision would not impact the

⁵ Hasan, Mubashar. "Historical developments of political Islam with reference to Bangladesh." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 47, no. 2 (2012): 155-167.

⁶ Roy Chowdhury, Arnab, and Ahmed Abid. "Emergent protest publics in India and Bangladesh: a comparative study of anti-corruption and Shahbag protests." *Protest publics: Toward a New concept of mass civic action* (2019): 49-66.

⁷ Tanjeem, Nafisa, and Rawshan E. Fatima. "The 2018 Road Safety Protest in Bangladesh: How a Student Crowd Challenged (or Could not Challenge) the Repressive State." In *Young People Shaping Democratic Politics: Interrogating Inclusion, Mobilising Education*, pp. 55-81. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023

employment prospects of the families of freedom fighters, which resulted in some confusion and conflicting reactions.⁸

D. The 2024 Quota reform movement

The 2024 Quota Reform Movement in Bangladesh was a substantial student-led protest against the government's job quota system, which was perceived by many inequitable and discriminatory. Decentralized leadership and widespread protests, notably in Dhaka, were the key characteristics of the movement, which was initiated by the release of a new job circular that maintained the previous quota system.⁹ Public support was further strengthened by the government's repressive measures, which included arrests and violent crackdowns. The movement played a role in the political instability that resulted in the overthrow of the Sheikh Hasina government, which led to the interim government's decision to reduce quotas and transition to a more merit-based system.

Factors Contributing to the Success of Student Protests

Public discontent and the support for student causes

The effectiveness of student protests is frequently influenced by public sentiment. Students can secure widespread support by aligning their demands with broader public concerns.¹⁰ The success of student protests in Bangladesh, particularly the July 2024 demonstrations, is profoundly rooted in the widespread public discontent and the strong support for the student cause. These protests, which are frequently motivated by concerns such as governance transparency and road safety, have a significant impact that extends beyond academic circles. Support from NGOs, civil society, and the general public provides essential logistical and moral support.

Media coverage and the role of social media

Despite an internet outage, social media played a critical role in mobilizing and unifying demonstrators during the student protests in Bangladesh in July 2024. Platforms such as Facebook

⁸ Ghosh, Saikat Chandra. "Conceptualizing student movements in Bangladesh post-2013: a qualitative and comparative case study of the Quota Reform Movement and the Road Safety Movement." *Social Identities* 29, no. 6 (2023): 534-554.

⁹ Islam Pranto, Samiul, Mashhud Hasan Al Faruq, Tabassum Kasfia, Mst Tasnia, Maliha Farhin Chhoa, and Jahid Hossain Samin. "Government Job's Quota Reform Movement in Bangladesh: A Violence Against Innocent Students." *This article has been submitted to F1000research Journal* (2024).

¹⁰ Kalam, Abul, and Md Al-Mamun. "Analyzing the rhetoric of contemporary BSMRSTU student movements: manifestations and social implications in Gopalganj, Bangladesh." *Frontiers in Political Science* 6 (2024): 1307615.

and Instagram were influential in disseminating the information regarding Abu Sayeed's death, which in turn stimulated widespread participation and concerns for political reform. In contrast to government-backed channels that disseminated propaganda, mainstream media outlets such as Jamuna TV offered real-time, on-the-ground coverage using drones.¹¹ The government's repressive measures were criticized by media major figures such as BBC and Al Jazeera on a global scale. Effectively, demonstrators utilized offline communication applications such as Briar and Bridgefy to circumvent the blackout, thereby maintaining momentum and employing digital innovation to challenge the government's narrative.



Source: Camden civil rights project

Leadership and decentralized organization

The resilience and adaptability of student movements are significantly improved by effective leadership and decentralized organization. In the 2018 student protests in Bangladesh, leaders such as Hasan Al Mamun, Rashed Khan, Nurul Haq Nur, and Faruk Hasan emerged organically, effectively mobilizing students and articulating the movement's demands.¹² In the same vein, the

¹¹ Barman, Harekrishna, Partha Sarathi Mandal, Mahadeb Das, and Kshiroda Roy. "Bangladesh at a Crossroads: Protests Mount over Government Job Quotas and Leadership's Response."

¹² Ghosh, Saikot Chandra. "Conceptualizing student movements in Bangladesh post-2013: a qualitative and comparative case study of the Quota Reform Movement and the Road Safety Movement." *Social Identities* 29, no. 6 (2023): 534-554. ¹² Barman, Harekrishna, Partha Sarathi Mandal, Mahadeb Das, and Kshiroda Roy. "Bangladesh at a Crossroads: Protests Mount over Government Job Quotas and Leadership's Response."

¹² Ghosh, Saikot Chandra. "Conceptualizing student movements in Bangladesh post-2013: a qualitative and comparative case study of the Quota Reform Movement and the Road Safety Movement." *Social Identities* 29, no. 6 (2023): 534-554.

student leaders Nahid Islam, Abu Baker Majumder, Asif Mahmud, Sarjis Alam, Hasnat Abdullah, and Nusrat Tabassum were instrumental in the coordination of protests that ultimately resulted in the government's resignation during the July 2024 Quota Reform Movement. The movement's organization was primarily decentralized, with informal networks and social media serving as the primary means of coordination among numerous student groups throughout the nation. The "Bangladesh General Students' Rights Protection Council" was a critical decentralized organization in this endeavor, enabling the movement to flourish without centralized control.

Challenges Faced by Student Movements

State Repression and Violence: A significant obstacle encountered by student movements is the utilization of force by the government to put down opposition. Authorities frequently mobilize law enforcement personnel to disperse demonstrations, apprehend organizers, and instill fear in participants. The 2018 Quota Reform Movement in Bangladesh faced intense police repression, resulting in more than 100 students becoming injured and imprisoned and harassing of leaders such as Rashed Khan.¹³ The Road Safety Movement encountered severe repression, resulting in students sustaining significant injuries and incidents of sexual harassment being reported.¹⁴ According to an OHCHR study, the July 2024 Quota Reform Movement resulted in a more severe reaction, leading to the death of more than 600 individuals between July 16 and August 11. Internet shutdowns were used to repress freedom of speech, while students across were subjected to arbitrary arrests, physical assaults, and torture.

¹³ Karimanal, Iniya, Rusmiya Aqid, Trevor Darr, Harry Clark, Shelby Tang, and Sanjay Karthikeyan. "Freedom and Fairness of the 2024 Bangladeshi Parliamentary Election."

¹⁴ Jackman, David. "The threat of student movements in Bangladesh: Injustice, infiltrators and regime change." (2019).



Source: *Geopolitical Monitor*

Internal Divisions and Leadership Issues: Student movements often struggle with internal conflicts and leadership challenges. Disagreements over goals, strategies, and tactics can fragment the movement, weakening its effectiveness. The emergence of multiple leaders or factions can create confusion and dilute the movement's message.¹⁵ For instance, during student protests in Bangladesh, differing opinions among student leaders about negotiation with the government and the direction of the movement sometimes led to infighting, which hampered collective action. Law enforcement agencies placed students under surveillance. Houses were raided and activities in social media were checked forcefully.

Co-optation by Political Parties: Political parties may attempt to co-opt student movements to further their own agendas. This can lead to the movement being hijacked, with the original goals overshadowed by the interests of the parties involved. In Bangladesh, student movements have occasionally been co-opted by larger political parties seeking to use the protests as leverage against their opponents.¹⁶ This co-optation can alienate students who wish to remain independent, causing divisions and weakening the movement's credibility.

¹⁵ Akbar, Tahsina. "Political quota for women and gender-equitable policies in Bangladesh." *ANTYAJAA: Indian Journal of Women and Social Change* 3, no. 1 (2018): 36-48.

¹⁶ Jackman, David. "Students, movements, and the threat to authoritarianism in Bangladesh." *Contemporary South Asia* 29, no. 2 (2021): 181-197.

Sustainability and Long-term Impact: Maintaining momentum over time is a major challenge for student movements. Additionally, movements may struggle to translate their immediate demands into long-term change. The impact of student protests often depends on their ability to maintain pressure on the government and to institutionalize their gains.¹⁷ In Bangladesh, while student movements have occasionally achieved short-term victories, sustaining these achievements and effecting lasting change has proven difficult, with some reforms being rolled back or ignored once the protests subside

The Role of Student Movements in Democratic Transition



Source: Prothom Alo

Influence on Political Reform and Policy Changes

The role of student movements in advocating for political reforms and influencing policy changes has been historically significant, frequently serving as a catalyst for broader societal demands. In Bangladesh, these initiatives have brought to light critical issues such as corruption, human rights, and education reform. Student activism once again played a critical role in the dramatic political shift that brought an end to Sheikh Hasina's regime in 2024, following the 2018 Quota Reform Movement, which resulted in substantial changes to the government employment quota system. This movement, in conjunction with others, played a role in the establishment of an interim

¹⁷ Mallick, Shahid, and M. Mazibar Rahman. "Empowering Youth Lasting Change; SEED SCALE a Process to Youth Engagement and Sustainable Development." *Technium Soc. Sci. J.* 13 (2020): 501.

government led by Chief Advisor Dr. Prof Muhammad Yunus implemented comprehensive political reforms that had a substantial impact on both domestic and international policies.

Contribution to the Democratization Process

Student movements have been instrumental in the democratization process, particularly in countries where authoritarianism or political instability has been prevalent. In Bangladesh, student activism has been a driving force behind some of the country's most significant political transitions, including the 1971 Liberation War, where students played a key role in mobilizing support for independence.¹⁸ More recently, student protests have continued to challenge undemocratic practices and demand greater transparency and accountability from the government. By engaging in non-violent resistance and advocating for democratic principles, student movements help to nurture a culture of civic participation and empower citizens to demand their rights. The 2024 Quota Reform Movement stands out as a catalyst for democratic change, leading to the downfall of Sheikh Hasina's regime and the formation of an interim government with a distinct agenda, signaling a significant shift in Bangladesh's political landscape

Shaping the Future Political Landscape of Bangladesh

The impact of student movements frequently exceeds the immediate political reforms they initiate, influencing the future political landscape of a nation. In Bangladesh, the participation of students in political activism has historically been used as a training ground for future political leaders. Many of the nation's most prominent politicians began their careers as student activists, and their involvement in these movements has significantly impacted their political ideologies and activities.¹⁹ Additionally, student movements contribute to the establishment of the agenda for future political discourse by articulating the aspirations of the younger generation. Student movements can redefine the political landscape by advocating for progressive changes and challenging existing power structures, thereby advancing it toward greater inclusivity and

¹⁸ Ullah, S. M. "Democracy in Bangladesh: Role of Student Politics (1972-2002)." PhD diss., University of Rajshahi, 2009.

¹⁹ Khan, Anam, Asif Javed, Samavia Batool, Fazal Hussain, Hamid Mahmood, and Vaqar Ahmed. "The role of youth in sustainable development." (2016).

democracy.²⁰ The influence of student activism will likely continue to be a critical factor in the shaping of Bangladesh's political future as it continues to navigate its democratic voyage.

Conclusion

To conclude, the political landscape of Bangladesh has been significantly influenced by youth-led movements, which serves as evidence that student activism is a potent catalyst for significant change. Students have consistently advocated for justice, equity, and reform, challenging entrenched power structures and advocating for more transparent and accountable governance, from the historic Language Movement of 1952 to the more recent Quota Reform and Road Safety Movements. These movements have effectively mobilized public opinion and influenced national discourse, despite encountering substantial challenges, such as state repression and attempts at co-optation.

The youth's resilience and determination emphasize the significance of their ongoing involvement in the country's political development and emphasize their critical role in the democratic process. It is imperative to acknowledge and incorporate the perspectives of young individuals into the long-term process of nation-building as Bangladesh transitions under the interim government. The interim government should prioritize the establishment of platforms for youth participation in policy-making, thereby guaranteeing that their ideas and concerns are addressed. Furthermore, the promotion of civic education and the encouragement of youth-led initiatives can ensure that they continue to participate in the development of a more equitable and just future for Bangladesh.

²⁰ Riaz, Ali. "Bangladesh." In *An introduction to South Asian politics*, pp. 72-104. Routledge, 2024.