

Resistance, Neoliberalism, and Democracy: Lessons from Bangladesh's 2024 Student Uprisings

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The Start of a Revolution

Throughout July 2024, Bangladesh experienced its most significant wave of civil unrest since its Liberation War from Pakistan in 1971. What began as a student-led demonstration against a controversial employment quota system quickly escalated into a nationwide uprising that reflected broader frustrations regarding economic instability, corruption, and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian government. Despite severe state repression - marked by military violence, arbitrary arrests, and an internet blackout - the student-led revolution succeeded in forcing Hasina, who had ruled Bangladesh for 15 years, to flee the country.

The catalyst for the unrest was a High Court decision on June 5, 2024, which reestablished a job quota created in 1972. The system reserved 30% of civil services positions for descendants of independence war veterans, and was abolished in 2018 after student protests.¹ The central criticism around the policy was that it served as a strategic tool for political favoritism, used to consolidate Sheikh Hasina's power by disproportionately benefiting the descendants of pro-government supporters, and reinforcing loyalty within the Awami League's increasingly autocratic regime. Furthermore, Hasina has a personal connection to the system, as her father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was the nation's founding leader.²

In early July, university students peacefully mobilized to demand quota reforms, reinforcing the lack of opportunities for merit-based roles in the public sector. However, they were violently repressed by the police and Awami League-affiliated groups.³ For 46 days, the suppression resulted in the death of 1400 people, including protesters, journalists, and bystanders, with the vast majority being shot by security forces.⁴ The violent response of the government increased the national support for the student movement, transforming what began as a demand for quota reform into a broader coalition united around a struggle for democracy and systemic political change, which ultimately culminated in Sheikh Hasina's resignation on August 5.

Neoliberalism's Legacy of Grievances

Bangladesh's economic development is often portrayed as a positive story, yet the reality is far more complex. Following its independence in 1971, Bangladesh was one of the world's poorest countries. Despite

¹Harindrini Corea. "What is happening at the quota-reform protests in Bangladesh?" *Amnesty*, July 29, 2024.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/what-is-happening-at-the-quota-reform-protests-in-bangladesh/>

² Suyesha Dutta. "What's Behind Bangladesh's Deadly Protests?" *Asia Pacific Foundation*, July 31, 2024.

<https://www.asiapacific.ca/publication/explainer-whats-behind-bangladeshs-deadly-protests>

³ Corea "What is happening at the quota-reform protests in Bangladesh?"

⁴ UN News. "Bangladesh protests probe reveals top leaders led brutal repression" *United Nations*, February 12, 2025. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/02/1160046>

the challenges faced by newly independent states, the country achieved a remarkable lower-middle income status in 2015, with an average annual real GDP growth of 6.4% since 2000.⁵ However, while Bangladesh's economic growth has been significant, opportunities have remained limited for the middle and working classes.

Like many post-colonial nations, Bangladesh integrated into the global economy at the peak of neoliberalism, aligning with international institutions, such as the World Bank and the IMF, that provided economic assistance to governments following the Washington Consensus development path. Although the original 1972 constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh's pledged the ideals of socialism, equitable rural development and the right to work, the economic environment redirected the country toward the neoliberal framework: structural reforms, such as redistribution of land, were replaced by Washington Consensus adjustment policies that emphasised free markets, deregulations and minimal state intervention.⁶⁷

As a target of the Structural Adjustment Programs,⁸ Bangladesh's development was driven by an export-driven growth model that prioritizes foreign investment at the expense of domestic economic sovereignty and social welfare.⁹ The country is the second-largest garment exporter and an essential player in global supply chains, with its primary competitive advantage being a cheap labor force.¹⁰ This model benefits economic elites and deepens socioeconomic disparities, which is evident in Bangladesh's employment rates: 40% of the Bangladeshi youth aged between 15 and 29 are neither studying nor working.¹¹

The student uprising of 2024 was not an isolated response to a quota system, but rather a broader political movement marked by the grievances of a marginalised generation shaped by the structural limitations of global capitalism. While Hasina was recognized for lifting millions of Bangladeshis out of poverty, mainly due to the garment export industry, the country's growth is undermined by the lack of opportunities.¹² Simultaneously, in the political sphere, popular discontent with Hasina's government

⁵ World Bank. *The World Bank in Bangladesh*, World Bank Group, October 17, 2024. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bangladesh/overview>

⁶ Anu Muhammad. *Bangladesh - A Model of Neoliberalism*. Monthly Review, March 1, 2015. <https://monthlyreview.org/2015/03/01/bangladesh-a-model-of-neoliberalism/>

⁷ *Constitute*. Bangladesh 1972 Constitution. https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Bangladesh_2014

⁸ *Constitute*. Bangladesh 1972 Constitution. https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Bangladesh_2014

⁹ *Constitute*. Bangladesh 1972 Constitution. https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Bangladesh_2014
Ibid

¹⁰ ARC Group. "Bangladesh Apparel Industry: Navigating Global Challenges", October 2, 2024. <https://arc-group.com/bangladesh-apparel-industry/>

¹¹ TBS Report. "39.88% youth in Bangladesh neither studying nor working" *The Business Standard*, March 24, 2024. <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/3988-youth-bangladesh-neither-studying-nor-working-814546>

¹² Anbarasan Ethirajan. "Sheikh Hasina: The pro-democracy icon who became an autocrat" BBC, August 6, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cg3ee303yxp0>

intensified since she started her career in a pro-democracy stance during a period of military rule in 1982, and has since shifted to an autocratic regime characterized by the forced suppression of the opposition.¹³

This creates a mixed grievance of political issues around corruption, repression, and inefficiency, with broader sentiments over an unfair economic system. Protesters challenged Hasina's autocratic government in favor of democracy and against her complicity in maintaining an economic model that inherently perpetuates inequality. The student's demand can reflect a wider rejection of neoliberal globalization, which has frequently resulted in "jobless growth", where global trade results in economic growth but fails to generate quality employment.

Diving deeper into the grievances produced by neoliberalism, the youth's frustration can be analyzed through the lenses of promises and expectations. The neoliberal model has economic growth as its primary agenda, which motivates popular expectations around prosperity. In the field of economic sociology, the concept of "fictional expectations" explains how, based on current promises, individuals can act "*as if their imaginary of economic life would become the future present*".¹⁴ This mindset creates an idea of a "cause and effect" relationship in which people expect that by following the rules of the game, such as working hard and obtaining an education, they will eventually experience meaningful rewards.¹⁵

However, development driven by global trade is not evenly distributed, generating a trade-off between growth and social equity.¹⁶ Although neoliberalism promotes education as a tool for social mobility, young graduates in Bangladesh are not experiencing an increase in opportunities. Currently, around 18 million young Bangladeshis are looking for jobs, and educated university graduates face higher rates of unemployment than their less educated peers.¹⁷

The disparity between neoliberal promises and reality leads to civic unrest. On an individual level, unmet expectations may lead to an individual's perceived failure. However, when disillusionment happens on a larger scale, such as the broader commodification of labor in Bangladesh, individuals can turn their frustration against the system itself. Facing a government that based its legitimacy on economic

¹³ Faisal Mahmud. "Sheikh Hasina: Once Bangladesh's democracy icon, now its "authoritarian" PM" Al Jazeera, January 8, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/8/sheikh-hasina-once-bangladeshs-democracy-icon-now-its-authoritarian-pm>

¹⁴ Jens Beckett. "Capitalism as a System of Expectations: Toward a Sociological Microfoundation of Political Economy." *Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies*, SAGE Politics & Society 41 (3) 323-250, DOI: 10.1177/0032329213493750.

¹⁵ Beckett, "Capitalism as a System of Expectations."

¹⁶ Muhammad, *Bangladesh - A Model of Neoliberalism*.

¹⁷ Hannah Ritchie. "What sparked the protests that toppled Bangladesh's PM?" *BBC*, August 6, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cq5xye1d285o>

development, yet failed to deliver the promises of democracy or an inclusive political economy, the Bangladeshi youth found the motivation to revolt.

Policy Recommendations: From Revolution to Reform

The student movement successfully ended a 15-year-long, increasingly authoritarian regime, and reduced the quotas for veterans' descendants to 5%.¹⁸ Sustaining these changes requires deliberate and long-term reform, which is especially difficult given Bangladesh's co-opted and politicised state institutions.

Throughout July, the organization of the uprising was impressive. Operating under a “leaderless model”, the students fostered a collective mindset that allowed the overall Bangladeshi population to participate and belong to their movement. Recognizing that their struggle for democracy and systemic change was deeply interrelated with other societal issues, activists adopted an intersectional approach, addressing gender and indigenous rights alongside economic and political grievances.¹⁹ By building ties with labor unions, the July uprisings united different social classes and created a broad coalition against the Hasina regime. The question remains, how can this momentum be translated into systemic political reform?

Following a massive movement of civic engagement, the changes demanded by the population must be institutionalized, which brings the Bangladeshi constitution into question. In democratic societies, constitutions should be grounded in popular sovereignty and reflect the will of the people. Therefore, after a revolution or uprising, drafting a new constitution is an important step to restore a positive relationship between the population and the state. Relying on the same constitution that helped to controversially elect Sheikh Hasina directly contradicts the democratic roots of the uprisings.

After Hasina's resignation, Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus formed an interim government with an advisory group to support the transition of power. Two leaders of the student movement were included in this group, marking an unprecedented achievement in Bangladesh and in most parts of the world. But this is only a first step: after revolutionary movements, direct civic engagement is essential to ensure a comprehensive economic and political environment and the government must take direct action to rebuild the trust within their citizens.

¹⁸ Harindrini Corea. “What is happening at the quota-reform protests in Bangladesh?” *Amnesty*, July 29, 2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/what-is-happening-at-the-quota-reform-protests-in-bangladesh/>

¹⁹ Chaumtoli Huq. “The Bangladesh Student Movement That Transformed a Nation” *LPE Blog*, September 10, 2024. <https://lpeproject.org/blog/the-bangladesh-student-movement-that-transformed-a-nation/>

The student protests demonstrated a collective demand for a more inclusive and accountable political system. Hence, a new constitution should be drafted with broader citizen participation, especially within the most active groups during the protests: students, labor unions, and marginalised communities. The reform must secure protections for civil liberties, a more transparent electoral process, and greater judicial independence, which would lay the foundation for a more democratic political structure.

In addition to that, reforming the constitution presents an opportunity to decentralize political power and to strengthen local governance. By shifting from autocratic decision-making and giving voice to community and regional parties, Bangladesh can include historically underrepresented groups into policymaking, advancing towards a more representative political order.

However, the 2024 uprisings were not merely political, but also motivated by the grievances produced by an economic growth empty of real opportunities. Therefore, addressing the economic roots of the protests is also essential to sustain political reform. The country's heavy reliance on the garment industry, which sustains cheap labor and weak work regulations, produces low-quality jobs that are not aligned with the current aspirations of the Bangladeshi youth. Diversifying industrial output and moving beyond garment exports to higher value sectors would reduce the dependency on volatile commodity markets and broaden the opportunities of employment, with better wages and working conditions. This can be achieved through public investments and incentives for entrepreneurship and innovation, that usually go along with a more inclusive and diverse economy.

While reviewing its economic policy, it is essential for Bangladesh to keep in mind who was the major force behind the uprising: the youth; the same generation that will sustain the country for the next decades. To empower its future leaders and workers, the country should carry out labor market policies for skill development and youth entrepreneurship, preparing young people with the capabilities necessary for a diversified economy. Along with that, labor rights must be secured through fairer wage laws and increased worker protections. Measures like this can help to reduce inequality, redistribute economic power, and transform the youth's motivation into economic empowerment.

Finally, economic policies should also be adapted to an intersectional environment, reflecting the broad participants of the protests. Policies must address the needs of female, rural and indigenous workforces, so marginalised groups can equally benefit from the reforms. The government should use the ties built by the students with labour unions as an opportunity to foster a collective work with the civil society and businesses in developing industrial strategies. Through economic justice and inclusive growth,

Bangladesh can pave the way to detach itself from exploitative structures of an hierarchical global division of labor while increasing the living standards for its population.

Challenges in Achieving Lasting Political Change

By the end of 2024, many challenges remained in the transition of power of the Bangladeshi government. Yunus' interim government declared the restoration of peace, the fight against corruption, and preparation for new elections as the state's priorities. However, ensuring fair political competition in Bangladesh is not an easy task. A long-term heritage of corruption, continuous debates over Islamist parties, the state's secular identity, and the geopolitical ties with India all form a complex political environment.

During this transition, a new party emerged from the student movements: the Jariya Nigarik Party, or National Citizens Party (NCP). Led by 26-year-old student leader Nahid Islam, the party's top positions are mainly composed of other student activists. Islam announced that the party's mission is to dismantle constitutional autocracy and adopt a new democratic constitution²⁰. Although this is a significant measure to effectively change Bangladesh's political economy, it is unlikely that a new and young-led party will win an election²¹. The NCP faces many political obstacles, including its dispersed voter base and the lack of established infrastructure, which makes large-scale mobilization difficult. In contrast, Bangladesh's main parties, such as the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the Awami League, or Jamaat-e-Islami, benefit from already established networks that can deeply influence local politics and ensure electoral success.

Institutional barriers in Bangladesh's political arena are further emphasized by the long-established influence of a politicized judiciary and military structures that assists traditional parties²², interested in maintaining their political legacy, which increases the challenge of implementing systemic political change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the 2024 uprisings can be understood by analyzing Bangladesh's complex postcolonial trajectory. During its 50 years of independence, the country has been shaped by its marginalised

²⁰ Julhas Alam. "Bangladeshi students who led uprising that ousted ex-premier Sheikh Hasina form new political party" *AP*, February 28, 2025. <https://apnews.com/article/bangladesh-students-political-party-hasina-yunus-7565d2860be1ed4c03bfd9a5beb4f539>

²¹ Nazmul Alam. "Can a student-led party become a force for change?" *Scroll.in*, March 6, 2025. <https://scroll.in/article/1079831/bangladesh-can-a-student-led-party-become-a-force-for-change>

²² Shahzad Uddin. "Bangladeshi students revolt, but wider movement against the government looks unlikely" *CNA*, 24 July 2024. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/bangladesh-student-protest-job-quota-police-military-violence-government-election-corruption-4501526>

position as a low-cost production hub in the global economy and by declining democratic institutions. The student movements express a two-way political and economic discontent motivated by grievances over a failing democracy, institutional corruption, and the harsh costs of a neoliberal structure. The path ahead is complicated. Systemic problems require systemic solutions, and structural, economic, and political reforms are necessary for Bangladesh to reevaluate its global position and strengthen its internal institutions.

On the political level, the uprisings bring hope to the scenario: the youth is not only aware of the need for reform, but actively determined to shape the country's politics. Their movements have already disrupted the existing power structure, but a sustained effort is required to change any established system effectively. If the youth's revolutionary ambitions escalate into long-term political participation, civic engagement can redefine Bangladesh's democratic future.

The economic roots of the discontent are more challenging to address. Following its independence, Bangladesh fell into the common neoliberal trap of specialization. As liberal economist Thomas Sowell explains, the international division of labor allows countries to produce goods at lower costs by becoming "specialists."²³ By being in a system that rewards low wages, Bangladesh's specialization in the garment industry happened through cheap labor and weak regulatory frameworks. While this sector was essential for economic development, it left most of the population with scarce, low-quality job opportunities. Like many Global South nations, Bangladesh, as a commodity exporter, remains trapped in a vulnerable commercial position that benefits the industrial elites while deteriorating conditions for the broader population. In an intersectional approach that unites different sectors of society and maintains the drive from the uprisings, the population must keep pushing for economic transformation. Bangladesh must move away from an overreliance on cheap labor exports and embrace a model of economic sovereignty and industrial diversification to create sustainable opportunities for its youth.

²³ Sean Byrnes. "Neoliberalism Hasn't Helped Much of the Global South" *Jacobin*, May 22, 2022. <https://jacobin.com/2022/05/free-trade-global-south-imf-world-bank-liberal-order-bretton>

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