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Research Centre for Sustainable Hong Kong<sup>1</sup>**

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**Taking Stock of Bangladesh: Drivers and Future Directions**

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## **Introduction**

With past examples like the Language Movement of 1952<sup>3</sup> and the Liberation War of 1971<sup>4</sup>, student movements have always driven political change in Bangladesh. Driven by a call for the elimination of quotas in government jobs, initially, Bangladesh witnessed a wave of significant political changes in July-August 2024, including the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the formation of an interim government.<sup>5</sup> This paper examines the leading causes and policy consequences of the student-led government transition, which many consider the second revolution (after the independence movement in 1971), and proposes a few ideas for pursuing inclusive, democratic and sustainable development.

## **Background of the 2024 Movement**

The long-standing resentment over the reservation of quotas in government jobs—mainly concerning the reservation of 30 percent quotas for children and grandchildren of freedom

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bengali\\_language\\_movement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bengali_language_movement)

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/War\\_of\\_Liberation\\_The](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/War_of_Liberation_The)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/08/sheikh-hasinas-departure-exposes-fractures-bangladeshs-politics>

fighters<sup>6</sup>- underlines the 2024 student movement.<sup>7</sup> Similar calls to eliminate these quotas were raised in 2018<sup>8</sup>, which propelled the government to issue a directive to end the unpopular system. However, this decision was reversed in June 2024 at the High Court<sup>9</sup> after a writ suit by descendants of liberation warriors. The court's ruling sparked a resurgence of student demonstrations as worries grew about the return of an unfair and non-meritocratic quota system.

The students insisted on a fast settlement by executive action even though the government appealed to the Supreme Court<sup>10</sup> appellate division following the high court decision, and the Supreme Court had later set a further hearing in four weeks whilst holding on to its reversal decision in the interim. Tensions were raised by the government's perceived unwillingness to prioritise the problem and certain ministers' irresponsible remarks on the students' demands. The ruling party's- the ruling Bangladesh Awami League (AL)- decision to involve the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the student wing of the party, against the general students added an additional layer of complication in communication channels and eventually exacerbated the tension. On July 17, violent clashes between students and law enforcement authorities broke out after conflict first emerged between the BCL and the protesting students. However, it turned into a violent conflict when the students announced a "Complete Shutdown" program intending to stop all activities nationwide on July 18.<sup>11</sup>

The government was slow to realise the seriousness of the matter. Things could have been settled had the former Prime Minister engaged more proactively with the student leaders in the first week of July. A turning point was reached, however, when the police shot and killed Abu Sayed<sup>12</sup>, a student at Begum Rokeya University, in Rangpur on July 16. It is worth noting that, before the shooting, Abu Sayed did not pose any physical threat to law enforcement agencies. After July 16, the various political parties and groups that could not pose a practical challenge to the AL government in its 15-year rule came around to support the protesting students. An increasingly large number of citizens from all walks of life also came forward after violent clashes broke out and more students were killed or injured.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/why-bangladesh-freedom-fighters-anti-quota-reservation-protests-students-sheikh-hasina-reason-2568038-2024-07-17>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/8/5/the-victory-of-bangladeshs-student-movement-should-not-surprise-anyone>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/quota-system-in-bangladesh-scrapped-officially-1642534>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/quota-system-in-bangladesh-scrapped-officially-1642534>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/court/352276/govt-files-leave-to-appeal-against-high-court>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/parts-dhaka-almost-deserted-during-complete-shutdown-3659581>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/abu-sayeds-death-police-firing-cops-fir-runs-counter-known-facts-3662771>

The government failed to gauge the pulse of the movement accurately, even as they sought to step up their response. Curfew was enforced to contain the movement, yet the students refused to back down. At this point, the military played a conspicuous role in the events by deciding not to open fire to contain the movement. On August 5, the students called for a "March to Dhaka"<sup>13</sup> program by all citizens in the country to materialise their demand for the government's resignation. The authorities again imposed a curfew nationwide to deter people from flocking to Dhaka, but the military stuck to its decision not to open fire. After gathering at Shahbagh of Dhaka<sup>14</sup>, the protesting students marched to the official house of the Prime Minister, the "Gono Bhawan", on August 5. The former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina quit and headed for India the same day. The United Nations estimates that the movement claimed about 650 deaths<sup>15</sup> from July 16 to August 6, a significant loss for the nation.

### **Key Drivers**

Although the students initially aimed at eliminating the quotas, the movement is a confluence of multiple and diverse drivers involving heterogeneous actors.

**First**, the events kick-started when the High Court decided to reestablish quotas for descendants of freedom fighters. Students who had battled to eliminate quotas in 2018 were enraged by the policy change. They so got back active and launched the movement.

**Second**, the government's slow reaction, lack of involvement, and dependence on the BCL to manage the crisis further heightened the demonstrations. In the first stage of the movement, the upper levels of the government showed little regard for the student demands. Students perceived the delay in response as evidence that the government was ignoring their worries. In the last 15 years, the government may have felt they could contain the pressures of the opposing political parties. They thus exhibited resistance to interacting directly with the students. When they eventually decided to engage, it was getting too late.

**Third:** Mid-July saw a significant turning point in conflicts between police enforcement and students that resulted in the deaths of several hundred youngsters<sup>16</sup> in a few days. Hence, the movement ceased its narrow focus on an administrative revision of government recruitment policy (the quota provision) to become a political call for the government's resignation. Above

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/march-dhaka-programme-today-3669921>

<sup>14</sup> <https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Shahbag>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/nearly-650-people-killed-in-recent-spate-of-violence-in-bangladesh-un-report/article68535793.ece>

<sup>16</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/July\\_massacre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/July_massacre)

all, the killing of hundreds of children and students caused deep mental pain amongst much of the population, including many traditional supporters of the ruling party.

**Fourth:** There has long been deep discontent in society over a wide range of issues, including price hikes of essential household goods, pervasive corruption, and poor quality of public administration. The AL Government had failed to prioritise the combat against corruption. The governing political elites were widely seen to have benefited themselves through economic manipulation and unscrupulous tactics while the general population struggled to meet their basic needs. As the protests spread, more political factions and demographic segments rallied behind the students' objective, causing the movement to rapidly expand beyond its initial focus on eliminating quotas to encompass a broader call for the government's resignation.

**Fifth:** The AL Government's top officials were overconfident about their capacity to administer their nation. They had expended on achieving industrial growth but fell short of understanding social aspirations, let alone effective political communications. The domination of 'hybrid' leaders in the party and government, who infiltrated the party and the government in the last 15 years, caused a sense of deprivation among the dedicated party members, thus numbing them about providing their support to the government when necessary. As the overthrown government ran the country with too much confidence in the last 15 years, the government ignored the youth's strength in mobilising the people and the real needs of the people. They thus failed to contain the movement, and finally, a regime change resulted.

**Sixth:** Geopolitics and international affairs<sup>17</sup> also significantly influenced the events. Although the Hasina Administration had managed to preserve ties with two regional heavyweights, India and China, its relations with the US<sup>18</sup> and Europe were not very amicable. Before the 2024 general election, the US administration was very critical of the election process<sup>19</sup> and emphasised the participatory election, ensuring the participation of all political parties, including the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Even the US administration imposed visa restrictions<sup>20</sup> on some of the higher-ups of law enforcement agencies and political leaders. Before and after the election, former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was very critical of the stance of the US administration, describing their action as an intervention into the domestic affairs of Bangladesh. Thus, the overthrown administration did not receive any support from

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/how-bangladesh-can-survive-geopolitical-age-3279716>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irlrT3zvsqQ>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/us-steps-pressure-bangladesh-ahead-elections>

<sup>20</sup> <https://bd.usembassy.gov/30460/>

the international actors while they tried to contain the student movement. Given the US-China competition and India-China rivalry, Bangladesh's strategic positions in this region expose the country to a vulnerability that has necessitated the country's government to maintain a robust and balanced relationship with all the nations.

### **New Baseline**

In many respects, the changes brought about by recent events have offered new possibilities and challenges for Bangladesh. **First:** Former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned and departed Bangladesh on August 5, 2024. An interim government<sup>21</sup> headed by Nobel Laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus<sup>22</sup> featuring two student leaders was formed to bring order. There are 21 government advisers overall. The fundamental responsibility of the interim government is to realise the ambition of the students who fervently wish for national transformation. Following the departure of the Sheikh Hasina government, we observed an unstable state in the country as the demonstrators engaged in vandalism on government buildings, houses and properties owned by the AL leaders and supporters as well as, in some cases, on the minority groups (like Hindus)<sup>23</sup> who were customarily perceived as AL supporters. The normalisation of the circumstances required some time. The interim government will need to bring back stability in the country as soon as possible so that people feel safe and go on with day-to-day life and so that further steps can be taken to realise the reform aspirations in favour of a healthy, democratic and sustainable future.

**Second:** On July 21, the Supreme Court decided<sup>24</sup> that with 5% set for the children of freedom fighters, 1% for people from ethnic minority groups, 1% for physically challenged and third gender, and 93% of government job candidates should be chosen based on merit. Under the Supreme Court's direction, the former AL Government published a circular<sup>25</sup> following the court's direction that allowed job seekers to be hired subject to merit. The long-standing debate on the contrast between meritocracy and quotas is expected to end, and deserving and qualified job seekers will be hired for government jobs.

**Third:** The movement has inspired a more general social awakening of the younger generations. Emphasising the importance of eradicating political prejudice and corruption in institutions, students and civil society organisations are now calling for a more open and fair

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<sup>21</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yunus\\_interim\\_government](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yunus_interim_government)

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2006/yunus/biographical/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/aftermath-al-govts-fall-minorities-faced-205-attacks-52-districts-3673296>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/sc-verdict-govt-jobs-93pc-merit-7pc-quota-3660211>

<sup>25</sup> <https://today.thefinancialexpress.com.bd/first-page/govt-issues-circular-cutting-all-job-quotas-to-7pc-1721758959>

political system. The extended tenure of the AL administration exerted a kind of politicisation effect on government and social institutions at all levels, which is uncondusive to inclusive governance. The current interim government will need to address this issue and reduce the politicisation of institutions.

**Fourth:** The major political parties have already started voicing their demands to the interim government to declare a roadmap for the next election. Implementation of reforms and planning a free, fair and credible election will take time and require patient and collaborative efforts. How the various political parties, such as the BNP, navigate the process in collaboration with other social groups and the interim government plays a vital part in ensuring a smooth transition period.

### **Going Forward**

The interim government has faced an extensive reform agenda requiring changes in practically every field, and societal expectations are running high. Given the high stakes, we would like to contribute several initial reminders.

**First:** To enhance accountability and public confidence, the interim government has to prioritise the re-establishment of democratic institutions—in particular, the judiciary and election commission, given the criticisms against politicised institutions. In the first several weeks of its existence, the interim government has taken several initiatives to 'neutralise' the judiciary with new judicial appointments at the top levels. The government also plans to reform the election commission, which will play a neutral role in future election management. These efforts are in the right direction and should be doubled down in the near future.

**Second:** The interim government should concentrate on putting rules guaranteeing merit-based hiring in public sector employment into effect and enhancing diversity in hiring to mitigate minority marginalisation. Crucially, reforms in the education system must stop the politicisation of educational institutions so that students of different social groups will equally benefit from education and be equipped for the challenge of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Universities are essential venues for knowledge creation and application. University governance and management need to be significantly improved, with qualified academics chosen as the heads of the universities.

**Third:** Stiff policies need to be in place to contain better corruption. Corrupt practices have undermined the economy, particularly the banking and stock markets. The government should prioritise the financial industry in combating corruption.

**Fourth:** Policies that involve more young people in leadership ought to be created. To guarantee that students' issues are considered throughout the policymaking process, the government has to create effective communication channels with youth organisations.

**Fifth:** The government should ensure people's rights to express themselves peacefully. Maintaining political reform and civil liberty will prevent violent outbursts and social disturbance. All minority groups have the right to feel safe and secure in society.

**Sixth:** To heal the wounds from the recent outbursts of violence, the interim government should pursue a policy of reconciliation by including all relevant parties in open communication to restore confidence and rebuild communal trust. Further occurrence of violence by all parties should be stopped and penalised.

## **Conclusion**

The summer events of 2024 demonstrated the continuous influence of young-led activity in the political scene of Bangladesh. From court rulings to general governance concerns, the newly formed interim government must move swiftly to address the fundamental reasons for discontent and act towards enhanced justice, equity, inclusiveness and democracy.