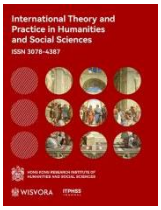
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# Identity Politics, Institutional Deconstruction, and the Development and Transformation of Bangladesh's Student Movement: A Global History Perspective

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**Abstract**

Student politics has long shaped Bangladesh's political and social order. The student movements of 2024 precipitated significant political change and marked the beginning of a new phase in the country's development. Viewed through the lens of global history, these events are not merely domestic phenomena but form part of a longer trajectory in which postcolonial youth mobilization, identity construction, and institutional transformation intersect with broader global processes—including the legacies of the Cold War, crises of neoliberal governance, transnational youth networks, and democratic experiments across the Global South. Nationalism, in this context, functions both as a tool for forging consensus and as a local response to, and reworking of, global institutional templates. This article examines the evolution, characteristics, and implications of these developments for Bangladesh's political and social landscape, while situating them within comparable patterns of change in other developing societies.

## 1. Introduction

Research on the political, economic, and social structures of middle and smaller powers in South and Southeast Asia remains a valuable area of inquiry. Within this broader field, the study of student politics in Bangladesh offers a useful lens for examining the country's recent political developments, social dynamics, and governance challenges (Alam et al., 2011; Nasrin & Rahman, 2019).

Student politics has long played a visible role in Bangladesh's political life (Umar, 2004). The events of 2024 brought renewed attention to the capacity of student groups to influence national debates and political processes. An analysis of these developments can shed light on underlying issues such as youth employment, institutional performance, public trust, and the interaction between domestic pressures and regional factors. It also provides an opportunity to observe how questions of national identity and collective belonging are articulated in

contemporary political discourse.

This paper focuses on two interrelated dimensions: the practical challenges of national development that Bangladesh currently faces, and the ways in which ideas of national identity and social cohesion are expressed and contested, particularly among younger generations. By examining the evolution, characteristics, and implications of recent student political activity, the study aims to contribute to a clearer understanding of Bangladesh's political trajectory and the broader patterns of change visible in comparable developing societies.

The analysis draws on both qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to provide a balanced assessment of the drivers, features, and potential consequences of these political dynamics.

## 2. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative and quantitative techniques to examine the development and characteristics of student politics in Bangladesh. The integration of both approaches aims to provide a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of the subject.

### 2.1 Data Collection

Qualitative data were gathered primarily through a combination of structured and semi-structured interviews, supplemented by observational materials and secondary sources. These methods were used to explore the perspectives of relevant actors and to trace the evolution of political and social trends associated with student activism. Quantitative data collection involved targeted questionnaire surveys conducted among specific population groups, enabling the analysis of broader patterns and correlations. Additional techniques, including statistical analysis, historical comparison, and literature review, were incorporated to strengthen the empirical foundation of the study. The overall data collection strategy prioritizes reliability, transparency, and relevance to the research questions.

## 2.2 Analytical Framework

An integrated analytical framework was developed to systematically examine the behavior and interactions of various political and social actors. Qualitative methods, particularly case study analysis and process tracing, were applied to ensure contextual depth and to capture the specificities of the Bangladeshi setting. Once the core framework was established, correlation analysis, content analysis, and comparative assessment were employed to identify patterns and draw more generalizable insights. The framework is designed to remain adaptable to changing political conditions while maintaining analytical rigor.

## 2.3 Scope of Analysis

The analysis focuses on political strategies, institutional dynamics, and prevailing social attitudes, with particular attention to questions of governance, national identity, and youth political participation. While broader ideological dimensions and regional strategic contexts are considered where relevant, the primary emphasis remains on the domestic drivers and implications of student politics in Bangladesh. The study seeks to provide empirically grounded observations that contribute to a clearer understanding of political change in developing societies facing similar structural challenges.

## 3. Background

The political developments in Bangladesh in recent years have been closely linked to long-standing socio-economic and governance challenges. The student protests that began in 2024 were triggered by a High Court ruling in June that reinstated a civil service quota system. This system reserved a portion of government positions for descendants of "Freedom Fighters" from the 1971 War of Independence, raising concerns among many students about employment fairness and equal opportunity.

Initial demonstrations were concentrated at Dhaka University, where students organized walkouts and marches calling for reform of the quota policy. As the protests spread to other public universities, tensions

increased. In July, transportation disruptions occurred in several areas, and confrontations between demonstrators and security forces resulted in casualties. Public statements by government officials further heightened the atmosphere of confrontation.

By early August 2024, the situation had escalated to the point that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned and left the country. An interim government was subsequently formed under the leadership of Muhammad Yunus, with commitments to maintain order and prepare for a political transition. Student groups continued to express views on the pace of reforms, accountability for earlier incidents, and the future structure of governance. Differences remain between various student organizations and the interim authorities regarding the distribution of responsibilities and the timeline for elections.

These events reflect deeper issues that have accumulated over time in Bangladesh, including youth unemployment, questions of institutional effectiveness, and public trust in political processes (Hossain et al., 2019; Nasrin & Rahman, 2019). They also illustrate the complex interplay between domestic pressures and regional geopolitical factors. The trajectory of the current transition will depend on how these underlying challenges are addressed while maintaining basic political stability and economic continuity.

## 4. The Political and Social Environment in Bangladesh

An examination of political and social conditions in Bangladesh requires consideration of both the operation of state institutions and the practical relationship between citizens' everyday needs—livelihoods, legal protections, and prospects for advancement—and the performance of governing authorities.

Since independence, Bangladesh's development has been influenced by geographic, economic, and institutional factors (Umar, 2004). The country occupies a strategically significant location in South Asia, bordered by India on three sides and Myanmar to the southeast, with access to the Bay of Bengal. This position offers potential for regional trade and connectivity, while also presenting challenges related to neighbourhood relations and external pressures. Economically, the garment industry has long dominated export earnings. Structural constraints include elevated youth unemployment, infrastructure gaps, and exposure to external economic fluctuations.

In the political sphere, successive administrations have sought to maintain public order while managing competing social demands. Under the previous government, efforts to ensure continuity of authority involved tighter management of political competition and public expression. These measures were accompanied by questions regarding the degree of institutional autonomy and the scope of political participation. Concurrently, longer-term issues—limited formal employment opportunities for young people, perceptions of uneven access to public resources, and varying levels of administrative effectiveness—contributed to public discontent (Wolf, 2019).

These interconnected geographic, economic, and political conditions form a complex environment. Progress in expanding opportunities and improving governance capacity must be pursued alongside the preservation of basic stability and the conditions required for sustained economic development.

## 5. Political Concerns of Students and Broader Society

## 5.1 Structural Challenges in the Political and Economic System

Bangladesh faces a combination of economic and governance pressures that have shaped public expectations, particularly among younger generations. Economically, recent indicators point to moderated growth, elevated inflation, declining foreign-exchange reserves, rising external debt, and a relatively low tax-to-GDP ratio. The heavy reliance on the garment sector for export earnings, together with exposure to global economic fluctuations, has constrained fiscal space and limited the creation of sufficient formal employment opportunities.

On the political side, the previous administration prioritized continuity of authority and public order.

Measures taken to manage political competition and public discourse raised questions about the breadth of participation and the independence of certain institutions. Appointments and administrative practices in some areas were perceived as favouring political loyalty, which affected public confidence in governance processes. These developments, alongside persistent concerns over corruption and unequal access to opportunities, contributed to growing dissatisfaction, especially among students and young people seeking stable pathways for advancement (Hossain et al., 2019; Arafat, 2024).

Addressing these structural issues requires careful attention to both economic diversification and the gradual strengthening of institutional capacity, while safeguarding the basic conditions of political stability necessary for sustained development.

## 5.2 Expanding Opportunities for Youth Development

A central concern for many students and young citizens is the availability of fair and accessible channels for education, employment, and social mobility. High levels of youth unemployment and perceptions of limited merit-based opportunities have fuelled demands for greater fairness in public recruitment and more responsive governance.

Student organizations have articulated preferences for political reforms that enhance transparency, expand participation, and reduce external influence over domestic affairs. Some student leaders have moved into formal political activity, including the formation of new parties, and have emphasized the importance of national autonomy and collective identity. Nationalism has served as one means of mobilizing support and framing shared goals (Nasrin & Rahman, 2019).

At the same time, experience in many developing countries indicates that rapid or poorly managed political transitions can generate uncertainty, disrupt economic activity, and complicate the delivery of public services. The more practical challenge lies in translating youth aspirations into workable policies that improve employment prospects and institutional performance without undermining social order. Building broader consensus around gradual, inclusive reforms remains essential if these aspirations are to be met in a sustainable manner (Arafat, 2024).

# 6. Ideological Currents and the Role of Nationalism

The political activities of students in Bangladesh are accompanied by a range of ideological orientations that seek to connect abstract principles with practical governance concerns. These orientations reflect both dissatisfaction with existing conditions and aspirations for a more effective and inclusive political order.

Two interrelated factors help explain the intensity of current student political engagement. First, many student leaders emphasize the need to move beyond inherited political labels and focus on concrete issues such as institutional performance, public services, discipline, and social stability. Their stated objectives often centre on improving the functioning of government and addressing immediate societal problems rather than solely on abstract ideological commitments (Hossain et al., 2019).

Second, questions of national identity and collective belonging occupy a prominent place in student discourse. In periods of political uncertainty, appeals to national character and shared identity can serve as powerful mobilizing tools, particularly among younger generations. This phenomenon is not unique to Bangladesh; similar patterns of heightened national sentiment among youth have been observed in various countries facing rapid social change or perceived governance deficits. In the Bangladeshi context, such sentiment often combines a sense of responsibility for the nation's future with frustration over limited opportunities and institutional shortcomings (Alam et al., 2011; Wolf, 2019).

The relationship between governmental stability and the scope of student politics is noteworthy. Where political institutions are relatively consolidated and possess functioning mechanisms for addressing grievances, student activism tends to remain within established channels of debate and electoral competition. In contrast, when institutions are under strain and public trust is low, nationalist appeals can gain broader traction and

amplify existing tensions. Bangladesh's geopolitical position and complex regional relationships add further layers of sensitivity to these dynamics.

The interplay of historical legacies, institutional challenges, and generational aspirations has therefore contributed to the prominence of student politics in recent years. Rather than viewing these developments through a single evaluative lens, it is more useful to examine how competing ideas of national identity, effective governance, and social order interact within the country's specific conditions. The key analytical task is to understand the conditions under which such ideological currents can be channelled toward constructive institutional improvement while minimizing risks to political stability and economic continuity.

## 7. Outcome and Conclusion

The recent activation of student politics in Bangladesh reflects deeper structural tensions that have accumulated over time, including youth employment pressures, questions of institutional performance, and public expectations regarding fairness and opportunity. These dynamics form part of a broader pattern visible in various developing countries, where rapid social change intersects with limited institutional capacity and external geopolitical constraints.

While peace and development remain central aspirations for most societies, national trajectories continue to be shaped by historical legacies, domestic political realities, geographic position, and development priorities. In Bangladesh, the student movements of 2024 contributed to a significant political transition. The formation of an interim administration marked a new phase, yet differences persist among political actors regarding the pace of reform, accountability, and the future distribution of authority.

Experience across many developing countries suggests that large-scale political mobilization, if not accompanied by careful management of order and economic continuity, can generate uncertainty and complicate longer-term progress. Sustainable improvements in governance and opportunity are more likely to result from gradual institutional strengthening, broader social consensus, and policies that expand employment and public services, rather than from prolonged confrontation (Nasrin & Rahman, 2019; Arafat, 2024).

The future direction of Bangladesh's political process will depend on the ability of various forces—including student organizations, the interim authorities, and other political groups—to channel existing energies into practical measures that address structural constraints while preserving basic stability. The central task remains the pursuit of development pathways suited to the country's specific conditions, with attention to both the aspirations of younger generations and the requirements of social order and economic resilience.

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