

Bangladesh’s July-August Uprising: A Student Movement That Transcended Quota Reform

in [South Asia](#) by [Kazi A Nurul Huda](#) 30/09/2024



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[The July-August 2024 student-public uprising in Bangladesh](#) began with a call for government job quota reforms but swiftly evolved into a profound challenge to the political status quo. What started as a protest over quotas transformed into a broader movement for regime change and reshaped Bangladesh's political landscape.

The protests commenced on July 1st, primarily involving students from Dhaka University and other institutions, who sought changes to the government's job quota system. Initially, these demonstrations, marked by rallies and blockades, attracted limited public attention and seemed like yet another routine protest. However, the situation escalated significantly on July 14th when [Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina](#) made a controversial statement comparing the protesters to Razakars, the traitors in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. This comment, widely perceived as an insult, ignited widespread outrage.

In response to the Sheikh Hasina's remarks, students organized anti-discrimination rallies, with [chants](#) such as "Who are you? Who am I? Razakar! Razakar! Who said so? Who said so? Dictator! Dictator!" These slogans challenged the government's narrative and underscored the growing discontent. That night, violence erupted when thugs from the ruling party Bangladesh Awami League's student wing, the Student League, specifically targeting female students, [attacked](#)

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[protesters](#). This violence marked a crucial turning point in the movement.

Following this, [Nahid Islam](#), a key figure in the uprising, called for protests across educational institutions on July 16th, demanding that the Prime Minister retract her statement. The Awami League's response, including General Secretary Obaidul Quader's threat to confront "[self-proclaimed Razakars](#)" on July 15, heightened tensions. The clashes between students and the police-Student League alliance on July 16th resulted in at [least six deaths, including Abu Sayed](#), whose defiant stance against police repression became a symbol of resistance.

The government's reaction included [closing universities and evacuating dormitories](#), an attempt to regain control. However, the momentum shifted again on [July 18th](#) when private university students took to the streets and clashed with government forces and Awami League party members and their allies, despite their limited direct stake in government jobs. Their involvement was fueled by outrage over the Prime Minister's comments and the death of Abu Sayed, as the movement expanded beyond immediate grievances to confront broader issues of political repression and injustice.

[The Supreme Court's ruling on July 21st](#), which favored merit-based recruitment, did not end the unrest. The violence had already resulted in [over 130 deaths](#), and public outrage continued to grow. The government's viol

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lure to address protesters'

demands shifted the movement's focus from quota reform to a call for the government's resignation. This shift highlighted a deepening frustration with the government's authoritarian practices and systemic issues.

The success of the student movement in toppling the government was not merely due to its tactics but also its ability to unite diverse groups under a common goal. Unlike established political parties like Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), which struggled to connect with the middle class and youth, the student movement transcended traditional political divides. It effectively countered the Awami League's narrative by using slogans that resonated with a broader audience and dismantled the Razakar label used to discredit opponents.

The slogan "Who are you? Who am I? Razakar! Razakar! Who said so? Who said so? Dictator! Dictator!" played a pivotal role in neutralizing the government's attempts to undermine the movement. It allowed political parties to participate without fear of being [labeled anti-liberation](#) and reassured non-political citizens that the movement was not solely a political maneuver. This slogan's significance lay in its ability to legitimize the opposition's claims by denouncing the [government as a dictatorship](#).

The movement's evolution from a social movement for quota reform to a political movement demanding regime change was marked by its ability to unite various factors. The Supreme Court's decision to



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reduce the quota from [56% to 7% on July 21st](#), the focus shifted to demanding the Prime Minister's resignation, particularly after the government's violent response and refusal to apologize. This transition underscored the movement's success in shifting public sentiment from specific grievances to a broader challenge to the regime.

The involvement of BNP and JI, despite [their historical failures to mobilize effective opposition](#), demonstrated the movement's unique ability to bridge political divides. Their support, while not always overt, amplified the movement's impact. The emotional resonance of civilian casualties and the effective counter to the government's narrative played a crucial role in galvanizing support.

The success of the movement was not due to a new ideological framework but to its clear, actionable objective. The focus on regime change allowed various groups to unite despite a lack of shared democratic or pluralistic vision. This unity, driven by a common goal, was essential in the movement's effectiveness.

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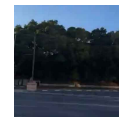
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For the international community, the Bangladesh student uprising offers a significant case study in grassroots resistance against authoritarianism. It highlights the need for support for democratic expressions and resistance to state repression. The movement reveals that genuine political reform requires addressing not only immediate demands but also the broader systemic issues that enable authoritarianism.

In conclusion, the July-August 20224 student-public uprising represents a pivotal moment in Bangladesh's political history. It demonstrates the power of collective action in confronting authoritarian regimes and underscores the need for continued support for democratic movements globally. As Bangladesh moves forward, it is essential to examine the constitutional elements that allowed authoritarianism to flourish and ensure that future reforms address these foundational issues.

Kazi A S M Nurul Huda is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Dhaka. He earned his PhD in philosophy from the University of Oklahoma, USA. His main areas of interest are epistemology, political philosophy, ethics, and how they relate to each other. He is also engaged in applied philosophical and ethical topics, such as environmental philosophy, development ethics, business ethics, bioethics, and philosophy of education. He has published numerous research articles in prominent academic journals. The journals include [Developing World Bioethics](#), [Business Ethics, the Environment, and Responsibility](#), [Cultural Dyr](#)  English [Journal of Applied Philosophy](#),

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and [Symposion](#). Dr. Huda regularly writes for national and international news outlets as part of his work as a public intellectual, where he presents perspectives grounded in philosophy. His most recent commentaries have been published in [The Daily Star](#), [The Diplomat](#), and [E-International Relations](#).

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