

Briefing Paper #3 on
**Bangladesh's Youth Uprising:
Towards a Democratic Future**

September 2024



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Democratic Future

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Background

Sheikh Hasina's regime, termed a 'thugocracy' by *The Economist*,¹ ruled Bangladesh for over 15 years, making Hasina the longest-serving woman head of state. Relying on 'patronage politics', the Hasina-led Awami League government captured all state institutions, effectively vanishing the differences between the state and the ruling party.² The country was on the verge of becoming a totalitarian state after three sham elections overseen by Sheikh Hasina's government in 2014, 2018 and 2024, in which AL won landslide victories by rigging the elections and disenfranchising the people.

Because of the lack of democracy, accountability within the institutions declined, giving birth to some significant structural issues—large-scale financial scams in banking sectors, money laundering, and crony capitalism—which eventually resulted in jobless growth, where the economy expanded but did not generate sufficient jobs to absorb the growing workforce, especially for graduates and skilled labour. According to the Labour Force Survey 2022, graduate unemployment in Bangladesh increased to 28% by 2022.

The lack of decent jobs in the private sector, especially for graduates, made public sector jobs more demanding than ever. Hence, in June 2024, when a Bangladeshi court decided to restore the discriminatory quota-based recruitment system for public jobs where 56% of jobs are reserved for different groups of people, youth in Bangladesh who were already suffering from an acute job crisis due to the decade-long jobless growth under the Hasina regime, started protesting.³ By mid-July, the protests turned deadly when Sheikh Hasina's government ordered a brutal crackdown, and within weeks, the death toll went beyond hundreds.

As the protesters, led by the youths, asked for accountability for the murders during the crackdown, Hasina's government ignored the call and ordered fresh violence on protesters on August 4. More protesters died on the streets, mainly in the hands of Awami League-backed cadres, on that day. This triggered the protesters to declare the 'March to Dhaka'. As protesters came out on August 5, defying curfew, Sheikh Hasina resigned and fled.

With Sheikh Hasina's downfall, the aspiration for democracy was renewed.

In this context, the Asia Democracy Network (ADN) and Sydney Policy and Analysis Centre (SPAC) organised the fourth bimonthly webinar series on Bangladesh on August 23, 2024. During the webinar, the participants discussed the nature of Bangladesh's youth uprising and the future of Bangladesh's democracy.

This brief provides a summary of the discussion.

¹ *The Economist*. (2022). How sanctions really can improve respect for human rights. *The Economist*. <https://www.economist.com/asia/2022/01/29/how-sanctions-really-can-improve-respect-for-human-rights>

² *The Economist*. (2024). Bangladesh has ousted an autocrat. Now for the hard part. *The Economist*. <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2024/08/08/bangladesh-has-ousted-an-autocrat-now-for-the-hard-part>

³ Jha, S. (2024, August 14). From Arab Spring to Bangladesh regime fall — 'jobless growth' is a national security issue. *The Indian Express*. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/arab-spring-bangladesh-regime-fall-9513471/>

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1. Outline and the Discussants

The webinar was divided into three segments: (i) the nature of the uprising and the role of females, (ii) the role of rap music and cultural activism during the movement, and (iii) the future of democratic reforms.

Three discussants who joined the webinar included:

- **Nusrat Tabassum**, Coordinator of the Students Against Discrimination;
- **SkibKhan**, a Bangladeshi rapper; and
- **Rezaur Rahman Lenin**, independent researcher and human rights activist.

Aaqib Md Shatil, SPAC's research and policy consultant, moderated the webinar. Sabra Zahid, the Asia Democracy Network's program officer, delivered the opening remarks.

The 90-minute session started at GMT 1100.

2. Key discussion points

2.1) Nature of uprising and role of females

The movement was launched in early July and spearheaded by the youths, mostly university students and soon-to-be graduates, who asked for a fair recruitment system in public sector jobs, given the scarcity of decent jobs and high-level graduate unemployment. However, a massive number of common people who had nothing to do with the quota or recruitment system joined the students in the streets when the security forces cracked down on the protesters.

The movement reached a critical juncture on July 16, 2024, when the security forces, along with Awami League's (AL) loyal armed cadres, opened fire on the protesters, killing 6, mostly students. In other parts of the country, many were badly beaten by AL student wing Chhatra League cadres.

The next day was a public holiday, but to quell the protest, the government declared all educational institutions closed and ordered the students to evacuate their respective campuses and dormitories, which created uncertainty among the protest organisers regarding the protest's future.

However, on July 18, when students from all educational institutions—schools, colleges, degree colleges, and private universities—came out on the streets defying the government's order, and the security forces opened fire at them, killing dozens on the streets, the movement peaked.

But among all, women were omnipresent everywhere during the protest. It was indeed the participation of women that shaped the protest as it helped break down the environment of fear created by the autocratic regime of Sheikh Hasina, killing hundreds in a few weeks. More people started coming out. At one stage, even newly married wives came out with their spouses.

The increased enrolment of female students in educational institutions has empowered them by providing access to knowledge and critical thinking skills, making them more aware of their rights and responsibilities. This awareness has contributed to their active participation in civic movements, particularly in demanding democratic reforms

As the fear vanished, the crowds got larger. On August 5, 2024, despite the declaration of a curfew, large crowds, comprising people from all walks of life, occupied the roads of Dhaka and stormed inside Prime Minister's resident Gono Bhaban, forcing Sheikh Hasina to resign and flee to India.

2.2) The influence of cultural activism

Despite the comparatively thin presence of mainstream artists and musicians supporting the protesters during the protest, rappers, hip-hoppers, and graffiti artists played a crucial role in inspiring the youth through their creative works.

The songs created during this time gave hope to the protesters, fuelled their anger, and gave them the courage to challenge the system of power and eventually overthrow it. The songs and the artists behind the music essentially became the forefront of the resistance.

Rappers released 30 to 40 songs during the protest to support the protesters. Some of the notable music tracks include Kotha Ko (Speak up), Awaaz Utha (Raise your Voice), Desh Shongskar (Reform the Country), Jobab de (Answer us), etc. In addition, some producers gave away their music beats for free so that the rappers did not need to pay for them.

The motto for rappers and musicians was, 'Keep it stupidly simple'; hence, the lyrics of their tracks were on-point, targeting the regime's brutality and urging the protesters not to stop doing what they were doing. This approach built the bridge between the protesting youth and the musicians, and they all started to dream of a free Bangladesh together.

Hip-hop and rap music have been instrumental in mobilizing and empowering young people, providing them with an outlet to articulate their feelings. The music has served as a source of emotional and mental sustenance for numerous demonstrators, bolstering their resolve and concentration in the face of hardship and injustice.

This came at a cost. Security forces were after the musicians at one point, and one of the rappers, Hannan Hossain Shimul, was arrested during the protest and placed on a two-day remand for releasing Awaaz Utha, which became popular among youth and inspired many.

2.3) Ongoing and future reforms

After the mass uprising, revolutionary spirits are still on the streets. On August 8, 2024, Bangladesh's first and only Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Professor Muhammad Yunus, took over as the chief advisor of the interim government and formed an interim government. Under his leadership, more than 20 eminent citizens and two youth coordinators who led the uprising joined the government. It is uncertain how long the new government will stay, but the government is now implementing some reforms to ensure accountability in governance.

Since 2009, according to the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) estimates, over 600 people have been victims of enforced disappearances, with many later found in police custody or their bodies discovered in remote areas. However, around a hundred of them remain missing. The interim government formed a commission to find the perpetrators of enforced disappearances and the fate of the missing victims. Bangladesh also signed the International Convention on Enforced Disappearances. The new government appears committed to reviewing and amending some problematic laws.

The International Crimes Tribunal Act and the Cyber Security Act are the two most problematic laws that need immediate review. The International Crimes Tribunal Act was used to prosecute alleged war criminals who mostly belonged to opposition parties, and almost all of the accused were sentenced to death. The Cyber Security Act is often termed unamendable because of its draconian nature.

Besides, security forces need to be held accountable for the crimes they were allegedly involved in, most notably, RAB and DGFI. The U.S. Treasury imposed sanctions on the

Rapid Action Battalion or RAB officials for their role in gross human rights violations. Extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and torture in custody should end.

On the other hand, the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) should ensure that its officials follow the core human rights standards and are not being used against the people's interests.

The ones accused under the draconian acts should also be freed through due process.

3. Recommendations

The webinar focused on the nature of Bangladesh's youth-led uprising, the role of different actors and the required reforms for the future.

- a) Promote female enrolment in education, raise awareness about their rights and civic responsibilities, and focus on gender equality in education and leadership roles.
- b) Ensure a safe space for creative expressions that can inspire change by connecting the youth of Bangladesh with cultural activists.
- c) Build trust between the government and the people by holding security forces accountable for human rights violations and establishing an independent commission to investigate and provide justice for victims.
- d) Review and amend laws like the International Crimes Tribunal Act and the Cyber Security Act to ensure they align with human rights standards, do not limit free speech, and do not target opposition members.
- e) Promote platforms for citizen engagement and build transparent, accountable institutions to sustain democratic values and address citizen demands, especially human rights, justice, and freedom.

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