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From revolt to revolution: exploring motivating factors of Bangladesh's July 2024 uprising

Md. Sohel Rana ^{a,*}, Shadia Sharmin ^{a,c}, Mohammad Bin Amin ^{b,d,e,*}, Judit Oláh ^f

^a Department of Business Administration, University of Scholars, 40, Kemal Ataturk Avenue, Banani, 1213 Dhaka, Bangladesh

^b Doctoral School of Management and Business Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Debrecen, Böszörményi street 138, 4032 Debrecen, Hungary

^c Centre for Higher Studies and Research, Bangladesh University of Professional, Mirpur Cantonment, Dhaka 1216, Bangladesh

^d Department of Business Administration, Faculty of Business Studies, Bangladesh Army University of Science and Technology, Saidpur 5310, Nilphamari, Bangladesh

^e Department of Business Studies, State University of Bangladesh, 696 Kendua, Kanchan, Rugganj, Narayanganj 1461, Dhaka, Bangladesh

^f Doctoral School of Management and Business Administration, John von Neumann University, 6000, Kecskemét, Hungary

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the motivating factors behind Bangladesh's July 2024 uprising, which initially began as a protest against the civil service quota system and subsequently evolved into a nationwide revolutionary movement. Employing Reflexive Thematic Analysis, the research draws on protest narratives, media reports, and activist statements to identify the key dynamics that shaped the uprising's trajectory. Findings revealed six interrelated themes: structural grievances, rooted in corruption, inequality, and authoritarian governance; the emergence of youth identity as a generational force for change; the role of emotions, including anger, hope, and fear, in sustaining mobilization; the strategic framing processes that expanded sectoral demands into systemic challenges; aspirations for democracy and justice; and online-offline mobilization cycle which gave the movement future-oriented legitimacy. The study contributed to scholarship on contentious politics by demonstrating how grievances, emotions, identity, and framing interact to transform protests into revolutionary moments. It also highlighted the methodological value of Reflexive Thematic Analysis in capturing the meaning-making processes of social movements. While limited by reliance on textual data and focus on immediate events, the research underscores broader implications for theory, policy, and activism. It shows that ignoring youth grievances risks fueling systemic unrest, whereas youth-driven mobilizations can catalyze democratic renewal in semi-authoritarian contexts.

Introduction

Bangladesh has a long history of student-led activism shaping its democratic and political landscape, from the 1952 Language Movement to the pro-democracy struggles of the 1990s (Ullah, 2009; Riaz, 2016; Jackman, 2021; Ghosh, 2023). The 2018 quota reform protests exposed dissatisfaction with patronage-based recruitment systems and rising youth frustrations (Mahmud, 2025; Zainuddin et al., 2025). In July 2024, what began as opposition to the reinstatement of freedom-fighter quotas in public employment escalated into one of the largest uprisings in post-independence Bangladesh, mobilizing students, urban middle classes, and disenfranchised youth alike (Abid, 2025; Mahmud, 2025). This uprising reflected not only policy-related grievances but also deep-rooted frustrations over inequality, governance, and generational

exclusion (Ahmad, 2025; Chowdhury, 2025).

The July 2024 uprising is one of the most significant milestones in Bangladesh's political history. Unlike the previous protests, which used a quota-based system, it transcended one-issue protests and became an oriented movement toward the mass offering to achieve democratic accountability, equity, and systemic change (Rodacki, 2025). The scale of the movement suggests that the issue of domestic unrest was interwoven with global processes at the neoliberal reorganization level, digital connectivity, and the transnational discourses on youth empowerment and the right to democracy. In turn, the movement is to be evaluated in the wider paradigm of the political contradictions of globalisation, where dreams of global modernity are mixed with dissatisfaction that is caused by feelings of exclusion and precarity.

This study places the July 2024 uprising in the context of some of the

* Corresponding authors.

E-mail addresses: drsohelmr@gmail.com (Md.S. Rana), shadia.sharmin@ius.edu.bd (S. Sharmin), binamindu@gmail.com (M.B. Amin), olah.judit@uni-neumann.hu (J. Oláh).

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main theories of globalization that explain how global interdependence transforms political participation and resistance. Both Giddens (2003) and Appadurai (1996) understand globalization as a change process that connects the local with global flows of capital, culture, and identity. The concept of glocalisation presented by Robertson (1992) gathers the idea that global concepts are viewed through the prism of local situations- a concept that proved to be instrumental in comprehending how the Bangladeshi youth rebrand international notions of democracy to combat domestic injustices in the country. In the meantime, Sassen (2014) and Rizvi et al. (2022) suggest that neoliberal globalization produces social expulsions and inequality, thus fueling new models of political consciousness. Tarrow (2022) and Castells (2015) emphasize the importance of networked movements enabled by digital networks and transnational solidarities that are not constrained by national borders. Together, these insights reveal that the July 2024 uprising in Bangladesh was not a solitary incident but a globalised trend of young people's mobilisation driven by economic precarity, digital connectedness, and cross-national democratic imaginations.

The Bangladesh uprising is part of a wider trend of youth-led mobilisation in South Asia, highlighting similarities between generational unhappiness and digital mobilisation. In Sri Lanka, Aragalaya protests were protests by the youth in 2022 that opposed economic collapse and political dynasties, and resulted in the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapakse (Kaur, 2024). The example of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests (2019–2020) and the farmers' movement (2021–2022) in India demonstrated how local demands were turned into international ones through transnational solidarity and mobilisation via social media (Sangwa, 2025). Equally representative of a generational activism of gender justice and inclusive governance was Pakistan's Aurat March and Students Solidarity March (2019–2023), and across the world, youth politics that the world informed (Bagheri, 2022). These movements have a lexicon of globalised resistance, using digital spaces and transnational imaginaries to disrupt existing political regimes even though they differ in context (Ragandang, 2025; Van Ongevalle et al., 2025). As a result, the Bangladesh uprising is part of a regional and global chain of so-called connected revolutions, in which local activism is supported by transnational digital repertoires and a transnational conception of justice.

With the growing academic interest, a critical gap in analysis becomes apparent. A swift transformation of the 2024 quota protests into a policy agitation with a limited geographic focus and a nationwide revolution is an unsatisfactory aspect of the process. This study will argue that the revolt was not merely a response to domestic political grievances, but a product of globalized youth consciousness that was formed by the combined effect of the economic disparities and inequalities, digitalization, and the spread of globalized democratic imaginaries. To this end, the current study will be guided by the following general research question: How did globalized systems of inequality and transnational narratives of democracy interplay with local grievances to turn the July 2024 quota protests into a national movement in Bangladesh?

By answering this question, this study will place the July 2024 uprising in Bangladesh in the larger academic discussion of globalization by analyzing how transnational economic and cultural networks influence protest processes, youth mobilization, and democratic resistance in the Global South. It helps to make comparative studies on how local movements translate global discontent into revolutionary change in their operationalisation, hence understanding the interaction between state policy, social inequality, and globalization in determining the modern forms of mass mobilization.

This paper advances globalization scholarship by arguing that the July 2024 uprising was primarily driven by globalized inequality mediated through digital networks, rather than by globalization in a diffuse or totalizing sense. While cultural globalization, transnational democratic imaginaries, and glocalised identities played important supporting roles, the central mechanism connecting global processes to local mobilization was the experience of socioeconomic exclusion under

neoliberal political economy, amplified and accelerated through digitally networked communication. By foregrounding this mechanism, the study demonstrates how globalized inequality becomes politically actionable when mediated by digital infrastructures that transform localized grievances into nationally resonant and morally charged collective action. In doing so, the paper contributes to debates on how globalization reshapes contentious politics in semi-authoritarian contexts of the Global South (Sassen, 2014; Castells, 2015; Rizvi et al., 2022; Tarrow, 2022).

The term “revolution” is used in this study in an analytical and processual sense rather than as a definitive evaluation of outcomes. It denotes the rapid expansion, radicalization, and delegitimization of existing authority structures driven by mass participation, rather than the consolidation of a new political order. Acknowledging that the classification of the July 2024 events remains contested, this paper employs the concept to capture the movement's scope, intensity, and symbolic rupture with the existing regime (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015; Beisinger, 2007).

Theoretical and literature framework

Globalization and the reconfiguration of political agency

Globalization has fundamentally reshaped the conditions under which political agency is formed and exercised, particularly in the Global South. Rather than treating globalization as a uniform or abstract process, this study understands it as a set of interconnected economic, cultural, and communicative transformations that restructure how grievances are experienced and articulated. Giddens (2003) conceptualizes globalization as the intensification of worldwide social relations, linking distant localities in ways that reshape political consciousness. Building on this, Appadurai (1996) emphasizes the circulation of global ideoscapes and mediascapes, through which democratic ideas, rights-based discourses, and imaginaries of justice travel across borders. Robertson's (1992) notion of glocalization further clarifies how these global ideas are not passively adopted but are reinterpreted within local political and cultural contexts.

Together, these perspectives suggest that political contention in Bangladesh cannot be understood solely as a reaction to domestic policy decisions. Instead, youth political agency emerges at the intersection of localized grievances and globally circulating ideas about democracy, meritocracy, and justice. Globalization, in this sense, does not determine protest outcomes, but it reshapes the symbolic and cognitive resources through which actors interpret inequality and envision political alternatives.

Globalized inequality and structural discontent

While globalization has expanded connectivity and opportunity, it has also intensified structural inequalities, particularly under neoliberal economic arrangements. Scholars such as Sassen (2014) and Rizvi et al. (2022) argue that neoliberal globalization produces forms of “systemic expulsion,” including precarious employment, elite capture of state institutions, and the erosion of social mobility. In many Global South contexts, these global pressures intersect with entrenched clientelist governance, producing a perception among educated youth that meritocratic pathways are systematically blocked.

In Bangladesh, rising graduate unemployment, inflation, and unequal access to public-sector employment reflect these broader dynamics. The quota system thus became meaningful not only as a policy grievance but as a symbol of a wider structure of exclusion shaped by both global economic forces and domestic patronage politics. This study treats such conditions as structural discontent: long-term, globally inflected inequalities that remain politically latent until activated by catalytic events.

Digital globalization and networked mobilization

A defining feature of contemporary youth mobilization is the role of digitally networked communication. Castells (2015) describes modern social movements as operating through decentralized networks that enable rapid coordination, emotional amplification, and narrative diffusion beyond territorial boundaries. Similarly, Tarrow (2022) and Della Porta (2017) emphasize how digital infrastructures facilitate the transnational diffusion of protest tactics, frames, and repertoires.

In the Bangladeshi case, digital platforms functioned as more than organizational tools; they constituted arenas where injustice was documented, emotions were circulated, and collective identities were forged. Online spaces enabled protesters to connect campus-based actions to national and diasporic audiences, accelerating the scale and visibility of contention. At the same time, state attempts at digital repression—such as internet shutdowns—highlighted how deeply political contestation had become embedded in global communication infrastructures. Digital globalization thus mediated the translation of structural grievances into sustained collective action.

Integrative Perspective: Globalized mobilization dynamics

Drawing these strands together, this study conceptualizes the July 2024 uprising through an integrated framework of globalized mobilization dynamics, where globalized inequality provides the structural foundation of discontent, and digital globalization supplies the means through which that discontent is organized, framed, and scaled. Cultural globalization and globalized democratic imaginaries operate as supporting processes, shaping how youth interpret injustice and articulate demands in locally resonant yet globally intelligible terms.

Rather than treating globalization as an all-encompassing explanatory force, this framework foregrounds globalized inequality mediated through digital networks as the primary mechanism linking global processes to local revolutionary mobilization. This approach allows for a focused theoretical lens while remaining attentive to the multiple ways global forces intersect with domestic political structures. The analytical implications of this framework are taken up in the Discussion section, where it is used to interpret the empirical themes generated through Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

Contextualizing the July Revolution: A Synthesis of events and grievances

The July 2024 uprising in Bangladesh was not a sudden eruption of discontent, but rather the culmination of decades of accumulated societal frustrations. To understand its dynamics, it is necessary to situate the events within both their immediate political triggers and long-standing structural grievances.

The immediate Catalyst: Quota reform Resentment

The catalyst of the protests was the June 5, 2024, decision of the High Court that revived an unpopular quota system in the hiring of the public sector that had been repealed in 2018 due to massive student protests (Mahmud, 2025). The system gave 56 percent of the civil services employment to different groups, in which 30 percent was allocated to descendants of the freedom fighters who fought in the Liberation War of 1971 (Abid, 2025). Although the government presented it as a historical sacrifice, it was widely seen by critics as a political patronage tool that favored the ruling party loyalists, especially the Awami League (Ahmad, 2025). To the increasing number of educated and unemployed young people in the country, the ruling was an epitome of institutionalisation of inequality and marginalization. Therefore, the reinstatement not only resurrected old wrongs but also solidified the views on a state apparatus that was seized by partisan interest (Chowdhury, 2025).

The structural Underpinnings: Decades of discontent

Although the quota issue triggered the movement, its rapid diffusion and radicalization can only be explained by deeper structural grievances embedded in Bangladesh's political economy and governance.

Economic frustrations

Despite years of reported GDP growth, much of this development was characterized as “jobless growth” that failed to create sustainable employment opportunities (Riaz, 2016; Rodacki, 2025). Rising youth unemployment, inflation, and wage stagnation produced acute frustrations among university graduates, many of whom faced precarious futures despite costly education (Rana et al., 2024; Mahmud, 2025). These material hardships became central to the protest narratives, linking quota reform to broader issues of distributive injustice.

Political repression and institutional corruption

Since its electoral victory in 2008, the ruling Awami League systematically dismantled democratic checks, including abolishing the caretaker government system that once ensured free elections (Riaz, 2016; Chowdhury, 2025). Civic spaces shrank under surveillance, harassment of activists, and repression of opposition voices (Abid, 2025). Widespread corruption, nepotism, and the capture of state institutions by political elites deepened public disillusionment. The quota system itself came to symbolize this institutional capture, reinforcing the belief that opportunities were distributed not by merit but through partisan loyalty (Ahmad, 2025).

The escalation to Revolution: A Causal trajectory

The protest's evolution into a revolution was shaped by the sequence of violent escalations. Initially peaceful demonstrations turned deadly when activists of the ruling party's student wing, the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), alongside security forces, launched attacks on student protesters, leaving hundreds dead and thousands injured (Mahmud, 2025; Chowdhury, 2025). Rather than suppressing dissent, this violence intensified public outrage.

The government's imposition of a nationwide curfew and internet shutdown further radicalized the movement (Ahmad, 2025). The killing of student activist Abu Sayeed, whose death was widely circulated on social media, became a defining moment of moral injury and mobilization (Rodacki, 2025). Protesters shifted from demanding quota reforms to broader calls for justice, accountability, and the dismantling of the BCL, ultimately escalating into a mass revolt demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her cabinet (Abid, 2025). The following Table 1 illustrates the key events and their causal significance.

Theoretical Framework: A social movement lens

This study adopts a social movement theory perspective to analyze the July 2024 uprising in Bangladesh, conceptualizing it not as an isolated event but as part of a broader process of contentious politics (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). Contentious politics emphasizes the dynamic interaction between challengers and authorities, where state responses can fundamentally reshape the trajectory of protest movements. In the Bangladeshi context, measures intended to suppress dissent, including violent crackdowns and communication blackouts, paradoxically deepened public discontent and radicalized the movement (Mahmud, 2025; Chowdhury, 2025).

A central analytical instrument used in this study is the notion of tactical diffusion, which describes the spread, development, and escalation of protest tactics in a series of contention (Gamson, 1999; McAdam et al., 2003). This process was vividly demonstrated by the July 2024 uprising: the first peaceful protests and sit-ins were soon replaced by blockades, nationwide shutdowns, and a non-cooperation campaign,

Table 1
Key Events and Causal Trajectory of the July Revolution.

| Date | Event | Causal Significance |
|------------------|--|--|
| June 5, 2024 | High Court decision reinstates quota system. | Initial Spark. A catalytic event that triggered public outrage and peaceful protests. |
| July 15–20, 2024 | Chhatra League and police attack student protesters. | Tipping Point to Violence. The government's response radicalizes the movement and broadens its support. |
| July 18–28, 2024 | First nationwide internet shutdown and social media blocks. | Catalyst for Digital Defiance. The attempt to suppress communication validates protesters' claims of an authoritarian regime and drives them to use VPNs and other bypass methods. |
| July 19, 2024 | Nationwide curfew imposed; armed forces deployed. | Escalation of State Repression. This action further inflames tensions, leading to increased deaths and defiance. |
| August 3, 2024 | Anti-discrimination Students Movement announces "comprehensive non-cooperation" with a single demand for the PM's resignation. | Final Phase of Radicalization. The movement's narrative shifts from a policy critique to a total rejection of the government's legitimacy. |
| August 5, 2024 | Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigns and leaves the country. | End of Regime. The ultimate consequence of the escalating protests and mounting pressure. |

Source: Author's own compilation

the effectiveness of which was enhanced by online mobilization (Rodacki, 2025; Ahmad, 2025). Following these changes in tactics, the study points to the role of interaction with regime responses in developing a self-perpetuating aspect of escalation.

Another guiding principle is the distinction between structural factors and catalytic factors, a framework widely applied in analyzing uprisings such as the Arab Spring (Beissinger, 2007; Bayat, 2013). In Bangladesh, structural grievances, including youth unemployment, clientelist governance, and generational inequality, formed the long-term foundation of discontent (Riaz, 2016; Ghosh, 2023). However, catalytic events, most notably the reinstatement of the freedom-fighter quota and subsequent state repression, ignited widespread mobilization by transforming latent frustrations into an urgent anti-regime narrative (Abid, 2025; Mahmud, 2025).

Importantly, the regime's repressive toolkit produced counterproductive outcomes. While intended to dismantle the protests, violent crackdowns and censorship instead generated viral digital content documenting state brutality. This user-generated media not only validated protesters' claims but also galvanized broader public outrage, echoing repression-driven backfire effects observed in other authoritarian contexts (Earl, 2011; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). In this sense, repression became a catalyst rather than a deterrent.

Finally, the protest's capacity to unite diverse constituencies, including students, teachers, lawyers, cultural workers, and members of the diaspora, was rooted in the fusion of economic grievances with political corruption narratives. While the quota system appeared as a policy issue, it came to symbolize entrenched patronage networks and authoritarian entrenchment. This framing transformed individual frustrations (such as unemployment among graduates) into collective grievances against systemic injustice, creating a broad-based coalition (Chowdhury, 2025; Ahmad, 2025). By situating the July 2024 uprising within social movement theory, this framework underscores how the interplay of structural grievances, catalytic events, tactical diffusion, and repressive backfire converged to produce a mass mobilization unprecedented in Bangladesh's post-independence history.

Methodology: Reflexive Thematic analysis (RTA)

This study uses the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) to explain the multiple layers of meaning in the July 2024 uprising in Bangladesh. RTA is a research method that suits politically sensitive studies because of its interpretive flexibility, the focus on reflexivity that demands that the researcher be critically aware of his or her positionality, assumptions, and biases (Terry et al., 2017; Clarke and Braun, 2021). In contrast to thematic methods that use codebooks, RTA does not assume any theoretical frameworks beforehand; rather, it provides participants with inductive emergence of themes through the data, which prioritizes lived experiences and meaning of participants (Nowell et al., 2017). Its devotion to getting beyond superficial meanings makes sure that the analysis reflects on the underlying grievances, feelings, and communal identities that formed the basis of the uprising (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

While the analysis followed an inductive Reflexive Thematic Analysis approach, theoretical frameworks related to globalization, social movements, emotions, and framing informed the interpretation of themes rather than the coding process itself. Initial coding was conducted without predefined categories, allowing patterns to emerge organically from the data. Subsequently, established theories were mobilized ex post to contextualize and deepen the interpretation of these inductively generated themes. This approach aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2019) assertion that reflexive thematic analysis permits theoretically informed sense-making without imposing deductive constraints on the analytic process.

Data Corpus: A multimodal approach

A multimodal data corpus is employed to ensure analytic depth and triangulation, combining textual, visual, and digital sources (Denzin, 2012). Data were drawn from (shown in Table 2):

The six phases of Reflexive Thematic analysis

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019) six iterative phases, the analysis proceeded as follows in Table 3:

Findings

The Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) of multimodal data produced six overarching themes that illuminated the motivating factors of the July 2024 uprising in Bangladesh, as shown in Table 4. These themes highlight the interplay of structural grievances, generational identity, emotions, framing processes, democratic aspirations, and the novel dynamics of online-offline mobilization.

Table 2
Data Corpus Sources.

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| News Media Reports | National and international news outlets (e.g., The Daily Star, Dhaka Tribune, Al Jazeera) provide contemporaneous coverage and contextual narratives of protest dynamics and state responses (O'Doherty, 2017). |
| Human Rights Reports | Official reports from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and NGOs offer independent verification of casualties, detentions, and violations often obscured in domestic accounts (OHCHR, 2024). |
| Scholarly Literature | Peer-reviewed works on contentious politics, youth movements, and democratization in South Asia provide theoretical grounding and comparative insights (Gamson, 1999; Riaz, 2016). |
| Social Media Content | Publicly accessible posts from Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) are critical given the digital mobilization of the movement. Social media not only facilitated organizational strategies but also constructed narratives and counter-narratives in real time (Gerbaudo, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2018). |

Source: Author's own compilation

Table 3
Phases of Thematic Analysis.

| | |
|--|---|
| i) Familiarization with the Data | The researcher immersed themselves in the dataset through repeated reading, viewing, and note-taking. This reflexive engagement includes recording impressions about protest shifts, symbolic slogans, and government reactions (Terry et al., 2017). |
| ii) Generating Initial Codes | Systematic coding was applied to both semantic (surface-level) and latent (interpretive) meanings. Codes emerged organically without a predefined codebook, capturing protestors' explicit grievances as well as underlying structural concerns (Braun & Clarke, 2021). |
| iii) Generating Initial Themes | Codes were collated into broader themes that tell a coherent story about the data. This creative process connects dispersed grievances (e.g., unemployment, governance failures, inequality) into unified interpretive categories (Clarke & Braun, 2018). |
| iv) Reviewing Themes | Themes were critically refined by assessing their fit against both the coded data and the dataset as a whole. This recursive step ensures internal coherence and representational accuracy (Nowell et al., 2017). |
| v) Refining, Defining, and Naming Themes | Each theme was clearly defined, named, and linked to its analytic essence. Care was taken to ensure distinctiveness between themes while grounding them in rich empirical evidence (Braun & Clarke, 2019). |
| vi) Producing the Report | The final analytic narrative weaved together themes supported by illustrative extracts. The report foregrounded reflexivity by acknowledging how the researcher's positionality shaped interpretive choices, while also emphasizing RTA's iterative and non-linear nature (Braun & Clarke, 2021). |

Source: Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019).

Theme 1: Perceived Injustice and Structural Grievances.

Through the analysis, it became clear that protestors always associated their movements with structural iniquities such as systemic corruption, established clientelism, and government oppression. Although the quota system was a catalyst on its own, the situation of inequality and democratic backsliding escalated the dissatisfaction. This result conforms to the relative deprivation theory formulated by Gurr (2015) and to the works of Della Porta (2017), who focused on the role of structural grievances in organizing controversial politics. The state was often described in the protest discourse as favoring partisan devotion over merit, a theme that appears in Lewis (2011) and Hossain (2017) on the continued presence of patronage politics in Bangladesh.

Theme 2: Youth Identity and Generational Solidarity.

The uprising was framed by July protesters as a generational struggle. Youth protesters described themselves as representing a "new Bangladesh," directly opposing what they viewed as an entrenched political elite that had monopolized power. This generational identity provided a unifying narrative, fostering solidarity across class and regional divides. Such dynamics resonate with McAdam and Snow's (2000) analysis of collective identity as a critical mobilizing factor and Riaz's (2016) work on the historical role of student activism in Bangladesh. The protests thus marked a continuation of Bangladesh's tradition of youth-led democratic struggles, from the Language Movement of 1952 to the 1990 s pro-democracy uprisings (Riaz, 2014).

Theme 3: Emotional Drivers: Anger, Hope, and Fear.

Emotional forces played a central role in sustaining mobilization. Protesters articulated anger at injustice, hope for democratic renewal, and fear of repression, all of which coexisted as powerful motivators. These findings align with Jasper's (2019) emphasis on the emotional dynamics of collective action, where emotions are not peripheral but central to sustaining activism. Particularly, the anger directed at police violence and the hope for a "better Bangladesh" formed the affective glue of solidarity, even as fear of state retaliation persisted.

Theme 4: Framing of the Movement: From Quota Protest to

Table 4
Thematic Table.

| Themes | Sub-themes | Illustrative Evidence | Source |
|---|--|---|---|
| 1. Perceived Injustice and Structural Grievances | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Quota as an immediate trigger – Corruption and clientelism – Economic precarity – State repression | The quota system was the spark, but corruption and inequality had already suffocated us; jobs are not for talent; they are for loyalty. | Mahmud (2024); Chowdhury (2024) |
| 2. Youth Identity and Generational Solidarity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – "New generation" identity – Opposition to entrenched political elite – Collective dignity and future opportunities | We are not just students; we are the new generation of Bangladesh; the old elite stole our future, and we are reclaiming it. | Ethirajan (2024); Human Rights Watch (2024) |
| 3. Emotional Drivers: Anger, Hope, and Fear | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Anger at injustice – Hope for change – Fear of repression and violence | We are angry, but our anger gives us strength; even in fear, we believe in a better Bangladesh. | Ahmed and Ellis-Petersen (2024); Amnesty International (2024) |
| 4. Framing of the Movement: From Quota Protest to Revolution | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Diagnostic frames (corruption, inequality) – Prognostic frames (systemic change) – Motivational frames (youth power, sacrifice) | Protest slogans and placards: 'From quota to freedom'; speeches emphasizing sacrifice: 'Our blood will bring change'. | Staff (2024); Anika (2025) |
| 5. Visions of Change and Democratic Aspirations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Democratic accountability – Fair governance – Social justice and equality | We want a Bangladesh where jobs are fair and leaders are accountable; this is not only about quotas; it is about democracy itself. | Humayra (2025); Amnesty International (2024) |
| 6. Online-Offline Mobilization Cycle | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Strategic use of Facebook and other platforms by Generation Z students – Viral circulation of videos/images documenting state violence – The government's prolonged internet shutdowns and censorship attempts – Protesters' adaptation via VPNs and alternative channels | Social media posts showing police crackdowns that went viral; testimonies of protesters using encrypted apps; reports on internet shutdowns fueling more street demonstrations. | Anika (2025); Zami and Smith (2024) |

Source: Author's own compilation

Revolution

The uprising underwent a rapid transformation in its framing, evolving from a policy-specific demand to a revolutionary call for systemic change. Through diagnostic frames (e.g., identifying corruption and inequality as problems), prognostic frames (e.g., calling for regime change), and motivational frames (e.g., invoking youth sacrifice and

national renewal), activists reshaped public discourse. This transformation is consistent with Snow & Benford's (1988) framing processes in social movements and Tarrow's (1996, 2022) insight that frames can scale up narrow grievances into broad-based political revolts.

Theme 5: Visions of Change and Democratic Aspirations.

Demonstrators repeatedly expressed hopes that were not limited to short-term complaints. These were the visions of fair governance, democratic accountability, and a more just society. These prospective narratives are evidence of the so-called future orientation of social movements that Tarrow (2022) views as collective imaginaries that continue to move even after the short-term needs have been fulfilled. In this instance, the democratic ideals are taken as the general objective, and the rising turns into the fight not only against the quota system, but against the authoritarian regime.

Theme 6: Online–Offline Mobilization Cycle.

The uprising was deeply shaped by the interplay between digital and street-based mobilization. Social media platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) were instrumental in organizing protests, amplifying outrage over state violence, and generating viral imagery of repression. This digital activism produced what Tufekci (2017) describes as a “networked protest dynamic,” where online outrage fueled offline escalation. The government's prolonged internet shutdowns represented an attempt at “digital repression” (Howard et al., 2011), but these tactics ultimately failed. Protesters adapted through VPNs and encrypted apps, turning digital defiance into a symbolic act of resistance itself (Gerbaudo, 2018). The online–offline cycle thus functioned as both a practical organizing mechanism and a motivator that strengthened solidarity under conditions of censorship.

Together, these six themes demonstrate that the July 2024 uprising in Bangladesh cannot be understood solely as a reaction to the quota system. Rather, it was the convergence of structural grievances, generational identity, emotional drivers, framing strategies, democratic aspirations, and digital mobilization that transformed a student protest into a nationwide revolution. These findings highlight the intersection of long-standing political-economic inequalities with emergent digital activism, offering critical insights into the evolving nature of contentious politics in South Asia.

Discussion

This study set out to explain how the July 2024 quota protests in Bangladesh transformed into a nationwide uprising, and what this transformation reveals about globalization, youth mobilization, and contentious politics in semi-authoritarian contexts. Rather than reiterating empirical findings, this discussion interprets those findings through three interconnected lenses: (1) the study's theoretical contribution to globalization and contentious politics, (2) its comparative relevance within South Asia and the Global South, and (3) its implications for youth-led mobilization under conditions of digital authoritarianism.

Contribution to globalization and contentious politics

The central theoretical contribution of this study lies in demonstrating how globalized inequality, mediated through digital networks, can transform localized policy grievances into revolutionary contention. While globalization scholarship has variously emphasized cultural flows (Appadurai, 1996), institutional restructuring (Giddens, 2003), and transnational activism (Tarrow, 2022), this study shows that globalization becomes politically consequential when material exclusion generated by neoliberal political economy intersects with digitally enabled communicative infrastructures.

In Bangladesh, structural inequalities such as graduate unemployment, clientelist governance, and declining meritocracy were not new. What proved transformative was the capacity of digitally networked publics to render these inequalities visible, emotionally charged, and

morally actionable. This finding aligns with broader research on how emerging middle and lower-middle classes in the Global South increasingly experience development as uneven and exclusionary, generating political discontent rather than stability (Fischer & Nisa, 2025). Digital platforms accelerated tactical diffusion, amplified repression-induced outrage, and enabled rapid frame alignment across social groups, reinforcing the argument that grievances alone do not produce mass mobilization unless activated through relational and communicative processes (McAdam et al., 2003; Jasper, 2019).

The study also refines the concept of globalization by showing how global democratic imaginaries were strategically localized through historical narratives of student activism and liberation in Bangladesh. Rather than passively adopting global norms, protesters embedded them in locally resonant moral vocabularies, echoing findings from studies that highlight how global inequalities and urban transformations generate new political subjectivities through localized disruption (Marinovic, 2025). In this sense, globalization reshaped not only material conditions but also the symbolic resources available for political contestation.

Comparative Insights: South Asia and the global South

Placed in comparative perspective, the July 2024 uprising aligns Bangladesh with a broader pattern of youth-led mobilizations across South Asia and the Global South. Similar to Sri Lanka's Aragalaya movement, India's anti-CAA protests, and Pakistan's Students Solidarity and Aurat March movements, the Bangladeshi uprising emerged from the convergence of economic precarity, political exclusion, and generational frustration (Kaur, 2024; Sangwa, 2025; Daraz et al., 2025). Across these contexts, youth activism has increasingly relied on digital platforms to scale protest, bypass institutional barriers, and gain transnational visibility.

However, the Bangladeshi case illustrates a particularly rapid escalation from sectoral grievance to regime-level challenge. This pattern resonates with comparative research showing that where securitization, political repression, and cross-border instability intersect, localized grievances can quickly acquire national and regional significance (Saisin et al., 2023). Unlike movements that remained episodic or issue-bound, the July uprising achieved a symbolic rupture with regime legitimacy, supporting Beissinger's (2007) argument that revolutionary moments often arise when state responses expose the fragility of authority rather than suppress dissent.

Beyond South Asia, the findings also echo scholarship from other Global South contexts, where corruption, exclusion, and unequal access to resources undermine state legitimacy and generate collective action (Ngameni et al., 2023). These parallels suggest that Bangladesh's experience is not exceptional but illustrative of a wider global condition in which youth mobilization emerges from the intersection of inequality, governance failure, and globalized expectations of justice.

Youth mobilization under digital authoritarianism

A key implication of this study concerns the evolving relationship between youth activism and digital authoritarianism. The Bangladeshi government's use of internet shutdowns, surveillance, and coercive repression reflects a broader global trend in which states attempt to regulate digital spaces as sites of political control (Howard et al., 2011; Tufekci, 2017). Yet, as this case demonstrates, such strategies can produce repression backfire effects rather than compliance (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011).

Digital repression intensified perceptions of injustice, validated protesters' claims of authoritarian overreach, and transformed connectivity itself into a site of resistance. The widespread use of VPNs, encrypted messaging, and diasporic amplification illustrates how youth movements are not merely adapting to digital authoritarianism but actively repoliticizing digital access as a democratic entitlement. This

dynamic reflects a broader global trend in which digitally connected youth challenge exclusionary governance by mobilizing across online and offline spaces, even under conditions of censorship and surveillance.

For activists, the findings underscore the strategic importance of reframing sectoral grievances as manifestations of systemic injustice and leveraging emotional narratives to sustain participation under repression. For policymakers, the case offers a cautionary lesson: ignoring or suppressing youth grievances through coercion and digital shutdowns risks accelerating political instability rather than restoring order. More broadly, the study suggests that youth-led mobilization will remain a central force in semi-authoritarian contexts where globalized inequality, digital connectivity, and political exclusion converge.

Implications of the study

The July 2024 uprising in Bangladesh carries significant theoretical, policy, and practical implications that extend beyond the specific case of the quota protests. At the theoretical level, the study underscores the value of Thematic Analysis for unpacking the multi-layered dynamics of social movements, particularly by capturing the interplay of grievances, identity, emotions, and framing in shaping contentious politics. By showing how a sectoral issue expanded into a revolutionary struggle, the findings reinforce and extend existing theories of mobilization that highlight the fluidity of protest trajectories (Snow & Benford, 1988; Tarrow, 2022). The results also suggest that future scholarship should further integrate perspectives on digital activism and emotional politics into the study of democratization, as these elements were central to sustaining momentum despite repression.

From a policy perspective, the revolt shows how risky it is to ignore or repress the grievances of youths in semi-authoritarian environments. A failure by governments to offer viable channels of democratic accountability will encourage the development of local dissatisfaction into systemic opposition, as observed when the quota question became a vehicle of wider dissatisfaction with corruption, inequality, and oppression. The policies that promote stability and governance in South Asia are involved in international organizations, and policymakers must understand that the youth mobilization led by young people is not merely disruptive but rather a justified demand of democratic renewal. Reactions based exclusively on repression or internet blockages, which have been reported in the course of the protests (Mahmood, 2024), are not bound to be effective in the long term and can increase polarization.

Practically, the findings highlight the critical role of youth as agents of democratic change and the importance of digital spaces as arenas of mobilization. Activists can draw lessons from the July 2024 uprising about the power of reframing sectoral grievances into systemic challenges, the mobilizing potential of collective emotions, and the strategic use of online platforms to amplify visibility and circumvent censorship. Civil society organizations and advocacy networks may also find in this case a blueprint for building solidarity across generational and sectoral divides, thereby sustaining broader movements for accountability and justice. Ultimately, the implications of this study suggest that the intersection of grievances, generational identity, emotions, and digital repertoires will remain central to understanding and shaping the trajectories of future protest movements in Bangladesh and beyond.

Limitations and future research Agenda

While this study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of Bangladesh's July 2024 uprising, it is not without limitations. The analysis primarily relies on secondary sources such as news reports, NGO accounts, and activist statements, which, although rich in narrative detail, may carry inherent biases and selective representations of events. The absence of first-hand interviews with protesters, policymakers, or civil society actors limits the depth of lived experiences that could further illuminate the complexities of mobilization. Additionally, the focus on the immediate aftermath of the uprising restricts the ability to

capture its long-term consequences for Bangladesh's political trajectory. The reliance on textual data also constrains the capacity to fully explore visual and performative dimensions of the protests, such as symbolism, art, and embodied practices, which often play a crucial role in sustaining collective action.

Future research should address these gaps by employing mixed-method approaches that combine ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and digital ethnography to capture both the experiential and structural dimensions of mobilization. Comparative studies across South Asia and other regions of the Global South would enrich understanding by situating the Bangladeshi uprising within broader patterns of youth-led democratic struggles. Longitudinal research is also needed to examine whether the July 2024 uprising produces enduring institutional reforms or remains a momentary disruption. Finally, greater attention should be paid to the role of digital repertoires, transnational solidarity networks, and diasporic activism in shaping contentious politics in Bangladesh, as these factors are likely to influence future cycles of protest and democratization.

Conclusion

This study has examined the July 2024 uprising in Bangladesh, tracing its transformation from a quota-based protest into a broader revolutionary movement through a thematic analysis of narratives, media accounts, and secondary reports. The findings reveal that the movement was driven not only by immediate grievances over the quota system but by deeper structural injustices, generational identities, emotional currents, framing strategies, democratic aspirations, and digital mobilization. Taken together, these factors illustrate the multi-dimensional nature of contentious politics and highlight the agency of youth as central actors in processes of democratic renewal. By situating the uprising within broader theories of grievances, framing, emotions, and digital repertoires, the study contributes to the growing body of scholarship that emphasizes the interplay of material, cultural, and technological forces in shaping protest trajectories. At the same time, the case of Bangladesh underscores the risks of ignoring systemic discontent in semi-authoritarian contexts, where localized grievances can escalate rapidly into demands for systemic change. While limited by its reliance on secondary sources and focus on immediate events, the research provides a foundation for future empirical inquiry into the longer-term impacts of the uprising. Ultimately, the July 2024 events demonstrate how youth-led mobilizations can serve as catalysts for democratic transformation, offering both opportunities and challenges for governance in Bangladesh and beyond.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Md.Sohel Rana: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization. **Shadia Sharmin:** Writing – original draft, Project administration, Investigation, Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Validation, Visualization. **Mohammad Bin Amin:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software. **Judit Oláh:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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