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From Screens to Streets: Decoding Bangladesh's Gen Z July Uprising

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Executive summary

While revolutionary movements' association with youth and students has long been a global phenomenon, the frequency and impact of Gen Z movements has been remarkable, particularly in Global South countries. They are characterised by novel patterns, innovative strategies, solidarity dynamics, and transnational digital networks, revealing a unique transformation in resistance politics in both scale and scope. In this new wave of youth activism, collective assertions of agency against authoritarianism, exclusion, censorship, corruption, and crisis have sparked massive uprisings and resulted in the collapse of regimes in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal.

Drawing on Bangladesh's historic July Uprising in 2024, which ended Sheikh Hasina's 15-year authoritarian rule, this article brings into focus the distinctive character of contemporary youth activism, comprising Gen Z's creative and digital resistance and generational aspirations. During the weeks-long violent protests in Bangladesh, Gen Z created a political tsunami through graffiti, cartoons, posters, music, performances, and memes, blending political urgency with the distinctive wit, irony, and satire embedded in Bengali cultural expression. Even amid violent repression and state surveillance, these creative interventions sustained the movement, converting everyday public and virtual spaces into sites of collective resistance. This article unravels the changes in politics introduced by Gen Z movements as well as their overarching impact on the policies and practices shaping democracy in Bangladesh and beyond. Building from digital ethnography and secondary resources, this paper makes a case for understanding how young people experience, respond to, and live with a revolution. Highlighting the importance of understanding revolutions from below, this article engages in the debate of whether this political 'youthquake' signals a tectonic but sustainable shift in democratic transition and practice in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Gen Z, Bangladesh, authoritarianism, July Uprising, social media, resistance

1 Introduction

A Facebook message published by the Students Against Discrimination (SAD) Movement on 4 August 2024 led to one of the most pivotal events in Bangladeshi political history. Made during a period of curfews, mass arrests, and increasing violence, the post by youth leader Asif Mahmud (who later became the youngest member of interim government cabinet) urged students and citizens to march to Dhaka the next day to change the course of history. The nationwide protests, which had begun in early July, took a crucial turn and started converging on the capital within a few hours after the post. By 5 August thousands had set out, going against their [fears and threats of repression](#). The SAD Movement's Facebook post defined the nature of the July Uprising, where digital platforms were not simply support systems but the lifeline that merged online communications and street politics.



[Figure 1] Poster: Students Against Discrimination announces long march to Dhaka on August 5, 2024. License: © SAD Facebook Page.

The weeks-long protests that started in early July culminated in the long march to Dhaka on August 5 (popularly known as 36 July) and ultimately toppled the authoritarian regime of Sheikh Hasina, the longest-serving female prime minister in the world, who ruled Bangladesh with an iron fist for over 15 years. This event has become known as the Monsoon Revolution (Shrabon Bidroho). Displaying youth power built through voices and actions, the movement is widely considered the world's first successful revolution led by Gen Z, comprising those born between 1997 and 2013. The July Uprising represents

a continuation of Bangladesh's [long-standing tradition](#) of student activism, rooted in a political history dating back to the British colonial era and the independence movement against the [Pakistani military dictatorship](#). The Student–People's Uprising led by the SAD Movement in July 2024 was remarkable for its scale and energy, tapping into widespread public discontent with authoritarianism, corruption, and unfulfilled democratic aspirations. These grievances had been simmering for years, fuelled by instances of state repression and dissent dating back to the late 2010s. Notably, a series of youth-led protests – from [the 2018 university quota reform](#) movement to [mass demonstrations for road safety](#) – signalled growing discontent under Hasina's regime. Each of these flashpoints revealed the state's increasingly stringent response to criticism, whether through the enactment of severe legislation such as the Digital Security Act or the assertive deployment of police and party cadres to quell protests.

The solidarities forged in these movements – which have often been decentralised, digitally mediated, and visually expressive – suggest the emergence of a new political grammar led by the young generation as well as the manifestation of a new battlefield through social media. Gen Z activists narrate their politics not through conventional party structures or central leadership but through memes, anime flags, TikTok clips, graffiti, and rap music, all under the ethos of 'everyone is a leader'. In so doing, they perform a vivid [art of resistance](#) that not only exposes the dangers of dissent under authoritarian rule but also highlights the resilience that emerges in response.

Since the beginning of the protests, the SAD-led movement consistently responded to government repression through framing, narrative-making, organising, and coordination of collective actions. In a compromised and violent political environment, the protests illuminated both possibilities and limitations as the nation seeks democratic transition. This raises a number of questions concerning what exactly makes youth political activism distinct in Bangladesh and the ways in which it manifested during the July Uprising. Was the movement a temporary spark, or will it have reverberations? How do young people navigate the generational divide and current political culture for the conceptualisation of a post-revolutionary society and state?

Taking these complexities and 'connective actions' manifested through digitally networked political mobilisation into consideration, this paper critically reflects on the Gen Z movement in Bangladesh by exploring the following questions:

1. How did Gen Z position itself in the authoritarian context of Bangladesh? What sparked resistance, and what makes this generation's activism distinct from previous (failed) movements?
2. How did 'art as resistance', in the form of slogans, graffiti, music, memes, and humour, play out in this movement?
3. How does Gen Z imagine a post-revolutionary, just society? What is (if anything) in Gen Z's manifesto for the future?

Combining digital ethnography with secondary literature consisting of scientific journal articles, newspaper articles, and reports, this paper seeks to unravel the changes in politics introduced by Gen Z movements, including new patterns, narratives, and strategies, and their overarching impact on the policies and practices shaping democracy in Bangladesh and beyond. Unpacking the dichotomy of brutal suppression and surveillance (by the state) and its clever and creative disruption (by youth), this study aims to present nuanced perspectives on the grammar of revolution coming from the Global South, diversity in youth movements, and the changing landscape of resistance.

2 Context: Suppression, Censorship, and the Road to Resistance

To understand the context of why apparently apolitical students who grew up under the reign of Sheikh Hasina became fiercely critical of her regime, it is important to outline the political trajectory over the 15 years of her rule. The defiance of Gen Z did not come out of the blue; it was a cumulative reaction to [decreasing democratic space](#) since the Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina regained power in 2009. Routine censorship and legal intimidation of any form of critical expression (including political satire and cartoons) became mostly extinct as avenues of dissent narrowed, especially in mainstream media through consolidated ownership.

Since 2014, the administration of Sheikh Hasina was described as more and more authoritarian. The government silenced opposition parties, severely restricted [freedom of the press](#), and even criminalised dissidents. Online space also came under fire following enactment of the Digital Security Act in 2018, which imposed particularly harsh [penalties on online speech](#) deemed harmful to the state, the ruling party, or the official version of the Liberation War. The legislation made warrantless arrests available and soon became an instrument of silencing journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens.

The climate of fear worsened after two pivotal student-led movements in 2018. The first was the Quota Reform Movement, a nationwide student protest against a decades-old policy reserving 56% of government jobs for various groups, including 30% of posts reserved for descendants of Freedom Fighters. Students saw this quota system as discriminatory and nepotistic since it greatly limited open merit positions and supposedly favoured those connected to the ruling party. Mass protests erupted in early 2018, forcing the government to reform the system.

Only weeks later, in late July and August 2018, a second wave of youth anger sparked the Road Safety Movement. It started as a spontaneous protest by teenagers after a speeding bus killed two secondary school students in Dhaka. Outraged by the chaos and corruption

of the transport sector, tens of thousands of students – mostly teens in school uniforms and university students – [flooded the streets](#) of the capital and other cities. The Road Safety Movement eventually subsided after the government made several reform promises and carried out mass arrests of student protesters, but it marked another instance of youth activism being forcefully contained.

In the aftermath of 2018's twin student movements, the Awami League government intensified measures to deter future dissent. The Digital Security Act was enforced rigorously from late 2018 onward, targeting online critics and leading to the death of cartoonist Mushtaq Ahmed [while in police custody](#). Dozens of journalists, academics, and social media users were arrested under the Digital Security Act within a year of its passage, often for Facebook posts critical of the prime minister or alleging government misconduct. Within this climate of pervasive fear and censorship, informal forms of expression such as graffiti, memes, and digital caricatures started to offer an alternative means of expression to a less privileged and younger generation unable to act in other established ways. The political awakening of Gen Z was therefore not so much a cultural movement but rather a reaction to shrinking civic space and freedom of speech. Beneath the surface, frustration was growing among young people over job scarcity, corruption, and authoritarian rule.

Taken together, the Quota Reform and Road Safety Movements revealed a digitally connected, politically conscious generation unafraid of confrontation yet routinely brutalised by power. Subsequent demonstrations over tuition fees, campus violence, and pandemic mismanagement kept grievances alive, creating a collective memory of injustice. By 2023, young Bangladeshis who had never experienced another government saw formal politics as hopelessly unresponsive, priming the explosive revolt that erupted the following year.

In essence, by early 2024 the stage was set. Bangladesh has a [young population](#) (over half of the population is under 35) that felt betrayed by an unaccountable regime, hemmed in by surveillance, and robbed of their voice in the nation's future. These accumulated grievances – lack of democracy, rampant censorship, economic precarity – coalesced into a broad sense of 'enough is enough'. All that was needed was a catalyst to transform this latent disillusionment into an open revolt. The trigger for a new youth uprising in July 2024 was in fact the very same issue that had caused protests six years earlier: discriminatory quotas in government jobs.

In 2024, rumours spread that the Awami League regime, after years of stalling, was considering reinstating the 30% civil service quota for descendants of Freedom Fighters – the exact policy students fought to overturn in 2018. Many young graduates, facing high unemployment, saw this as the last straw. By June 2024 public university students began mobilising once again to demand a truly merit-based recruitment system, and the SAD Movement started gaining traction on campuses around the country. This time, however, the authorities showed zero tolerance from the outset. Top government figures openly mocked and threatened protesters. Prime Minister Hasina herself gave a speech in early July 2024 belittling the students' demands, sarcastically asking that if the grandchildren of Freedom Fighters should not get jobs, who should – the descendants of 'razakars' (traitors)?

The outrageous insinuation that protesting students were descendants of razakars, which effectively labelled educated youth as the worst villains in Bangladesh's liberation history, infuriated students. Students united in anger after being called traitors simply for demanding fairness. They coined ironic slogans in response, such as 'Tumi ke? Ami ke? Razakar, razakar' ('Who are you? Who am I? Apparently, we're all traitors!') and 'Chaite gelam odhikar, hoye gelam razakar' ('We came to ask for rights and we were labelled traitors'). Such slogans became rallying cries and soon found their way onto walls in the form of graffiti as protests grew. Students and sympathisers painted the biting phrases on campus gates, public walls, and roads.

The situation [escalated dramatically](#) on 16 July 2024, when police opened fire on a group of unarmed student protesters at a university campus in Rangpur. A 25-year-old student named Abu Sayeed was shot dead in broad daylight as he stood empty-handed with his arms raised. Sayeed, the first martyr of this renewed movement, became a potent symbol. Overnight, graffiti appeared lamenting his death: 'Amar bhai ke marle keno?' ('Why did you kill my brother?') was scrawled in red and black on walls in Dhaka.

The days that followed Sayeed's murder saw Bangladesh plunged into what many started calling the Long July Uprising of 2024. Students across public and private universities erupted in mass protests soon joined by ordinary citizens against the government's repression and misrule. Crucially, the protest movement transcended its original catalyst (quota reform) and snowballed into a broad anti-government revolt – a youth-led pro-democracy movement. The government, alarmed by the spreading unrest, imposed the most extreme censorship measure yet: a nationwide internet shutdown. Beginning on 18 July, all mobile and broadband internet services were turned off for days in an unprecedented blackout intended to sever coordination among protesters and throttle news of state atrocities. On top of this, authorities declared shoot-on-sight curfews in major cities. Faced with an information vacuum, protesters turned to analogue means of spreading their message and documenting their struggle. Dhaka's walls effectively became the newspapers and social media feeds of the uprising.

On 5 August 2024, Sheikh Hasina resigned and fled the country, ending her 15-year reign. That day – often referred to in graffiti and popular discourse as '36th of July' (since the revolution exceeded the month of July by five days) – saw jubilant celebrations in Dhaka. The death toll, however, was sobering. Estimates of those killed during the 36-day uprising range from approximately 1,000 to 1,500, with thousands more injured. The heavy losses made clear that the uprising was not an isolated eruption of anger but the product of deeply entrenched political and social forces shaping the nation's trajectory. It was a culmination of long-simmering forces in Bangladeshi society: years of authoritarian governance, denial of democratic voices, and the unyielding will of a new generation determined to reclaim their future. A few days later, on August 8, 2024, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus was sworn in as Bangladesh's interim leader. His administration later transferred power to [Tarek Rahman](#), head of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, following the party's victory in the general election held on February 12, 2026.

3 From Screens to the Streets: Gen Z in Bangladesh's Long Revolutionary Movement

This paper is not merely an attempt to record the reasons behind the political awakening of Generation Z; it also examines how Gen Z's mobilisation and communication patterns portray a radical break with the hierarchical, institutionalised tradition of political activism in Bangladesh. Thus, the overarching analytical dilemma is not why Gen Z protested but how their tactics revealed a generational divide between a digitally equipped generation and an established political culture based on set norms, command lines, and elite domination. This separation has caused a ['tectonic' change](#) in the politics in Bangladesh and has [implications for South Asia](#) at large.

The July Uprising has rewritten the theatre of politics in Bangladesh. Political contestation grew more digital in this period, with memes, viral posts, and short videos serving as weapons of persuasion, localisation, and resistance. Campuses, streets, and online spaces became part of one hybrid public space where everyday users could effectively contribute to the development of political narratives in real time. In this saga, the internet was not a passive observer of weeks-long protests during July and August but served as a core organising tool of mobilisation, turning daily online interactions into a form of political protest.

This paper considers the specific digital and cultural tactics used by the movement, such as modes of decentralised coordination via social media and the appropriation of political identity via transnational symbols. Such practices permitted new, fluid ways of political belonging that were in strong contrast to the centralised, party-based movements of previous decades. The movement extended beyond metropolitan centres and never depended on real-life mobilisation, as was the case of earlier protests; instead, it relied on [digital platforms](#) as the main organisation engine rather than as an auxiliary tool. Social media platforms, including Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Instagram, played a key role in [shaping public opinion](#), coordinating resistance, and maintaining contact outside the protest areas.

Protest art in the form of graffiti, caricatures, cartoons, posters, memes, and music also became a key marker of the July Revolution. In essence, this uprising functioned as both catharsis and proclamation for Bangladeshi youth. One commonly cited artwork by protesters and scholars documenting the uprising is an extended calendar of July signed by 'Gen Z' stretching to the ['36th of July'](#), implying that the revolution extended time itself (Figure 1).

জুলাই গণঅভ্যুত্থান

১-৩১ জুলাই, ২০২৪



[Figure 2] The '36th of July' calendar maps the key moments of the movement, charting the progression of protests from 1 July through 5 August that ultimately led to Hasina's removal from office. License: © Tirthosthan.

This transformation was further enhanced by demographics. The population of youths in Bangladesh is approximately one third of the entire population. More than 30% of registered voters in Bangladesh are younger than 35 years old, and many had no experience voting in a general election prior to the July Uprising. Together with a high level of digitalisation, the presence of cultures of protest worldwide, and the lack of economic and political prospects, this demographic fact formed the basis for a new type of mass mobilisation, leading to the outbreak of the July 2024 Uprising. In the following sections, I illustrate how graffiti, music, cartoons, and memes shaped the movement and how social media facilitated their distribution.

3.1 Graffiti of Defiance: Walls as New Battleground

One of the most striking features of the July Revolution was how, in tandem with protests on the streets, a wave of graffiti and street art swept across Bangladesh's cities. The movement was above all a youth-driven revolt – a 'Gen Z revolution' both in leadership and in creative spirit. Graffiti became the signature art form of this generation's resistance, functioning as a collective voice and an expression of youthful identity. The imagery and slogans painted across Bangladesh spoke to the courage, creativity, and solidarity of the country's young people.

Thousands of raw, rebellious, and unpolished works of graffiti during the July Uprising have transformed walls and surfaces into representations of anger, sorrow, and demands for justice. Slogans like 'Sonar Bangla Aj Mrityupuri Keno?' ('Golden Bengal, why today are you a land of corpses?') and 'Amar Bhaider Marli Keno?' ('Why did you kill my brother?') responded to the repressive state. These rough images and texts did not merely claim

space; they also captured the history and shared feelings of the movement that could not be removed by censorship or the passage of time, forming a living archive of counterculture that would not be forgotten or lost.



[Figure 3] At the peak of the crisis, graffiti emerged spontaneously – brief, spray-painted expressions of outrage on city walls, raw and unrefined. In this image, the message reads, 'Hasina, you are the killer of students.' License: © Bangla Outlook.

Graffiti provided a cheap, accessible, and instant method of expression in cases where editorial gatekeeping, legal threats, and internet censorship blocked traditional means of protesting. Unsanitised and anonymous slogans such as 'Dhaka – a city of corpses' and 'Stop killing' emerged at night and were able to communicate with crowds without external mediation. Murals were painted to commemorate fallen protesters. Among the most memorable of these was a mural of Abu Sayeed, who was depicted standing unarmed with his hands up.



[Figure 4] Many graffiti narratives centred on youth empowerment were strengthened with symbolic imagery. One popular picture featured the breaking of chains by a bloodied fist, accompanied by the statement 'WE CAN!' and 'signed' by Gen Z. License: © Bangla Outlook.

These symbols conveyed the demand for agency and declared that young Bangladeshis were capable of escaping the cycle of systematic authoritarianism. Protesters repeatedly stressed non-violence when facing the opponent, preferring to express emotions with art. They replaced the propaganda of the regime with portraits and slogans related to state power, using colourful pictures of hope and resistance. For example, one mural depicted a policeman silencing a young man, symbolising the silencing of young voices (Figure 5).



[Figure 5] Police silencing a student protester. This graffiti piece appeared on the Dhaka University campus. License: © Anas Ansar.

A striking aspect of this graffiti culture was that it was inclusive, with high involvement among young women, unlike in earlier examples of protest graffiti. Women both created and were subjects of protest banners. In one popular mural celebrating of a real-life act of bravery, a female student holds her palm up to a police van to protect other demonstrators (Figure 6). Collectively, these images positioned young women as defenders at the forefront of the movement, challenging gendered stereotypes about political agency and violence.



[Figure 6] Graffiti depicting a female student who stood in front of a police van carrying detained protesters. The image draws on one of the most iconic photographs of the uprising, capturing the moment when a female student confronted the vehicle as her male compatriots were taken into custody, transforming the scene into a powerful symbol of resistance. License: © Bangla Outlook.

The fashion and references incorporated into the graffiti were an extension of a wider youth identity. Inspired by global street art and protest culture, Gen Z protesters combined elements of humour, irony, and pop culture. Slogans like 'Bye bye Hasina', 'Game over', and 'Amra Butterfly, Tora Caterpillar' (meaning 'We are butterflies, the government is a caterpillar') were inspired by popular gaming lingo, lyrics, and slang. Such light-hearted yet subversive actions contrasted with the conventional framing of protest language and promised a generational break with current political culture.

The organisational approach of Gen Z protesters was also reflected in their graffiti. Activists used online organisation as well as physical tools like graffiti for peaceful, direct action. Flash graffiti campaigns were held with the help of social media, and the images produced were then photographed and relayed over the internet. Graffiti served as an offline equivalent to viral digital content as it is fast, visually provocative, and easy to duplicate. Its online distribution allowed it to go beyond the streets, giving it a lasting digital life and contributing to Gen Z's collective memory.

This ongoing, grassroots, digital record of the uprising went directly counter to state erasure efforts, which saw walls washed and repainted. Artists in the July Uprising took inspiration from the [Language Movement of 1952](#) and [the Liberation War of 1971](#) to insert this movement within a lineage of national struggle. In this way, graffiti not only glorified recent martyrs but also discredited the regime's claims of representing the legacy of 1971. Graffiti therefore transformed public spaces into both a memorial and medium to create a counter-history from the bottom up.

Moreover, the content of the graffiti often emphasised unity and collective leadership. In response to the question that loomed after the regime's fall – who is the alternative leader? – one work of graffiti declared, 'The answer is unity: you, me, and us.' This slogan rejected the traditional hierarchy of politics in favour of generational solidarity. The movement did not elevate a single messianic figure but rather [positioned the people](#) as the driving force of leadership. This sentiment of horizontal, [leaderless unity](#) is emblematic of many Gen-Z-led movements, from [Africa to Asia](#) to the heart of [Europe](#), which stress that everyone has a role in leadership.

3.2 'Awaz Utha Bangladesh' ('Wake Up Bangladesh'): The Music and Lyrics of the July Uprising

Protest music has a long history in Bangladesh's political and social transformation. From 1952's patriotic songs against Pakistani cultural hegemony to the folk songs of the 1971 Liberation War, such as 'Muktir Gaan' ('The Song of Freedom'), music has profoundly helped to galvanise public opinion, inspiring generations to challenge authority. The July Uprising was no exception to this tradition, but what was unique this time was the extensive use of rap music as a powerful outlet to point out societal and political injustice.

Numerous songs emerged to express young people’s anguish. Rap became a means of protesting, with songs featuring strong words such as ‘Godi Char’ (‘Step Down’) and declaring the willingness to make dramatic sacrifices, as in ‘Sesh Nishwash’ (‘Last Breath’). Up-and-coming artists Hannan Hossain Shimul and Shezan released tracks like ‘Awaaz Utha’ (‘Raise Your Voice’) and ‘Kotha Ko’ (‘Speak Up’), capturing the frustration and hopes of the thousands marching against inequality and authoritarianism.

17	গদি ছাড়(Leave the throne - Rap)	Lyrics : GENIE GREEN & HAWKIN	Youtube
18	জেগে উঠেছে হুত জনতা(The Student Masses Have Awakened)	Edit & Voice: M Ferdus Reza	Youtube
19	বন্ধ থাকুক পড়ালেখা অন্ধ থাকুক জ্ঞান (Let Education Stop, Let the Nation Be Blind)	Tarek Mahmood	Youtube
20	স্বাধীন দেশের স্বাধীন মানুষ বলতে গেলে কথা(Talking About Free People of a Free Country)	Tanzir, Inman, Sajidul & Habibullah	Youtube
21	ছাত্রসমাজ এক হও (Student Society Unite)	M Ferdus Reza	Youtube
22	লড়া(Fight)	Bilal Hossain Noori	Youtube
23	দেশ কার? (Whose Country? - Rap)	Artist: Lunatic Vcer & Rhythmist Music: Antivenom	Youtube
24	অসুস্থ বাংলাদেশ(Sick Bangladesh - Rap)	Imtiaz Akib	Youtube
25	বিদ্রোহের কান্না(Cry of Rebellion)		Facebook
26	বিদ্রোহের ডাক(Call of Rebellion)		Facebook
27	স্মৃতির বিদ্রোহ(Rebellion of Memories)		Facebook
28	ছাত্র(Student- Rap)	Imtiaz Akib & Tanz	Youtube
29	আয়রে আয় তোরা গায়ে কাফন পড়া (Come on, You Wear the Shroud)		Youtube
30	বাংলাদেশ ছাত্র আন্দোলনের গান (Bangladesh Student Movement Song)	Indian Singer- Abhishek Chakrabarty	Youtube
31	বাংলাদেশ ছাত্র আন্দোলনের গান (Assume Artists' Song)	Words: Ashidul Islam Music: Shahidul Islam Artists: Mushfika Khatun and Rafiqul Islam	Youtube

SL.	Name of the Song	Writer(s)	Supportive link(s)/ Source(s)
1	শেষ নিঃশ্বাস(last breath)	Lyrics: Zulfiqar Ahmed Shakeel, Music: Jihad, Guitar: Anik	Facebook
2	কথা ক (Talk), (a Rap song)	Shezan Beatz	Youtube
3	হায় সাদ্দাদ (Alas; Saeed)	Lyrics: Didar Mastual, Music: Jihad	Facebook
4	রাজাকার(Rajakar)	Anonymous	Youtube
5	পাল্টে দে ইতিহাস (Change history)	Anonymous	Youtube
6	দেশ সংস্কার(Reforming the Nation - Rap)	GOLD CUBE AND SCARECROW	Youtube
7	করাবী কতো দলানি? (How Much Will You Sell Out?)	Written by Nirita Noor	
8	স্লোগান(Slogan - Rap)	Artist : Mcc-e Mac Ft Gk Kibria Music : DIMSHO HARD	Youtube
9	আওয়াজ উঠা(Raise Your Voice - Rap)	HANNAN	Youtube
10	দাম দে(Pay the price - Rap)	Crown ENGINE	Youtube
11	বাংলা মা(Mother of Bangla - Rap)	CHEF-IQ	Youtube
12	স্বাধীনতার গন্ধ(Scent of Freedom - Rap)	Restive	Youtube
13	আর কতো? (How Much More? - Rap)	Rain Khalil	Youtube
14	ছাত্র আন্দোলনের গান(Student Movement Song)	Anonymous	Youtube
15	ও প্রধান জোমাকে বলছি শোনো(O leader, listen to me)	Zillur Rahman	Youtube
16	তুমি কে আমি কে রাজাকার রাজাকার... (Who Are You, Who Am I? Rajakar Rajakar...)	Newton JR.	Youtube

[Figure 7] Compilation of rap songs and other musical works by young artists released during the July Uprising. Prepared by the author.

Shezan released ‘Kotha Ko’ on 16 July 2024. The song draws parallels between the Language Movement of 1952 and the July Uprising, highlighting how the state tried to block freedom of expression in both cases to suppress the revolution. As a direct response to such brutality, Shezan prompts listeners to ‘speak up’ against the fascist regime in almost every other sentence. Rapper Hannan’s ‘Awaaz Utha’ was perhaps the most direct and unapologetic battle cry released during the student-led protests. Hannan’s spitfire verse courageously [calls out the regime’s tyranny](#) and predicts leaders will soon be toppled from their thrones. These songs became rallying cries among protesters, serving as anthems of resistance. Hannan’s music swept the country, leading to his [arrest and subsequent imprisonment](#) for 12 days by the police. He was released on 6 August following the government’s collapse. The courageous efforts of both Shezan and Hannan fuelled the spirit of the movement against injustices and earned them a [spot in the academic textbooks](#) produced by the interim government.



[Figure 8] Cover poster of the single rap songs 'Awaz Utha' ('Raise Your Voice') by rapper Hannan and 'Kotha Ko' ('Speak Up') by rapper Shezan. License: © Hannan and Shezan.

Throughout the uprising, Bangla rap functioned as an instrument of radical expression facilitated by a rapidly shifting digital environment. These songs of resistance reveal a nuanced socio-political dimension denouncing corruption and elite impunity. They called for justice and freedom of expression, exposed the pervasive culture of fear under authoritarianism, engaged in mass mobilisation through artistic performance, and made revolutionary calls for a new political order.

3.3 Cartoons as Resistance

Cartoons and satire have long been engrained in Bangladesh's political culture. However, during the 15 years of Awami League rule, the number of political cartoons in Bangladesh steadily declined due to widespread self-censorship. The July Uprising marked a notable shift in this regard. During the SAD-led movement, intensified government efforts to suppress dissent were met with an even stronger public response. As repression increased, the resistance became unstoppable. Among the various forms of protest, cartoons and satirical illustrations came forward as a particularly powerful tool of rebellion, capturing the spirit of the time. Cartoonists began depicting Sheikh Hasina and other political figures directly, overcoming long-standing fears and taboos. This change was driven by a growing realisation that self-censorship had become meaningless amid escalating violence.

Throughout the 20-day student-led uprising, both professional and amateur cartoonists produced at least 500 cartoons. These works were widely shared on social media platforms, reaching millions of viewers and contributing to what many described as a 'cartoon revolution'. The rapid circulation of these images amplified protest messages and helped sustain public engagement with the movement.

Cartoonists who were at the forefront of the July Uprising explained that sharp and provocative cartoons function as a unique visual language capable of directly connecting with the masses, particularly when justice fails to serve them. [According to the cartoonists,](#)

where lengthy or overly intellectual explanations may fall short, cartoons can convey powerful messages and easily communicate complex political realities with clarity and immediacy.

Several cartoonists were wanted by the police, reflecting the risks associated with creating work challenging the authorities. Satirical platforms like [Earki](#), which is popular among young people, published protest cartoons on a regular basis, further contributing to the spread and visibility of visual forms of resistance during the uprising.

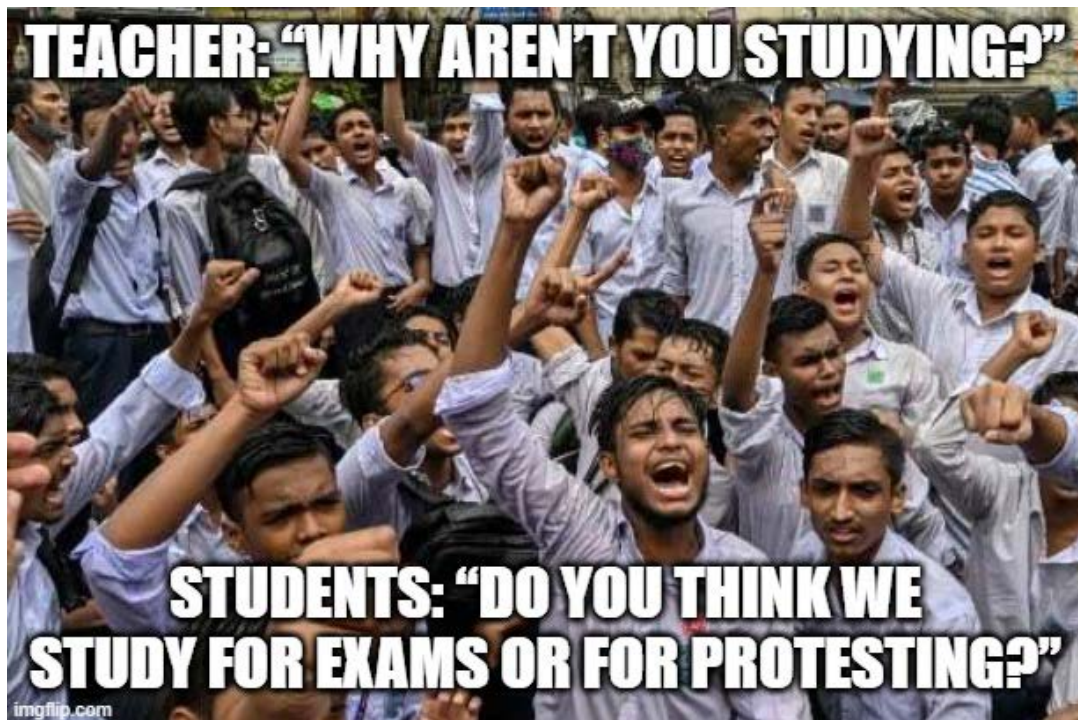


[Figure 9] Cartoon depicting the broadcasting of authoritarian state performance in 'Hirok Ranir Deshe' ('In the Land of Queen Hirok'). License: © Natasha Jahan.

Young cartoonist Natasha Jahan's artwork 'Hirok Ranir Deshe' reimagines the classic allegory of Satyajit Ray's film *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (1980) through a contemporary lens. Beneath its fantastical narrative and musical form, Ray's film delivers a sharp critique of authoritarian rule, exposing how repression, censorship, and arbitrary power generate a deeper social anarchy. By shifting the figure of the ruler from king to queen, the work invoked contemporary political realities, explicitly referencing Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. This gendered inversion updated Ray's satire for a new moment, demonstrating how authoritarian structures persist across time while adapting their forms. In doing so,

the artwork affirms satire's enduring power to reinterpret cultural memory as a tool for critique and resistance.

3.4 Memes Mocking the Regime: A Remnant of Chorompotro



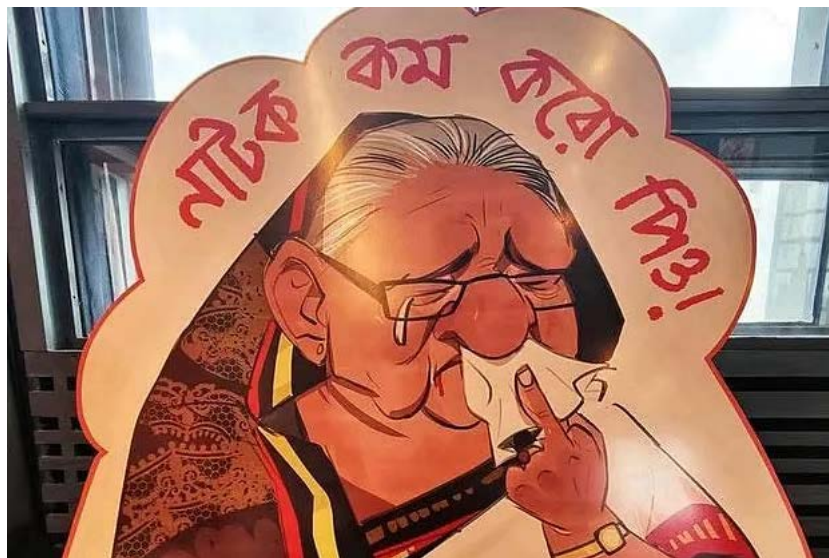
[Figure 10] A popular meme circulated online among students during the July protests which led to frequent cancellation of class lecture and closure of educational institutes.

As streets filled with tear gas, protesters were beaten, and unlawful arrests increased, Bangladeshi youth adopted an unexpected political tool: the meme. The widely circulated meme in Figure 10 encapsulates the spirit of student participation during the July Uprising in Bangladesh. On the surface, the statement appears humorous, yet it reflects the dual reality students faced in balancing academic responsibilities while actively engaging in collective resistance against injustice.

A significant generational and ideological gap between those in power and Gen Z transformed memes into coded political messages. Inside jokes, pop culture references, and phrases such as 'Natok kom koro, piyo' ('Tone down the theatrics, dear') and 'Post delete koro shomossha hobe' ('Delete the Facebook post or there will be trouble!') criticised explicitly performative politics and online surveillance and became accessible and widely understood forms of protest. The humour in memes serves a dual function: it personalises political content, allowing viewers to identify more closely with protesters, while also enabling dissent in forms less likely to be immediately censored or violently suppressed. Some observers even drew parallels between this meme-driven resistance and the role

of Chorompotro, a radio programme produced by M. R. Akhtar Mukul during the 1971 Liberation War. Through satire and comedic storytelling, Chorompotro boosted the morale of freedom fighters, ridiculed occupying forces, and served as a form of both informational and psychological resistance.

The parallels between Chorompotro and contemporary protest memes are evident. Both operationalised satire and humour to communicate political messages, mobilise the public, and challenge state authority. Just as Chorompotro played a critical role during the Liberation War, memes during the July Uprising sustained public engagement and kept political issues visible.



[Figure 11] A viral meme urging the prime minister to tone down the 'natok' (theatrics). The meme circulated widely after Sheikh Hasina visited a burned metro station and publicly expressed outrage, with critics interpreting the gesture as performative rather than genuine. License: © Rats Asif.

Unlike traditional political art forms such as newspapers, radio commentaries, or satirical columns, memes bypass editorial oversight. Because of their humorous and relatively light tone, memes are difficult to criminalise directly. Furthermore, when authoritarian regimes respond harshly to meme creators, this often [provokes further criticism and ridicule](#). Memes thus became an unanticipated [civic communication channel](#) in an environment of severe censorship and authoritarian control during the July Uprising, enabling young people – many of whom had become increasingly disenchanted with formal politics – to re-enter political discourse.

A large number of memes were generated during the uprising to portray the emotions, aspirations, and demands of the younger generation. These memes condensed complex political grievances into brief, clickable formats well suited for advocacy and awareness-building. Visual depictions of students facing police lines, accompanied by captions such as 'This is our education now', conveyed the lived realities of protesters and evoked strong emotional responses.

Young, tech-savvy activists were the central demographic of the July Uprising, and they leveraged their technological fluency and deep familiarity with social media platforms to produce meme-based content that resonated with peers and facilitated mobilisation. Instead of signifying apathy regarding politics, digital tactics like meme production represent a form of adaptation to the shifting circumstances of punishable behaviours, surveillance, and communication, especially in limiting or dictatorial environments. Meme-based activism in this sense is a broader shift in the conception, organisation, and maintenance of collective action in the 21st century. The inability of the old guard to decode this form of expression signals an evolving political terrain – one in which even a meme can function as a democratic weapon.

4 Can the Gen Z Protests Foster Lasting Change in Bangladesh?

The July 2024 Uprising represented a deep generational rupture in Bangladeshi politics not only in terms of leadership and mobilisation but also in the very form of political expression. It was the first time in decades that young people expressed political dissent in a manner that was so discordant with the behaviours and attitudes of the established elites. The most visible such break between the generations was students' reclaiming and subversion of the language deployed by the state. Students proudly adopted the incredibly derogatory term *razakar* that Sheikh Hasina levelled against them. Chanting 'Tumi ke? Ami ke? Razakar, razakar', they turned the insult into a communal claim about the righteousness of being morally superior to authoritarian governance.

In addition to slogans, Gen Z protesters created a unique form of satire and copious commentary that quickly crossed the internet and the streets. Statements such as 'Oi mama na please' ('Hey dude, please don't') were used to satirise inappropriate or coercive state practices, and 'Natok kom koro pio' ('Tone down the theatrics, dear') made fun of the performative speeches made by political leaders, particularly Sheikh Hasina. 'Chalai den' ('Spread the news') became the abbreviated name for regime-backed disinformation after a leaked WhatsApp message revealed ruling party activists telling each other to write fake news. The political literacy of Gen Z was built on irony, speed, and solidarity, enabling young people to discredit the official discourse without using any ideological appeal.

The most drastic aspect of the Gen Z movement was the opposition to leadership and reluctance to mobilise under conventional political parties. The movement carried a philosophy that anyone could be a leader rather than imposing the need to follow charismatic leaders and divisional command structures. This practice ran counter to the established patron–client political culture practised in Bangladesh, which places a premium on loyalty, seniority, and

dynastic rule. This made it challenging for the regime to use surveillance or repression to suppress dissidence because mobilisation was not centralised around committees but rather took place via loose digital networks. This horizontal system expanded the playing field, especially for students, women, and first-time activists who had never participated in formal politics.

Gen Z activists also redefined political legitimacy itself as based on collective presence, morality, and responsibility to peers, as opposed to loyalty to political sponsors and established party hierarchies. Politics were negotiated in the hybrid spaces between social media sites and the streets and campuses. Mobilisation occurred in various places, undermining Dhaka as the political epicentre. This decentralisation allowed the movement to continue even during curfews, internet shutdowns, and violent crackdowns.

Nonetheless, the Gen Z movement also encountered severe problems, regardless of its transformative potential. The politics of Bangladesh remain highly violent, factionalised, and intolerant, and the political apparatus has traditionally been hostile to any kind of reform not championed by the elite. The issue of the generational gap also poses difficulties for a transition as the aged elites are neither ready to give up power nor willing to mentor young people. Young leaders often find themselves at odds with the established political culture, and there is no organised political apprenticeship to help them navigate the complex political system, coalition politics, and policy implementation in a weak post-authoritarian state.

Moreover, social media succeeded as a mobilisation tool but has also caused fragmentation. Young leaders have been targets of rumours, disinformation, and character assassination. Another significant challenge is physical insecurity, as the case of 32-year-old political activist [Sharif Osman Hadi](#), spokesperson of a political and cultural organisation called Inqilab Moncho (Platform for Revolution), reveals. Hadi died in hospital in Singapore in December 2025 after being shot in the head by masked attackers – a common tactic of the deposed Awami League regime – while he was on an election campaign. He was killed in full view of the nation he tried to uplift. Such cases underscore the lack of institutional protection for young political players who seek to make a difference.

Finally, although there was an effort to institutionalise the revolutionary energy through the creation of the [National Citizen Party](#) in 2025, the party soon came under serious allegations of corruption, opportunism, and ideological vagueness. The party, which was considered a new representative of centrist politics, suffered damage to its anti-corruption reputation when its top members were accused of involvement in controversial matters. They also faced much criticism from the liberal and women's wings of the party establishment when the leadership announced an electoral partnership with Jamaat-e-Islami, the largest Islamist party in Bangladesh and currently the main opposition following the 12 February, 2026 parliamentary election.

The gap between mobilising revolutionary fervour and persuading the broader public of the capacity to deliver stable governance remains a central challenge for Gen Z politics. Moral honesty, symbolic resistance, and sentimental solidarity ensure the success of a revolution

because they effectively delegitimise authoritarianism, but they are insufficient for managing a complicated post-authoritarian state (Jasper, 2011). The latter task requires institutional literacy, bureaucratic negotiation, and trade-offs, all of which are slow and politically costly (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986).

This contradiction is organisational rather than generational. Youth movements have the moral high ground but may not have strong institutional memory and mentorship. Without cross-generational collaboration and long-term leadership formation, revolutionaries risk undergoing ideological dilution, falling prey to opportunism, and causing disenchantment among the broader population (Mansbridge et al., 2013). The question of whether the changes Gen Z has pushed for in Bangladesh will last will be determined by young people's ability to transform ethical resistance into sustainable institutional changes.

5 Conclusion

The July Uprising marked a turning point in the history of Bangladeshi politics, not only by overthrowing an authoritarian system but also by paving the way for new political action by Gen Z. The Gen Z protesters who led the uprising made censorship, repression, and surveillance into an engine of creativity, recasting common forms of culture into weapons for politics and mass memory.

In retrospect, the aftermath of the revolution has also exposed its limitations. The 18-month interim government led by Professor Muhammad Yunus may ultimately be remembered as an administration marked by commendable intentions but undermined by institutional fragility, political opportunism, and internal fragmentation – symptoms of limited governing capacity and insufficient cohesive leadership. The Gen Z 'youthquake' is a promise and paradox: it carries both an energised reconfiguring of political engagement and issues of consolidation, accountability, and leadership. How this new political wave triggered by young people will mould the political and social landscape will only be revealed in the years to come.

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