

The July Revolution: Fatalities and narratives in Bangladesh's 2024 anti-discrimination movement

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Abstract

Bangladesh's 2024 July Revolution, also referred to as the Anti-Discrimination Movement or July Uprising, followed the Supreme Court's reinstatement of a quota system allocating 56% of public-sector jobs, including 30% for descendants of freedom fighters, about 10% for women, about 10% for district-based allocation, 5% for indigenous communities, and 1% for people with disabilities. Protests spread rapidly, led primarily by students and young professionals, and were met with curfews, mass arrests, internet shutdowns, and live ammunition. Domestic monitoring confirmed 819 deaths, while a later United Nations assessment estimated as many as 1,400, suggesting that the national toll likely exceeded contemporaneous counts. Drawing on human rights reporting, news sources, and eyewitness accounts, this article analyzes fatalities by age, occupation, cause, and region, and examines how youth leadership, martyrdom narratives, and media coverage shaped public sentiment. Percentage estimates refer to confirmed cases during the study period, while the later United Nations estimate is noted to contextualize scope. The findings clarify who was most at risk and where and when lethal force clustered, and they situate these patterns within debates on protest policing and accountability during a period that culminated in the resignation of then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The article contributes to scholarship on protest movements and outlines implications for institutional reform in Bangladesh.

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Introduction

The 2024 July Revolution in Bangladesh, sometimes described in media and public discourse as the Anti-Discrimination Movement, the July Uprising, or the Monsoon Revolution, marked a turning point in public contention over inequality and access to public-sector opportunities. Its immediate trigger was the Supreme Court's decision to reinstate a quota system that allocated 56% of public-sector jobs, among them 30% for descendants of freedom fighters, about 10% for women, about 10% for district-based allocation, 5% for indigenous communities, and 1% for people with disabilities. Protests spread rapidly across public and private universities and then into wider society'.¹⁻³ The government's response included mass arrests, curfews, internet shutdowns, and the use of live ammunition. Early monitoring reported 819 confirmed deaths; of those, about 69% were under 30 and 18% were children.⁴⁻⁶ A subsequent OHCHR⁷ fact-finding report estimated as many as 1,400 deaths overall, with approximately 12 to 13% children. The July Revolution reflected broader dissatisfaction with economic conditions, corruption, and human rights violations, and it coincided with the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on 5 August 2024 and the appointment of the Nobel Laureate Prof. Dr. Muhammad Yunus as Chief Advisor to lead an interim government on 8 August 2024.⁸⁻¹⁰

This study uses a descriptive-interpretive approach to examine the movement's causes and the distribution of fatalities by age, occupation, cause, and geography. It draws on contemporaneous human rights reporting, media sources, and eyewitness accounts. Percentage estimates refer to confirmed cases available during the study period; while the later OHCHR⁷ estimate is used to contextualize national scope, though disaggregated microdata from that report were unavailable for integration.

Beyond documenting statistical patterns, this paper analyzes how deaths were framed as symbols of resistance in media and public discourse, and how these narratives intersect with debates on protest policing and accountability in Bangladesh. The study does not directly measure changes in state and citizen relations; its interpretive claims are limited to patterns evident in contemporaneous reporting and secondary sources.

The analysis builds on scholarship on repression and mobilization, movement framing and media effects in contentious politics.¹¹⁻¹⁷ Taken together, these perspectives shape the paper's contribution to debates on anti-discrimination movements and the broader implications of coercive protest management and reform in Bangladesh.

Historical background and evolution of the quota system in Bangladesh

The Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) originated in the Civil Service of Pakistan, a continuation of the Indian Civil Service established during the British colonial period.^{18,19} After independence in 1971, Bangladesh introduced a quota system to reflect its

demographic and political realities. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Awami League government designed the system to support families of those who had sacrificed during the Liberation War.²⁰ Initially, 30% of public sector jobs were reserved for descendants of freedom fighters, 40% for underrepresented districts, 10% for women, particularly those affected by the war, and the remaining 20% for candidates selected purely on merit.^{21,22}

Adjustments were introduced over time in response to demographic changes and social pressure. In 1976, the quota for district based candidates was reduced to 20%, and the 40% merit based allocation was reinstated.²³ By 1985, the 10% quota for women became a general reservation for women, while the 30% quota for freedom fighters remained unchanged. Later revisions added 5% for indigenous communities and 1% for people with disabilities, bringing total reserved quotas to 56% by 2012 and leaving 44% of positions open to merit.^{24,25}

Although the quota system was intended to address historical injustices, its continued implementation generated discontent among younger generations.²⁶ For decades, university students and young job seekers viewed the system as a barrier to equal employment opportunities, since most public sector jobs remained inaccessible to them despite their qualifications.²⁷ The first large scale anti quota protests appeared in 2007 under the caretaker government but quickly faded amid political instability and the government's unwillingness to negotiate.²⁸

Subsequent student protests in 2011 and 2014 also failed to achieve significant reform, and many protesters were labeled as members of Bangladesh Islami Chhatrashibir, the student wing of Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, which politicized and delegitimized their cause. Dissatisfaction peaked during the 2018 Quota Reform Movement, which saw mass protests and demonstrations across the country.^{29,30} The students called for a reduction in the 56% quota system rather than its complete abolition. Although the then Prime Minister announced the cancellation of quotas in 2018, implementation remained incomplete, and practices varied across recruitment rounds. Two court rulings reshaped the legal landscape in 2024. On 5 June, the High Court reinstated quotas that had been rolled back administratively, and later, on 21 July, the Supreme Court capped the reservation for descendants of freedom fighters at five percent while retaining other categories. These decisions, combined with long-standing grievances over access and fairness, formed the immediate legal context for the 2024 student led protests. Key milestones are summarized in [Table 1](#).

Escalation of the 2024 anti-discrimination movement

Against this legal backdrop, campus mobilization intensified and quickly moved beyond universities into broader civic spaces. Protests began on major public campuses in Dhaka and spread to private universities as student networks coordinated marches, blockades, and sit ins.³¹ The movement soon expanded beyond the educational sphere, driven by widespread frustration with the government's handling of the economy, persistent corruption, and growing perceptions of authoritarianism.^{1,32}

The government's response was swift and severe. Educational institutions were closed, key organizers were targeted, and movement was restricted under curfew as security

Table 1. Chronological timeline of key events quota system and movement.

Date	Events
1972	The awami league government introduces the quota system to support underrepresented areas, women, and families of freedom fighters.
1976	District-based quotas reduced to 20%, and merit-based recruitment increased to 40%.
1985	10% quota for women introduced.
2010	Quotas extended to the grandchildren of freedom fighters.
2012	A 1% quota for people with disabilities added, bringing total quotas to 56%.
2007-2014	Multiple student-led movements demanding quota reform fail to achieve lasting change.
March 8, 2018	High court denies petition challenging the quota system's validity.
March 21, 2018	The then prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, announced the continuation of the quota system for freedom fighters' descendants.
July 1, 2020	Government decides to eliminate all quotas for civil service, but reforms remain ambiguous.
June 5, 2024	Supreme court reinstates the 56% quota, sparking new protests across Bangladesh.
July 1, 2024	Protests resume after Eid Al-Adha; university students and faculty join in.
July 7, 2024	Nationwide Bangla blockade initiated by students, halting road and rail transport.
July 10, 2024	Appellate division cancels freedom fighters' quota for 4 weeks; protests intensify.
July 14, 2024	Prime minister Hasina dismisses protests in a controversial public statement, worsening tensions.
July 15, 2024	Chhatra league launches violent attacks on protesters, injuring hundreds.
July 16, 2024	Student leader Abu sayed is shot and killed by police in Rangpur, further inflaming protests.
July 17, 2024	Nationwide shutdown declared by students; protests turn violent, with clashes reported in major cities.
July 20, 2024	Curfew imposed by the government; internet blackouts enforced. Student leader Nahid Islam abducted.
July 21, 2024	Supreme court reduces quotas from 56% to 7%, but protests continue.
July 29, 2024	Over 2,800 students officially arrested in Dhaka, with widespread reports of 10,000 total arrests nationwide.
July 31, 2024	March for justice held by students, demanding justice for killings and mass arrests. Social media access restored after a 13-day blackout.
August 1, 2024	"Remembering the heroes" program launched to commemorate victims of government violence.
August 4, 2024	Dhaka March program declared by students; over 100 deaths in violent clashes with police.
August 5, 2024	The then prime minister Sheikh Hasina resigns and flees the country under intense pressure from protesters and the military.

Source: Authors compilation, 2024

agencies intensified operations. The ruling party's affiliated student and youth wings, including Bangladesh Chhatra League, Jubo League, and Swchasebak League, also confronted protesters.^{33,34} The Sheikh Hasina led government imposed a nationwide internet shutdown that constrained coordination and public reporting, restricted social

media platforms, and deployed multiple agencies, including the police, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), and the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB).^{35–37} Civil society groups and later fact finding documented live ammunition use and military grade weapons in crowd control.^{34,38} The interim government of Bangladesh later banned the Bangladesh Chhatra League on 23 October 2024 under the Anti-Terrorism Act, 2009, citing alleged involvement in terrorism and human rights violations, including the suppression of protests during the July 2024 events.³⁹

By mid-July, the movement had transformed into a nationwide uprising. On July 7, 2024, students launched the Bangla Blockade, disrupting train routes, highways, and major roadways.⁴⁰ Protesters called for a nationwide civil disobedience campaign, demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and reform of the quota system.⁴¹ Some segments of the ruling party accused Bangladesh Islami Chhatrashibir, one of the largest student organizations of Bangladesh, of infiltrating the protests, but student leaders rejected these claims, insisting that their movement was grassroots and nonpartisan. The situation turned violent on July 16, 2024, when police and student protesters clashed in Rangpur. Police shot and killed student leader Abu Sayed near Begum Rokeya University.^{42,43} After footage of the shooting circulated widely on social media, he became a symbol of the movement and an iconic figure for protesters nationwide.^{44,45} By July 17, violence had spread to Dhaka, Chattogram, and Rangpur, resulting in the deaths of at least six protesters. The government's violent crackdown and lack of accountability deepened public anger and intensified unrest.^{46,47}

On July 20, 2024, the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court canceled a lower court's decision and ruled that 93% of government jobs should be awarded on merit. By this time, however, the movement had taken on a life of its own, with broader calls for government reform.⁴⁸ As protests intensified, several public universities became strongholds for student activists, and clashes between protesters and police continued to escalate.

Government crackdown and political fallout

As the July Revolution intensified, the government adopted increasingly forceful measures to contain it. The initial response involved large police deployments and targeted arrests of student leaders.³⁰ As protests spread from university campuses in Dhaka to cities such as Chattogram, Rangpur, and Rajshahi, authorities escalated with mass detentions, house raids, and deployment of paramilitary forces.^{2,33,49} Reports from rights groups described arbitrary detentions and alleged extrajudicial killings, with families stating that some individuals were taken by security forces and later found dead or remained missing.⁵⁰

On July 14, 2024, then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina made a highly controversial public statement, calling the protesters “troublemakers” and “Razakar,” or enemies of the state, and accusing them of trying to destabilize the country.⁵¹ Her remarks were widely condemned by civil society groups, opposition parties, and international observers. Rather than easing tensions, they inflamed public sentiment and galvanized more students and citizens to join the protests. The following day, on July 15, the ruling party's student wing, Chhatra League, launched coordinated attacks on student protesters. Armed with sticks,

rods, and firearms, they injured hundreds and marked the beginning of a new and more violent phase of the government's crackdown, including assaults on female protesters at the University of Dhaka (DU).^{52,53}

Between July 15 and 19, clashes between protesters and security forces resulted in dozens of deaths, including children. In Dhaka, public buildings such as BTV Bhaban (Bangladesh Television headquarters) and Setu Bhaban (government transport offices) were vandalized, and key infrastructure, including the Dhaka metro rail, was brought to a standstill amid widespread disruptions.^{30,34,46} The violence and state repression received intense coverage in domestic and international media, drawing condemnation from human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.^{53,54}

Despite earlier curfews and nationwide internet restrictions, protests continued in city centers and district towns. Reports of enforced disappearances and incommunicado detentions intensified public concern. On 20 July, protest leader Nahid Islam was reported missing in Dhaka, becoming a rallying point and sharpening accusations of state intimidation.⁵⁵ By late July, demands had shifted decisively from recruitment policy to accountability for deaths, injuries, and mass arrests, as well as broader questions about political transition.⁴⁸

Protesters sought justice for the killings, the resignation of Sheikh Hasina, and the restoration of democratic governance. By late July, the government's position appeared increasingly fragile amid reports of internal dissent within the Awami League and rising pressure from both the public and the security establishment.⁵⁶ On 1 August, organizers launched the Remembering the Heroes campaign to honor those killed, but despite efforts to reassert control, unrest persisted, and more than 213,000 people were implicated in criminal cases. On 5 August, the movement called a mass mobilization under the banners March for Dhaka and Dhaka Gherao. Demonstrators converged on the capital from across the country, amplifying their rallying cry: "Step Down Hasina, Step Down Fascism."^{55,57,58}

On August 5, 2024, under immense pressure, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced her resignation and fled to India seeking political asylum, marking the most significant political upheaval in recent Bangladeshi history.^{9,10,59} Her departure symbolized the collapse of a regime that had ruled for more than a decade and was widely regarded as a victory for the student-led protests. The Revolution's success, however, came at a severe cost. Hundreds of people were killed, and thousands were arrested or reported missing during the unrest, as documented by human rights groups and subsequent fact-finding reports. In the immediate aftermath, student organizations aligned with the Revolution paused demonstrations and demanded the restoration of internet access, the lifting of curfews, and the release of detainees. The authorities struggled to restore order while managing tens of thousands of arrests and pending cases.^{6,60}

Data on fatalities and temporal analysis

Reports from the HRSS and Amnesty International documented 819 confirmed deaths during the movement.^{4,61} A subsequent United Nations assessment estimated as many as 1,400 deaths nationwide, with roughly 12 to 13% of the victims being children. These estimates highlight the gravity of the government's response and the scale of unrest during

the protests. Data were compiled from multiple sources, including eyewitnesses, victims’ families, hospitals, and media reports, underscoring the widespread impact of the conflict. The evidence suggests that the national toll was likely higher than early counts indicated. Barriers to verification included movement restrictions, communication blackouts, pressure on medical facilities, and rapid burials without full identification, all of which hindered accurate reporting.

This study analyzes HRSS-confirmed deaths ($n = 819$) recorded as of August 2024. As disaggregated OHCHR microdata were unavailable, the following analyses examine distributions by age, occupation, cause, and geography based solely on HRSS confirmed cases. Temporal patterns show clusters of lethal incidents in mid-July and again in early August, consistent with the main protest waves and intensified security operations. Taken together, these patterns underscore both the concentration of risk among young people and the scale of the state response across the country.

Demographic breakdown of fatalities

Age distribution

The movement primarily involved young people, who were disproportionately affected by the state’s use of violence. Sixty nine percent of the victims were under 30 years old, with 44.24% of the deaths occurring in the 21 to 30 age group, reflecting the central role of university students in leading and sustaining the protests. Additionally, 27.54% of the deceased fell within the 11 to 20 age group, showing that even teenagers were heavily affected. The combined 71.78% of deaths among those aged 11 to 30 highlights the vulnerability of younger generations to state violence, as illustrated in [Figure 1](#).⁴ This

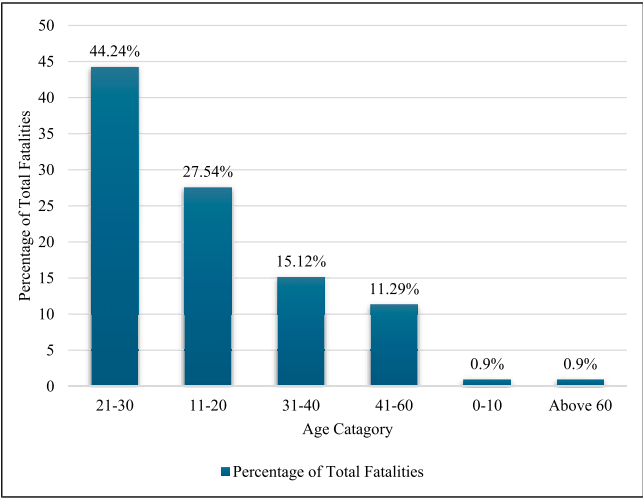


Figure 1. Fatalities by age category (percentage). Created by authors, 2024, Source: HRSS⁴

demographic pattern makes clear that the movement was driven by the youth of Bangladesh, who bore the brunt of the government's repression.

Gender distribution

Information on fatalities by gender is incomplete, but available evidence shows that both men and women played significant roles in the movement. Eyewitnesses and photographic records suggest that thirty to forty percent of protesters were women active in campus demonstrations, marches, and coordination activities, while men were often present in larger numbers on the front lines where confrontations occurred. Reports indicate that approximately eight to ten percent of the victims were female, reflecting the visible roles women played, particularly in university based protests, as shown in Figure 2.⁴ One of the most widely reported cases was that of Nafisa, an 18 year old student whom police shot and killed in Savar on 5 August 2024, symbolizing the courage and vulnerability of young protesters of all genders.⁶² The participation of both men and women demonstrates the breadth of engagement in the July Revolution and the shared costs borne by students and young citizens throughout the protests.

Occupation based analysis of fatalities

Students were the most affected group, accounting for over fifty five percent of the fatalities.⁴ They led the movement against the quota system and bore the brunt of police brutality and government crackdowns. Many of those killed were enrolled in major universities such as Dhaka University, the University of Rajshahi, and Jahangirnagar University, as well as other colleges across the country.⁵⁴ The heavy losses among students symbolized an assault on the future of the nation's youth. Several cases illustrate this tragedy. Farhan Faiyaaz, a 17 year old student from Dhaka Residential Model College, was killed during a clash on July 18, 2024, after being caught in the violent suppression by Jubo League members and the police.⁵⁴ His death became a rallying point for continued protests. Similarly, Mir Mahfuzur Rahman Mugdha, a student at the Bangladesh University of Professionals, was fatally shot while distributing water to protesters,⁵⁴ effecting the selflessness and commitment of the students involved in the movement. In Chittagong,

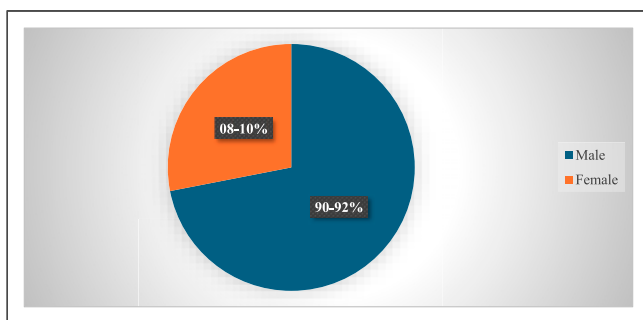


Figure 2. Gender breakdown of fatalities. Created by author, 2024, Source: HRSS⁴

Faisal Ahmed Shanto, a first-year accounting student at MEC College and a quota reform protester, was reportedly killed in an attack reportedly involving members of the Chhatra League.

Beyond the student population, the fatalities included garment workers, rickshaw pullers, day laborers, and professionals, showing how the movement’s appeal extended far beyond university campuses.⁴ This broader participation reflected growing public frustration with the government’s policies and the violent repression of dissent. For example, Aklima Begum, a garment worker in Gazipur, was killed during a protest on July 19, 2024, where factory workers joined student led demonstrations to protest labor conditions alongside quota reform. Similarly, Rahim Uddin, a rickshaw puller in Savar, was fatally injured in clashes between the police and protesters near a university area. Mohammad Shohag, a bus driver in Dhaka, was also killed during demonstrations that brought transport services in the capital to a standstill, as shown in Figure 3.⁴

Many workers, especially those employed in critical sectors such as transportation and textiles, were caught in clashes as the protests disrupted daily life and intensified confrontations with security forces. A small number of teachers and professionals were also among the dead, reflecting how the movement attracted support from intellectuals and middle-class participants who shared the broader demand for justice and reform.

Causes of death

Analysis of the causes of death shows that most fatalities resulted from gunfire. Over 58.4% of the deceased were shot, many during confrontations with paramilitary units and security forces. The RAB, BGB, and local police used live ammunition against protesters, particularly in urban centers such as Dhaka, Chattogram, and Rangpur.^{4,52,53} Amnesty

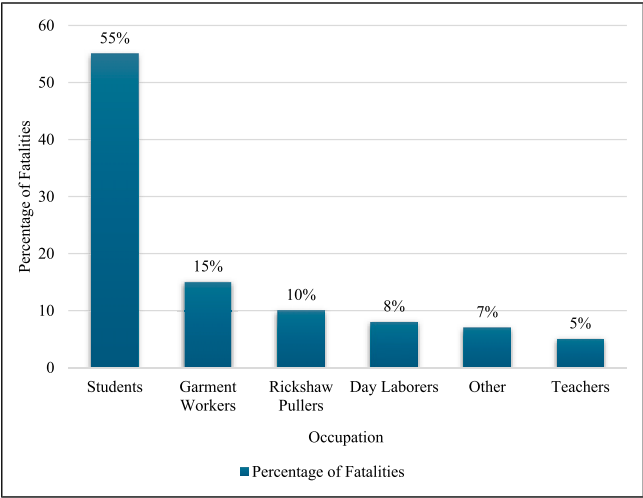


Figure 3. Occupation-based fatalities. Created by authors, 2024, Source: HRSS⁴

International reported the use of unlawful weapons such as birdshot, which is typically used for hunting and is not suitable for crowd control.⁶⁰ Additionally, witnesses indicated that shots were fired from helicopters and by snipers. The use of live ammunition to disperse protesters was heavily criticized by human rights groups, who accused the government of employing disproportionate force against unarmed demonstrators. One of the most widely reported cases was the killing of Abu Sayed, a 25 year old protest leader at Begum Rokeya University.⁶³ Police shot him at close range during a quota protest, and his death became emblematic of the government’s excessive use of force against student protesters.^{44,45}

In addition to gunfire, 8.7% of the deaths were caused by burns, likely resulting from fires that broke out during clashes between protesters and government forces. Fires were particularly prevalent during the Bangla Blockade in July, when transportation systems and government buildings were set ablaze in response to the crackdowns. A further 8.2% resulted from beatings, as victims were attacked by police or Chhatra League members using batons, tear gas shells, and other blunt objects. Another 7.1% were attributed to other causes, including asphyxiation, stampedes, and fatal injuries sustained during protests, as shown in Figure 4.⁴

Geographical distribution of fatalities and injuries

The geographical distribution of fatalities during the 2024 July Revolution reflects the national scale of the unrest, with some regions experiencing far higher concentrations of violence and casualties than others.⁶⁴ According to the Ministry of Health of Bangladesh, 18,247 individuals were injured throughout the movement. The highest number of injuries was reported in Dhaka division, with 11,073 cases, while the lowest was recorded in Barishal division, with 236 (Figure 5). In terms of fatalities, 443 people were declared dead on the spot and another 179 died in hospitals, bringing the total to 622 officially

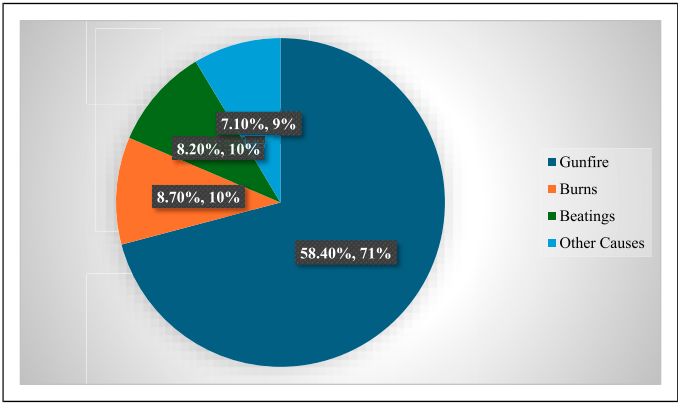


Figure 4. Causes of death. Created by authors, 2024, Source: HRSS⁴

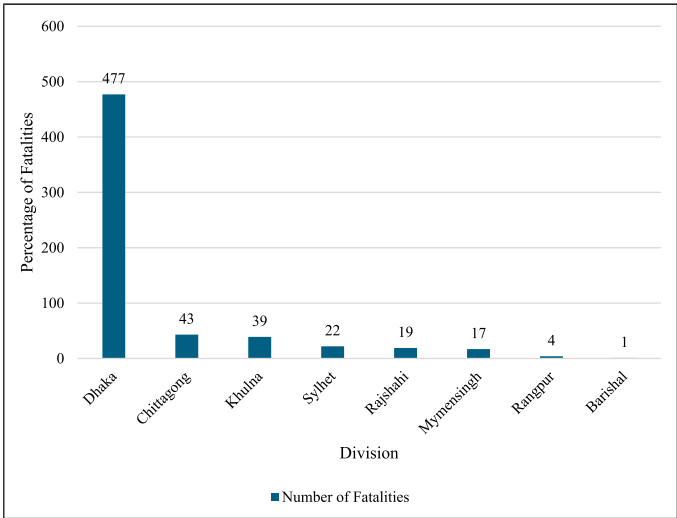


Figure 5. Geographical distribution of fatalities. Created by authors, Source: Morol.⁶⁴

registered deaths. Dhaka division recorded the highest number, with 477 deaths, underscoring its position as the epicenter of the movement.^{4,64}

Other divisions reported 43 deaths in Chittagong, 39 in Khulna, 22 in Sylhet, 19 in Rajshahi, 17 in Mymensingh, and 4 in Rangpur. Although these figures were lower than those in Dhaka, they show that the movement spread beyond the capital, reaching industrial centers and rural regions alike. Gazipur, Sirajganj, Savar, and Jessore saw particularly violent clashes in areas with strong student and labor union participation. The lowest number of fatalities was recorded in Barishal, with only one officially reported death, as shown in Figure 6.

However, the Ministry of Health noted that many fatalities were not registered in hospitals, and some deaths were not officially recognized, especially those that occurred outside of formal medical facilities or during intense clashes.^{43,65} This suggests that the actual death toll was likely higher than official numbers indicate, as numerous fatalities may have gone uncounted in the immediate aftermath of the protests.

Division	Injured	Disabled	Eye Injuries
Dhaka	11,077	498	603
Chattogram	1,736	-	22
Khulna	1,546	11	5
Rangpur	1,205	1	5
Rajshahi	1,154	8	4
Sylhet	918	-	2
Mymensingh	577	-	4
Barishal	206	7	2
Total	18,419	525	647

Authors compilation, 2024, source: Desk (2024b)

Figure 6. Injury Statistics by Division Authors compilation, 2024, Source: Desk.⁶⁵

Temporal distribution of deaths

The analysis of deaths by date reveals distinct periods of intensified violence. The highest spike in fatalities occurred from August 4 to 6, accounting for 53.08% of the total deaths. This period marked the peak of violence, as protests intensified and the government escalated its use of force.^{4, 58} Clashes were particularly severe during the Dhaka March program, when government forces employed lethal tactics to decisively suppress the protests. Another significant wave of unrest took place from July 15 to 19, accounting for 17.44% of fatalities. This period coincided with the government’s initial attempts to contain the movement through mass arrests, curfews, and internet restrictions. Protesters, undeterred by these measures, continued their demonstrations, resulting in deadly confrontations.

A further 15.64% of deaths occurred from July 20 to 23, a period marked by continuing clashes involving the Chhatra League, police, and protesters. The remaining 9.23% occurred after August 6, during the final days of the movement when security forces continued operations to disperse residual demonstrations.⁶⁶ The least violent phase was from July 24 to August 3, when 4.62% of deaths took place, likely reflecting the temporary impact of government concessions and ongoing peace negotiations, as shown in [Figure 7](#).

Unidentified victims and government suppression

An estimated 17.6% of the deaths were not officially documented, either because of deliberate government suppression or the practical challenges of identifying victims amid mass violence, as shown in [Figure 8](#). Reports indicate that hospitals were instructed not to release information about those injured or killed, and some victims were buried quickly

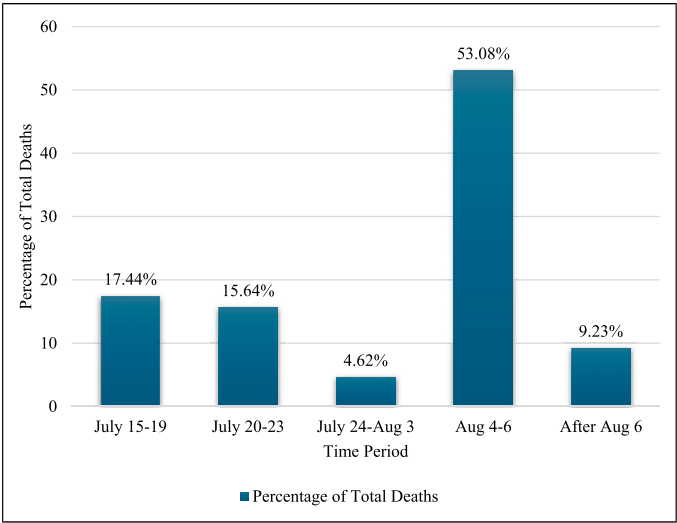


Figure 7. Temporal distribution of deaths. Created by authors, 2024, Source: HRSS.⁴

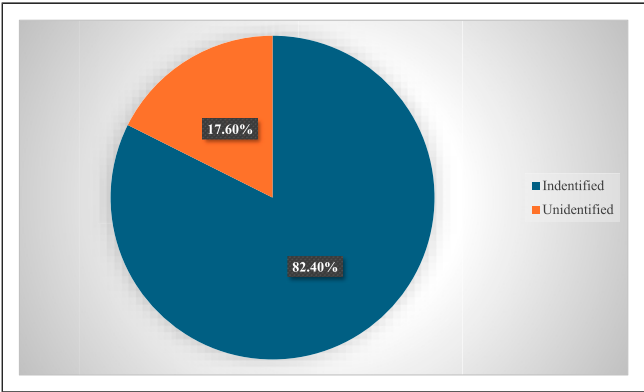


Figure 8. Identified and unidentified victims. Created by authors, 2024, Source: HRSS.⁴

without proper identification, particularly those who died in intense clashes between July 15 and August 6.^{4,57}

Human rights organizations have called for independent investigations into these deaths, arguing that the lack of transparency underscored the government’s responsibility for concealing extrajudicial killings.⁴³ Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch expressed concern about the inability of families to identify their loved ones and urged the establishment of an independent commission of inquiry to investigate enforced disappearances, unlawful killings, and the use of disproportionate force by the state.^{67, 68}

Impact on children

The protests had a severe impact on children, who became unintended victims of state violence. UNICEF confirmed at least thirty-two child deaths during the unrest, many of them bystanders or relatives of protesters.⁶⁹ Their inclusion among the casualties intensified domestic and international condemnation of the government’s use of force.⁷⁰ Among the most widely reported cases were Abdul Ahad, a four-year-old shot while standing on a balcony in Rayerbag, and Riya Gope, a six-year-old from Narayanganj who was struck in the head while her father carried her to safety; both later died of their injuries.⁷¹ The OHCHR⁷ similarly documented the killing and injury of children through live fire and other unlawful tactics, noting that hospitals were pressured to withhold casualty data and families struggled to locate missing minors. The deaths of these children became a powerful symbol of the movement, amplifying calls for accountability from human rights groups and underscoring the human cost of the government’s response.

Mass arrests and legal repercussions

In the wake of the government’s crackdown, over 10,000 people were arrested in less than 10 days, and more than 61,000 were named in legal cases.⁶ Many detainees were students, activists, and journalists held without trial or legal counsel. One emblematic case was that

of Faiyaz, a seventeen-year-old Dhaka College student arrested and placed on police remand, underscoring the state's deliberate targeting of youth.⁷² Reports from rights groups describe widespread beatings, electric shocks, and other forms of torture in detention facilities. These arrests and arbitrary detentions reflected the government's shift toward an explicitly authoritarian posture, aimed at neutralizing the protest movement through fear and legal intimidation. Officials attempted to portray the uprising as a national security threat, labeling protesters as terrorists and foreign agents to justify the use of lethal force. This framing was widely rejected by international observers and human rights organizations, which condemned the violations of civil liberties and due process.

Martyrdom and the politics of memory

Martyrdom has long shaped Bangladesh's political imagination, where the idea of sacrifice for justice and freedom occupies a deeply moral and emotional place in public life. Rooted in both religious values and collective historical experience, it serves as a language through which citizens interpret loss and injustice. The memory of the 1971 Liberation War, in which countless people were killed in the pursuit of independence, continues to stand as the most powerful expression of this ideal.⁷³ Earlier precedents such as the 1952 Language Movement, when students were killed demanding recognition of Bengali as a state language, also embedded the figure of the young martyr at the center of national identity.⁷⁴

The 2024 July Revolution consciously drew on these historical memories. Protest leaders and commentators often described the slain students as inheritors of the moral legacy of 1952 and 1971, portraying their deaths as part of a continuous struggle for equality and human dignity. The killing of Abu Sayed near Begum Rokeya University became a defining moment. His image circulated widely across traditional and social media, transforming personal tragedy into a shared symbol of resistance. In online forums and campus commemorations, fallen protesters were remembered as shaheed, martyrs who gave their lives for a fairer society.⁴⁴ In this context, martyrdom functioned not only as an act of remembrance but also as a political resource. It transformed grief into solidarity, legitimized defiance, and gave the movement a moral vocabulary that resonated far beyond university campuses. By invoking a lineage of sacrifice deeply embedded in the nation's collective memory, the 2024 movement linked its immediate grievances to a longer history of Bangladesh's struggle for justice and equality.

The role of social media in constructing martyrdom

Social media transformed the way martyrdom was understood and communicated during the 2024 July Revolution. Platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, Telegram and YouTube became spaces where protesters documented and shared violence in real time, creating a collective record of suffering and resistance.⁷⁵ Through images, videos, and personal accounts, the victims were not only mourned but redefined as symbols of defiance against state repression. The circulation of the video showing Abu Sayed's killing became a turning point. The footage spread rapidly, provoking grief, outrage, and calls for justice under hashtags such as #MartyrForJustice,

#StopStateViolence, and #StepDownHasina.⁷⁶ These digital expressions extended beyond mourning; they mobilized solidarity, turning online spaces into engines of political participation.

In the aftermath of key killings, social media users organized offline commemorations. Students and activists gathered at Shaheed Minar, lighting candles and holding Gayebana Janaza (absentee funerals) for those killed. These acts of remembrance, born online and enacted in public, linked personal loss with collective identity, ensuring that the memory of the fallen remained central to the movement's moral and political momentum.⁷⁷

Religious and cultural framework of martyrdom

Beyond historical parallels, the idea of martyrdom in the July Revolution was deeply rooted in Bangladesh's religious and cultural traditions. In Islamic thought, the term Shaheed, meaning martyr, carries a sacred association with sacrifice in the pursuit of justice and moral duty.⁷⁸ In Bangladeshi Islamic discourse, the term "Shaheed", meaning martyr, holds profound significance.⁷⁹ Many protesters' deaths were framed within this spiritual context, portraying them as individuals who gave their lives for equality and righteousness. Religious leaders and clerics played an active role in shaping this interpretation. In the weeks following the deaths of prominent student leaders, Friday sermons across Dhaka and other cities invoked Quranic teachings on resisting tyranny, drawing explicit parallels between the protesters' struggle and the concept of *jihad fi sabilillah*, or striving in the cause of justice.⁸⁰ This framing conferred moral legitimacy on the movement and expanded its resonance beyond the student population, uniting broader segments of society under a shared ethical vision.

The religious and cultural symbolism of martyrdom continued to influence public life long after the protests subsided. Roads, university halls, and student programs were renamed in honor of those killed, while "Martyrs for Justice" events became recurring acts of remembrance.⁸¹ Student leaders frequently invoked the names of fallen activists during speeches, positioning their sacrifices as part of an unfinished struggle for democratic reform. As Bangladesh entered the post Hasina era, this narrative found renewed expression in the Rebuilding Bangladesh initiative, which emerged as a social and political movement advocating justice, transparency, and meritocracy.⁸² The memory of the martyrs thus transcended the events of 2024, evolving into a lasting moral compass for national renewal and resistance to authoritarianism.

Media coverage and narrative control

Media coverage during the Movement became both a vital source of information and a site of intense contestation. As protests spread and state repression deepened, control over the narrative turned into a struggle between the government, independent media, and the protesters themselves. The presence or absence of coverage profoundly influenced how the movement was understood within Bangladesh and abroad.

From the outset, the government of Sheikh Hasina sought to manage and restrict information about the protests. Independent journalists and news outlets faced harassment, detention, and physical attacks while reporting from protest sites.⁷⁵ The Bangladesh

Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) repeatedly imposed internet shutdowns and blocked social media platforms at key moments to prevent the circulation of videos and eyewitness reports.⁵ During the height of the unrest in July 2024, several journalists from leading newspapers were detained or threatened, and newsrooms were pressured to downplay the scale of demonstrations and fatalities.

State owned media, particularly Bangladesh Television (BTV), promoted an official narrative that depicted the movement as politically motivated and violent. Protesters were frequently labelled as “troublemakers” or “agents of foreign interference,” while reports of state violence were omitted or minimized.⁷⁵ The Press Information Department issued formal guidelines that discouraged journalists from using words such as massacre or government violence, and limited coverage of deaths. These measures narrowed the space for independent reporting and produced two sharply divergent accounts of events: one circulated by state media, and another emerging from citizen journalists and independent outlets.⁸³

Social media as a tool of counter-narrative

Despite strict control of state media and censorship of traditional outlets, social media became the central platform for constructing a counter narrative during the July Revolution. Social media platforms allowed protesters to organize, communicate, and broadcast real time updates to national and international audiences. On July 18, 2024, images and videos of the police assault on Dhaka University students spread rapidly online, igniting widespread outrage.^{29,46} These user generated posts directly contradicted the government’s portrayal of “peaceful intervention,” exposing scenes of violence and repression. Hashtags including #StepDownHasina, #StopStateViolence, and #QuotaReform unified the movement and kept global attention on the government’s actions. Citizen journalists and independent YouTube channels provided on the ground footage and analysis, expanding the protest’s reach beyond official narratives.²⁴ When the government imposed nationwide internet shutdowns during peak unrest, communication briefly stalled. Protesters responded by using Virtual Private Networks (VPN) to evade restrictions, while members of the Bangladeshi diaspora amplified their voices abroad. The hashtag #BoycotRemittance emerged as a powerful form of economic protest, with expatriates vowing to suspend remittances until the government met the protesters’ demands. Given the country’s heavy reliance on remittances, this campaign heightened international attention and economic pressure.⁸⁴

Symbolic acts of online solidarity also flourished. Supporters changed their profile pictures to red flags, honoring those killed and sustaining the movement’s visibility across digital platforms.³² Despite censorship and shutdowns, social media remained indispensable for coordination, evidence gathering, and sustaining the collective memory of resistance.⁵⁶

International media and global attention

As domestic media faced censorship, international outlets became essential in documenting the 2024 protests. Al Jazeera, BBC, TRT World, CNN, CGTN, Anadolu

Agency, AFP, Reuters, The Guardian and The New York Times provided extensive coverage of the escalating violence, highlighting human rights abuses and the deaths of student protesters.⁸⁴ This global reporting intensified scrutiny and placed new pressure on the Bangladeshi government. Human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, released reports condemning the excessive use of force and calling for accountability.

The visibility created by this coverage prompted strong reactions from the international community. Several agencies of the United Nations and foreign political leaders called for independent investigations into the killings and allegations of extrajudicial violence. The Hasina administration, which had initially portrayed the protests as a domestic issue, struggled to sustain that narrative once international attention expanded.

As diplomatic pressure increased, key institutions within Bangladesh, including the military and sections of the ruling party, became unwilling to support the government's continued use of violence. This loss of internal backing, combined with global condemnation, led to the resignation of Sheikh Hasina and her departure to India on August 5, 2024.^{58,76}

Discussion and conclusion

This study examined the 2024 July Revolution in Bangladesh, also referred to as the Anti-Discrimination Movement, through a quantitative and descriptive analysis of confirmed fatalities and the social narratives that emerged around them. The findings reveal clear patterns in how the state used coercive power to suppress dissent and how citizens, particularly students and young professionals, mobilized in response. The government's reliance on mass arrests, live ammunition, and communication blackouts not only intensified violence but also reshaped the movement's purpose, transforming a specific demand for quota reform into a broader confrontation over justice and accountability.

The data show that young people bore the greatest costs of state repression, with students representing the majority of the dead and injured. The framing of these deaths as acts of sacrifice created a moral and emotional foundation for sustained resistance. Martyrdom narratives, amplified by both traditional and social media, became an organizing force that linked immediate grievances to Bangladesh's longer history of protest and sacrifice. These patterns illuminate how collective memory, and digital communication can interact to sustain mobilization even under severe repression.

While this study does not directly measure the complexity of state and citizen relations, it identifies the structural conditions that shaped that relationship during the movement. The evidence suggests that coercive responses to peaceful protest can deepen social divisions, delegitimize state authority, and reinforce demands for accountability. In this sense, the analysis contributes to understanding how state power and civic mobilization intersect in contemporary Bangladesh.

The study is not without limitations. The data rely on contemporaneous reporting, and the absence of systematic qualitative interviews restricts insight into individual motivations and decision making. Future research integrating interviews, ethnographic

observation, and archival materials would enrich understanding of how participants perceive risk, repression, and political change.

Despite these constraints, the findings highlight both the potential and the limits of protest driven reform. The movement achieved immediate political consequences with the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, yet the underlying causes of discontent, inequality, governance deficits, and limited institutional accountability, remain unresolved. The 2024 Anti-Discrimination Movement thus stands as a defining episode in Bangladesh's political trajectory: one that exposed the costs of state repression while reaffirming the capacity of collective action, led by the country's youth, to demand justice and shape the national conscience.

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This work is dedicated to the unsung heroes of Bangladesh's July 24 Revolution, and to all who sacrificed their lives in the pursuit of justice throughout the nation's history.

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