

ESID Working Paper No. 125

The threat of student movements in Bangladesh: Injustice, infiltrators and regime change

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August 2019

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ISBN: 978-1-912593-28-6

Abstract

For decades, large-scale political mobilisation in Bangladesh has been monopolised by deep-rooted and often violent political parties. Over the past decade, however, the opposition has been suppressed, leaving them unable to wage the strikes and protests typical of the country's politics. Alongside their decline has been a resurgence of street movement beyond conventional political boundaries. These movements are unpredictable, coalesce around issues of injustice, and emerge in particular from urban students. This article examines the movements for reform to civil service quotas, and for improved road safety, seen primarily in Dhaka in 2018. Such movements pose two principal threats to the ruling party: first, they have the potential to undermine their legitimacy and create a moment of crisis on which the opposition could capitalise; second, they can exacerbate tensions between interest groups on whom the ruling party rely to maintain power. The state response of concessions and repression reflects these threats and the delicate balance of maintaining legitimacy while using coercion. With a rich history of political movements and a lack of alternative channels for political expression, responding to grievances that can motivate such movements will be an important challenge for the ruling party to maintain their grip on power.

Keywords: student movements, reform, political parties, Bangladesh, violence, state

Jackman, D. (2019) The threat of student movements in Bangladesh: Injustice, infiltrators and regime change. ESID Working Paper No. 125. Manchester, UK: The University of Manchester. Available at www.effective-states.org

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1. Introduction

The year 2018 was crucial for Bangladeshi politics, beginning with the imprisonment of Khaleda Zia, the leader of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) on corruption charges, and ending with the landslide victory for the ruling Awami League (AL) in the general election. The year also saw much street protest and violence in the country's capital, Dhaka; however, unlike previous decades, this by and large stemmed not from the *hartal* (general strikes) often waged by the opposition, nor was it the bombings that had been seen around the 2014 election. Instead, the unrest came from two student-led *andalon* (movements), campaigning on issues of injustice, relating to quotas for employment in the civil service, and road safety. This resulted in marches, blockades of key streets and intersections, acts of vandalism, clashes between protestors, the police and political activists of the ruling Awami League, arrests, and major concessions from the government. These movements felt modern, with popular Facebook groups emerging, live streaming on 'Facebook live', and the rapid spread of fake news, and as such chimed with contemporary urban protest seen globally, most notably of late in the Arab Spring. To understand the significance of these movements and the threat they pose, however, we need to look not so much to other events around the world, but to Bangladesh's own history. Viewed in this light, these movements can be understood as the contemporary articulation of a fundamental mode of protest, particularly seen around elections and when the space for political competition is limited.

Bangladesh's politics is bound up with social movements, which have underpinned key political transitions seen in the country, including the Liberation struggle of 1971 and return to parliamentary democracy in the early 1990s. These movements have often emerged from among urban students, the wider middle class, and political parties, which have both fomented such movements and grown from them. Despite their importance to Bangladesh's political life, there has been little attempt by scholars to study such movements as a distinct form of contentious politics, and therefore as amenable to comparative analysis. While we have insightful analysis of contemporary student politics under recent Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and Awami League (AL) regimes (Andersen 2013; Ruud 2014; Suykens 2018), viewing student movements as a whole presents a significant lacuna. Two factors have made such analysis even more pertinent to understanding contemporary politics in Bangladesh, as well as the forms of protest likely to emerge in coming years. First, the consolidation of power under the ruling Awami League has decimated conventional opposition, through what are widely viewed as highly authoritarian practices, meaning that it is likely to be through alternative routes that dissent and protest is felt. Second, over the Awami League's past two terms in office, there has been a rise in social movements beyond conventional political boundaries, beginning with the Shahbag movement of 2013.

This article focuses on two student movements, which struck Dhaka and wider Bangladesh in 2018: the movement for quota reform, and the movement for road safety. While motivated by two very different issues, having origins in separate

groups of urban students, and protesting in very different ways, there is also a commonality to the threat they posed, and the response from the government, which can be discerned by analysing the movements in tandem. This article argues that these movements pose two key threats to the ruling party: first, they have the potential to create a national crisis that undermines the legitimacy of the government, galvanises wider support on the street, and therefore presents an opportunity for the depleted opposition to bring pressure to bear. With the opposition's ranks significantly weakened, such a moment offers important and rare political opportunity. Second, these movements create and exacerbate competing interests in society and within the base of the Awami League, requiring careful management to ensure the stability of the ruling coalition. With the Awami League seemingly set on remaining in power, a key challenge will be mitigating the grievances which motivate such unrest, and responding to the unpredictability of these movements in a manner which does not undermine their moral authority and risk escalating discontent into a broader move against the party.

This paper is based primarily on a series of 30 interviews conducted between April and September 2018 with Bangladesh *Chattra League* leaders and activists (the student wing of the ruling Awami League) at Dhaka University, protestors in the quota reform movement, and journalists covering both movements. This is supported by interviews conducted in 2017 with leaders in the transport sector, and extensive consultation of secondary sources, relying on articles from two leading English language newspapers collated on a daily basis through 2018 and early 2019. In terms of structure, the article begins with an analysis of social movements in Bangladesh, outlining the key roles played by students and the recent resurgence of student movements. The following section examines the two cases together, plotting the evolution of both movements, the threat they posed to the state, and the mixture of repression and concessions they were met with, while the final section concludes.

2. Students and street movements in Bangladesh

2.1 Movements and students

Social movements are a particular form of contentious politics, one that differs widely in character and scale, but that is often linked closely to elections, political parties, revolutions and war, both historically and today (Goldstone 2003; Tilly 2004; McAdam and Tarrow 2010; Tarrow 2015). The interplay between social movements and these wider dynamics is multifaceted. For example, the ideology and organisation of political parties is often rooted in such movements, and as such these struggles have long-term implications for the character and dynamics of political parties (Desai 2003). Movements furthermore often serve to bring particular issues to the fore that can be acted upon during elections and, more dramatically, can also morph into revolutions, and be a catalyst for war (Tarrow 2015). Movements build momentum through coalitions with wider societal actors, deploy diverse modes of protest, including non-violence, and can be bolstered when faced with state repression that delegitimises the ruling regime (Goldstone and Ritter 2018). Collectively then, although social movements can disrupt and reshape politics, they

should be seen as inherent to, rather than an aberration from, 'normal' institutionalised politics (Goldstone 2003; Tarrow 2015). Analyses of social movements should then examine their form and role in relation to political parties, elections and institutionalised politics more broadly.

In Bangladesh a diverse repertoire of contentious politics is commonly seen on the streets, including *hartal* (general strikes), blockades, rallies, marches, human chains, sit-ins, hunger strikes, vigils, sieges, charges, street fights, killings and bombings. Diverse groups routinely use many of these to advance their interests, notably political parties, the groups and factions within them, but also NGOs, religious groups, students, garments workers, and other occupational groups. Distinct within this repertoire is the notion of a 'movement' (*andalon*), which incorporates many of the above into a sustained protest and wider political agenda. Such movements take different forms, including for environmental issues, such as the Phulbari coalmine (Faruque 2018) and Rampal power plant, but also much larger issues of injustice and politics. Indeed, socio-political movements have been at the heart of major political transitions in Bangladesh, closely linked throughout the country's history to elections, and significant changes to the political system (Jahan 1987). This can be seen most crucially through the Liberation struggle itself in 1971, the move to parliamentary democracy in the early 1990s, and key transitions in power between political parties and caretaker regimes over recent decades.¹ These movements have historically incorporated both political parties and wider interest groups in society, such as students. It is also from these struggles that political parties have grown in strength, providing an organisational backbone, leadership, skills in mobilization, and ideological narratives that have served the parties in their quests to dominate rivals. It is not then an exaggeration to say that *andalon* are at the heart of Bangladesh's political history.

The urban middle class, students and Dhaka University have played a central role in fomenting such movements. Closely following partition in 1947, students at Dhaka University began agitating for greater freedom when the government of Pakistan asserted that the official language of East Bengal (named 'East Pakistan' from 1955) would be Urdu, not the native Bangla. This grievance evolved into the 'language movement' (*basha andalon*) originating at the university, and incorporating the wider urban middle class. At a time when the vast majority of the population lived in rural areas, this marked a watershed in the geography of the politics of the region, although arguably it drew strength from the tradition of peasant radicalism (Alam 1991). Students killed in 1952 at the university as part of the struggle became martyrs, memorialised in the monument, Shaheed Minar. In the early 1960s, the student movement was galvanised by changes in education policy, which were also a

¹ Looking back further in history, Indian independence and partition can also be read in relation to the social movements that preceded it, such as those advocating non-cooperation and civil disobedience. Looking back further still, we can point to a rich history of rural movements marking Bengal, such as the late 18th century 'fakir movement' resisting the taxation of the East India Company, and the 19th century Wahabi-inspired 'farazi movement' raising the peasantry against zamindar.

vehicle for the wider movement for democracy, resulting in marches, sit-ins and *hartal* (Umar 2006). By the late 1960s, other urban groups, such as 'industrial labor, urban slum dwellers, and petty service holders', often in smaller towns, were incorporated into these movements (Jahan 1987: 172). In the Liberation struggle, Dhaka University students served as key mobilisers, linking the movement geographically and between classes, partly because the majority of students themselves came from rural areas, with closer links to the peasantry (Alam 1991). As a result, during the Liberation War, the Pakistani army targeted and brutally suppressed the university as a hotbed of resistance in their 'operation searchlight', leading to massacres and hastily dug mass graves. Students elsewhere were also crucial to the guerrilla groups which mobilised against the Pakistani army, such as 'Kader bahini', consisting primarily of school and college students (Maniruzzaman 1980).

From these events has come a deep association between Dhaka University and the country's struggle for liberation, as well as a high regard for student politicians (Van Schendel 2009). Leadership in student politics is a key route to a national political career (Andersen 2013; Ruud 2014; Suykens 2018), and events that mark Dhaka University campus can quickly reverberate around the nation, spreading to other universities and colleges. As the Chattra League president of one hall put it to me: 'If there is any movement or problem here at Dhaka university, the whole of Bangladesh is shaken and becomes unstable. To create instability at Dhaka University means creating instability everywhere'. This has been demonstrated in key subsequent political transitions. In the 1980s, for example, students were some of the first to mobilise in rallies against the military rule of President Ershad, and pivotal to the wider movement for democracy's success, when they united key political parties and the alliances they commanded together through the 'All Party Student Union' (APSU), leading to the formation of all party committees in district towns, agreement of a joint declaration against the regime (Maniruzzaman 1992), and significant protests at Dhaka University (Uddin 2006). Ershad's efforts to contain the opposition movement led to a significant number of protestor deaths and injuries,² which galvanised further support following the killing of a doctor by the government at Dhaka University (Maniruzzaman 1992), culminating on 4 December 1990, when hundreds of thousands of people openly protested his rule on the streets of Dhaka, leading to his resignation. This was only a few months after he had reportedly commented that 'a sit-in of a few thousand people in a city of 7 million people cannot change the government' (Kamaluddin 1990: 21).

Key to such movements bringing political change in Bangladesh has not been student politics per se, but the interaction between students and other actors – most crucially political parties – and their collective impact on the regime in power. It is also in part through these movements that the country's main political parties have

² In response, the regime shut down the university, and attempted to co-opt the leadership. There has even been speculation that in the year previously conflict between students' wings of political parties had been fostered by the intelligence agencies to prevent their collective mobilisation against the state (Uddin 2006: 201).

gained the prominence they have today. In the case of the Awami League, for example, the language movement prior to partition was a core issue around which they organised as a party, from which AL politicians emerged, and through which they gained popularity (Jahan 2018). This continued as the Six Points Programme in the 1960s and in Liberation, the AL successfully managed to appeal to the entire nation (ibid). Similarly, subsequent struggles – such as the BNP’s sustained pressure against Ershad’s military regime during the 1980s, and AL’s mobilisation against the BNP during the mid-1990s and military-backed caretaker regime of 2006-2008 – each time bolstered their organisational strength, demonstrating their capacity to bring change in the nation.

A key change to the character of student politics since the 1990s, however, has been the degree to which the student organisations of the ruling party have controlled the agenda and potential for student mobilisation. When in power, the auxiliary organisations of each party, such as the *Bangladesh Chattra League* (AL’s student wing, henceforth ‘Chattra League’), *Jatiyotabadi Chattra Dal* (the BNP’s student wing, henceforth ‘Chattra Dal’) and *Bangladesh Islami Chattra Shibir* (Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh’s [JIB] student wing) have monopolised life on campuses, often violently suppressing the voices that oppose their interests. Nationally, these student bodies have provided crucial muscle for their respective parties to mobilise in the far wider repertoire of contentious politics in which they engage, most centrally *hartal* (Andersen 2013; Suykens and Islam 2015; Ruud 2014). This mirrors a transition seen more widely across Bangladesh, where political life has become steadily more polarised between two main political camps. Contentious politics on the streets – around the universities or elsewhere – has then been largely the purview of these political parties, to the exclusion of mobilisation of a more ‘civic’ nature. In practice, street politics has been concerned less with ideology and more with the strength of particular leaders and factions at a local level, and at a national level with unseating the rival coalition. While movements through Bangladesh’s history have involved an interplay between students and political parties, subsequent to 1991, movements have been led and dominated by the political parties, with less participation of the wider public (Jahan 2018).

2.2 A recent resurgence

It is then within this context that we must begin to examine the movements that have struck Dhaka city and the wider country during the Awami League’s last two terms in office, beginning with the Shahbag movement in 2013 and, more recently, being felt through the quota reform and road safety movements in 2018. Unlike the dominant forms of contemporary politics in Bangladesh, these have not been organised (at least initially) within conventional political boundaries, originate with the urban middle class youth, have been on a significant scale, and have brought sustained pressure to bear on the government.

This began in 2013 with the Shahbag movement, a spontaneous protest started by a small group of online activists at a prominent junction north of Dhaka University. The

movement was sparked by a court verdict that Abdul Quader Mollah, a senior leader of Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, would receive only a life sentence for crimes committed during Bangladesh's Liberation. After the conviction, Mollah showed the 'V' (victory) sign to supporters, prompting widespread anger and a sense of injustice (De 2015). In response, thousands – and later hundreds of thousands – of people congregated, held candle vigils, and called for the government to reconsider the verdict, demanding the death penalty, and that JIB be banned.³ The movement had some parallels to wider political events in the 'Arab Spring', which had recently been felt in many Muslim majority countries. The movement was young, with many protestors not supporters of a mainstream political party (Roy 2018), predominantly middle class, drawn from the sizeable student body, it was popular (some celebrities supported the movement), spread around the country, and it was mobilised partially through social media, such as Facebook. While often labelled as the 'Shahbag movement', it was referred to in context as *Gono Jagoron Moncho* ('mass awakening platform').

In only a matter of days, the government responded to the movement, passing an amendment to legislation enabling an appeal against the conviction of Mollah, months later returning a death sentence verdict, which by the end of the year had been implemented. With the movement attracting large numbers, there are widespread claims also that the movement's leadership was co-opted by the ruling party. Loud and public demands for Jamaat-e-Islami, and religious parties more generally, to be banned from politics found resistance from a rival movement, which caricatured the protestors as atheists calling for the banning not of Jamaat, but of Islam itself. The rival movement was led by the Islamist group, Hefazat-e-Islam, and emerged on the streets of Dhaka a few months later, with a 13-point list of demands promoting Islam in public life. Bringing tens of thousands of followers (many of whom were madrassa students), they blockaded entrances to the city, and marched in central Dhaka in early May, resulting in confrontations with ruling party activists and eventually the security forces in 'Operation Flush Out', resulting in a number of deaths. The estimated number of casualties differs widely, from the movement leaders' claim that it was in the thousands, to the government claiming it was less than a dozen.

What was important about these movements was not only their scale and timing, being in the run-up to a general election, but also the sense of unpredictability, with new political forces emerging and claiming to speak for the public on issues of justice and identity. This came at a time during and after which there has been sustained and systematic curtailing of political expression and mobilisation, with the opposition BNP left decimated as a political force (Jackman forthcoming), and mainstream civil society, such as prominent newspapers and NGOs, limited in their ability to voice concerns about the increasing consolidation of power under the ruling party. The

³ Some participants even suspected the AL were attempting to lighten the court decision as a means of co-opting JIB, thereby undermining the electoral strength of the BNP at the upcoming election.

backdrop against which new movements emerged in 2018 was then one where there had been precedent for large-scale and to some degree successful movements outside of the main political parties, while even less space to mobilise through formal political processes, and heightened sensitivity to instability in the run-up to the general election.

3. The quota reform and road safety movements

The two movements that struck Dhaka city in the crucial election year of 2018 share much in common. Both originated with urban students, were sparked by issues of injustice, were catalysed by unwise comments from ministers, mobilised through Facebook, were seen as an opportunity by opposition forces to create a national crisis, were suppressed violently by the police and Awami League activists, and yet achieved significant, albeit qualified, concessions. In light of the role that movements have played through Bangladesh's history, and the contemporary political context outlined above, this section examines the quota reform and road safety movements, to illuminate the threat they posed, and politics of the ruling party's response.

3.1 Injustice, insult and protest

On 8 April 2018, Dhaka University – along with university campuses across the country – was alive with protest. Thousands of students congregated en masse at Shahbag at the university, speeches were delivered through loudspeakers, slogans for government reform were chanted by the crowd, and by the evening small fires and tyres could be seen burning on the street. Together this created the largest protest movement Dhaka had seen for five years, since the Shahbag movement of 2013. Rather than seeking justice for historical wrongs, this movement's demands felt distinctly modern: reform of the quotas that dominate access to employment in the public service.⁴ Student agitation for quota reform was not, however, new. A smaller movement had surfaced in 2013 at the university, when students who had failed the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) exam took their grievances to the street, and the call for reform has also been made at senior levels of government, particularly by technocrats who ruled under the caretaker regime of 2006-2008, as well as bodies such as the 'Public Service Commission' (the body responsible for civil service recruitment).

In 2018, however, the cause took on a scale and significance not seen before. Earlier in February a small group of students – most of whom were not aligned to any political party – formed under the banner of the '*Bangladesh Shadharan Chhatra Odhikar Sangrakkhan Parishad*' (Bangladesh General Students' Rights Protection Forum) and began protesting at Dhaka University (DU). The movement grew on the back of simmering discontent around work opportunities for the educated, urban middle class, for whom employment opportunities commensurate to education are

⁴ It is important to note other recent student movements prior to those examined here. These include the 'anti-VAT' movement against VAT on private university fees in 2015, and protests against increasing student fees, which, it has been argued, stem from the increasingly 'neoliberal' policy driving higher education in Bangladesh (Kabir and Greenwood 2017).

perceived to be difficult to find. Meanwhile the cost of living in Dhaka is increasing, and a striking 56 percent of jobs in the public sector are currently allocated on the basis of quotas, jobs that have become more attractive since salary increases introduced by the current government. Of these, 10 percent are allocated to women, 10 percent to people from 'backwards districts', 5 percent to ethnic minorities, and 1 percent to people with disabilities. Over half of the quotas (30 percent of all opportunities) are targeted towards the children and now grandchildren of 'freedom fighters' of Bangladesh's 1971 war of Liberation against West Pakistan.⁵ For a young generation without living memory of the war, these are the most controversial. As one protester put it to me: 'My father was 11 during the Liberation War, so he was too young to fight, and because of that I am not eligible. How is this a fair system?' The sense of injustice is exacerbated further by the widespread dealings in fake freedom fighter certificates – which is a longstanding problem (Maniruzzaman 1979: 48) – recent reforms that have further increased the claimants by reducing the lower age limit for freedom fighters from 13 to 12.5 years, and the fact that positions allocated on the basis of quotas often go unfilled.⁶

In the face of these perceived injustices, the movement outlined five demands, which were widely publicised in the national press and shouted for on the streets. These were: i), the reduction of quotas from 56 to 10 percent; ii), merit-based recruitment of vacancies where quota candidates were unavailable; iii), stopping special recruitment tests for quota-based jobs; iv), standardising the age limit for job seekers; and v), stopping quota applicants from applying more than once. Before turning into a mass blockade of the streets, the movement had taken a variety of actions over preceding months, each escalating in size: from a human chain, to a cycle movement, followed by a march and, finally, by a mass blockade accompanied by the call for an indefinite strike at public universities until their demands for quota reform were met. Movements that start at DU spread quickly, and university- and college-level committees were established across the country, accompanied by protests and blockades through major towns and cities. Inflammatory comments in parliament by a government minister further motivated the movement, with the then agriculture minister labelling the protestors 'children of razakar' (war criminals, collaborators in Bangladesh's War of Liberation).

Only a few months later, another movement sprang up in Dhaka, originating with college and school students, rather than DU. On 29 July, three private buses were racing each other along the busy Airport Road, a primary avenue connecting the airport and north of Dhaka city to the centre. Although such races are a daily occurrence in the city, in this instance one bus lost control and hit a group of

⁵ It should be noted that the proportion of merit-based appointments has in fact increased over Bangladesh's history. Immediately after independence, 80 percent of positions were allocated on the basis of quotas.

⁶ Protestors at Dhaka University also described the movement gaining traction because of a sense that their degrees are being devalued. Students in constituent colleges of Dhaka University are awarded the same degrees as them, despite not – as DU students described it to me – being at the same level academically.

students, injuring many, while killing 17-year-old Diya Khanam Mim and 18-year-old Abdul Karim Rajib from Shaheed Ramiz Uddin Cantonment College. As often happens in road accidents, onlookers and those affected took immediate justice, and here a group of students vandalised nearby vehicles and set fire to buses, before being joined by hundreds of other students and blockading the road. Anger was, however, magnified by the reaction of the then shipping minister, Shajahan Khan, who is also the executive president of the Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation, which represents over 235 transport unions and incorporates around 6 million workers (Daily Star 2019). When asked about the incident, he reportedly referenced a recent crash in India with a higher number of casualties, before asking 'But do they talk about it in the way we do?' and smiling.

As well as having his support base in the transport sector, the minister had also been publicly criticised for his interventions in the sector, including in 2011, when he issued 28,000 driving licences without the appropriate test. Nationally there are estimated to be around 1 million vehicles driven in Bangladesh by drivers without licences, while there are only 176 registered driving instructors (Daily Star 2018a). It was later found that none of the bus drivers involved had a licence, and one did not have the appropriate route permit. With the sense of injustice magnified, the next day students – many of whom were dressed in their uniforms and carrying school bags and ID cards – blockaded the avenue on which the incident occurred for much of the day, issuing a nine-point demand, notably demanding there should be capital punishment for such offences and an apology from the minister, along with a string of measures designed to improve road safety and the terms on which students access it. Over the following days, the movement escalated across Dhaka and wider Bangladesh, with students from schools, colleges and universities blocking key junctions and avenues, including, once again, Shahbag. A recurring chant heard throughout the movement, was in English – 'We want justice!' – with other chants and slogans aimed against the government, police and shipping minister.

Students, however, not only protested, but also began enacting the change they wished to see, enforcing new traffic rules. Videos rapidly circulated on Facebook of students surrounding vehicles armed with mobile phones, checking licences and documentation, and passing those who failed their checks to the police. These acts – some bordering on 'rude accountability' (Hossain 2010) - were striking, with police, politicians and senior civil servants not exempt from their reach. Students, for example, stopped a deputy inspector general of one police branch on a central avenue in the city, plastering the windows of his SUV with posters, and forcing him to leave the vehicle and greet the crowd. Protestors found that the vehicle had no registration certificate available, nor could the driver show a licence. Police officers were regularly stopped by protestors, and a senior minister was prevented from driving the wrong way down a road. Students even created new orderly (and very slow-moving) traffic lanes, with a special lane for emergency vehicles. Celebrities joined the movement to show support for the students' efforts. The movement spread around the country, with similar – but smaller scale – protests, processions and human chains seen in major urban centres, such as nearby Gazipur and

Narayanganj, and further away Sylhet, Chittagong and Rajshahi, many shouting the familiar chant: 'We want justice'. Meanwhile the Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation suspended all their services, alleging harassment by the protestors.

3.2 Concessions and caution

In both cases, once the movement had reached a significant scale, the government immediately offered concessions, and appeared cautious not to inflame tensions. In the case of quota reform, before the movement had escalated into a blockade, the protestors' demands had been flatly rejected by the government, with a common sentiment being that the sheer suggestion was 'anti-Liberation', an insult to freedom fighters and their families who had made sacrifices for the nation. As the movement gathered in strength – and, critically, as it took to the streets and blockaded roads – the general secretary of the Awami League, Obaidul Quader, was sent to negotiate and there appeared to be a concession that the government would consider plans to reform the quota system, on the condition that the movement left the streets. At one point, some leaders in the movement accepted this; however, the agreement was almost immediately rejected by the majority of the protestors, leading to a split in the movement, new convenors emerging and street protests continuing.

From the beginning of the quota movement, the response of the Chattra League was different to previous episodes. Rather than attack the movement head on, violently repressing it, as they had done in 2013, when a similar but smaller-scale movement had emerged at the university, the leaders appeared to equivocate. One reason for this was that in fact many Chattra League activists, and even some mid-ranking leaders themselves, actively joined the protest. The quota movement found support from across the student body. Although the vast majority of protestors did not have an explicit political affiliation, activists of all political groups, including Chattra League, Chattra Dal, and Islami Chattra Shibir, could be seen protesting. As a senior Chattra League leader described it:

'There were some from Chattra League in the leadership of the movement against the quota system in BCS. The spokesperson of the organisation leading the movement was a vice president of X Hall wing of Chattra League. The movement could be dismantled in the beginning, but we didn't receive any instruction from the party. Because it was not difficult for Chattra League to foil the movement. In the past, when Chattra League was asked for action, we immediately did it. The protesters couldn't stand in front of us.'

Some then leaders in the Chattra League described to me not being able to openly attend the protests, even though they knew the system was unfair and supported the quota cause. There was a particular need not to step out of line, because leaders were awaiting the appointment of the Chattra League's central committee.⁷ A further

⁷ A rumour circulating on Dhaka University campus at the time – heard from some former senior Chattra league leaders, as well as current junior leaders – was that the Chattra League itself allowed the movement to gather strength, offering a further possible explanation for why

reason, however, was that the protestors had learnt from the 2013 experience and carefully crafted their political discourse accordingly. Knowing that in the public imagination quota reform was often labelled as ‘anti-Liberation’, the movement strategically positioned themselves as pro-Bangabandhu, pro-Awami League protestors. A Chattra League hall leader at DU described this:

‘During the 2013 quota movement, the students chanted anti-government slogans, and because of this they were put down by the police. But this time they were very mature, very intelligent, they used the same slogans that we do, they were shouting the same thing, showing photos of Bangabandhu and Sheikh Hassina, so of course we could not attack them.’

The party was similarly cautious – at least initially – in dealing with the road safety movement. As it rapidly took on a significant scale, seemingly from nowhere, the movement had an air of unpredictability, which was unwelcome politically in the run up to the general election. In response to the movement’s demands, the government gave immediate concessions, notably rekindling the ‘Road Transport Act’, which had reportedly been stalled for over a year, due to opposition from the transport sector (Daily Star 2018b). Amongst other measures, the Act stipulates that the maximum term of imprisonment for causing death through reckless driving is five years. The drivers responsible for the accident were also quickly caught and arrested by the Rapid Action Battalion, and the registration of the company responsible – ‘Jabal-e-Noor Paribahan’ – was cancelled. Associations responsible for the sector in Dhaka announced reform to labour relations designed to reduce competition between buses, and the government also immediately announced the start of a ‘traffic week’, in which the police became suddenly vigilant against road traffic violations, and began issuing a huge number of fines and reprimands. Senior politicians called for students to return to class, and families of both victims were also personally given 20 lakh taka in savings certificates by the prime minister in a ceremony.

3.3 Infiltrators, fake news and moral crises

In both movements, however, such concessions failed to make any significant mark on momentum, and events quickly turned violent, with clashes between protestors, police and ruling party activists, and widespread arrests. Important in shaping these outcomes were claims that the BNP were attempting to intensify such protests to create a moment of crisis on which they could capitalise. The context of an election year and the inability of the BNP to mobilise significantly on the streets in recent years are thus crucial to understanding the threat posed by such movements.

With the quota movement morphing into a blockade, and tens and thousands of angry and vocal students on the streets of Dhaka, it conjured up images of Shahbag.

the movement was able to gain momentum. The supposed rationale behind the allegation was that some in the Chattra League leadership were trying to force a delay in the re-election of the central committee (due early 2018), so as to prolong their stay in power. The rumour went that in creating chaos at the university, leaders were sending a message to senior central party leaders to manoeuvre better opportunities for themselves.

Claims – and some evidence – began to emerge that the BNP were attempting to influence the course of the movement. It should be made clear that the government have a very clear interest in characterising movements in this way as a means of legitimising the coercion they use to control them. Indeed, senior Chattra League leaders allege that the quota movement was directly funded by the BNP, as one put it to me: ‘The convenor of the movement has received funds from the BNP. From Tarique Rahman⁸ in London. We think it is 1.20 crore taka. This money was to spread the movement throughout the country.’ Where else did they get the money for the placards, for the transport, for the medical treatment, went the argument. While the claim formed part of the ruling party’s campaign to discredit the movement, a leaked phone call available on YouTube showed that Tarique Rahman had contacted a BNP-affiliated professor at the university and was attempting to influence events. The party as a whole also openly supported the movement, proclaiming that they would abolish certain quotas if they were to come to power.

The primary threat to the government was not that they would be overpowered by the students. They could of course use the might of the police and political muscle to confront them. Rather, the fear was that events could take a turn that would undermine their moral authority and legitimacy. A real possibility was that a protestor would die at the hands of the police or party, leading to moral outrage and a risk that the wider public would take to the streets in solidarity. One reading of events on 8 and 9 April was that such an event was almost engineered. On 8 April, the movement was at its strongest, and the police were facing down the crowd with baton charges, water cannons, rubber bullets and tear gas. At this time a post appeared on Facebook and began to circulate widely, claiming falsely that a protestor had been killed. As a result, key Chattra League leaders moved to Shahbag – under instruction from the prime minister, as they described it – to reassure the convenors of the movement and calm the situation. At this point, a small group of unknown actors raided the house of the university’s vice chancellor (VC), destroying furniture, burning cars, while also taking the hard drives of nearby CCTV cameras. The claim made by both Chattra Leaguers and some protestors interviewed was that the attack on the VC’s house was orchestrated by outside political forces, in an attempt to further escalate events.⁹ Chattra Leaguers, journalists and protestors, all described to me being at the house when a group wearing motorbike helmets and carrying guns and metal rods arrived and stormed through the gate to the VC’s house. A senior Chattro League leader described it:

⁸ Tarique Rahman is the son of Khaleda Zia, and currently acting chairman of the BNP, living in exile in London.

⁹ Rumours were spread that some of the movement’s leaders were directly involved with the BNP or Jamaat. This was in part fuelled by the media. For example, the newspaper, the *Daily Ittefaq* made the unfounded claim that one leader in the movement had a background in Islami Chattra Shibir, in an article which they quickly retracted. This led to the student’s father being temporarily detained by police. Similarly, digging into the movement leaders’ Facebook histories, speculation over a ‘like’ or share, even if only remotely connected and years in the past, led to further scrutiny.

‘They spread the news on Facebook that one protester had died. They have over a hundred thousand members on their group, and so when this happened we were all up at Shahbag negotiating with the convenor of the movement. This is when they decided to invade the house of the VC. Look at this photo of the burnt cars. Normal students can’t do that. This was shibir, BNP people. The news on Facebook was to divert us.’

A counter narrative, however, is that the raid was in fact orchestrated by the Chattra League themselves, as a means of delegitimising the movement and justifying their repressive measures to control it. In any case, immediately after the raid on the VC’s house, the Chattra League took decisive steps. Armed, as protestors described it, with guns, sticks and metal rods, student political leaders and activists began to beat protestors to disperse the movement. This led to a number of charges and counter-charges by the protestors through the early morning of the 9th, ironically all happening near a statue commemorating a student who had died because of student political violence in the 1990s. Female students were on the front line of the student protest, and the Chattra League were supported by other Chattra League students from elsewhere in Dhaka, whom they had paid, protestors allege, to come to the university to support them. Fake news continued to be spread on Facebook, with a claim a few days later that a female Awami League student leader had cut the tendons on the foot of a protestor, provoking further protest.

A similar dynamic can be read in the road safety movement, with widespread claims from the ruling party that ‘infiltrators’ were attempting to escalate confrontation. From the outset, the movement was far more violent than that for quota reform, with students often only of school or college age, vandalising buses and vehicles. Only a few days into the movement, it was clear the concessions offered would not persuade students to cease, and the call for students to return to school changed to schools and colleges being closed. Both police and Awami League activists (notably from the Chattra League and Jubo League) began to confront the protestors violently on the streets. The police were armed with tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannons, while Awami League activists wielded sticks, iron rods, machetes and even pistols, many concealing their identity by wearing motorcycle helmets (such activists are often colloquially termed *cadre* when associated with violence). Unlike in the quota movement, protests and rallies sprung up across Dhaka city, often at key junctions, avenues and near educational institutions. As a result, skirmishes ensued, with police and the Awami League charging protestors and, in some cases, protestors throwing bricks and stones, and charging back at the Awami League activists. Many photographers attempting to document incidents were beaten by ruling party activists, and a huge number of students were attacked, suffering injuries and in some cases hospitalised. In perhaps the most widely known incident in the protest, the photographer Shahidul Alam was arrested after giving an interview on Al-Jazeera, later leading to widespread condemnation and international campaigns for his release. During the protest, international actors, such as EU envoys, Western embassies and rights organisations, called for the government to end the violence.

Amidst such clashes, there are claims that the BNP and Islami Chattra Shibir activists were attempting to escalate the violence, both digitally through fake news, and physically on the streets. The BNP publicly supported the movement, condemned the state violence waged against students, and flatly denied any accusation that they had orchestrated any of the more extreme acts occurring during the movement. The movement highlighted the government's failure to manage the sector, they argued, and suggested the government should stand down, with a delegation from the BNP also meeting the families of the victims. The Awami League's general secretary claimed that the BNP were attempting to capitalise on the movement, saying: 'They [BNP] have no options left. So they will now depend on the quota reform movement and student movement. They don't have the strength, courage and ability to do something on their own' (Daily Star 2018c). In one incident, for example, images and claims began to circulate on Facebook that student protestors had been killed in the Dhanmondi area of Dhaka, and female student protestors had been raped in a nearby Awami League office. Chattra League activists eventually invited a small group of students into their offices to demonstrate that no such events had occurred, leading to a press conference to dispel the rumours. In response, mobile internet speeds were temporarily lowered to 2G, meaning photos and 'Facebook live' could not be broadcast. The Awami League's general secretary claimed that 'infiltrators' from BNP and Jamaat, using 'fake ID card and wearing school uniform' (New Age 2018), had used the cover of the movement to attack an Awami League office in the upmarket Dhanmondi district, leading to injuries and hospital treatment for a number of their activists. In another incident, an alleged phone conversation between a senior BNP leader and activist was leaked, suggesting that BNP activists were being encouraged to join the movement.

3.4 The politics of concessions

Both movements ended amidst a mix of concessions and repression. The road safety movement fizzled out after nine days of intense protest, and with 53 cases lodged against protestors and 102 arrests by 20 August (Daily Star, 2018d). The movement had won a commitment to significant reform; however, traffic quickly returned to its chaotic norm. The blockade of the quota reform movement ended with the decision by the prime minister that quotas would be scrapped in their entirety. The movement flared up sporadically and on a limited scale over the subsequent months, though with the blockade removed, the movement's leaders lost much of their leverage, and allegedly faced sustained harassment from the Chattra League (movement leaders were reportedly threatened with death, beaten, and, in the case of one protestor, allegedly shot), and arrest by the police. Across both movements, the basis for the cases and arrests differed, but often included vandalism, arson and section 57 of the ICT Act, relating to the promotion of fake news and use of 'Facebook live'. A significant component to such arrests was the monitoring of social media (for example through the Social Media Monitoring and Cyber Security Department, under

Dhaka Metropolitan Police), which identified the IDs of individuals spreading fake news.¹⁰

In practice, the implementation of the concessions achieved by both movements has been qualified and hindered, exposing tensions within the ruling party's base. In the case of quota reform, the prime minister did not simply agree to the demands of the movement (a reform of the quotas), but took them a step further by abolishing quotas altogether, although acknowledging that special measures would be taken for ethnic minorities and people with disabilities. In parliament she explained that were the system to be reformed, other movements would simply appear demanding further reform. In response, the movement's convenors gave Sheikh Hasina the honorific title of 'Mother of Education'. The risk with the move, however, is that it undermines a key source of support for people directly linked to the Liberation struggle. This is detrimental to the Awami League because of the significance that the Liberation has for the party's identity and ideology, and any action seen to devalue the struggle could threaten their popularity. In practice, the outcome may be qualified. In early October 2018, for example, the cabinet approved a recommendation from the committee established to examine the issue, that for tier I and II jobs within the civil service, appointments will be made solely on the basis of merit, while quotas will be kept for jobs within tiers III and IV. Nonetheless, in response to the reform, pro-freedom fighter quota protests emerged on a far smaller scale at Shahbag and elsewhere, attempting to counter the decision, with the prime minister reportedly stating that if the movement gathers in strength then it is possible the government would listen. Protests were also organised by ethnic minorities and students with disabilities. Shajahan Khan, the then shipping minister, became involved in the movement, in a move perceived to be a means of galvanising further personal political support. Providing support to the movement, his actions seemed to have the result of splitting the movement, changing the name, and installing people close to him as the movement's convenors, meaning he was in the unusual position of being a minister while also seemingly supporting a social movement opposed to the government's position. Some leaders within the original quota reform movement also organised protests calling again for their original proposal.

The case of road safety reform reveals even more starkly the politics of implementing such concessions. The movement was a direct threat to the interests of the powerful and well organised transport sector, represented in government by Shajahan Khan, the then shipping minister. Road transport workers are regularly involved in political mobilisation, and the sector as a whole is the source of much informal income for political leaders through, for example, various tolls and extortion/protection rackets (*chanda*) at the street level. The incident which sparked the movement was caused by buses racing for customers, a level of competition which is a result of two key factors: first, a highly deregulated sector, in which an estimated 200 bus companies operate in Dhaka alone, meaning many ply the same routes; and, second, labour

¹⁰ One leader of the quota reform movement was later arrested also in the road safety movement for spreading fake news.

relations between bus drivers and owners. Most drivers have worked their way up the labour hierarchy, previously working as bus ‘helper’ and then ‘conductor’. Rather than receive a salary, they work on a contract basis, whereby they pay the bus owner a fixed fee or rent for the day they work, and only when they pay this off during a day’s work are they able to earn. Drivers are then incentivised to compete intensely, and hence speed, drive recklessly, stop at inappropriate places, and some regularly work 16-, 17- and 18-hour shifts. Bus drivers meanwhile live with the knowledge that if they do injure or kill a pedestrian, they may well be lynched by the public on the spot, and hence if they are in an accident, they immediately run and hide. A key announcement made during the protest was then the abolition of such contract relations, bringing drivers under a salary system, as pronounced by the Dhaka Road Transport Owners’ Association; however, in practice this has only been partially implemented.

More contentious to reforming the sector has been the Road Transport Act. In the years preceding the movement, the draft bill of the Act had been met with much resistance. The legislation proposed to increase the severity of punishments and terms of access within the sector; for example, that death by reckless driving could lead to five years in prison, and that drivers are required to be educated up to at least grade 8. In interviews with leaders from the Bangladesh Truck Covered Vans Owners Association in 2017, they described the legislation as highly hostile to their interests, the government’s attempts at including them in dialogue as ‘*eye wash*’ (meaning for appearances only), and they stated that the laws would be ineffective without wider changes. For example, they claimed that there are 1 million drivers with fake licences, and the laws would punish those holding them, without touching those who created them. If the government failed to listen to them, they could call a strike that would be felt across the whole country, with the price of rice rising in only six hours. Indeed, in response to the legislation, a wider body – the Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation, led by the then Shipping Minister – implemented a two-day strike in late October 2018. Workers blocked public bus depots, and stopped traffic on key routes. The protest was violently enforced, with even private drivers humiliated and attacked, some being hit or having oil smeared over their faces. Demands included making all offences bailable, opposing measures such as the five lakh taka fine for involvement in a road crash, and police harassment. The move was perceived as a show of strength by the minister. As of early 2019, the law has not yet taken effect and, in a controversial move, Shajahan Khan was appointed to lead a 15-member committee to reform the transport sector. Meanwhile, limited efforts have been made to improve the enforcement of traffic regulations, including the inauguration of a new regular ‘traffic discipline programme’, in which students are to be incorporated as volunteers at new checkpoints managed under the Dhaka Metropolitan Police.

4. Conclusion

Andalon are central to Bangladesh’s political history, galvanising key groups across society around issues of injustice and reform to confront regimes and bring significant

political transformation. Throughout Bangladesh's history, students have been at the heart of such movements, offering a well organised, large and enthusiastic pool of labour, ready to be called to and lead political events. Key to how political change has been achieved is through alliances across groups, often with students being at the heart, but crucially involving the organisational strength of political parties. These movements have proven particularly vital to the country's direction during times of authoritarian rule, and where there has otherwise been a lack of political competition. It is thus in this light that we should read the resurgence of student-led social movements in Bangladesh. While the issues they raise are significant, and addressing them creates tensions within the base of the ruling party, the primary threat that such movements pose is that they can serve as the basis for a wider and more far-reaching campaign to disrupt the ruling party. Hence they take a particular significance in election years, where opposition forces are seeking routes to increase pressure on the government, and there is a climate of anticipation and uncertainty.

While institutionally this repertoire of contentious politics is a familiar one in Bangladesh, the contemporary forms it takes are not. As in much of the world, social media and mobile phones have become centre stage in the ways in which movements and protests are organised and spread. The advantages of such platforms are clear, in providing a highly accessible and rapid mode of communication. Facebook groups and live streaming magnify the injustice, through provocative postings, photos, charismatic speeches, acts of 'rude accountability' (Hossain 2010), and by highlighting acts of 'self-sacrifice' for the cause (Suykens 2018). As seen through Bangladesh's history, individual incidents of injustice can easily spark wider protests and escalate events out of control. Hence the ease with which fake news can spread through Facebook poses a significant threat to the ruling party, and an opportunity for forces that oppose them. The readiness with which the government has prevented telecommunications in moments of crisis (through lowering the bandwidth, for example), along with the raft of new measures and bodies within the security agencies to regulate and monitor social media, demonstrate that this is a new terrain on which politics is being played out.

This then raises significant questions for Bangladesh's political future. In light of the decline of the BNP, such movements may represent one of the few ways in which people can collectively mobilise outside of party-political boundaries to make their voices heard. In the absence of meaningful electoral competition, the identity and legitimacy of the ruling party is also increasingly dependent on delivering development outcomes. This then suggests that the capacity of the political regime to respond to such grievances will continue to be crucial in coming years, particularly in and around elections. In practice, addressing such grievances requires confronting interest groups on which the ruling party depends, and then translating this into material change on the ground. Both are significant challenges, and it remains to be seen whether either can be achieved, if indeed there is the political will to do so. It is also unlikely that the demands of the middle-class urban youth can be easily satisfied. Existing issues of road safety and employment may flare up again and, despite Bangladesh's significant development successes, the possible list of other

motivations is sizeable. If they do translate onto the streets, finding a balance between concessions and status quo, public legitimacy and internal political stability, will continue to be crucial to the ruling party in Bangladesh.

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