

Youth in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The youth population is the backbone of any country. Youth in a country is a viable and potential human resource not only in population structure but also in social structure. May the countries in Asia be on the list of developing countries, but the countries of the region have an increasing demographic share of the youth in the general population. In Bangladesh, the youth population occupies almost 40% of the total population. However, they cannot play significant roles in the country's socioeconomic development and change due to the many problems it faces and the lack of support from the government. Even though the government has established plans and programs for youth welfare, they face many economic and cultural obstacles that stop them from moving forward. This research will not only present the problems that the young generation face in Bangladesh but also make suggestions to improve their future.

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Introduction

Youth around the world is always unpredictable, both in their thoughts and even more in their actions. Nowadays, the political situation around the world is so complicated that all parts of society must be included in trying to solve the various issues of the community. The critical question is how the youth can help rebuild the social structure and how they can create novel values that all would respect. Western societies give the young population more opportunities to engage in political life. However, a large percentage of this population seems indifferent to engaging in politics and often even ignores the problems of their societies.

On the other hand, in the developing parts of the world, even though youth do not have as many opportunities as the youth in the developed world to involve themselves in political life, they are trying hard to change the political, societal, and economic norms of their lives. They are more eager to engage in politics and try helping to solve issues than decades before. Although there is a need for proper education, scientists notice this contradiction between the developed and the developing countries. Thus we cannot attribute this phenomenon to the lack or not of educational form but only to the lack of interest from their side.

This article will discuss the engagement of the young population and specifically of the students, in political life in Bangladesh. However, this situation only applies to the case study of Bangladesh. In all developing countries, scientists or researchers can observe that young people get involved in politics only when they think it is necessary, even though there is enormous corruption and clientelism among the students. However, when they see that there is something that they can do, they are involved and try their best to change the situation. Thus, to make a difference in the longer term, young people must be engaged in formal political processes and have a say in formulating present and future politics. Bangladesh is yet a country that has not a proper education system and lacks the financial means to help its citizens escape their everyday problems, but in which the young population, especially the students, are doing their best to achieve a stable and democratic country.

Anti-Ershad Movement

Bangladesh is the eighth most populous country in the world, and half its population comprises young people. It is essential to say that according to Bangladesh's law, a person is categorized as a youth when he/she is between the 15-35 age gap. Currently, almost half of Bangladesh's population consists of young people who can provide for and improve the situation of their country. However, after the Anti-Ershad Movement and his removal of him from the government and the establishment of democracy in the country, the youth became more and more distant from the political life of the country.

After the de-colonization of India from the British Empire, Bangladesh united with Pakistan, called East Bengal, with Dhaka as its capital city.¹ However, the people were not satisfied with this union with Pakistan and, in 1971, started a war for independence and the creation of Bangladesh as an autonomous state. After gaining independence in 1972, the country established its first constitution and adopted a secular, multiparty parliamentary democracy.

At the same time, the country joined the Commonwealth of Nations, the United Nations, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the Non-Aligned Movement. The President of the

¹ S. M. Shamsul Alam (1995). Democratic politics and the fall of the military regime in Bangladesh. *Critical Asian Studies* <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.1995.10413048>

Awami League, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, became the first President and then the country's Prime Minister. However, after the country faced many economic problems, a breakdown in the food supply chain, poor health services, and many other problems, he lost his popularity among the citizens; he denied the multiparty character of the constitution and established a one-party state in 1975.²

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman tried different ways to increase his power and concentrate all the power in his hands. However, during the 1970s, after a coup d'etat against him and his assassination, political turmoil seized the country, which led Bangladesh to be governed by a military junta led by the Chief Martial Law Administrator for three years. In 1982 another coup d'etat took place by chief justice Ahsanuddin Chowdhury who was installed as the President of the country. However, the actual power was at the hand of the army chief Hussain Muhammad Ershad assuming the presidency in 1983.

According to the general history, the Anti-Ershad movement started at the beginning of 1990. However, students started their movement against the government of Ershad in April 1982. Ershad was quite unpopular with the citizens of Bangladesh.

As the students are always at the forefront of change, and their opposition movement against the government took an even greater degree on 17 September 1982, one day before Education Day in Bangladesh. Students' agitation and unity increased when the regime announced a national educational reform policy widely regarded as highly reactionary and against the rights and freedom of the educational sector.

These protests against the educational reform continued throughout the remaining year of 1982. Precisely, on 8 November 1982, during one of these protests, the police and different paramilitary groups that were under the orders of Ershad invaded the campus of Dhaka University, attacking and beating students.

At the same time, many of the university's facilities were damaged. This fact drove the students to create an organization, the Charta Samgram Parisad (Organization for Student Struggle), on 21 November, demanding first the realization of full democracy and respect for fundamental human rights, secondly the abandonment of the proposed reform education policy and third not least the release of all political prisoners and the end of the political repression. Thus, as was expected, none of these demands were met, and the suppression of the citizens, especially the students, became even harsher.

However, the following year, in January, the oppositional parties took the side of the students. They released a joint statement condemning the police forces for their actions against the student at Dhaka University. Various political and non-political organizations joined the movement, which was the starting point of a unified political protest against the dictatorship of General Ershad. At the same time, General Ershad was losing the popularity that he still had among the Muslim community due to some jokes he made about the 1952 Movement language.

These events helped the opposition move to a new level of unity, with the leading political organization forming a fifteen-party alliance. From 14 February 1983, this fifteen-party alliance, including a unified student body, adopted many joint political agendas that increased

² S. M. Shamsul Alam (1995). Democratic politics and the fall of the military regime in Bangladesh. *Critical Asian Studies* <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.1995.10413048>

the feeling of the anti-Ershad movement. Over time, more than one anti-Ershad political alliance was formed, but the primary demand from all of them was the complete restoration of democracy.

Nevertheless, with the formation of these pro-democracy alliances, the military rule in the country did not lose its power and position. However, this period was when the citizens of Bangladesh decided which party/alliance would follow and, to some extent, formed their political beliefs up until now.

For a long time, the opposition was fighting with each other and decided to unite to overthrow General Ershad. The students engaged heavily in overthrowing General Ershad and the end of his dictatorship. Quite a few times, students cut off all communication between Dhaka and the rest of the country. However, with the establishment of the Awami League under the rule of the Khaleda Zia, students started to distance themselves from the political sphere, and we can say they became indifferent to the political future of the country, as they had overthrown General Ershad's regime and establishment the democratic rule of the country.

Student Violence-Clientelism

After General Ershad's fall, students started to distance themselves from the country's political life. They started to develop clientelism relations with the political parties, not for the sake of the educational or societal system but only for the sake of themselves. Violence and student clientelism³ tend to downplay how violent it was in the past. The current role of violence in student politics, while serving different goals usually inside the university, which took place during previous national movements, should not be completely disconnected from the historical role of violence. In the past, before the anti-Ershad movement, student violence was an essential part of its usefulness in national movements. Like then, as now students use the political parties to justify the use of youth violence tendency inside the universities as a way to control the young population and their political beliefs. Most major political parties have student wings in tertiary and secondary educational institutions. The ruling party's student wing wields control everywhere. The intra-party violence spreads to educational institutions. That fact, it is an observable high level of power that politics and especially the parties have inside the universities and among the students, and how are trying to manipulate this power to gain more influence on the young population.

Student leaders draw upon the history of their movement to free the country from the dictatorship of the Ershad era to legitimize the important place student politics and parties play in universities in Bangladesh and to validate their role as public authorities. However, as many facts have shown, students still have not lost their political and societal consciousness, and when it comes to serious matters that disturb society are willing to take the initiative to protest and even change a new society.

Road Safety Movement

In August 2018, a crash occurred between two buses operated by unlicensed drivers racing to collect passengers. The outcome of the crash was the death of two high-school students in Dhaka and the injured of many more people.

³ Suykens, B. (2018). A Hundred Per Cent Good Man Cannot do Politics': Violent self-sacrifice, student authority, and party-state integration in Bangladesh 10.1017/S0026749X16001050

This fact provoked a series of protests led mainly by students in Bangladesh advocating road safety improvement, which were held from July 29 till August 8 of, 2018. The fact showed that even though students were under political influence and clientelism was a big problem among the students at the universities, mainly in Dhaka, the students still were united and willing to oppose the government when something tragic as the road accident, happened.

The protests were peaceful until August 2, when police attempted to disperse the demonstrators with tear gas, and people believed to be members of a pro-government youth league attacked protesters and journalists. The police arrested several protesters and a photographer for giving an interview about the protests to international media. From how the government handled the protests, we can conclude that democracy is in danger in Bangladesh, and there is no clear way how the international community or the local population can solve this problem.

The road accident impelled students to demand safer roads and stricter traffic laws. The demonstrations began in Dhaka in May but gradually spread to many big cities around Bangladesh. Many international organizations and high-profile figures expressed solidarity with the demonstrators. As a result, the third Sheikh Hasina Cabinet approved on August 6 a draft traffic act stipulating capital punishment for intentional killing and a maximum five-year prison sentence for accidental killing but only with a motor vehicle. In the draft, the other kinds of vehicles were omitted. Although the protesters thought the maximum 5-year jail sentence was too light for accidental deaths due to unintentional driving deaths, the protests were over by August 8. On August 8, the situation in the city was back to normal.

Although the parliament passed many traffic laws and regulations, it had yet to be implemented.

Bangladesh's Public or Road Transport Sector is one of the most corrupt sectors of the country. The state of road governance is, and the types of impunity and misgovernance tolerated. The killing of two students on July 29 was a tragic finale to a chain of impunity and misgovernance blighting the roads and road transportation.

They asserted their right to fix the all-encompassing rot set in the country's transport sector. The insensitive and offensive comment by the president of Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation (BRTWF), who is also the Shipping Minister of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh, and the low public confidence in the administration to dispense justice and address the concerns of the protesters resulted in the quick spread of the protest like wildfire in other town and cities. School and College going boys and girls, in dozens, hundreds, and thousands, took to the streets demanding justice and effective measures to curb death and maiming on the roads. They also demanded enforcement of existing laws to ensure that only licensed persons become eligible to drive registered and roadworthy vehicles. The student's frustration over the inefficiency and corruption of the traffic police and the latter's collusion with transport syndicates and their godfathers led them to take control of the traffic management in Dhaka City. These students, mostly teenagers, in school uniforms with bags on their backs, braving.

Hunger and thirst in summer heat and rains, have successfully brought about a semblance of order that this country had never experienced in the past. These young people ensure only licensed persons are in the driving seat of duly registered roadworthy vehicles, advise car passengers to put on seat belts, motorcyclists to wear helmets, and pedestrians to use

footpaths and zebra crossing intersections. For the first time since Independence, one lane in key arterial roads was made accessible for Emergency vehicles. The self-appointed teenage enforcers of the law were polite but firm. With due respect, they made a senior minister change direction and drove on the right side of the road, and another minister left his vehicle as it did not carry proper registration of papers. Imbibed with the spirit of upholding the law, they stopped vehicles; they even stopped a Navy vehicle for not carrying proper documentation. Spontaneous demonstrations by protesters at some intersections adversely affected the traffic flow and caused substantive hardships for commuters. Despite this, the student protesters commander warm understanding from the city dwellers at large. Social media has witnessed an outpouring of compliments. People reassured them that they were prepared to handle the inconvenience of traffic delays and detours as those were for the greater good. Some suggested that if citizens can withstand the agony of congestion and closures imposed by political party programs that are of little interest to them, then why not endure this temporary discomfort for a worthy cause? For many days the students took the role of the police and controlled the traffic on the roads.

Prospects for the Youth

The development of the youth and their participation in community life is a significant priority in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These goals recognize that the young population is a crucial target for creating a better future and reducing the world's different problems. In the developed world, the government and development actors have realized that opportunity, and they support the enforcement of the youth to a significant degree. However, on the other hand, in developing countries, the authorities still need to give more attention to youth development, and many times, they hold them back from their self-evolution, which leads them to migrate to another country in search of better prospects.

The government of Bangladesh, with its 2017 Youth Policy, wants to ensure the maximum utilization of the youth's potential, empowerment, and development morale; thus, it has been the leading investor in the youth. Nevertheless, 3 in the 2017 Youth Policy, Bangladesh's government still needs to achieve all these goals. With the current situation in the country, it is difficult in the future we will be able to achieve them. Nowadays, there are limited opportunities for the country's youth population in Bangladesh; however, there are still many chances for the government to change its policy and try to empower the youth and, with that, develop the country itself.

In the digitization era and rise of globalization, many opportunities in the international community could help the Bangladesh government implement measures to enhance and empower youth participation in the country's growth and development. First of all, the government must reduce the illiteracy of the youth, either in urban or rural areas. Although the citizens in urban areas do not have so big a problem with the lack of education in rural vicinities, the citizens and especially the young population, do not have the same opportunities in the education sectors, and that is becoming increasingly in the gender equality problem. Women in rural areas are not engaged with the community due to the perseverance of old beliefs about gender inequality. For the limitation of this issue, the government should create and support local organizations devoted to the limitation of education and organize training and vocational programs for the youth population who wants to broaden its horizons. The government and the organizations must be ready to transform the problems that they will face into opportunities if they are genuinely determined to pursue their goals. Focusing on preparing the young population for a better future and creating work

opportunities is essential. The youth must be equipped with skills to meet the fourth industrial revolution. Otherwise, Bangladesh has to pay a heavy price and maintain or lower its position in the international community.

The youth must see that the government trusts their capabilities and gives them many opportunities to excel. In this case, the government could establish various programs that would financially support the innovation sector, like the opening of start-up programs, investment in automation, and digitization programs developed by the youth population. For the youth, it is vital to have the support and the trust of the government to create a start-up or any other program they want, of course, if they have the vital knowledge and skills about them. Also, they need to have a communication channel with the governmental authorities to discuss their problems and ideas to improve the society in which they live and a significant part of it.

The unemployment and, consequently, the migration of the youth is harming the country's development and reducing its tax income. So the government should create more job opportunities for the young population with or without education.

Conclusion

The young population is the only force that can change the world fundamentally. In Bangladesh, students fought in the anti-Ershad period to bring democracy and change people's lives. Students often escape their country's political, societal, and economic life. However, there is only the need for Sparkle to start again to struggle for their rights and the rights of the whole society. Like the Road Movement of 2018 awakened the youth to struggle against the government that will always be happening, whatever the cause may be. The protest of 2018 is unique in many ways. It is not to put the government on the dock but to draw its attention to the urgent need to make the roads safe. It is not to claim political power but to demonstrate how state agencies should function efficiently. The protesters have that with good intentions and commitment, the tasks that public-funded professional forces could not perform for decades were indeed doable. The students presented a 9-point charter of demands to the government. Their massive mobilization, and the support it garnered from the masses, forced the government to concede within days.

Nevertheless, it remains to be seen if or how the government embodies those verbal commitments into reality. The prospects for the youth in Bangladesh are very bright if the government handles the issue correctly. There is already JAAGO Foundation, which supports youth empowerment in the country, but the government needs to do something too.

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