

**From Rebellion to Revolution: The Interplay of Social Media and Government Repression in
the July Revolution 2024**

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Submitted to the Department of Economics and Social Sciences in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Social Sciences in Anthropology

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that:

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing my degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material that has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Finally, to myself – “You made it.”

Glossary

AL	Awami League
BCL	Bangladesh Chhatra League
DU	University of Dhaka
Govt.	Government
PM	Prime Minister
PSC	The Public Service Commission

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Abstract

The Quota Reform Movement of 2024, also known as the July Revolution, marked a significant chapter in Bangladesh's long-standing debate over the controversial quota system in government employment. Originally designed to address historical inequalities, the quota system had become a source of widespread dissatisfaction, particularly among the nation's youth, who felt it impeded merit-based recruitment. This thesis explores the role of social media in the mobilization and coordination of protests against the reinstatement of the quota system by the High Court, as well as how government repression influenced the trajectory of the movement. The research employs a qualitative approach, combining both primary and secondary data including semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, the research gathers insights from protest coordinators and participants across both public and private universities. This study examines the complex dynamics of protest organization, the strategies employed to overcome government-imposed restrictions, and the ways in which government repression shaped resistance efforts. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram played a critical role in circumventing traditional media control and state surveillance, allowing activists to unite, share information, and amplify their voices. Despite efforts by the government to suppress the movement through internet shutdowns, physical violence, and political rhetoric, the protests evolved from a demand for quota reform into a broader struggle for political accountability and social justice. The findings suggest that social media not only acted as a tool for organizing protests, but also as a means of countering state narratives, thus sustaining momentum amid intense government crackdowns. Furthermore, government actions, including violent repression and the dismissal of protesters' demands, were found to amplify collective anger, escalating the protests into a larger movement for political change. Ultimately, the 2024 Quota Reform Movement underscored the power of digital activism in reshaping protest dynamics and highlighted the enduring public dissatisfaction with entrenched political systems in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Quota Reform Movement 2024, Social media activism, Government repression, Student protests in Bangladesh, Digital mobilization.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Social media has emerged as a transformative tool in shaping political landscapes, driving mass mobilization, and challenging state authority across the globe. In Bangladesh, digital activism has played a crucial role in recent political movements, from the Shahbagh Movement of 2013 to the Road Safety Movement of 2018, and has taken center stage in the latest chapter of student-led resistance: the Quota Reform Movement of 2024.

The evolution of digital activism has allowed for rapid organization, real-time documentation of state violence, and decentralized leadership structures. These tools have empowered movements to gain unprecedented traction, challenging the state's monopoly on public narratives. The Quota Reform Movement is the most recent example of how social media can amplify protests, facilitate political mobilization, and act as a counterbalance to government repression.

The government's response to these movements has ranged from dismissive rhetoric to violent crackdowns, mass arrests, and even internet shutdowns, all aimed at curbing dissent. However, rather than suppressing resistance, these tactics have fueled further activism, underscoring the crucial role of digital media in modern protest. To understand how these forces interacted in the 2024 protests, it is important to examine both the historical context of political resistance in Bangladesh and the rise of social media as a tool for mobilizing and spreading political movements.

1.1 Background of the Study

The power of digital activism in shaping global political movements is undeniable. In Bangladesh, the evolution of activism through social media platforms has significantly altered the dynamics of political mobilization, allowing activists to challenge both authoritarian rule and societal injustices. Notable global movements such as #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, the Hong Kong Protests, and Myanmar's resistance have leveraged digital platforms to spread awareness, organize protests, and demand accountability. Similarly, in Bangladesh, movements such as the Shahbagh Movement (2013) and the Road Safety Movement (2018) demonstrated how social media could amplify the voices of protestors and challenge government control.

The Evolution of Digital Activism in Bangladesh

The Shahbagh Movement (2013): Seeking Justice for War Crimes

The Shahbagh Movement of 2013 was one of the first major student-driven protests in Bangladesh that fully embraced the power of social media for organizing and spreading a political message (Ullah, 2013). This movement emerged when the International Crimes Tribunal of Bangladesh sentenced Abdul Quader Mollah, a leader of the Jamaat-e-Islami party, to life imprisonment for war crimes committed during the 1971 Liberation War. Many, especially students, believed the sentence was too lenient, and they demanded the death penalty for Mollah (Anam, 2013). Social media became a crucial tool for the movement (Roy, 2019). Activists used Facebook to organize protests, share news updates, and mobilize supporters. Twitter was used to amplify the message and create hashtags like #Shahbagh, which made the cause trend on social media, bringing national and international attention (Roy, 2019). Social media allowed protesters to quickly disseminate their grievances, refute government narratives, and counter the misinformation that was being spread by pro-

government voices (Roy, 2019). The Shahbagh movement highlighted the potential of digital activism in a country with a significant youth population that was eager to see change. The use of social media created a sense of urgency and solidarity, which contributed to the pressure that led to the amendment of the war crimes law, and ultimately, Mollah's execution (Al Jazeera, 2013). However, the backlash was also severe. Bloggers and activists associated with the movement were targeted by extremist groups, illustrating the dangers of online activism in a politically charged environment (Sahgal, 2013). This period marked the beginning of digital activism's influence in Bangladesh, but also highlighted its vulnerabilities, especially in an authoritarian context.

The Road Safety Movement (2018): Student-Led Demand for Safer Roads

The Road Safety Movement in 2018 emerged after the tragic deaths of two schoolchildren who were hit by a reckless bus driver in Dhaka (The Daily Star, 2020). The incident triggered widespread outrage, especially among students who took to the streets demanding stricter road safety laws, better enforcement of traffic regulations, and accountability for corrupt practices within the transportation sector. This movement is a clear example of how social media can empower younger generations to challenge societal issues that have long been ignored or downplayed. Social media platforms, primarily Facebook and Twitter, were instrumental in mobilizing students and spreading the message (Parvez, 2022). Schoolchildren organized protests, shared photos and videos, and used social media to document police misconduct and violations of traffic laws by bus drivers. Hashtags like #RoadSafetyBangladesh gained significant traction online, further amplifying the demand for reforms. One of the most viral moments of the movement was when students, many of whom were minors, took charge of traffic management on the streets, outdoing the authorities in maintaining order (NPR, 2018). These images went viral and became a symbol of the students' determination to force change. The government, initially dismissive of the protests, was eventually pressured into making policy changes (The Business Standard, 2021). The movement led to the introduction of new traffic laws and a more stringent approach to law enforcement in the transport sector. However, the movement also faced harsh repression. The government cracked down on the students, using police forces to disperse the crowds and intimidate protesters (Human Rights Watch, 2018). The use of force, including beating students and arresting activists, was widely condemned and documented through social media. Despite this, the movement's impact was undeniable: it successfully brought attention to the systemic issues plaguing Bangladesh's transport system and forced a response from the government.

Global Movements: The Role of Digital Activism and State Repression

The interaction between social media and state repression has been observed in several global movements, where digital tools played a transformative role in mobilization and resistance.

The Arab Spring Movement (2010–2012)

In the Arab Spring uprisings, activists used platforms like Facebook and Twitter to organize and mobilize against authoritarian regimes across the Middle East (Howard, Agarwal, & Hussain, 2013). Despite violent crackdowns and internet censorship, social media allowed protesters to document abuses, share their stories, and galvanize global support (Khondker, 2011). However, the government's response varied, with some regimes resorting to violent suppression while others attempted to regulate and control online discourse (Tufekci, 2017). The Arab Spring demonstrated how digital tools could bypass traditional media censorship, but also how repressive governments could evolve new tactics to stifle dissent (Tufekci, 2017) (Khondker, 2011).

Black Lives Matter Movement (2013–Present)

The Black Lives Matter movement used social media to bring attention to systemic racial injustice and police violence in the United States (Freelon, 2016). Viral videos of police brutality, shared through Twitter and Facebook, sparked nationwide protests and global solidarity (Ince, 2017). The movement's use of social media not only brought attention to the issue but also enabled decentralized organizing that was difficult for authorities to control (Freelon, 2016). However, the state's response involved mass arrests, surveillance, and disinformation campaigns designed to undermine the movement (Crawford, 2021).

The Hong Kong Protests (2019–2020)

The Hong Kong protests against the erosion of democratic freedoms were fueled by encrypted messaging apps and social media. These platforms allowed protesters to coordinate their actions in real-time, despite the increasing repression from Chinese authorities, including the imposition of a National Security Law (International, 2020). The use of decentralized online organizing was pivotal in maintaining the momentum of the protests, despite the state's attempts to stifle dissent (Lee, 2020).

Myanmar Movement (2021–Present)

After Myanmar's military coup in 2021, social media played a key role in organizing resistance against the junta. Activists used VPNs and guerrilla media tactics to bypass internet shutdowns, documenting state violence and maintaining communication despite governmental efforts to disrupt their efforts. The resilience of digital resistance in Myanmar showed how online activism could adapt to extreme repression and maintain momentum in the face of violence and censorship.

The July Revolution of 2024: Continuing the Legacy

The Quota Reform Movement of 2024, widely known as the July Revolution, emerged as a pivotal moment in the ongoing struggle against the quota system in Bangladesh. The quota system, which reserves a certain percentage of government positions for specific groups, was initially introduced to address historical inequalities, particularly those arising from discrimination against certain segments of society. However, as Bangladesh's young population grew increasingly educated and ambitious, many felt that the quota system became an obstacle to merit-based recruitment, which was central to their aspirations.

The most recent round of protests in 2024 was triggered by the reinstatement of the quota system by the High Court, which overturned previous reforms made in 2018. While the protests were sparked by the court decision, the issue had been simmering for years, with protests against the quota system dating back to 2013. The 2018 protests, in particular, saw widespread student mobilizations across the country, resulting in the government partially scaling back the system. However, the 2024 decision to restore the system reignited the frustration of students, particularly university students, who viewed the system as unjust and detrimental to their future prospects.

What set the 2024 movement apart from previous efforts was the scale and intensity of the protests. While previous movements had seen large-scale demonstrations, the July Revolution was far-reaching, with participation from students of both public and private universities, as well as members of the general public. The movement also drew on the lessons of previous protests, particularly in terms of mobilization strategies, and quickly spread through social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Twitter. These platforms became essential in organizing, coordinating, and amplifying the protests, allowing a diverse group of people to connect and take action.

At its core, the 2024 movement was about challenging an outdated system that many viewed as perpetuating inequality in a rapidly modernizing society. As students and activists rallied, their demands grew beyond mere reform of the quota system to include broader calls for government accountability and justice in the face of repression. What began as a campaign to reduce quotas in government hiring soon became a symbol of resistance against what protesters viewed as a political system that was out of touch with the needs of the people.

The 2024 movement unfolded against a backdrop of increasing political dissatisfaction in Bangladesh, particularly among the youth. This generation, more digitally connected and globally aware than ever before, found in the quota protests a platform for expressing broader discontent with the political establishment. The movement also highlighted the growing role of digital activism, with social media providing a powerful tool for organizing protests, communicating with the public, and countering state-controlled narratives. It became clear that the 2024 Quota Reform Movement was not just about quota reform but also about resistance to an entrenched political system that many believed was failing to address the issues facing the country's youth.

1.2 Research Questions

The study aims to explore the following research question:

1. How did social media contribute to the mobilization of the 2024 Quota Reform protests, and how did government repression influence this process?
2. In what ways did government repression shape the resistance efforts of the 2024 Quota Reform protests, and how did social media play a role in countering state control?

1.3 Research Objectives

- a. To analyze the role of social media platforms in the mobilization of the 2024 Quota Reform protests and how government repression influenced the speed, scale, and reach of online activism.
- b. To examine how government repression shaped the trajectory of the 2024 Quota Reform protests, with a focus on how protest coordinator and participants used social media to counteract these efforts and sustain the movement.

1.4 Significance of the Research

This study is significant as it examines the interplay between digital activism and government repression, focusing on how these forces shaped the transformation of the 2024 quota reform protests into a nationwide uprising. Given the increasing reliance on social media for political mobilization, this research provides critical insights into how online platforms facilitated protest coordination, shaped public discourse, and countered state-controlled narratives.

This study contributes to the existing body of literature on digital activism, political repression, and mass mobilization, offering a case study on Bangladesh. It enhances our understanding of how social media radicalizes politically neutral individuals, providing empirical evidence to support or challenge existing theories on digital mobilization. It expands on repression-radicalization theory, demonstrating how state violence and censorship unintentionally fuel resistance instead of suppressing it.

The study highlights the dynamics of state repression and its unintended role in escalating peaceful protests into full-scale political movements. It provides insights into the changing nature of student activism in Bangladesh and how digital tools amplify collective action. It provides insights into the changing nature of

student activism in Bangladesh and how digital tools amplify collective action. By documenting this movement, the study contributes to the historical understanding of political resistance in Bangladesh and the lessons learned for future activism.

Chapter 2

Review of Related Literature

This chapter will examine relevant studies by various scholars that are related to the topics and aspects of this dissertation. The first section reviews the historical context of student movements in Bangladesh, focusing on their role in shaping political change. The second section explores the identity and moral politics within youth-led movements, analyzing how digital platforms have transformed activism. The third section examines the existing literature on state repression and its impact on student protests, particularly focusing on covert and overt forms of control. Lastly, the fourth section highlights gaps in the literature and introduces the need for a more cohesive analytical framework to study digital mobilization and state responses in the context of student-led movements.

2.1.1 Historical Context of Student Movements in Bangladesh

The role of student movements in Bangladesh has long been central to the country's political transformation. From the 1952 Language Movement to the anti-Ershad protests of the 1980s, students have historically served as catalysts for change. More recent examples, including the 2013 Shahbagh Movement, the 2015 No VAT on Education protests, the 2018 Quota Reform Movement, and the Road Safety Movement of the same year, represent a continuity of youth-led mobilizations that challenged authoritarian tendencies and demanded structural reform.

2.1.2 Identity and Moral Politics in Youth Movements

Youth-led movements in Bangladesh are often driven by more than just political demands—they are also acts of moral expression and identity formation. Chowdhury's (2019) concept of resistance sociality, developed through his ethnographic study of the 2013 Shahbagh Movement, helps illuminate how young people transform online activity into offline political agency. According to Chowdhury, social media does not simply act as a communication tool; it creates a digital locality—a space where affect, urgency, and belonging are collectively produced. This locality enables individuals to imagine themselves as part of a wider movement, encouraging participation even before offline mobilization begins.

Through shared symbols, slogans, candlelight vigils, and viral posts, youth activists cultivate a sense of emotional and political urgency. These performative acts foster affective solidarity, reinforcing their collective identity as a politically aware generation confronting injustice. This same structure of resistance sociality was echoed in later movements such as the Road Safety protests, where students across the country used Facebook posts, live videos, and viral hashtags to build momentum. While these movements originated from specific grievances—such as deadly road conditions—they quickly transformed into broader critiques of state impunity and generational neglect.

Students framed their activism as a moral duty—one tied to their roles as protectors of justice, safety, and national integrity. Chowdhury's framework helps explain how these movements were sustained not only by ideological demands, but also through the cultivation of shared emotions, digital rituals, and a sense of historical urgency among youth. As the protests moved from screen to street, they challenged traditional boundaries of activism, showing how identity and morality can be powerful mobilizing forces in the digital age.

2.1.3 Gaps in the Literature: Strategy, Technology, and State Response

However, while these accounts provide rich ethnographic detail, they often emphasize cultural meanings and collective identity over strategic interaction. There is comparatively little focus on how students tactically respond to state repression, or how social media technologies have restructured leadership, coordination, and speed of action. This gap becomes more noticeable when examining the 2018 Quota Reform Movement, which received considerable attention for its scope but less for the digital infrastructures that enabled it. Platforms like Facebook did not merely host communication—they reconfigured it, allowing horizontal forms of organization, near-instantaneous updates, and peer-to-peer mobilization that bypassed traditional hierarchical models.

2.1.4 Theoretical Insights on Digital Mobilization

To better understand these dynamics, international theoretical frameworks offer valuable tools. Zeynep Tufekci's (2017) work on digitally networked movements argues that while social media enables rapid scaling and mass participation, it often lacks the depth of traditional organizing. These movements can erupt quickly and draw attention but may struggle to negotiate demands or sustain momentum in the face of state pushback. This “weak structure, strong burst” phenomenon is especially applicable to the 2024 Quota Reform Movement, which mobilized rapidly across the country, only to face challenges in maintaining coherence and continuity.

2.1.5 Protest Escalation and State Repression

Francisco's (2004) work provides further insight into how protest participation shifts in response to repression. His theory suggests that when state violence is seen as unjust, it can backfire and cause more people to join a movement instead of backing away. This framework helps explain why, after events like police killings, internet shutdowns, and curfews during the 2024 protests, participation surged instead of declining. The government's attempt to control the protest instead intensified it—an effect that Francisco's model helps make sense of.

Studies on state repression in hybrid and authoritarian regimes (Davenport, 2007; Earl, 2011) highlight both overt and covert methods of control that governments use to suppress dissent. Overt repression refers to visible and direct tactics such as arrests, internet shutdowns, curfews, or the use of police force. These actions are publicly known and aim to break momentum by instilling fear. However, repression also works through less visible, covert mechanisms—such as monitoring activists online, hacking social media pages, spreading rumors, sending anonymous threats, or harassing families. These informal methods often go unreported but are equally effective in weakening mobilization by making people feel unsafe, watched, and isolated. This psychological pressure produces what scholars call a “chilling effect”—a condition in which people self-censor, withdraw from activism, or avoid public political expression altogether. These frameworks are particularly relevant to regimes that present themselves as democratic, like Bangladesh, where the appearance of electoral legitimacy masks authoritarian practices underneath. By drawing on these insights, this thesis situates the state's response to the 2024 Quota Reform Movement within a broader pattern of repression that functions both visibly and invisibly.

2.1.6 Towards a New Analytical Lens

Despite the applicability of these global theories, there remains a lack of Bangladesh-specific studies that synthesize digital activism, state repression, and student-led resistance in a cohesive analytical framework. This thesis seeks to fill that gap. By drawing on both local narratives and international scholarship, it explores how the 2024 Quota Reform Movement, initiated as a student protest, transformed into a national political crisis—highlighting the strategic use of social media and the layered nature of state repression.

Table 1 Summary of Key Literature

Author (s)	Focus	Key Concepts\Findings	Relevance to Research
Chowdhury (2019)	Shahbagh Movement	“Resistance sociality” – transition from online discussion to offline protests facilitated by social media	Explains how online interactions transform into offline protests, helping analyze how social media fueled youth activism in the Quota Reform and Road Safety Movements.
Tufekci (2017)	Global digital movements	“Networked movements” – fast mobilizations, weak structure, vulnerability to state repression	Frames social media’s role in the 2024 movement’s scale and fragility
Francisco (2004)	Protest behavior under repression	Harsh repression can backfire and escalate protest; uses threshold methods	Supports this studies argument on how state violence escalated protests rather than suppressing
Davenport (2007)	State repression in hybrid regimes	Visible vs. invisible forms of repression; how repression works in democracies	Helps explain Bangladesh’s covert repression tactics despite democratic claims
Earl (2011)	Political repression strategies	“Diffuse control” – indirect forms like surveillance, fear, and social pressure	Shows how state control operated without overt physical violence

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two key theoretical approaches to understand the dynamics between protest and state response during the 2024 Quota Reform Movement in Bangladesh: Marlies Glasius's (2018) concept of authoritarian practices and Jürgen Habermas's (1989) theory of the public sphere.

2.2.1 Public Sphere (Habermas)

This study also draws on Jürgen Habermas's (1989) concept of the public sphere to understand how citizens engage in political discourse. Habermas defines the public sphere as a space where private individuals come together to discuss public matters freely and critically, without interference from the state. It is through such discussion that public opinion is formed, ideally leading to democratic legitimacy.

The public sphere is not limited to physical spaces like town halls; it also includes media, literature, and now digital platforms, where ideas are exchanged and debated. In its ideal form, the public sphere is marked by:

- Open access to all
- Freedom of expression
- Rational-critical debate
- Independence from state and corporate control

However, Habermas also notes that in modern societies, the public sphere can be distorted. This distortion happens when economic or political forces manipulate communication, or when access to the sphere is restricted to certain groups, undermining equal participation.

In contemporary contexts, especially with the rise of social media, the public sphere is often fragmented and influenced by algorithms, misinformation, and surveillance. Yet, it remains an important space for collective political expression, resistance, and mobilization.

Habermas's theory helps explore how democratic participation emerges and is shaped by communication practices, particularly when citizens use public platforms to contest authority, express grievances, and demand change.

2.2.2 Authoritarian Practices (Glasius)

This study adopts Marlies Glasius's (2018) concept of authoritarian practices to examine how modern states exercise control over dissent. Glasius argues that authoritarianism is not always defined by the absence of elections or formal democratic structures. Rather, it is characterized by practices that undermine accountability, suppress political opposition, and restrict civil liberties, regardless of whether the regime appears democratic.

Authoritarian practices can take multiple forms, both visible and hidden. These include:

- Direct and violent repression, such as arrests, torture, police brutality, or even mass killings
- Subtle or informal repression, such as surveillance, disinformation, online harassment, legal manipulation, and intimidation

Glasius emphasizes that these methods are often combined strategically. While some actions, like open violence, aim to physically eliminate resistance, others work to discredit or isolate dissenters without immediate physical force. This blend allows governments to silence opposition while maintaining an image of legitimacy, especially in the eyes of the international community.

By focusing on the practice rather than the regime type, Glasius offers a flexible framework for analyzing repression in hybrid systems where democratic and authoritarian elements coexist. This approach is particularly useful for examining how states respond to popular mobilization, especially when such movements are perceived as a threat to the ruling power.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine how the peaceful Quota Reform Movement in Bangladesh escalated into a significant political force that challenged the ruling AL government. A qualitative approach was selected due to its ability to provide rich, contextual insights into participant experiences and the social, political, and digital dynamics of the movement. Unlike quantitative methods, which focus on numerical data, qualitative research enables an in-depth exploration of the movement's complexities, such as the role of digital activism and government responses. While the sample size is small, it aligns with qualitative research norms, prioritizing depth over breadth. Ethical concerns, including anonymity and participant security, were carefully managed to protect respondents from potential repercussions.

The methodology combines both primary and secondary data sources, utilizing semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and secondary resources. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns.

3.1 Demographic Profile of Interviewees

The interviewees for this study were selected using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods. Purposive sampling ensured that participants with direct involvement in the Quota Reform Movement were included, while snowball sampling helped identify additional respondents through recommendations from initial interviewees. Initially, I used purposive sampling to identify protest participants through my own social network- selecting individuals I knew had taken part in the movement. As the study progressed, snowball sampling played a key role: one of my friends recommended her friends, who then referred more participants. Then through one friend, I was able to access a large number of participants from a specific university.

To reach the protest coordinators, I identified one potential coordinator by observing his activities on my Facebook feed. After contacting him, he referred me to other coordinators, and this chain continued, forming a snowball sampling process.

The sample is divided into two main groups:

- **Coordinators of the Protest:** Individuals who took leadership roles in organizing the protest.
- **Participants in the Protest:** Those who actively participated in the protest.

Demographic information including age, profession, prior protest involvement, and educational institution was collected to understand their perspectives and involvement in the movement. This demographic data provides essential context for interpreting the interview responses and understanding how different backgrounds shaped the interviewees' involvement in the movement.

Table 2 Summary of the Private University Coordinators' Demography

No	Name	Age	Profession	Previously Protest Involvement	Educational Institution	Current Leadership Roles
1	Sakin Shabab	26	Student	Participated before, with no coordination	BracU ¹	Executive Member of PUSAB ² , Jugno Ahobayok Shommilito Beshorkari, Boishommo Birodhi Chatro Andolon
2	Muhtasim Fuad	22	Student	Joined in past protests, no coordination	DIU ³	Representative of Combined Private Universities in the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement
3	Munim Mubashshir	23	Student	Coordinated protest before	NSU ⁴	Member of the Anti-Corruption Commission, Representative of Combined Private Universities

Table 3 Summary of the Protest Participants' Demography

No	Name	Age	Profession	Previously Protest Involvement	Educational Institution
1	Masum	22	Student	No Participation	DU
2	Ridwan	25	Student	No Participation	DU
3	Sharif	23	Student	Participated before	DU
4	Fardin	24	Student	No physical Participation, Contributed through social media	DU
5	Mozahid	24	Student	Participated before	DU

¹ BRAC University² Private University Students Alliance of Bangladesh³ Dhaka International University⁴ North South University

6	Tasirul	25	Student	Participated before physically and through Social Media in other	DU
7	Saifee	25	Student	No physical participation, Active on social media	DU
8	Rabby	25	Student	Participated before	BracU
9	Husam	24	Student	No Participation	BracU
10	Zarif	24	Student	Participated before	BracU
11	Fahi	24	Student	Actively Participated before	BracU

3.2 Data Collection

Data collection for this study was conducted through primary and secondary resources. The primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), while secondary sources included media reports and academic literature.

3.2.1 Interviews

The main source of data for this research came from semi-structured interviews, conducted with 7 participants across two key groups: protest coordinators and participants. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility and depth, allowing participants to express their views openly while enabling the researcher to probe into relevant themes. This method is especially effective in qualitative research when seeking to understand complex social processes, individual perceptions, and lived experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Focus Areas

The interviews were designed to explore the following themes:

- The role of social media in mobilization.
- Perceptions of government actions.

Interview Groups

- **Coordinators of the Protest:** Three coordinators were interviewed to understand the planning, mobilization strategies, interactions with the government, and how the movement evolved into a political force. Due to their ongoing involvement in political affairs and busy schedules, interviews with three private university coordinators were conducted online.
- **Participants in the Protest:** Four participants were interviewed to explore their motivations for joining the movement, their use of social media, and their interpretation of government actions. Interviews with four private university students were also conducted online, chosen for convenience and accessibility.

Participation Selection

Both purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to select both groups. Protest participants were mostly selected through friends and extended networks, while coordinators were initially selected by observing their visibility and activity on social media related to the movement and then referred by one another.

3.2.2 Focus Group Discussions

To understand the shared experiences, collective emotions, and dynamics of the 2024 Quota Reform Movement among public university students, two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted. FGDs are a widely used qualitative research method that enable researchers to gather in-depth insights through group interaction and dialogue. According to Krueger and Casey (2015), FGDs help uncover not only what people think, but how and why they think that way, making it especially useful for studying collective action and protest experiences.

Conducting the FGDs

- **Participant Selection:** Participants were selected through informal network-based sampling. I initially identified individuals from my own Facebook friend list who had been active during the 2024 Quota Reform Movement. I reached out to one friend who had participated in the protest and requested their help in gathering others. This friend then coordinated with his peers and juniors from the same university, resulting in small groups of participants for each FGD. This approach allowed me to access participants who were already familiar and comfortable with one another, which helped facilitate open and natural group discussions.
- **Setting and Duration:**
 - The first FGD, lasting 32 minutes, was conducted with three participants in a garden space in Jasimuddin Hall, University of Dhaka. The setting was chosen for its familiarity and relative privacy to ensure comfort.
 - The second FGD was held in the open seating area of the TSC canteen, also at the University of Dhaka, with four participants, and lasted one hour. The open, informal setting was chosen to encourage relaxed and natural conversation.
- **Procedure:** Before each session, I briefed participants on the purpose of the discussion and obtained informed verbal consent for participation and audio recording. The FGDs were guided by a set of open-ended, semi-structured questions focused on:
 - Their motivations for joining the protest
 - Collective strategies and coordination
 - Experiences of repression or support
 - Reflections on the movement's impact

I acted as the moderator and ensured that all participants were given space to speak, while gently guiding the discussion to remain on topic. The goal was to allow participants to engage with each other's memories and perspectives, which helped generate richer narratives than one-on-one interviews.

3.2.3 Secondary Resources

In addition to primary data, secondary resources were used to enrich the primary data and provide broader context to this study. These resources included media reports and academic publications.

- **Media Reports:** Newspaper articles and online news platforms provided real-time coverage of key events in the movement, such as protests, police crackdowns, and government responses. Media framing was essential in understanding the public perception of the movement and the role of social media in mobilization. Viral content, such as videos and photos, helped amplify the movement's message.
- **Academic Publications:** Included literature on digital activism, social movements, and government repression.

Sources were selected based on credibility (e.g., national newspapers, investigative journalism) and theoretical relevance (peer-reviewed studies).

3.3 Justification and Ethical Considerations

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study as it enables an in-depth exploration of participant experiences and perceptions, providing a deeper understanding of the social, political, and digital dynamics of the Quota Reform Movement. Qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), are particularly well-suited for exploring complex issues such as activism, political repression, and digital mobilization, which require detailed, contextual insights that cannot easily be captured through quantitative data alone. This approach allowed for the exploration of subjective experiences and the nuanced ways in which participants engaged with the movement, making it possible to uncover insights into the motivations, strategies, and challenges faced by those involved in the protests.

While the sample size of 14 interviews and 2 FGDs may appear small, it aligns with the norms of qualitative research, which prioritizes depth and richness of data over breadth. In qualitative research, the goal is not to achieve statistical representativeness but rather to understand the underlying patterns, meanings, and themes that emerge from participants' lived experiences. Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the potential risks for participants, the relatively small sample size allows for a more manageable and detailed analysis, ensuring that each participant's voice is given sufficient attention and that the data can be analyzed in depth.

The sample size also reflects the practical limitations of access to key participants, as well as the time and resource constraints inherent in qualitative research. It is important to note that while the sample is not large, it still provides valuable insights into the dynamics of the movement, capturing the perspectives of both protest coordinators and participants. Furthermore, the focus on in-depth interviews with individuals who were directly involved in the movement helps to ensure that the findings are based on informed and authentic experiences.

Ethical Considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process to protect the anonymity and security of participants. Given the politically sensitive nature of the movement and the risks of government surveillance or retaliation, particular attention was paid to maintaining confidentiality. All participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous and that their responses would be treated with the utmost confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used in the reporting of findings to further protect the participants' identities.

Additionally, the research design considered the potential security risks posed to participants, particularly protest coordinators and individuals involved in high-profile actions. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were fully aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without

consequence. To mitigate potential risks, interviews were conducted through secure, private channels, and sensitive information was handled with care.

By addressing these ethical concerns, this study aimed to ensure that the voices of participants were heard without jeopardizing their safety or anonymity, thereby maintaining the integrity of the research process.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, which allowed for the identification of key themes and patterns within the qualitative data. All the interviews were recorded with the interviewee's consent. All of the respondents agreed to participate voluntarily. The interview questionnaire was semi-structured to ask further essential questions.

Steps in Analysis:

1. **Transcription:** After conducting the interviews, firstly, the recordings were transcribed and then translated into English as necessary to capture the exact responses and ensure accuracy in analysis.
2. **Initial Coding:** Key statements were coded based on themes such as protest organization, government response, social media's role, and movement escalation.
3. **Thematic Categorization:** The initial codes were grouped into broader themes that emerged across different interview groups: Coordinators, Participants, and Observers. These themes included:
 - **Mobilization and Planning:** How the movement was organized, both online and offline.
 - **Government Response:** The government's attempts to suppress the movement and how activists responded.
 - **Role of Social Media:** The impact of digital platforms in spreading the message and mobilizing supporters.
 - **Escalation of the Movement:** How the protest transformed from a localized demand into a broader political challenge.
4. **Interpretation and Synthesis of Data:** Finally, the information collected from interviews and group discussions was carefully examined and connected with each other, as well as with the secondary sources like news reports and articles. This helped to build a clear and complete understanding of the protest movement and answer the main questions of the study.

Chapter 4

Findings

To understand the interplay between social media specifically Facebook and government responses, transformed the movement into a catalyst for the fall of the AL regime which became the July Revolution 2024, I have gathered information from two different sources: interviews and secondary sources. By taking all considerations into account, my interviews focus on the perspectives of two groups of people (protest coordinators, protest participants) involved in the movement and the broader political and social implications of the events; and what are the possible factors contributing to the power shift that ensued. This research, specifically, one-on-one in-depth interviews, used qualitative methods. The interviews were semi-structured to explore specific themes in detail and gather additional insights about particular topics by asking more targeted questions. I used media reports and academic journals published by scholars, articles from newspapers for secondary resources.

4.1 Coordinators' Perspectives

4.1.1 Prior Experience in Coordination

The participant's prior experience in activism and protest coordination revealed varying levels of involvement, with some taking on leadership roles in smaller, localized protests while others gained their first experience in large-scale movements. Sakin had a history of active participation in multiple protests but had not taken on coordination responsibilities before the Quota Reform Movement. He was present in significant movements, such as the 2015 “No VAT on Education” protest in front of Daffodil University, the 2018 quota reform movement at BRAC University, and the Road Safety Movement. Despite his involvement, his role remained limited to participation. Fuad stated that while he had participated in various movements, the Quota Reform Movement marked his first experience as a coordinator. Munim had a more comprehensive background in both participation and coordination. His activism began in 2018 with the Road Safety Movement, where he was a participant as a first-year college student. Over time, Munim transitioned into coordination roles, particularly within his university. The diverse experiences of these three coordinators demonstrated the gradual progression from participant to leader, with smaller campus movements serving as training grounds for more significant coordination responsibilities. For Sakin and Fuad, the Quota Reform Movement marked a turning point, enabling them to transition into leadership roles. For Munim, his prior campus-based leadership experience provided the necessary foundation to coordinate and manage complex protests effectively.

4.1.2 How the Early Stages were Organized

The initial goal of the protest was to address the issue of quota reform, though the participants quickly realized that it was not the primary concern for all students, especially those from private universities. For Sakin, the catalyst for his involvement came when he saw news of attacks on students, particularly those from Dhaka University, by Chhatro League members. “*When it comes to the quota system, private universities like ours are generally not that concerned with government jobs, and in many cases, even less so,*” he admitted. However, the attacks on students from his university and others made it clear that staying passive was no longer an option. He joined the protests on the 16th, which was the first time private university students participated. He mentioned how BRAC University played a key role by negotiating with the Badda Police to ensure their safety until 5 p.m., as protests were met with police aggression. Sakin’s personal concern was avoiding casualties, and fortunately, there were none that day.

Fuad similarly noted that private university students were not initially concerned with the quota issue. However, the unprovoked attacks on Dhaka University students by Chhatro League members created a sense of collective grievance. *“Private university students felt that ‘student nationalism’ had been wounded,”* he said. By leveraging this sentiment, he was able to galvanize students within his circle to join the protest.

Munim recalled the initial protests at NSU starting on July 15. The goal was to raise awareness about the nationwide anti-quota movement and to protest against the police and Chhatro League’s attacks on protesters. *“We weren’t concerned about the quota issue,”* Munim emphasized. They mobilized students through online communication, reaching out to familiar contacts and organizing the protest via messaging platforms. They gathered about 40 students at NSU, where they explained the reasons for the protest and engaged with the campus community. Munim’s group blocked the main road for about 30–40 minutes, attracting coverage from local media. The protest concluded for the day with an announcement that the next day’s plans would be shared later.

In the early stages, online platforms were crucial for organizing the protests. Coordinators like Fuad, Munim, and Sakin used their prior protest experience and contacts to mobilize students. They connected with others through messaging platforms like WhatsApp and Discord to coordinate actions, share instructions, and ensure that the protests proceeded smoothly. They used these tools to centralize communication and prevent confusion, as well as to maintain security against external threats, including surveillance from political forces. As the movement grew, the coordination shifted from initial awareness-building to more structured collaboration among universities, eventually uniting them in a collective protest.

4.1.3 Role of Social Media to Coordinate Protest Activities

Social media was a critical tool for protest coordinators, allowing them to communicate, strategize, and expand the movement despite significant governmental opposition.

Sakin highlighted the significance of staying connected even when physically distant or in hiding. He said, *“I was very active on social media during that time because I was able to know a lot through it. I was one of the first to turn my profile picture red to show solidarity.”*

Fuad explained,

“Since Chhatro League members were lurking around every campus, it was challenging to call for protests directly. But online platforms helped us mobilize the first rally, and the word spread through Facebook.”

Munim shared,

“We spent more time on Messenger than meeting in person. Outside university hours, we couldn’t meet until late, so we had to strategize on Messenger calls,”

These digital meetings enabled organizers to rapidly expand the protest, connecting universities around Bashundhara, including Green University, State University, and UITS, as described by Munim: *“On the 15th, we started small, but by the 16th, we had 100–150 students, and the word kept spreading through social media.”*

4.1.4 Strategies used to expand the protest beyond Dhaka and University Students

Social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Discord were pivotal in ensuring the movement extended beyond Dhaka and connected universities nationwide. Participants highlighted the importance of unified communication and coordination across platforms.

Sakin described, *“By the 16th and 17th of July, the movement successfully engaged 68 out of 117 registered private universities. Many other universities automatically joined the movement after the 18th due to the outreach efforts on platforms like WhatsApp and Discord.”*

Fuad argued that public resentment, stemming from what he referred to as "16 years of fascist governance," created an opportunity to mobilize people outside the university student body. He highlighted that the mass killing on the 18th acted as a catalyst, prompting the general public to directly join the movement. Munim elaborated on the importance of shifting the movement's narrative beyond the anti-quota issue. While the initial demands focused on the quota system, organizers deliberately emphasized justice for attacks on students, particularly the brutal assaults on female students at Dhaka University. Munim identified two groups among supporters: 1. Those who backed the "July Revolution" and aimed for a broader uprising, and 2. Those solely focused on the anti-quota movement.

To expand the movement's reach, organizers worked to engage the general public, particularly by framing the Chhatro League's attacks as an injustice that demanded immediate redress. This framing resonated beyond Dhaka and university circles, encouraging participation from schools, colleges, and the general public. Munim noted that the movement aimed to address the "*hate politics*" mindset prevalent among Gen Z, arguing that without active engagement in political issues, meaningful change would remain unattainable.

Participants agreed that highlighting the aggressive behavior of the Chhatro League was a powerful mobilization strategy. Munim described how outrage over Chhatro League's attacks on fellow students—particularly female students—was brought to the forefront of the movement's messaging. He believed this sense of shared anger and injustice was instrumental in driving participation and sustaining momentum.

4.1.5 How Social Media Helped Sustain the Momentum of the Protests Amid Govt. Repression

Social media played a pivotal role in sustaining the momentum of the protests, especially in moments of government repression, by countering state-controlled narratives and keeping protesters connected. According to Sakin, the government-controlled news portals and newspapers only reported in favor of the government, ignoring the realities of the protest. Social media emerged as the primary tool for sharing accurate and timely information. Those active on platforms like Facebook ensured that the brutal truths—the violence, the demands, and the students' suffering—were widely circulated, enabling the protest to grow and resonate with a broader audience. Sakin emphasized that social media was instrumental in their ability to share updates and gain support: "*Through social media, our protest truly grew.*"

After the internet shutdown, the movement faced significant challenges in maintaining communication. However, when the internet was restored, but access to social media platforms remained blocked by the government, activists turned to VPNs as a solution. Fuad explained, "When the government shut down the internet, it temporarily slowed the movement. But once the internet was restored, the government still blocked access to social media. We had to rely on VPNs to bypass these restrictions and use platforms like Telegram to continue organizing."

The emotional impact of social media was equally significant. Videos of the indiscriminate shootings by the police, brutal beatings of students, and the targeted violence of Chhatro League members against female protesters were widely shared online. These visuals evoked powerful emotions, fueling anger and reinforcing solidarity among activists. As Munim described, watching these scenes made it impossible to remain indifferent: "*Every attack on the activists, big or small, gave us a significant boost.*" The brutality captured in these videos became a rallying point for many, further strengthening the protesters' resolve.

Social media also amplified the voices of influential figures who stood in solidarity with the movement. Munim explained Teachers, such as Golam Rabbani from Jahangirnagar University, whose poetry and speeches went viral, became symbols of moral support. Another teacher, possibly Nova Ahmed, delivered a speech that resonated deeply with the students and gained widespread attention online. For the protesters, these viral

statements offered emotional encouragement and validated their struggle. Munim highlighted how seeing teachers raise their voices on social media served as a major morale boost during difficult moments. He said, *“It's worth mentioning that this was all made possible because of social media. It gave us a huge boost to see them raise their voices for us. Their support was a big deal for us.”*

4.1.6 Govt. Responses' Influence on Protest Strategies and Escalation

Sakin described the frustration and anger triggered by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's speech in a black saree where she mocked the protestors instead of addressing their demands. Calling students “razakars” further enraged the community, making it impossible to remain calm. The government's rhetoric, combined with actions like kidnappings, disappearances, and physical assaults, heightened students' resolve to continue protesting. Sakin acknowledged how his personal anger grew so intense that it influenced his leadership decisions.

Munim also emphasized that Sheikh Hasina's “razakar” comment was a major turning point. The speech provoked reactions across campuses in Dhaka and beyond, sparking protests in universities like Jahangirnagar, Chittagong, and Rajshahi. Following this, the eviction and beating of Dhaka University students from their halls escalated the movement further. It became clear that these actions were reckless decisions that pushed general students to mobilize en masse.

Fuad highlighted how the government's repeated mistakes, especially after July 18, altered the trajectory of the movement. The mass killing on July 18 and the internet shutdown became critical incidents that spread the protests nationwide. Students who fled Dhaka to avoid arrest took on significant roles in mobilizing protests outside the capital.

Munim added details about the events of July 18, describing the violent confrontation at Canadian University. Police actions, including clashes, gunfire, and the eventual evacuation of police forces by helicopter, further enraged the protesters. On July 19, protesters from NSU, IUB⁵, AIUB, and other universities gathered with sticks and bricks, preparing for renewed violence. The memory of July 18 strengthened their resolve, and the police, fearing escalation, responded cautiously by firing tear shells from helicopters.

A critical government response was the internet shutdown, which posed significant challenges for coordinators. Fuad described how the shutdown disrupted the online narrative of the movement. Munim emphasized that it created major communication gaps within coordination teams. Without internet access, coordinators were forced to rely on phone calls and face-to-face meetings, which were difficult to manage under curfew and intense police presence.

Munim noted that the government's imposition of a curfew created divisions within the coordination teams. While some coordinators supported breaking the curfew in defiance of government violence, others were hesitant. On the first day of the curfew, a small group of 30 students from NSU began mobilizing but gained momentum after joining ordinary citizens blocking roads. He shared,

“The internet was shut down, so we decided that we would break the curfew. After so many lives were lost, there was no question of adhering to the curfew. I clearly remember on the first day of the curfew, we were just about 30 people starting from NSU's 8th gate. When we reached Jamuna, we saw ordinary people blocking the road and sitting down. When we joined them, they were very excited.”

⁵ Independent University

During the curfew, police and BGB forces intensified their crackdown, even entering residential areas like Bashundhara to fire tear shells and rubber bullets. This added another layer of fear and urgency to the movement. Two NSU coordinators were detained by authorities (one by the DB and another by the police), further complicating leadership.

Fuad explained how the government's harsh responses pushed coordinators to shift the movement's goals. With repeated missteps, they started shaping the online narrative toward demands for the government's downfall. Munim added that government actions, particularly violent confrontations and provocative rhetoric, increased the scale and intensity of the protests. Protest leaders amplified these events to unite students and spread their message widely.

In essence, the government's missteps and aggressive actions became turning points that intensified and expanded the movement. Protest leaders used these incidents strategically to galvanize public outrage and strengthen the movement's momentum.

4.1.7 When Govt. Action Backfired and Strengthened the Movement

There were key moments during the protests when the government's actions backfired and ultimately strengthened the movement, pushing it beyond its initial demands.

Fuad pointed to the government's mishandling of the situation after the internet blackout was lifted. By reopening fire on the public, the government committed what he described as a severe mistake. While the initial internet shutdown briefly disrupted communication and slowed momentum, lifting it allowed the public to witness and share the brutality of the government's actions. At that point, it was no longer possible for the regime to fully suppress information. Public anger, already simmering from years of grievances, erupted, and the movement expanded into a broader call for justice. Fuad explained that there had been an opportunity for dialogue before the massacre, which the government failed to seize. However, after the violent crackdown, when the nine-point demands were presented, the government's refusal to accept them deepened public outrage. Even when the government finally agreed to the demands, it was too late. The damage had already been done, and the movement had transformed into a one-point demand for the removal of Sheikh Hasina's government.

Munim highlighted a specific turning point early in the movement when Sheikh Hasina made the grave mistake of calling students 'Razakar'. This label alienated the students further and galvanized their resolve. Additionally, Munim pointed out the use of state forces— police, BGB, and army against ordinary citizens, especially between the 2nd and 5th of August, as another key moment when government actions backfired.

4.2 Participants' Perspectives

4.2.1 Motivations Behind Joining the Quota Protest

The interview revealed distinct motivational patterns between private and public university students to join the quota reform movement.

Private university students' were primarily motivated by moral outrage and strong reaction to the violence against peaceful protesters. Their participation was largely triggered by opposition to the brutal attacks by the Chhatra League, particularly the use of deadly weapons against students. They saw it as the government's failure to take responsibility, which deeply disturbed them. As one participant mentioned, "*With the mentality*

of the government must bear responsibility, we wanted to end the suffering the Chhatra League caused for the DU students."

For many, the violent suppression of the protests was the turning point that led them to join the movement. Fahri reflected,

"When 14-15 July Awami League goons and Chhatra League started to beat students using deadly weapons I could not hold myself... Then I went to the protest."

While some private university students were unconcerned about the quota system, as most of them were not interested in government jobs, their involvement in the protest grew from a deeper sense of justice. One participant says,

"Initially it didn't bother me because personally I don't like Gov. Jobs and as I didn't want to apply for the Govt. Jobs, it didn't bother me whether there would be any quota or not."

Beyond the outrage against violence, the government's inaction emerged as another significant motivating factor. Husam noted, *"The allocation of a huge portion of the quota belonged to the freedom fighters. It was 52 years of independence and the freedom fighters and their next generation all benefited from the quotas. So there was no more reason to keep this system going."*

The FGDs with seven public university students revealed multiple interconnected factors that motivated their participation in the quota movement. The most fundamental motivation was their basic identity as job seekers. As Masum directly stated, *"Essentially, we are job seekers,"* highlighting how their primary concern was securing employment. This basic need for employment was closely tied to their fears about job market insecurity. Ridwanul explicitly expressed this anxiety: *"There was a fear that we wouldn't be able to get a job, and it was from that fear that we joined the movement."*

The participants' middle-class background emerged as a significant factor shaping their concerns. Sharif articulated this connection clearly: *"We come from middle-class families, and we basically just need a job."* The combination of their socioeconomic background and shrinking job opportunities made their participation feel natural and necessary, which Sharif likened to the inevitability of attending Friday prayers.

The perceived limitations of the private sector job market intensified these concerns. Participants highlighted how connections and nepotism dominated private-sector recruitment. Fardin explicitly described this challenge: *"We hear about lobbying in our private sectors, and how if you have no connection, your CV won't be looked at when dropped in the private sector."* These private sector limitations, combined with family expectations, created what Fardin termed a *"forced urge to pursue government jobs."*

A strong sense of systemic inequality and discrimination emerged as another crucial motivating factor. Mozahid articulated how the system was *"creating a small privileged group"* while excluding many others. Tasirul quantified this concern, pointing out that *"56% of the quota burden is placed on first and second-class jobs, and 70-80% is placed on third and fourth-class jobs,"* making it *"extremely difficult for our generation to overcome this."*

Concerns about national development and merit-based selection also motivated participation, particularly evident in Saifee's account. Despite being eligible for the freedom fighter quota himself, he opposed the extensive quota system due to its potential impact on administrative efficiency and national development. While acknowledging the necessity of certain quotas for disadvantaged groups like *"people with disabilities or Indigenous communities,"* he argued that the current percentage was excessive and could lead to situations where *"a less qualified person gets the opportunity over someone more deserving."*

The movement's momentum was strengthened by peer influence and a sense of solidarity among students. Fardin's experience particularly illustrates this dynamic. Initially hesitant, his perspective changed due to his friends' active involvement: *"When I saw my friends getting very active in the movement. They were telling me why I am not getting active.?"* His motivation then evolved beyond personal concerns to encompass collective welfare: *"Even if I get into another job, not all my friends will get the opportunity for jobs, I might not either. In that case, we must stand against this inequality."* This transformation from individual career concerns to collective solidarity led him to *"join this movement to establish my position in the job market."* His narrative demonstrates how peer influence combined with a growing awareness of collective interests strengthened students' commitment to the movement.

4.2.2 Information Sources

The findings identified multiple channels through which participants first learned about the movement: social media (particularly Facebook), personal networks (friends and seniors), in-person communications at university spaces, and traditional media (including news portals and mainstream news channels).

Social media, especially Facebook, emerged as the primary source of information for many participants. Several interviewees directly identified social media as their first point of contact with the protest. As Zarif simply stated, *"Social media has been the main source of information."* For Rabby it was both Facebook and also through his friends, while Masum specifically learned about it through his university's Facebook group. Mozahid's account vividly illustrates the rapid growth of social media involvement: *"A group named 'কোটা পুনর্বহাল হবে না' (quota would not be reinstated) was suddenly created on the afternoon of the day the decision was announced. We joined, and at that time, there weren't even 500-700 members. Gradually, the members started growing."*

Many participants learned about the protest through both how online and offline sources. Tasirul's experience exemplifies this multi-channel awareness: *"If I talk about my initial sources of information, it started with my surroundings in the hall, my friends and seniors, and then it was social media."* Traditional media also played a significant role for some participants. Husam and Fahi both mentioned learning about the movement through a combination of social media and mainstream media channels. Saifee's experience particularly highlights the multi-channel flow- initially learning through a news portal about the court's decision, then gathering more knowledge through friends, social media updates, and university programs held before Eid. As Saifee noted, *"Friends, social media, and news portals all played an equal role in knowing me about the protest."* Similarly, while Fardin first encountered the protest through social media, he understood the main issues and purposes behind it from his friends.

4.2.3 Role of Social Media in Their Participation

Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, Messenger, Telegram, and WhatsApp, served as crucial tools for organizing, communicating, and participating in the movement. These platforms were used in multiple ways: sharing information, coordinating protests, building public opinion, and connecting protest participants across different locations.

Facebook emerged as the primary platform for sharing updates, photos, and videos of daily protest activities. As Masum described, *"We were using Facebook by posting in support of the movement. We shared the posts of the daily events or the ones that were announced centrally. Additionally, we shared videos and pictures of our daily activities."* Participants used various features of Facebook, including posts, stories, and profile picture

changes, to show their support and create impact. Tasirul mentioned one such coordinated action, *"On the 1st of August, we all changed our profile pictures to red, which created a huge impact."*

Tasirul emphasized the crucial role of social media that the movement which initially began as campus-centric expanded beyond boundaries largely due to social media. Fardin noted its significant role in the early stages, particularly during the initial gathering at Shahbagh and protests on campuses. Multiple messaging platforms were used for coordinating protests and sharing immediate updates. Sharif explained the strategic use of different platforms: *"Messenger groups and Telegram groups also played a very important role at that time. This is because, on Telegram, you can have a much larger number of members, whereas on Messenger, the number of members is limited."* These platforms were crucial for organizing events and rallies, especially when traditional announcement methods were not possible.

Social media became particularly important for participants outside Dhaka and during emergencies. Mozahid, who lived in Rangpur, emphasized *"Since I connected to the movement outside Dhaka, social media played a significant role for me....Being outside Dhaka, I couldn't access Dhaka-specific news through traditional media,"* noting that traditional media was heavily biased and adhered to the AL's narrative, which he described as so-called *'formulaic media'*. Social media helped coordinate emergency responses, such as organizing blood donations and assisting injured protesters. Tasirul used social media to track updates and check on friends involved in the protest after leaving Dhaka and helped organize the movement activities in his upazila through creating secret groups. Similarly, Saifee used social media to issue official statements for schools and colleges in Rangpur to encourage participation.

The platforms served as alternative news sources when traditional media coverage was limited or biased. Fahi noted, *"As no TV Channel was showing the real picture, We saw the real massacre on social media."* Social media revealed the actual situation. Saifee similarly emphasized that *"social media was the only media where we could get valid news"* despite acknowledging the presence of some fake news. Saifee also emphasized how social media helped spread crucial information, such as news about Abu Sayed's death, which significantly intensified the movement.

Social media became an essential tool for distinguishing between supporters and opponents of the movement and offered a platform for participants to voice their messages, especially when not everyone had the chance to speak through traditional media outlets. Fardin mentioned that many TV channels and reporters might have covered the protests, but social media became a significant alternative for those who wanted to express their thoughts.

However, participants faced various challenges in their social media usage. Fardin described facing pressure from family members, teachers, and seniors warning about potential trouble. To overcome these obstacles, participants adapted their strategy: *"When we couldn't post openly, we put them in stories... it was also a way to convince friends and acquaintances to join the movement, to emphasize that it was a moral cause not just for us but for our next generations as well."* Husam mentioned difficulties due to internet blackouts. The impact of social media was significantly hampered after July 18th when, as Fahi reported, *"The former ICT minister Palak turned off our broadband networks"* during the crucial moments of the protest.

Social media thus played a multifaceted role: it served as a news source, a coordination tool, a platform for building public opinion, and a means of documenting and sharing the reality of the protests. As Ridwanul emphasized, it was *"the most significant role in uniting people and facilitating communication during the movement."*

4.2.4. Impact of Social Media Campaigns

The interviews with participants reveal the complex role social media played in mobilizing and sustaining the student movement. For many participants, hashtags were among the most prominent features of social media campaigns. While some participants like Rabby engaged actively with multiple hashtags including "#quota #quotaandolon #SaveBangladeshiStudents, #alleyesonbracu," According to him, *"Many more hashtags worked to reach out the posts to us, so yeah, it inspired me in general."*

Masum, another participant, described how the use of hashtags, particularly #QuotaNotComeBack, was central to their daily activities. He emphasized, *"There were many such hashtags that we used daily, and they motivated us."* For him, these digital symbols acted as a constant reminder of their mission and helped rally like-minded individuals to take action. Ridwanul echoed this sentiment, detailing how the repeated use of slogans like "Quota Na, Medha" in posts and videos became ingrained in their minds. He shared, *"Over time, just by listening to these, they became ingrained in our minds. There were times when I would hear 'Quota Na, Medha' even in my sleep."* He also highlighted how the saturation of movement-related content on Facebook - *"out of 100 posts, 90 were related to the quota movement"* - created a unified stance against the quota system within departments. Fardin used hashtags as a tool to draw attention to the situation in Bangladesh during the protests. He shared that, although he does not personally use hashtags in his own posts, he actively searched for them. He mentioned how he commented on posts from Dhruv Rathee, an Indian YouTuber, using multiple hashtags, encouraging him to create a video about the events unfolding in Bangladesh. He saw hashtags as a way to connect with a larger conversation, enabling him to see who else was discussing the issue and what others were saying about it.

In addition to hashtags, videos, and other visual content played a crucial role in motivating and mobilizing participants. Zarif mentioned how the constant flow of videos showing student protests and government repression helped to fuel his participation. *"The posts and videos of constant attacks on students did mobilize me further,"* he said. This response highlights the emotional impact that these visuals had on participants, driving them to act in solidarity with their fellow students. Fahi, too, reflected on the significance of videos showing violence and oppression. He remembered how, during the protests, *"Our Brothers and sisters were killed, and these AL govt. were enjoying killing innocent lives."* The graphic nature of these videos was a stark reminder of the brutality students faced and motivated many to join the cause. Sharif provided rich detail about the evolution of social media activism, from early hashtags like #QuotaNotComeBack to more confrontational ones like #StepDownHasina. He described how protest slogans like *"Legeche Re Legeche, Rokte Agun Legeche, Jegeche Re Jegeche, Chhatro Somaj Jegeche"* resonated deeply, drawing parallels to Sukanta Bhattacharya's poem, *"It reminded us of Sukanta Bhattacharya's poem, 'This age does not know any boundaries, this age knows how to break stones.' These words were working within all of us. It was like our blood was heating up automatically."* Sharif also discussed the impact of videos showing violence and oppression. He particularly mentioned the effect of videos documenting the killing of Abu Sayed. He expressed,

"The videos had a huge impact on the public. When the shooting incident occurred in Comilla, we were in the halls, and we thought, 'My brothers are being shot in Comilla, and we are just sitting here in the hall.' It felt like this couldn't continue since we were all from the same generation."

Participants also spoke about the symbolic importance of small actions, such as changing profile pictures to express solidarity. For example, Fardin recalled how a college teacher, despite being discouraged from publicly supporting the movement, expressed solidarity by wearing red clothing and changing his profile picture multiple times. This gesture of support, while subtle, held significant meaning for many. Fardin remarked, *"Seeing him align himself with the red color and express solidarity in this way was a powerful gesture."*

Similarly, Mozahid described how the act of changing profile pictures, especially to red, became an iconic symbol for the movement. He noted, *"The red profile picture became a symbol for us, and later, from the third of August when everyone started changing their DP to green (that 1 in green) or displaying the one-point demand, it continued to hold significance."* He characterized the movement as potentially the "Red Revolution" due to how the country divided into red and non-red supporters. He also revealed the strategic use of hashtags, explaining how protesters would write "#StepDownHasina" while simultaneously warning others not to write it - a clever form of digital resistance, He expressed:

"I also used this hashtag this way, many people were using it this way because, given the direct fascist approach, the way the state apparatus was exploiting us, it might not have been possible to openly say #StepDownHasina. So, we used it like this: 'If you are writing #StepDownHasina, don't write #StepDownHasina.'"

Saifee also mentioned using hashtags in these indirect and interesting ways, he said,

"We couldn't directly write it, so, many were writing things like #StepDownFascist or using similar fascist-related terms because there's a subtle nuance here. The subtle thing is that when I say fascist, I am not directly calling the government fascist - if that person identifies herself as a fascist, then it is not my responsibility. So, leaving that subtle gap, we ran the campaign, and this strategy, in a fun way, really inspired us."

Tasirul added powerful visual elements to the narrative, mentioning impactful videos like "a rickshaw puller giving a salute with his hand raised to the protesters." He mentioned another video that impacted him deeply, he mentioned,

"There was a video that I watched, it showed someone who had been killed, being brought in a stretcher, and then suddenly they were attacked again. They left the person behind, and everyone ran off. These kinds of things really shook me."

The sense of collective action on social media, particularly within large groups, was also mentioned by participants. Fardin shared how the strength of the movement's group dynamic acted as a campaign in itself. *"In a group of 200k or 300k people... it meant that everyone would go tomorrow, and it didn't matter who was coming or not."* Saifee expanded on the importance of collective mobilization through social media. He pointed to how the online groups played a significant role in organizing protests and campaigns. *"The first group created for the quota reform was itself a campaign. Seeing related posts at that time really inspired me,"*

Saifee, coming from the typically peaceful city of Rangpur, described how the killing of a batchmate in his hometown deeply affected him. He explained the impact of the movement's coordination, sharing, "What was really motivating for me was witnessing the unity and strategic timing of the protests. For example, when students from BracU in Badda were protesting, the police arrived, but at the same time, students from EWU were also joining the protest. This coordination caught the police off guard. Then, when the police brought in additional forces, students from NSU and AIUB arrived from another direction, creating a three-pronged approach. It felt powerful to see this level of unity against the authorities. Gradually, ordinary citizens began joining the protests, and at one point, there were no police on the streets. I was following the situation in real-time, both in person and on social media, particularly Facebook, and through videos. It was an overwhelming feeling of solidarity."

4.2.5 Social Media's Role in Amplifying the Movement

The interview with movement participants revealed several key dimensions of social media's role in sustaining and amplifying student protests. Social media emerged as the primary source of accurate information during the movement. Zarif emphasized this role: *"While news channels were broadcasting censored footage and publishing half-truths, social media became the only platform to extract the actual raw truth."* This sentiment was echoed by Fahri who noted, *"Social media was our mainstream media for us then. Where social media shows us the truth and tv channels show bullshit."*

Social media facilitated coordination between different universities and student groups. Husam observed that *"Public gatherings and protests from both public and private universities became possible due to the common platform everyone had."* This coordination was particularly crucial during critical moments, as Fahri recalled: *"I remember 18 July when the police suddenly attacked us. Suddenly our post encouraged other university students to come forward for us. At first, EWU responded and came for us. And then we were able to hold them back together."*

The movement's dependence on social media became evident when access was restricted. Husam noted, *"We also saw the protest slowing down at a point when for a brief period of time internet blackouts started to happen."* Rabby similarly observed that *"during the blackout, students couldn't do much to continue the movement."* However, Fahri added that despite occasional challenges with misinformation, *"we saw some rumors circulate on social media" social media ultimately "did a great job of creating a social bond between students, and family in an area to protect themselves."*

Social media, particularly Facebook, served as the primary platform for communication among the movement participants. As Masum explained, this aligned naturally with their generation's communication habits: *"As students, we are Gen Z, we are largely internet-dependent and enjoy scrolling through Facebook constantly."* Masum emphasized that *"social media played not just an important role but the most crucial one in this context."* He highlighted how the extensive reach of Facebook allowed for rapid communication within large groups, such as the Facebook group for the quota movement, which had around 300,000–400,000 members. This interconnected platform allowed participants in Dhaka to instantly learn about major developments, such as the martyrdom of Abu Sayed. This level of instantaneous communication was only made possible through social media, demonstrating its pivotal role in keeping participants informed and unified across distances.

Similarly, Ridwanul shared how social media became the primary tool for learning about upcoming protests and key updates, even in times of government repression. He recalled how, when the six central coordinators were arrested, new leaders emerged through social media, ensuring the continuity of the movement. Ridwanul noted, *"They managed to escape and, from a confined room, posted a video message saying that the movement would continue and that there would be protests the next day."* He also described how social media allowed updates about protests, such as the gatherings in Shahbagh and Raju, to reach participants swiftly. He said when *"A post in the Dhaka University group said, 'Now we will go out with Razakar slogans,' and we saw women come out with pots and pans in hand, gathering at Raju."* *"We heard about the killings of Abu Said and others in Comilla all through social media,"* he added, underscoring the crucial role of social media in relaying information during critical moments.

The ability of social media to organize and inform also empowered participants to take action independently. Sharif observed that while social media provided updates on when and where protests would occur, the drive to participate came from within. *"If our response to a social media post or directive hadn't been proportionate, the movement wouldn't have unfolded the way it did,"* he explained. Sharif noted that the internal motivation to act was even more critical than the information shared on social media. His personal sense of urgency to join the protests, even without waiting for further updates, he explained *"we didn't wait for updates anymore. On*

our own, we went because we felt the need to act." illustrated the dual role social media played: it was both a facilitator of communication and a motivator for action. As Sharif reflected, *"If I had only seen the updates on social media but remained passive, the protests wouldn't have happened."*

Social media served as a crucial alternative to traditional media, which participants noted was heavily restricted. Mozahid emphasized this point: *"Since traditional media didn't help us in the slightest during that time, the only place to reach out was social media."* This was particularly important for major announcements, as Fardin explained: *"when the call for a 'Long March to Dhaka' was made on the 3rd or 4th. There was no way television would report that the students had called for something as significant as a long march. We primarily received this news through social media during this time."*

While Facebook was the primary platform, participants described strategic use of multiple social media platforms to reach different audiences. Mozahid detailed how they used "Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and even TikTok, which played a big role." He noted how even on TikTok, users found ways to *"convey the message through their subculture."* The movement actively sought international attention through social media, with Mozahid and Fardin describing how they reached out to influential South Asian YouTubers: *"we have our South Asian big YouTubers like Dhruv Rathee, Akash Banerjee. We emailed them, and all the students sent emails."*

Social media enabled the movement to reach and engage diverse segments of society. Saifee highlighted how various influential groups joined through social media: *"the intellectual community... people from the cultural sphere... social media celebrities and actual celebrities."* *"Salman Muqtadir's role in the movement cannot go unmentioned; his contributions were significant, Similarly, Sayed Abdullah's posts and statements at the time effectively reached the masses,"* he noted, pointing to the involvement of public figures who helped spread the narrative. Pages like "BUETian Page," "JU Insider," and "DU Insider" and pages of private universities like PUSAB were particularly effective in delivering concise, impactful messages to large audiences. Additionally, social media's role was instrumental in generating grassroots support, with many individuals, particularly the elderly, receiving updates from younger family members. *"People of our parents' or grandparents' age were getting the news from us, as we were using phones,"* Saifee explained, illustrating how social media helped bridge generational divides and fostered widespread, silent solidarity.

Fardin discussed how social media bridged the information gap for people not directly involved in the protests but still engaged in the movement. He recalled how local communities, even in rural areas, received updates through social media and would seek confirmation of events they saw online. *"Their lives weren't directly involved in the movement. They worked all day and went to sleep at night, but because everyone now has access to phones or watches TV, they were indirectly connected,"* Fardin explained. He emphasized that while television and newspapers were selective in their coverage, social media ensured that people, even outside protest areas, could stay informed about the movement's developments.

However, as the movement progressed, security concerns influenced social media usage. Fardin described a migration across platforms: *"At one point, there was a shift from Facebook groups to WhatsApp groups... After that, we moved to Telegram."* This shift was driven by surveillance fears: *"we were hearing that the government was buying surveillance equipment from Israel."*

The movement's social media presence influenced broader community support. Saifee shared a powerful example: *"The night before the complete shutdown, I went to buy tiles at a shop, and the shopkeeper told me, 'I'm closing the shop tomorrow; take whatever you need today... We're doing it voluntarily in solidarity.'" This demonstrated how social media helped generate voluntary community support even in the absence of mainstream media coverage.*

Participants credited social media for transforming the movement into a national phenomenon. Mozahid noted, *"Through Facebook and Twitter, our voices reached every corner of the country. It gave us a platform to share our struggles and unite people."* Fardin added, *"Social media wasn't just a tool; it was our lifeline. It allowed us to counter the government's narrative and rally support."*

Fardin and Mozahid described how the movement's scope expanded through online platforms. Fardin explained, *"What started as a student protest quickly became a public movement because social media made it accessible to everyone."* Mozahid observed, *"The moment videos of the protests went viral, people from all walks of life joined in, and it became a fight for the nation's future."*

To illustrate how much power social media held in the struggle, Mozahid explained that the government's decision to cut off the internet was a clear indication of how much they feared the movement's ability to mobilize through social media. *"The government was forced to shut down the internet so that people can't use social media. This is because, just as we had taken it as our strength, the Awami League regime saw it as their biggest threat."*

4.2.6 How Govt. Response Affected Their Participants

The government's response to the protest significantly influenced the involvement and determination of the participants, often intensifying their commitment. For Rabby, the violence used by the government left a lasting impression. *"They didn't agree to our terms and tried to put our movement to an end through violence. I was lucky to get out of it with minor injuries, but many students died and lost their eyesight because of this,"* he shared, emphasizing the tragic consequences of the crackdown. Similarly, Zarif found himself further enraged and deeply committed due to the government's actions. *"The government's response further enraged me and made me even more involved in the protest,"* he explained, highlighting how the brutality galvanized students rather than deterring them.

Husam recounted how inflammatory remarks by the then-Prime Minister heightened the public's agitation. *"When the protest started to fuel more and more students around the country, there was a cheap response from former PM Hasina calling the mass students 'Razakars,'"* he said. He further noted, *"That kind of response coming from a country's prime minister was going to fuel more controversies... From that point, I became more actively involved in the protests."*

Fahi was outraged by the actions of law enforcement during the protests. *"When we saw the police, RAB, army—all these people who were supposed to protect us- but they were laughing while killing us, it encouraged me to fight against the law and the system,"* he said. The violence and mockery from authorities only solidified his defiance.

Masum viewed the government's tactics as repetitive and disingenuous. *"The government has been giving us different excuses at different times. At one point, they pointed to the court or something else,"* he explained. Drawing from the failure of the 2018 movement, Masum and his peers resolved not to be placated by empty promises. *"We realized that if we stopped the movement just by listening to the government's excuses...we would end up failing like we did in 2018."* Ridwanul shared a similar perspective, observing how the government's legal maneuvers were seen as inadequate and deceitful. *"Initially, the government tried to show us the legal procedure...suggesting that the issue of quotas would be resolved,"* he recounted. However, students quickly recognized the government's reluctance to meet their demands. *"We began to see the government as our adversary, considering them our enemy,"* he said, explaining how this adversarial stance deepened students' resolve.

Sharif reflected on the government's failure to connect with the public sentiment. *"The government kept imposing on us the idea that we were Pakistani agents,"* he said, referring to the derogatory labels used against the protesters. *"These things struck a nerve with us."* The government's heavy-handed rhetoric and the subsequent loss of lives shifted the movement's focus from quotas to justice. *"By then, over 1,500 students had been killed. We began to say, 'Keep your quota, give us back our brothers!'"*

Fardin elaborated on the government's multi-pronged attempts to suppress the movement, from deploying Chhatro League members to using law enforcement. *"The government initially tried to suppress the movement through the Chhatro League... When they failed, they deployed the Jubo League,"* he explained. Recalling the violence, he added, *"Law enforcement, including the police and BGB, directly entered the halls, detonated cocktails, and threw bombs. Such things happening on a university campus are unimaginable."*

Mozahid shared how the government's actions motivated him to push back even harder. *"The more obstacles they put in my way, the more determined I became to overcome or confront them,"* he said. He described how the tragic death of Abu Sayed and the subsequent police violence at various campuses spurred him into action. *"The government's actions were pushing me to react even more."*

Saifee noted how the government's rhetoric and oppressive actions fueled resistance among the students. *"The government always used rehearsed rhetoric, saying, 'Whatever is happening is being done by Shibir or BNP,'"* he said. However, he believed such narratives only alienated the public further. *"When the coordinators were detained and forced to give statements, these actions affected us... These actions were motivating us to go more in favor of the movement and against the government."*

Tasirul shared his own experience of being directly impacted by the government's response. He recounted, *"The government's actions, especially from the police, started from the 16th, and if I talk about my personal experience since I was in the hall. The regime we stood against, staying in the hall meant I was staying with that regime. Therefore, betraying them from within the hall, breaking everything they had, and going against them. Because of this, my list even went to a 'bhai,' and I couldn't go home. I had to stay somewhere else."* Tasirul further emphasized the extreme violence that ensued, noting, *"Combining everything, their response included killing people, using sound grenades on students, and then firing rubber bullets, killing about 1,400-1,500 people. This made me feel that I needed to be more involved, and it strengthened my determination even more."* Reflecting on media coverage, he said, *"If I talk about media coverage, the media was just a puppet. If we talk about real media coverage, it was our social media. Social media acted as a hub. The statements they made were trying to create a different narrative. They were saying those who died were drug addicts, were militants, or were linked to BNP and Jamaat. These narratives, in which I was also included, I had no such connection and that's when I realized that these narratives were false, and this is what motivated me to get more involved and move forward."*

The participants' testimonies illustrate how the government's response marked by violence, inflammatory rhetoric, and suppression backfired, ultimately strengthening the protesters' resolve and escalating the movement further.

4.2.7 Which Actions of Govt. Intensify Their Participation

The government's actions, including internet blackouts, forced evictions, and crackdowns, significantly intensified the participants' involvement in the movement and altered the perception of many protesters. Rabby stated, *"All the actions taken by the government only made us furious to end this government era."* Similarly, Zarif remarked, *"The government's actions only intensified my participation. Their statements were evidence of their fear, thus making my perception regarding the protest even stronger."* These sentiments highlight how

the government's repressive measures backfired, fueling the protesters' determination and shifting the movement's focus from quota reform to broader anti-government resistance.

The internet blackout emerged as a pivotal point for many. Initially, it caused confusion and panic, with protesters struggling to communicate and mobilize. Husam recounted, *"When the internet blackout occurred by the AL government, I used the FFTP server to communicate, and the internet blackout intensified my participation in the movement."* Fahi echoed this, stating, *"At first, it was a quota movement, but after how that government acted and how they handled the whole situation, it converted the whole protest and made it about the protest to break down the Awami League."* Sharif explained, *"I think those who participated did not depend on the Internet. They didn't come to Shahbagh because they saw something online; rather, people simply gathered at places like Jatrabari. The movement wasn't solely internet-based, so the internet crackdown did not have much of an effect. People started coming out of their homes because they couldn't get updates online anymore; they went to the streets to find out what was happening directly. Since they were already out there, the movement automatically intensified even more."* The blackout, while intended to suppress dissent, forced participants to find alternative ways to organize, demonstrating the unintended consequences of the government's actions.

The repressive measures also transformed the protesters' perceptions of the movement's nature. Sharif pointed out how the forced removal of students from university halls on July 17 only increased public participation: *"The government thought that if they scattered students from the universities, participation in the movement would decrease. However, they soon saw that, even though they had emptied the university halls, public participation only increased."* Ridwanul added, *"When the government started imposing crackdowns, internet blackouts, and curfews, these actions collectively reinforced in our minds that the government ultimately wanted to suppress us. This sense of repression from the government fueled our determination to resist and not be subdued."*

For many, personal experiences of state repression solidified their commitment to the movement. Tasirul, who comes from a martyr's family, said, *"When we were first called 'Razakars,' that was when the spark, the fire inside me, started."* He further explained that the internet blackout and other measures taken to silence dissent only deepened his resolve: *"The government may reach the highest level of oppression, but if we cannot break it, it will continue to exploit us for the rest of our lives."* Similarly, Mozahid described the labeling of protesters as "Razakars" by the prime minister as *"pouring ghee on the fire,"* which intensified the movement's momentum.

The dissemination of videos and reports during and after the blackout further fueled public outrage. Fardin shared, *"I remember talking to some friends, and they were telling me that their fathers had seen bodies outside, people being hanged or killed. These things acted like fuel on fire."* He described a video he kept, in which a police officer said to the Home Minister, *"We shoot. One die. Only one goes, sir. The rest don't."* Fardin noted, *"Each small video, each post, and each live broadcast acted like drops of petrol on coal, causing the flames to rise higher."*

Ultimately, the government's actions not only failed to suppress the protests but also intensified the determination of participants. Saifee reflected on the scale of violence and bloodshed, saying, *"So many people died, so much blood was spilled- it shouldn't have happened. When the 7% was achieved, I felt that those who were responsible for it- the government, the police, whoever they were needed to be overthrown. They didn't have the legitimacy to stay in power."* These experiences collectively demonstrate that the government's repression transformed a focused demand for policy change into a broader fight for justice and accountability, further igniting the resolve of those involved.

4.2.8 When the movement expanded beyond its initial focus causing the Shift

The interview data revealed multiple factors that contributed to the movement's evolution from quota reform to a broader movement. The findings center on government responses, mechanisms of expansion, and the transformation of movement resources and goals.

The primary trigger for transformation was the government's forceful response to peaceful protests. As Fardin stated, *"The government's wrong decision was firing on the students. Historically in Bangladesh, no government can survive after killing students in such a manner."* Multiple participants, including Rabby and Zarif, specifically highlighted how *"the government's self-centered statements and inappropriate remarks regarding the protest and protesters caused this shift."*

The government's dismissive attitude and failure to address initial demands emerged as another crucial trigger. Husam emphasized that the movement expanded *"when the ignorance of the government on this matter and mass killings in a peaceful protest started just to close the matter by force."*

Ridwanul highlighted how political factors and government responses fueled the movement's expansion. He specifically pointed to the Prime Minister's controversial statement about *"grandchildren of Razakars,"* noting that *"Her perspective on this might have been one way, but the statement was certainly against the students."* He described how this statement was *"slightly misrepresented on a larger scale and then used to propel the movement forward,"* though emphasizing this modification *"wasn't done by the general students; rather, it was executed by a particular group."*

Law enforcement actions played a crucial role in widening the movement's scope. Multiple participants, including Rabby and Zarif, emphasized how *"unethical acts by law enforcers further infuriated the people."* The legal intimidation tactics, as described by Mozahid, included filing *"an unidentified case against 2-3 thousand people."*

Social media emerged as a key factor. As Mozahid stated, *"This movement shifted from a student movement to a public movement, and that was definitely due to social media."* Tasirul described how protests persisted: *"As the days passed and we didn't get a response, we kept blocking Shahbagh and other places. This only increased our anger and frustration towards the government."*

The escalation fundamentally altered the movement's character and objectives. What began as a focused demand for quota reform transformed into what Fahi described as a *"do-or-die situation."* The killing of protesters marked a crucial turning point. As Mozahid explained, *"The movement did shift from its original demand, the quota demand, even though the 7% was later accepted. But we couldn't accept anymore because who would deliver justice for the killings?"* Similarly, Masum said, *"We initially began the movement focused on quota reform, but when so many of our brothers became martyrs, it was no longer limited to just quota reform."* The demands expanded to include *"a fair investigation into the killings of our brothers who fell victim to this violence."*

Table 4 Key Insights from Coordinators' and Participants'

Theme	Coordinators' Insights	Participants Insights
Social Media's Role in Mobilization	• Coordinators used platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and	• Social media, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp, was used by participants

	Messenger to organize, share instructions, and maintain security. • Sakin highlighted how online solidarity, like changing profile pictures to red, helped grow the protest.	to learn about the movement, join protests, and stay updated. • Participants highlighted the impact of specific actions like hashtag campaigns (#QuotaNotComeBack) and changing profile pictures to red or green as symbols.
Role of Govt.'s Repression	• Government repression (e.g., internet shutdowns, curfews) led to increased coordination efforts among activists. • Coordinators used VPNs to bypass restrictions, ensuring continued communication despite government crackdowns.	• The government's violent actions, including police brutality, served as a significant motivation for continued participation and escalated the movement. • The killing of students, harsh government rhetoric, and repression fueled participants' resolve to push for justice.
Strategies for Expanding the Movement	• Coordinators focused on expanding the movement beyond Dhaka through social media platforms like WhatsApp and Discord. • Fuad used collective grievances to motivate private university students to join.	• Participants were inspired by peer influence, solidarity, and shared outrage at violence against protesters. • The government's violence towards students was a turning point for many, who joined to protest against systemic injustice.
Govt.'s Impact on Protest Strategies	• Coordinators noted that the government's repressive tactics (internet blackouts, curfews) pushed students to engage in offline protests. • The government's negative response, such as the Prime Minister's comments, intensified students' resolve to continue the protests.	• Participants' perspectives were greatly influenced by the government's violent actions, which transformed a specific protest into a broader anti-government movement. • Many participants felt betrayed by the government's dismissal and mistreatment of protesters, intensifying their determination.

Emotional and Symbolic Impact of Social Media	• Social media allowed for real-time updates, creating emotional solidarity and enabling organizers to bypass traditional media to disseminate their message. • Social media amplified the voices of influential figures (e.g., teachers) to further energize the protest movement.	• Videos and hashtags had an emotional impact, motivating many to take part, especially those outside Dhaka who were informed primarily through social media. • Participants like Fardin and Mozahid saw social media as a tool for spreading awareness, organizing, and connecting with a larger network.
Shift in the Movement's Focus	• Coordinators' strategies adapted as government repression intensified, shifting from a focus on quotas to broader calls for justice and regime change. • The movement's scope grew as coordinators linked protests with national issues like "hate politics" and state violence.	• As the movement evolved, participants shifted from specific demands like quota reform to broader calls for justice, focusing on government accountability. • The deaths of protesters, the government's failure to meet demands, and the escalation of violence turned the movement into a fight for national justice.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Analysis

This chapter will analyze the findings from the study on the 2024 Quota Reform Movement in Bangladesh. The goal is to explore how social media played a key role in organizing and spreading the movement, and how government actions impacted the way the protests unfolded. We will look at how digital platforms helped protesters connect and organize, even in the face of government repression. The chapter will discuss how social media not only helped mobilize the movement but also how it was used to counteract the government's attempts to control the situation. We will also consider how government actions, like censorship and violence, affected the protests and the ways protesters responded. By diving into these areas, we will see how social media and government repression worked together to shape the dynamics of the protests and the strategies used by those involved.

The findings of this study highlight the critical role of social media in mobilizing the 2024 Quota Reform Movement in Bangladesh and how government repression intensified the movement. This analysis connects these findings to broader theoretical frameworks on digital mobilization, state repression, and the emotional dynamics of collective action.

5.1 Social Media as a Tool for Mobilization and Coordination

The role of social media in the 2024 Quota Reform Movement was pivotal. As the movement grew, platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Messenger, Telegram, and Discord were used to coordinate protests, disseminate information, and ensure communication across various regions. For instance, coordinators frequently relied on WhatsApp and Messenger group calls to organize meetings late at night when face-to-face communication was no longer possible. These platforms allowed for real-time updates and quick decision-making, enabling the movement to adapt swiftly to changing circumstances. As one participant noted, social media made it possible for them to "learn about upcoming protests, their timing, and who was calling them all through social media". This rapid communication was crucial in keeping the movement active, especially after key coordinators were arrested.

The security and confidentiality provided by platforms like Discord were also essential. Protest coordinators used Discord to ensure that their plans remained secret, circumventing government surveillance. Discord's ability to provide a secure environment for communication became vital, particularly when activists faced growing threats from government agents and other groups. As one coordinator emphasized, using Discord allowed them to centralize coordination while ensuring that information remained secure from potential infiltrators or surveillance efforts by government-backed groups.

This form of digital mobilization can be seen through the lens of Zeynep Tufekci's (2017) theory of digitally networked movements. Tufekci's framework highlights the role of social media in enabling rapid mobilization, but also points out the challenges movements face in terms of sustaining momentum and negotiating demands once the initial burst of activity has passed. In this case, the speed and spread of the movement were facilitated by social media, but the challenge of maintaining momentum was mitigated by real-time updates, peer-to-peer mobilization, and emotional solidarity built through platforms like Facebook and Telegram.

5.1.1 Counteracting Government Censorship and Propaganda

Government repression played a significant role in shaping the trajectory of the movement. The Bangladeshi government's response included violent crackdowns, internet shutdowns, and curfews all intended to suppress the protests. However, these measures had the opposite effect, acting as a catalyst for further resistance. As one

participant noted, "the government's controlled media failed to report accurately on the protests," leading to a reliance on social media as the only space to share unfiltered information. Social media platforms allowed students to document police violence and government attacks in real-time, sharing graphic footage that galvanized public opinion. This counter-narrative on social media helped to reshape public perception, showing the violence and repression faced by protesters.

Marlies Glasius's (2018) theory of authoritarian practices helps explain this dynamic. According to Glasius, governments that use both visible and invisible repression—from police brutality to online surveillance often fail to suppress movements when the repression is perceived as unjust. The government's crackdown, which included mass arrests and violent confrontations, only intensified the movement. As one coordinator reflected, "The killings and police violence pushed the movement to evolve from a demand for quotas to a broader demand for justice." This reflects Glasius's concept of authoritarian practices, where visible repression, such as violence and arrests, paradoxically strengthens resistance by fueling collective outrage and mobilizing broader segments of society.

Additionally, Habermas's (1989) concept of the public sphere is applicable here. Habermas argued that the public sphere is essential for democratic participation, where citizens can come together to discuss and debate matters of public importance. Social media provided the space where citizens especially students could discuss their grievances and collectively demand reform. Despite government attempts to censor traditional media, social media became the ideal public sphere for the circulation of truth, especially when mainstream outlets failed to report accurately on the events of the protests.

5.2 Government Repression as a Catalyst for Wider Participation

The government's brutal response to the protests also led to the expansion of the movement. Many coordinators and participants noted that repressive measures like the internet shutdown and violent confrontations fueled their resolve. In particular, the mass killings of students on July 18 marked a pivotal turning point, shifting the focus from quota reforms to seeking justice for the deaths of students. As one protester put it, "After the killings, the movement went national. Students outside Dhaka started organizing protests, and it became a broader political issue." The violence made the protests more personal for many students, as they saw their peers being killed, which contributed to a radical shift in the demands of the movement.

This aligns with Francisco's (2004) work on how state violence can actually increase participation in a movement when it is perceived as unjust. According to Francisco, when state violence is disproportionate and unprovoked, it can backfire, leading to greater mobilization. In this case, the government's violent repression served as a recruitment tool, as students and other citizens became more involved in the movement after witnessing the brutality and injustice.

5.2.1 Repressive Measures: A Compounding Effect

The government's response can be categorized into five distinct forms of repression, each with a compounding effect on the movement: physical violence, rhetorical violence, communication blockages, movement restrictions, and mass killings. These actions not only intensified the resolve of the protesters but also expanded the movement, attracting a wider public.

- **Physical violence:** The use of tear gas, rubber bullets, and sound grenades was met with defiance, further mobilizing protesters.
- **Rhetorical violence:** The derogatory remarks by political leaders, such as calling protesters "Razakars" or "Pakistani agents," galvanized the students, turning their fight into a broader struggle for justice.

- **Communication blockages:** Despite the internet shutdown, protesters found ways to stay connected, further escalating their determination and creating new forms of communication to circumvent state control.
- **Movement restrictions:** The curfew and police violence created urgency and broadened the scope of participation, leading to wider mobilization and solidarity across Bangladesh.

Social Media as a Tool for Transformation and Resistance

The findings underscore the central role of social media in both facilitating the initial mobilization of the 2024 Quota Reform Movement and in countering government repression. While government repression sought to crush the movement, it instead contributed to the expansion and intensification of protests. By utilizing secure communication tools like Discord and Telegram, protesters were able to maintain coordination even under extreme pressure. Social media not only facilitated the dissemination of truth about the government's actions but also helped generate emotional solidarity, counteract propaganda, and build a collective identity. These elements combined to transform a localized quota reform protest into a national political movement, with the broader goal of justice and accountability for the violence faced by the protesters.

Theoretical frameworks, including those by Glasius, Habermas, and Tufekci, illuminate the dynamic relationship between state repression, social media, and political mobilization, highlighting how digital tools can serve as powerful instruments for resistance and reform, even in the face of authoritarian control.

5.3 Comparative Insights: Lessons from Global Movements

The July Revolution of 2024 in Bangladesh shares significant similarities with other major global movements, particularly in its reliance on digital mobilization and the role of social media in organizing protests. Like the Arab Spring, Hong Kong protests, and Black Lives Matter (BLM) movements, the Quota Reform Movement capitalized on the speed, reach, and accessibility of digital platforms to rally support, share real-time information, and coordinate activities. This shift towards digital activism has become a defining feature of contemporary resistance movements, allowing for rapid mobilization even in the face of government repression.

However, while these movements share a common reliance on digital tools, their outcomes and trajectories diverge significantly. The Arab Spring, for instance, saw the downfall of long-standing regimes, but its aftermath has been mixed, with some countries experiencing political instability, civil war, or the reemergence of authoritarianism. The Hong Kong protests similarly relied on decentralized digital coordination but faced severe state crackdowns, leading to the erosion of autonomy and freedoms despite the widespread use of digital tools. The BLM movement, on the other hand, has sparked ongoing dialogue about racial justice and systemic reform in the U.S., but its goals remain unfulfilled, illustrating the complexities of achieving lasting political transformation through digital mobilization alone.

In contrast, the outcome of the July Revolution in Bangladesh remains uncertain. While the protests led to significant political upheaval, the long-term effects of the movement are still unfolding. The experience of movements like the Arab Spring serves as a cautionary tale—although digital activism can catalyze change, it does not guarantee sustained political transformation. The lack of centralized leadership, the potential for political opportunism, and the challenge of maintaining momentum once immediate demands are met are issues that Bangladesh's Quota Reform Movement must contend with.

Future research should explore how sustained political transformation can be achieved in the digital age, particularly in revolutions that begin as online movements. Lessons from global movements suggest that while digital tools can amplify dissent, achieving lasting political change requires a well-organized movement that can bridge online mobilization with offline action and institutional reform. In Bangladesh's case, the movement

must find ways to maintain its momentum and evolve into a force capable of achieving not only political change but also broader societal reform.

By examining these comparative insights, Bangladesh can learn valuable lessons about the limitations and potential of digital activism. Understanding these lessons will be crucial for ensuring that movements like the Quota Reform Movement do not just create immediate disruption but also foster enduring political and social change.

Ultimately, this study shows that the combination of social media activism and state repression created a powerful force for political change. The ruling party underestimated the power of digital mobilization and failed to recognize that its own violent responses were fueling the movement's strength. The findings suggest that in future protests, governments that rely solely on suppression may only accelerate their downfall, especially in a digitally connected world where repression can be exposed instantly and lead to mass resistance.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

The Quota Reform Movement of 2024, which evolved into the July Revolution, was a defining moment in Bangladesh's political history. What began as a student-led demand for reform in government job quotas quickly transformed into a mass uprising, fueled by social media activism and intensified by state repression. This study has explored the dual role of digital platforms in mobilizing protesters and shaping the discourse, while also analyzing how government crackdowns contributed to the escalation of unrest.

Social media emerged as a powerful tool for coordination, information dissemination, and public engagement, allowing protesters to bypass state-controlled narratives and connect on a national scale. However, the government's countermeasures, including internet shutdowns, censorship, and violent crackdowns, instead of suppressing the movement, galvanized further resistance. The excessive use of force and failure to address the protesters' demands ultimately led to a broader movement that challenged the ruling regime.

By examining the interactions between social media activism and government responses, this study highlights the evolving nature of youth-led political movements in the digital age. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how online platforms can accelerate mass mobilization, and how authoritarian responses to such movements can determine their outcomes. The July Revolution of 2024 serves as a case study in how grassroots activism, when amplified by digital tools, can redefine the political landscape. This research also raises important questions about the future of digital activism, state control over online spaces, and the long-term implications of youth political engagement in Bangladesh and beyond.

6.1 Summary of Findings and Discussion

The findings of this thesis highlight the critical role that social media played in the 2024 Quota Reform Movement in Bangladesh. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Discord were essential for organizing protests, sharing real-time information, and ensuring communication across regions. These digital tools enabled the movement to spread rapidly and adapt to changing circumstances, even when face-to-face communication was not possible or when government efforts to suppress the movement, such as surveillance, were intensified.

The study also reveals how government repression, including violent crackdowns, internet shutdowns, and curfews, had an unintended consequence of expanding the movement. Rather than suppressing participation, the state's aggressive response further mobilized support and shifted the focus of the protest from quota reform to a broader demand for justice. As the government's actions escalated, so did the resolve of the protesters, with many participants feeling that their cause had evolved into a fight for democratic rights and accountability.

The emotional and symbolic impact of social media was pivotal in maintaining solidarity and fueling the movement's growth. The ability to document and share instances of state violence on social media helped shape public perception, counteracting state-controlled narratives, and galvanizing wider public support for the protesters' cause.

The discussion also draws on various theoretical frameworks to understand the intersection of state repression and digital mobilization. Theories on digitally networked movements and authoritarian practices help explain how digital tools can facilitate rapid mobilization and how state violence can backfire, ultimately strengthening a movement.

Lastly, the comparison to global movements, such as the Arab Spring and Hong Kong protests, underscores both the potential and the challenges of digital activism. While social media can catalyze large-scale mobilization, maintaining momentum and achieving long-term political change remains a complex challenge

6.2 Limitations

This study has several limitations:

- One of the primary limitations of this study is the scope of the interviews conducted. I was only able to interview three coordinators, all of whom are affiliated with private universities. Unfortunately, I was unable to access or interview any of the key coordinators from Dhaka University (DU), where the protest initially began and where many of the central leadership figures were based. As a result, this study may not fully capture the perspectives or strategic insights of those who played the most prominent roles in organizing and directing the movement.
- The lack of access of government documents and the reliance on qualitative data from interviews means that the findings cannot fully capture the government's internal strategies or provide a quantitative measure of protest outcomes. Future research that includes official government communications and employs quantitative methods could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of repression on protest movements.
- Another limitation of this study is the lack of demographic diversity among participants. The majority of the interviewees and focus group participants were university students, particularly those from private and public universities involved in the Quota Reform Movement. While this group represents a significant and active part of the protest, other social groups, such as journalists, government officials, and policymakers, were not included. The absence of these groups may limit the study's ability to fully capture the broader societal and political implications of the movement. Journalists, for instance, could offer insights into media coverage and public perception, while government officials could provide perspectives on the state's response to the protest. The inclusion of these diverse groups might have enriched the findings, offering a more holistic understanding of the movement's influence and challenges. Future studies could expand their sample to include a broader range of stakeholders, such as journalists, government officials, and civil society representatives, to offer a more comprehensive view of the movement's impact. This would help provide a more balanced perspective, addressing the interactions between the student protesters and other key societal actors.
- Lastly, there is a lack of diversity in data collection methods. The research relied solely on two methods: interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) which may limit the breadth of perspectives. While the study utilized FGDs as a key data collection method, the number of participants in each group was relatively small—three participants in the first group and four in the second. While these discussions provided valuable insights, a larger number of FGDs with more diverse groups could have offered a broader range of perspectives. Additionally, the effectiveness of the FGDs depends on factors such as participant engagement and group dynamics, which may have influenced the depth of the data collected. These limitations highlight areas for potential improvement in future research.

6.3 Further Research Direction

While this thesis has explored the role of social media and government repression during the July Revolution 2024, there are several avenues for future research that could build on the findings and expand our understanding of modern uprisings and their consequences.

1. The Role of Social Media in Protests

Future studies could focus on the impact of algorithms, influencers, and content circulation on protest mobilization. While this thesis briefly touches upon the use of social media, a more in-depth examination of how platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) shaped the July Revolution could provide valuable insights into the dynamics of contemporary social movements. Research could explore the strategies employed by different platforms, how their algorithms influenced the spread of information, and the role of influencers in driving participation. A comparative approach would reveal the strengths and limitations of each platform in supporting or disrupting protest activities.

2. Long-Term Political Impacts of Government Repression

Another critical area for future exploration is the long-term political impact of government repression. This research could examine how trust in state institutions was altered following the revolution and whether the government's repressive tactics had lasting effects on political participation and public opinion. Additionally, further studies could explore whether the post-revolution government continued to use similar tactics or adapted its approach to dissent. Investigating these dimensions could provide valuable insights into how repressive regimes maintain control and how citizens' political behavior evolves in response to state violence.

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