



Civil Resistance Against Authoritarian and Religious Radicalism



Youth-Led Democratic Renewal in Post-Uprising Bangladesh



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About the Author

Arif Nezami is a social impact activist, policy advocate, and technology leader dedicated to expanding opportunities for youth, entrepreneurs, and civic leaders. Over the past decade, he has led initiatives blending innovation, community empowerment, and policy reform to tackle key socio-economic challenges. An IVLP alumnus of the U.S. Department of State, Arif has also participated in fellowships with the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, Atlas Network, Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung, ORF America, and others - shaping his global perspective on policy innovation and the use of technology and AI for social progress.



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Abstract

In July 2024, Bangladesh witnessed the historic “July 36 Uprising” - a month-long, student-led movement that confronted decades of one-party rule, fueled by unmet public expectations and a call for justice and accountability. Initially ignited by protests against a controversial government job-quota system, it rapidly evolved into a nationwide demand for accountability, meritocracy, and justice. The state’s response, which led to significant loss of life and widespread detentions, highlighted the urgent need for institutional renewal and stronger human rights protections. The regime’s collapse on August 5, 2024, opened an important window for democratic reform and civic reconstruction.

This study examines the post-uprising democratic reform process, focusing on how youth networks and civic-tech initiatives have sought to transform protest momentum into structured participation and policy engagement. Drawing on case studies of the Freedom Fellows and Reform Bangladesh Policy Labs programs led by Preneur Lab and partner organizations, the paper explores how digital platforms and grassroots training have enabled young citizens to co-create policy proposals, advocate institutional transparency, and embed participatory governance in the reform agenda.

Using a qualitative mixed method approach, combining program documentation, field interviews, and policy analysis, the paper situates Bangladesh’s transition within broader theories of recovery and nonviolent civic resistance. Findings suggest that youth-led civic ecosystems not only challenge governmental legacies through rights-based advocacy but also provide peaceful alternatives to extremist mobilization. As Bangladesh navigates its fragile transition, the study underscores how civic-tech-driven democratization can institutionalize youth participation, rebuild public trust, and lay the groundwork for a more inclusive and resilient democratic future.

1. Introduction

The collapse of Bangladesh's long-standing government on August 5, 2024, marked the end of one of South Asia's longest-ruling authorities. What began as a series of campus protests over a controversial government job-quota system quickly spiraled into the July 36 Uprising—a nationwide, nonviolent mass movement that united students, professionals, and ordinary citizens in demanding accountability, justice, and democratic renewal. For over a decade preceding the uprising, Bangladesh had witnessed a steady erosion of institutional independence, media freedom, and political pluralism. The events of 2024 therefore represented not just a political rupture, but a collective moral reckoning with a system that had normalized corruption, repression, and dynastic rule.



The post-uprising transition—anchored by the interim administration led by Nobel Laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus—opened a critical but uncertain window for reform. The government pledged to restore the rule of law, reform the electoral commission, ensure media independence, and decentralize governance. Yet, as scholars of democratic transitions caution, revolutionary moments do not automatically produce democratic outcomes; they create opportunities that must be institutionally and socially cultivated. Bangladesh's challenge is therefore twofold: to rebuild public institutions hollowed out by decades of politicization, and to sustain the civic energy that made reform possible in the first place.

This study investigates how Bangladesh's youth-led civic movements are shaping the country's post-revolution democratic reform process. Specifically, it explores the mechanisms through which nonviolent youth networks, such as Freedom Fellows and Reform Bangladesh Policy Labs, are transforming protest energy into sustained civic engagement, policy innovation, and participatory governance. These initiatives exemplify a new generation of "civic-tech" democratization, in which digital tools and grassroots organizing converge to bridge citizens and institutions.

Methodologically, this research employs a qualitative, multi-source analysis combining field reports, policy documents, and interviews with youth activists, civil society leaders, and policy advisors. It situates Bangladesh's case within comparative frameworks of recovery, drawing on literature from transitional justice, participatory governance, and civil resistance studies. The aim is not merely to document events, but to interpret the institutional and sociopolitical patterns emerging from them.

In the global context of democratic backsliding-from Southeast Asia to Eastern Europe-the Bangladeshi experience is emblematic of a broader question: can societies reclaim democracy through grassroots, digital, and nonviolent reform rather than elite negotiation or foreign intervention? By tracing the interplay between civic innovation and institutional change in post-2024 Bangladesh, this paper seeks to illuminate how youth-driven movements can operationalize democratic ideals into lasting reforms-offering lessons for other nations navigating the fragile aftermath of government collapse.

2. The July 36 Uprising and the Fall of the Govt

In July 2024, Bangladesh experienced a historic moment of civic awakening as long-standing public frustrations came to the forefront. Over the years, growing centralization of power had weakened public confidence and limited civic expression. Concerns over digital regulations, institutional independence, and press freedom added to calls for reform. The movement gained momentum on university campuses, where students peacefully mobilized against the reinstatement of the job-quota system - a policy widely seen as in need of modernization. Slogans like "Merit, not nepotism" reflected the aspirations of a new generation seeking fairness, opportunity, and accountable governance.

What began as a campus protest rapidly evolved into a nationwide nonviolent movement, connecting youth across Dhaka, Rajshahi, Khulna, and Chattogram through livestreams, encrypted messaging channels, and viral hashtags. The uprising, later dubbed the “July 36 Movement,” represented a digitally networked form of civil resistance where coordination and documentation replaced formal leadership structures.



The state’s response was firm and marked by significant confrontation between security forces and demonstrators, leading to the tragic loss of life and disruption across the country. Reports from the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) described the situation as deeply concerning, with casualties and injuries on a large scale. As the movement grew, teachers, professionals, and diaspora groups stood in solidarity with students, calling for peaceful resolution and reform. By early August 2024, signs of restraint within law enforcement and the armed forces indicated a turning point. On August 5, former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina stepped down, marking the closing of a long chapter in Bangladesh’s political history and paving the way for an interim government under Dr. Muhammad Yunus to guide the nation toward renewal and dialogue.

3. The Post-Uprising Civic Landscape: From Protest to Participation

The collapse of governmental rule left Bangladesh in an institutional vacuum. Ministries were paralyzed, the economy strained, and public trust fractured. Yet, out of this vacuum emerged an unprecedented civic reawakening, driven primarily by the same youth who had led the uprising. Instead of retreating into apathy, they pivoted from resistance to reconstruction.

Across university lawns and local fields, young organizers convened citizens' assemblies to deliberate on constitutional reform, electoral justice, and corruption. These informal gatherings-dubbed "policy cafés" by participants-became incubators for democratic imagination. In these spaces, slogans gave way to structured debate. Activists repurposed the same digital infrastructure used during the protests-Telegram channels, Google Docs, and livestream forums-to coordinate policy research and mobilize expert volunteers. For the first time in Bangladesh's political history, policy drafting became a civic act accessible to ordinary citizens.

Cultural production reinforced this shift. Music collectives, graffiti artists, and satirical cartoonists who had once lampooned state violence redirected their art toward accountability. Murals in Dhaka's Shahbagh warned bureaucrats, "Power Must Answer". Podcasts and YouTube news shows run by young journalists covered cabinet reforms with real-time analysis. This expansion of a pluralist, participatory public sphere marked a democratization of discourse, where critique became normalized and accessible.

The most notable transformation, however, was psychological: protesters began calling themselves "reformers." The term captured continuity rather than rupture-a belief that democracy required persistence beyond the euphoria of revolution. Surveys conducted by youth think tanks in late 2024 revealed a sharp rise in political engagement among citizens aged 18–29, signaling a durable civic awakening.

3.1 Institutional Openings and the Role of Youth in Governance

Recognizing this surge of civic participation, the interim government established consultative bodies on electoral reform, media freedom, digital governance, and decentralization. Civil-society coalitions nominated young experts and student representatives to these panels, ensuring that policymaking unfolded in public view. Hearings were livestreamed, comments solicited online, and policy drafts circulated through open portals-unprecedented practices in a nation long defined by opaque governance.

This institutional openness created fertile ground for civic organizations to operationalize reform. Preneur Lab Youth and Innovation Trust emerged as a central node in this transformation, bridging youth movements, civil society, and government forums. Through initiatives like Freedom Fellows and Reform Bangladesh, Preneur Lab converted street energy into civic literacy, evidence-based advocacy, and structured policy engagement.

3.2 Bangladesh Reform Commissions

The Bangladesh Reform Commissions were established in late 2024 under the interim government led by Muhammad Yunus, with the mandate of restructuring Bangladesh's key state institutions, restoring democratic balance, and promoting accountability and rights across sectors. The commissions cover areas such as constitutional reform, judiciary, electoral system, police, anti-corruption, public administration, local government, health, media, women's affairs, and labour rights. Each commission was tasked to prepare detailed reform proposals (often with a fixed deadline of about 90 days) which would then be published and debated. After the drafting period, the full reports were released (e.g. in February 2025 for six commissions). Following publication, a **National Consensus Commission** was formed (in February 2025) to review the multitude of reform proposals, engage political parties in negotiations, reconcile conflicting ideas, and prioritize which reforms could be implemented via legal or executive means and which would require constitutional amendments. Despite the ambitious design, many commission leaders have expressed frustration over the slow translation of recommendations into action, noting that much of the work remains at the stage of report writing with limited policy implementation so far.

Constitutional / Structural Reforms

- Enshrine “equality, human dignity, social justice, pluralism and democracy” as core constitutional principles

- Introduce institutional balance of power by limiting the excessive powers of the Prime Minister's Office.
- Propose a **bicameral legislature**: a lower house (400 seats, including 100 directly elected women members) and an upper house with proportional representation.
- Expand the scope of fundamental rights (e.g. right to food, health, housing, privacy, participation) and make them more enforceable in courts.
- Specific reforms for the interim (caretaker) government structure during elections.

Public Administration/Bureaucracy/Decentralization

- Reduce the number of ministries and reorganize into functional clusters (e.g. from ~40 down to ~25 ministries).
- Create two new administrative divisions (Comilla, Faridpur) and reorganize existing divisions into provinces.
- Establish a capital metropolitan government system for Dhaka (to coordinate metropolitan areas like Dhaka, Tongi, Narayanganj, etc.).
- Rename key administrative posts (e.g. Deputy Commissioner, Upazila Nirbahi Officer) and revise job descriptions for better service delivery.
- Strengthen digital governance, e-services, and website modernization; reorganize agencies like the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics; empower managing committees for colleges and schools.

Anti-Corruption / ACC Strengthening

- Increase the number of Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) commissioners and introduce a robust search committee for their appointment.
- Enact legal amendments to make misuse of constitutional or legal power and bribery clearly illegal; abolish provisions that legalize “black money.”
- Give ACC stronger operational, financial, and institutional autonomy to act as an effective ombudsman.

Judiciary / Legal System

- Decentralize the judiciary and reduce concentration of power in higher courts.
- Introduce enforceability to broader categories of rights and reduce gaps between constitutional guarantee and judicial remedy.

Electoral / Political Accountability

- Make political parties subject to the Right to Information Act to increase internal transparency.
- Disqualify candidates from standing in elections from the date of conviction (i.e. remove loopholes that allow convicted persons to run).
- Lower age for candidacy, require youth/women quotas or meaningful representation.

Local Government & Decentralization

- Restructure the three-tier local government system (Union, Upazila, Zilla) with distinct organograms and clearer functional roles.
- Form a **permanent Local Government Commission** with constitutional backing to oversee local governance matters.
- Increase reserved seats for women in local bodies, and guarantee women's representation in executive councils (e.g., one-third of mayors/ chairpersons).

4. Civic & Youth Participation

4.1 Freedom Fellows

Launched in 2021, the Freedom Fellows Program was designed to cultivate youth leadership rooted in constitutional knowledge and nonviolent activism. Following the 2024 revolution, it expanded dramatically, training over 300 fellows across all eight divisions by mid-2025. Each cohort participated in an intensive curriculum blending governance theory, human rights education, and participatory project design. Workshops emphasized practical problem-solving-developing community initiatives on local governance, digital rights, and gender inclusion.

Alumni impact surveys cited in program reports indicate that 70% of fellows initiated independent civic projects-town-hall dialogues, voter-education campaigns, and public policy blogs. Many later contributed to government consultations as youth advisors or civil-society representatives. Importantly, the fellowship maintained a gender-balanced and inclusive structure, with nearly half of participants identifying as women and several representing indigenous and rural communities.

The program's design embodied three analytical dimensions of post-revolution civic resilience:

1. Cognitive Empowerment: equipping youth with literacy in rights and institutions to articulate demands precisely.
2. Collective Identity Formation: fostering a pluralistic network that transcends partisanship and regional divides.
3. Continuity Mechanisms: ensuring mobilization energy survives electoral cycles through mentorship and peer accountability.

In doing so, Freedom Fellows transformed activism into governance capacity, institutionalizing the moral energy of July 36 within emerging democratic structures.

4.2 Reform Bangladesh: Digital Democracy and Policy Innovation

If Freedom Fellows built capacity, Reform Bangladesh provided the platform to deploy it. Conceived in late 2024 and formally launched in early 2025, Reform Bangladesh was a nationwide participatory policymaking initiative led by Preneur Lab and youth partners. It sought to demonstrate that the same generation that overthrew the government could now author the nation's reform agenda.

The initiative rested on three pillars:

- Regional Liberal Workshops: in-person advocacy and policy design trainings across universities (e.g., Rajshahi University, Varendra University).
- Digital Engagement Campaigns: public-awareness drives through social media and radio, promoting civic literacy.
- Youth Manifesto Platform: an open digital portal (reform.preneurlab.org) where citizens could draft and endorse policy ideas.
- The first workshop at Rajshahi University (February 2025) brought together 50 youth leaders who generated 104 policy ideas, many focused on constitutional reform, decentralization, and digital rights. Proposals were later refined and submitted to relevant reform commissions.

4.3 Digital Civic Infrastructure

The Reform Bangladesh portal operates as a hybrid civic-tech platform: part social network, part open-source think tank. It allows users to co-author briefs, collaborate on edits, and visualize issue clusters through interactive dashboards. Algorithms surface trending ideas while moderators verify factual consistency. Within its first campaign, the platform reached 20,000 users, with nearly 45% female participation, reflecting unprecedented gender inclusivity in policy consultation.

The platform's analytics revealed four major reform themes:

1. Electoral integrity and decentralization.
2. Youth entrepreneurship and equitable employment.
3. Digital governance and data protection.
4. Climate resilience and gender inclusion.

By converting grassroots dialogue into quantifiable civic data, Reform Bangladesh bridged the gap between citizen sentiment and policymaker deliberation.

4.4 Public Awareness and Narrative Shift

Branded under the slogan “Empower, Lead & Create Impact,” Reform Bangladesh's social campaigns reached more than 80,000 citizens through short-form videos, infographics, and radio talk shows. Visual storytelling reframed youth identity from protester to policy architect, emphasizing optimism over grievance. Local newspapers began citing Youth Manifesto statistics in editorials, embedding citizen-driven metrics into public debate.

4.5 Policy Outcomes and Institutional Interface

By early 2025, Reform Bangladesh's cumulative impact was measurable:

- Policy Generation: 100+ proposals forwarded to reform commissions, several under technical review by the Constitution Reform Commission.
- Capacity Building: hundreds trained in advocacy, communication, and stakeholder mapping.
- Institutional Interface: youth representatives invited to national consultations on digital governance and education reform.
- Network Formation: a trans-regional community sustaining engagement through Telegram groups and online forums.

These mechanisms operationalized the transition from street activism to state partnership. Where once protest banners demanded justice, today policy briefs propose legal reforms, ethical codes, and digital safeguards.

4.6 Civic-Tech Ecosystem and Democratic Culture

The broader civic-tech ecosystem emerging from Bangladesh's transition illustrates a new democratic model: nonviolent governance through participatory technology. Initiatives such as *ReformHub*, *CitizenConnect*, and *Digital Manifesto Tracker* use open APIs to publish policy progress and gather citizen feedback in real time.

This ecosystem demonstrates three enduring lessons:

1. **Participation Breeds Legitimacy:** Citizens who co-author reforms are more likely to defend institutions.
2. **Digital Platforms Heal Distrust:** Transparency and open data reduce rumor-mongering and foster social trust.
3. **Continuity of Nonviolence:** By giving youth structured roles in governance, reform movements maintain moral coherence and avoid relapse into extremism.

Civic-tech thus becomes not just a governance tool but a counter-radicalization mechanism-channeling disillusionment into evidence-based participation.

4.7 Challenges and Fragilities

Despite historic progress, Bangladesh's democratic reconstruction remains fragile. Rural connectivity gaps risk excluding peripheral youth from digital participation; political polarization could re-entrench patronage; and economic precarity strains volunteer-based activism. Moreover, attempts by some interim officials to co-opt independent movements raise concerns over autonomy.

In response, civic organizations emphasize transparency and horizontal leadership. Preneur Lab, for instance, publishes program funding sources and rotates youth coordinators quarterly to preserve accountability. Economic sustainability is also being addressed through entrepreneurship mentorship integrated into civic programs, aligning livelihoods with democratic engagement.

6. Analytical Synthesis: From Resistance to Reconstruction

The post-2024 transition in Bangladesh represents a paradigmatic case of civil resistance evolving into participatory governance. Unlike earlier cycles of revolt and repression, the July 36 generation translated dissent into institutional design. The dual architecture of Freedom Fellows and Reform Bangladesh demonstrates that sustainable democracy depends not only on regime change but on civic capacity—the ability of citizens to understand, influence, and implement reform.

In comparative perspective, Bangladesh's experience echoes Tunisia's 2011 democratic consolidation and Chile's student-led constitutional reforms, yet its uniqueness lies in the seamless merger of digital culture and institutional reform. The same online networks that once exposed violence now host deliberative policy debates. This transformation suggests a profound cultural shift: democracy as a continuous act of design, not merely a procedural event.

By mid-2025, Bangladesh will stand as a laboratory of civic innovation, where young citizens are not merely petitioners of the state but co-designers of its institutions. The revolution's greatest legacy may therefore lie not in the fall of the government, but in the birth of participatory citizenship.

6.1 Reform Commissions As Vehicles For Civic Input

A core achievement of the transition has been the creation of issue-specific reform commissions (e.g., on anti-corruption, governance, and related institutional questions). Public reporting documents, for instance, the Anti-Corruption Commission Reform Commission, which developed a set of recommendations submitted to the Chief Adviser; debates over implementation continue, underscoring that reform is now a public, contested process rather than an opaque one. These bodies have provided structured forums where civil society groups and young professionals can contribute proposals and scrutinize progress.

6.2 Youth Moving From Protest To Policy

Outside government, youth-led civic-tech and leadership programs have worked to convert street-level mobilization into evidence-based advocacy, policy drafting, and accountability monitoring. The Reform Bangladesh Policy Paper outlines how initiatives such as Reform Bangladesh (policy labs, digital portals for proposals) and Freedom Fellows (civic leadership training) channel participation into concrete submissions and public-facing policy ideas, reinforcing habits of open, data-informed deliberation.

6.3 More Protests – But On Policy And Accountability

Paradoxically, the end of the previous government has brought more demonstrations, not fewer - now oriented toward policy change, election timing, and institutional accountability rather than regime overthrow. Major rallies and marches across 2025 (including large opposition-aligned youth gatherings pressing for election dates and reform delivery) illustrate how protest has been normalized as a legitimate democratic tool. Regional and international monitors likewise note sustained street mobilization and calls to safeguard the right to peaceful assembly during the transition.

6.4 A Nonviolent Civic Culture, Anchored In Accountability

The moral consensus forged in 2024 - reinforced by subsequent UN human-rights reporting on the crackdown's toll - has helped keep youth activism disciplined and rights-focused while they work inside and alongside institutions. The transition's positive arc lies here: nonviolence has matured into participation, reform commissions have made state processes more permeable to citizen input, and a generation that once documented abuses now debates rules, designs policies, and monitors delivery.

7. Conclusion & Policy Implications

The July 36 Uprising marked a generational break in Bangladesh's political trajectory, transforming a protest movement into a civic blueprint for democratic renewal. One year later, the country's transition shows how nonviolent resistance can evolve into constructive governance. Through initiatives such as Freedom Fellows and Reform Bangladesh, young people have turned the moral energy of their struggle into lasting civic participation, embedding themselves in reform commissions, policy consultations, and digital governance experiments.

Recent data from these programs highlight how this transformation is taking shape. According to national youth policy submissions, 27 percent of recommendations focus on education and skill development, 20.7 percent on justice and legal access, and 19.8 percent on governance and political reform.

Together, these areas account for nearly 68 percent of all proposals, showing that most reform efforts are directed at strengthening the foundations of learning, law, and democratic representation. Economic reforms make up 18.5 percent, while healthcare (4.9 percent) and social inclusion (4.3 percent) complete the picture. The emphasis reflects a generation that seeks structural reform, not symbolic gestures.

The pattern is clear: democracy in Bangladesh is no longer limited to elections. It is becoming a process of continuous public engagement, supported by civic education, open data, and accountability. Youth-led initiatives such as GovTech experiments, electoral reform dialogues, and university-based policy review panels show that social movements can create not only political openings but also new institutions that channel participation into policymaking. Quantitatively, over one-third of contributors prioritized curriculum reform and skill development in areas such as artificial intelligence, data analytics, and the Internet of Things, while nearly one in five focused on independent electoral commissions and digital voting systems. These figures suggest that protest has matured into structured, results-driven reform.

However, this transformation remains fragile. The lack of a permanent constitutional framework, financial insecurity among young reformers, and unequal access to digital infrastructure could slow progress. Yet the growth of civic technology, student-led campaigns for policy implementation, and the expansion of inclusive commissions where proposals for women's and disability representation increased by more than ten percent indicate that the democratic spirit remains strong and adaptable.

For policymakers, the main lesson is to make inclusion a permanent feature of governance:

- Establish Youth Advisory Councils in each ministry to ensure sustained participation.
- Create open-data dashboards to track reform progress and promote transparency.
- Integrate civic and media literacy into national education curricula to align with the 27 percent focus on education reform.
- Expand digital participation tools beyond major cities to reduce regional inequality and support the 19.8 percent governance reform agenda.

For activists and scholars, Bangladesh now offers an example of democratic reconstruction built on civic participation. The country's experience shows that democratic renewal depends less on charismatic leadership and more on the collective effort of citizens who continue to shape their institutions through measurable, inclusive reform.

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