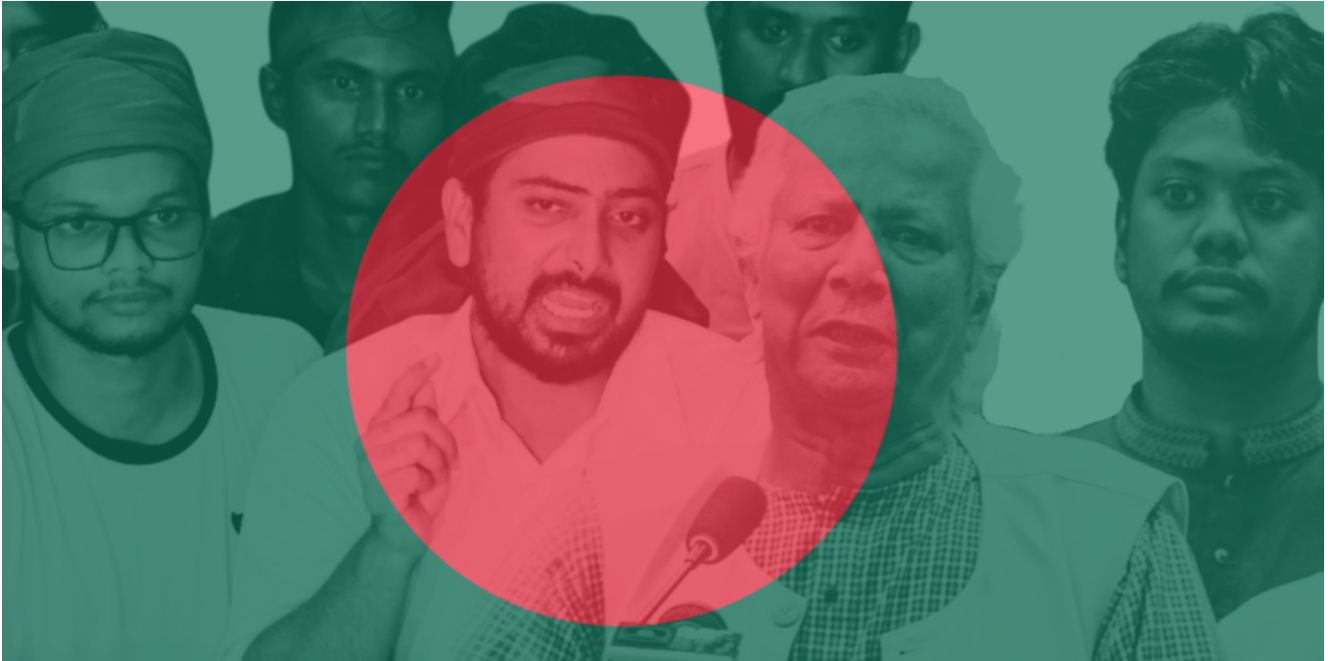


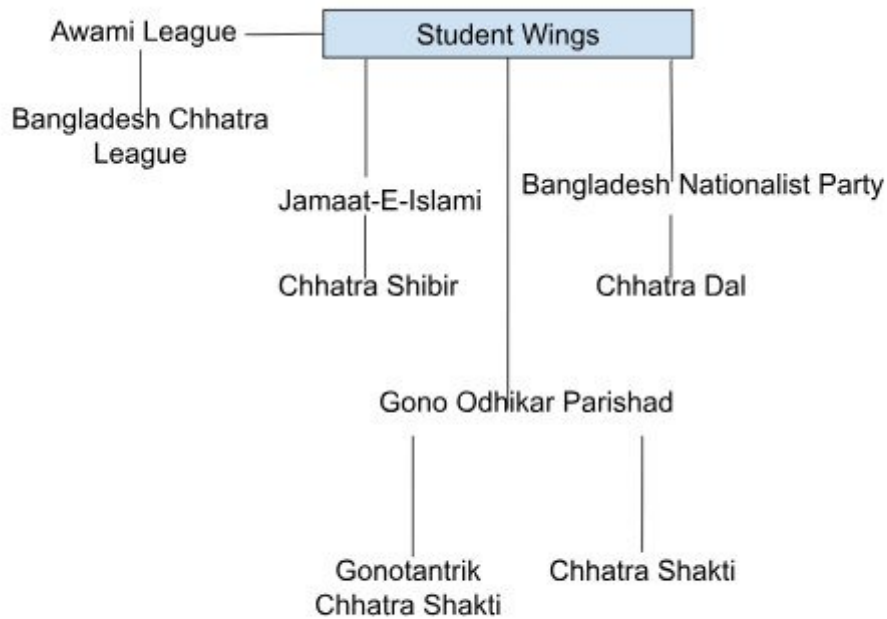
A New Social Contract in Bangladesh: Key Actors

written by Dr. Gaurav Saini | August 14, 2024



Bangladesh is at a critical juncture as recent protest movements shape its uncertain path forward. A sudden turn of events led to the deposition of Sheikh Hasina and her party, Awami League (AL), which had been governed for over fifteen years. Within weeks, college students successfully united various groups across the political spectrum, all disillusioned with the Hasina regime. This resulted in the forming of an interim government led by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus and supported by the military. Given the new set of actors involved, it is crucial to understand their interests, goals, and interactions in the socio-political arena to comprehend Dhaka's future trajectory and India's strategic options regarding partners and broader policy.

Student groups

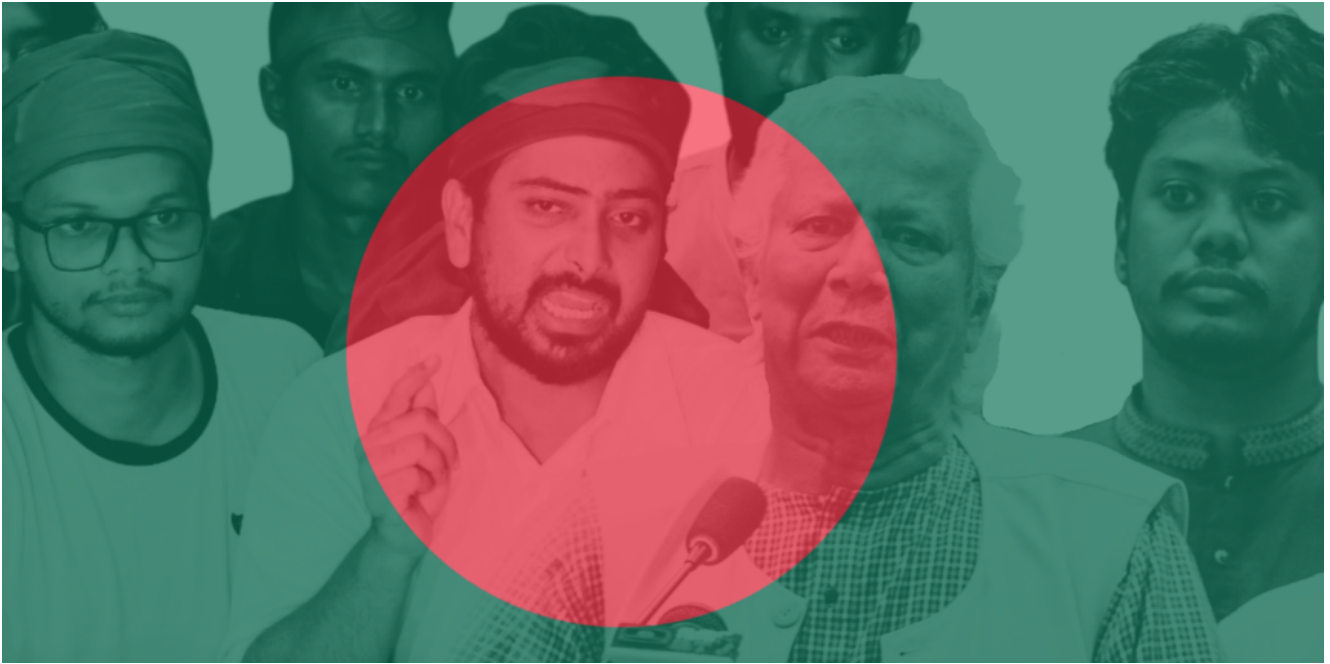


The Quota Reform Movement was primarily driven by a coalition of student groups known as the Students Against Discrimination. This coalition adopted a distributed co-leadership structure with twenty-three coordinators from public and private educational institutions. Many of these coordinators were [members](#) of the relatively new student group, Gonotantrik Chhatra Shakti (GCS), including prominent figures Nahid Islam and Asif Mahmud, who have since joined the interim government. The GCS was established to promote democracy and secularism and has continued to emphasize those aspects in recent protests. The organizational success of GCS is not surprising, as its leadership has a [history](#) of effectively organizing mass demonstrations, notably in 2018, against job quotas and pushing for road safety.

While the coordinators claimed that the Quota Reform Movement was entirely apolitical, it is notable that most of them had ties to political parties. Following the movement's success in 2018, they established a political party called Gono Odhikar Parishad (GOP), based on democratic and secular principles. Internal disagreements, however, led to the formation of various factions, including GCS and Chhatra Shakti (CS).

Interestingly, CS maintained close ties with pro-Islamist groups such as Jamaat-E-Islami (Jamaat), its student wing Chhatra Shibir, both of which have alleged links to Pakistan, and also the Chhatra Dal, the student wing of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the opposition party. Despite these affiliations, CS failed to gain significant control over the protests. Both right-wing student groups, such as the youth wing of Jamaat, and leftist student organizations affiliated with the Communist Party of Bangladesh participated in the protests. However, neither side has [succeeded](#) in steering the direction of the protests, with the GCS largely maintaining its dominance. Meanwhile, the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the student wing of the Awami League that supported the Hasina regime in suppressing protests, is now forced to operate underground, with its leaders facing public assaults.

Student groups have historically played a significant role in leading mass agitations in Bangladesh, often leading to short-lived periods of democracy followed by the emergence of autocratic, party-affiliated states. With the declining influence of leaders like Hasina and Khaleda Zia and their roles in shaping the interim government, there is a potential [shift](#) in this pattern. The rise of GCS and its success in mobilizing the masses suggest increased student participation in active politics that could be sustained. Notably, the Indian government is unpopular among student groups who believe Hasina had unwavering support from New Delhi. This sentiment was [echoed](#) by Nahid Islam, who urged India to reconsider its foreign policy while expressing a desire for “friendly ties with India,” offering hope for improved relations.



Interim government and military rule

After shifting its support to student groups, the Bangladeshi military, led by General Waker-Uz-Zaman, quickly took charge of state affairs, urging protesters to return home and maintain peace. It was followed by noticeable changes in the army leadership, with close associates of Hasina being replaced or arrested. Given Bangladesh's history of military involvement in politics, Zaman's decision to advocate for a civilian interim government was not wholly anticipated. The military's agreement to the student-proposed appointment of Yunus as chief caretaker further defied expectations. While military rule could have brought stability and public acceptance in the current uncertain political climate, [pressure](#) from student groups heavily influenced the decision to avoid military involvement. A possible explanation for Zaman's actions could be the precedents set by his predecessors where military rule was unpopular with the public. Alternatively, it could be suggested that his control over the army is still [weak](#), allowing students to take the lead.

The interim government formed under Yunus, supported by the military, primarily includes members from civil society and professional fields rather than traditional political leaders.

Efforts were made to ensure diverse representation, which various stakeholders, including the BNP, Jamaat, and student groups, have approved. This has led to the appointment of individuals like Adilur Rahman Khan and Saleh Uddin Ahmed to key positions, both of whom have close affiliations with the BNP. Including student leaders was an unanticipated move that has further strengthened the influence of student groups. Additionally, multiple intellectuals and rights activists, such as Nurjahan Begum, a former associate of the Grameen Bank, have been included. Interestingly, Khalid Hossain, who has ties with Hefazat-e-Islam (HeI), was also [added](#) to the government on the recommendation of the Islamist groups. The HeI is noted to have held anti-Modi sentiments and organized large protests against India's close ties with Bangladesh.

Understanding the opposition parties

If elections are announced within the constitutionally mandated three months, the BNP is the [only](#) party with the potential to perform well electorally, as recent protests have significantly weakened the AL. This potential was demonstrated when Khaleda Zia led a massive rally following her release, showing that the party still has a substantial base despite years of crackdowns. However, there are significant barriers that could hinder the BNP's resurgence. Its recent poor electoral performances and declining public support reflect these challenges. The party has boycotted most recent elections, alleging they were rigged under the Hasina regime, but even in the elections it participated in, it struggled to secure votes. Despite claims of rigging, the BNP's [performance](#) in the last election held under a neutral caretaker government was also poor, winning only about a quarter of the 300 parliamentary seats.

Several factors explain the declining significance of the BNP. First, many Bangladeshis perceive the party as lacking a coherent ideology. While the AL had maintained a nationalist ideology rooted in its role in the independence movement, the

BNP has been seen as a mix of disparate elements—leftists dissatisfied with AL's nationalism, rightists seeking an Islamist revival, opportunists, and Pakistan-era establishment figures marginalized after independence. This ideological malleability has led to the [perception](#) of the BNP as power-hungry, which is further supported by their intermittent association with Jamaat. As the BNP's influence waned, Jamaat became an important ally against the AL.

However, aligning with the extreme right has caused internal rifts over this association and the party's stance on secularism. It has also [distanced](#) the BNP from influential student groups, particularly the GCS, which emphasize secular ideals. Notably, the student wing of the BNP failed to dominate the narrative during the protests, and the party was forced to sponsor the leader chosen by the students for the interim government.

Additionally, the BNP expelled party members involved in violence against minorities, and leaders issued statements assuring non-discrimination against minorities. This reflects the various vulnerabilities and challenges the BNP faces in the current circumstances. The party's efforts to distance itself from anti-minority actions indicate an attempt to address internal conflicts and improve its public image. Still, these actions highlight the difficulties in reconciling its diverse ideological factions and maintaining cohesion amid changing political dynamics.

Meanwhile, the Jamaat faces its own challenges. Despite significant pressure and persecution from the Hasina regime, the large turnout at its first rally in over a decade suggests that its substantial cadre still exists. Although Jamaat's political fortunes have been limited, with poor electoral performance, its organizational capacity as a political unit remains noteworthy. After being banned from participating in elections in 2013, Jamaat formed a new political party called the Bangladesh Development Party (BDP), which was denied

registration by the Hasina regime. However, the BDP's activities and influence are likely to grow in the present circumstances.

Significant differences persist within Jamaat, especially concerning its role in the 1971 freedom struggle. Some members have sought to change the perception of Jamaat as being associated with Pakistani forces that committed war crimes during the conflict. However, senior leaders strongly denounced this stance and expelled the dissenting members. These expelled leaders formed their own political party, the Amar Bangladesh Party (ABP). Although ABP has also been denied registration, it has the [potential](#) to be a strong rival to the BDP in the arena of right-wing politics in Bangladesh.

Way forward

Bangladesh's history with transitional governments has often led to the rise of autocratic regimes, dampening hopes for long-term democratic change. Although the emergence of democratic and secular student groups offers some optimism, the current destabilized law and order situation and the return of old autocratic forces cast doubt on that hope. This complicates India's position as it must urgently build new relationships with the new actors. India's previous strong support for Hasina and poor relations with the BNP and the Jamaat may make this endeavor more challenging. So far, the Bangladeshi military and student movements are taking steps to prevent the scenario of unrepairable relations by emphasizing that India remains a friend. However, the complexity of the current political environment could rapidly alter such attitudes, leading to more difficulties for New Delhi in its neighborhood. It is crucial to understand the dynamic interests of these actors and their interactions as they shape the future trajectory of Dhaka and its relationship with the outside world.

