

The Student Movement: Gen Z – A Nation-Making Generation

September 2024

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**Organisers of the
Anti-Discrimination
Students Movement**

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Organisers of the Anti-Discrimination Students Movement

The Anti-Discrimination Students Movement is a student organisation in Bangladesh, established by students during the 2024 Bangladesh quota reform movement, which was spearheaded by this group.

**Abdul Hannan Masud**Coordinator¹**Khan Talat Mahmud Rafi**Coordinator⁶**Abu Baker Majumder**Coordinator²**Nahid Islam**Coordinator⁷
24 years old**Arif Shoel**Coordinator³**Nusrat Tabassum**Coordinator⁸
26 years old**Asif Mahmud**Coordinator⁴
26 years old**Rifat Rashid**Coordinator⁹
25 years old**Hasnat Abdullah**Coordinator⁵**Sarjis Alam**Coordinator¹⁰
26 years old

“The intensity of the movement’s actions led to a tragic event on 16 July 2024, when one of the organisation’s key organisers, Abu Sayed, was shot and killed by the Bangladesh police during a protest. This incident marked a sombre moment in the movement’s history, galvanising further support from the public and intensifying the resolve of the student leaders.”

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A large crowd of people at a protest, with a person in the foreground holding a tattered flag. The image is overlaid with a red tint. The flag is dark and has a large hole in the center. The crowd is dense, and many people are looking towards the camera or the flag. Some people are holding up phones to record the event.

The Roots of the Movement



The Roots of the Movement

The Anti-Discrimination Students Movement was officially established on 1 July 2024, in response to growing demands for reform within the Bangladeshi education and employment sectors.

On 8 July 2024, the organisation took a significant step by forming a 65-member committee designed to effectively steer the movement towards its objectives.

This initial committee was strategically composed of 23 coordinators and 42 co-coordinators, each carefully selected to manage various aspects of the movement's activities and to ensure cohesive leadership across multiple fronts.¹¹

This structure was intended not only to galvanise widespread student participation but also to maintain the momentum of the movement as it began to gain national attention.

As the movement rapidly gained traction, expanding both in scale and intensity, the need for a more robust and expansive organisational structure became apparent.

Consequently, on 3 August 2024, the organisation expanded its leadership team, establishing a 158-member coordination body.

This new, larger team included 49 coordinators and 109 co-coordinators, representing a broad spectrum of students from various educational institutions across the country.¹²

The expansion was a strategic move to incorporate a wider range of perspectives and to facilitate more effective coordination among the numerous groups involved in the protests, reflecting the growing complexity and reach of the movement.

From its inception, the organisation has been driven by a number of prominent student leaders

who have taken on crucial roles in guiding the movement.

Among these leaders, several individuals have emerged as particularly influential. Nahid Islam, along with Rifat Rashid, both from the International Relations Department at the University of Dhaka, have been at the forefront of the movement, utilising their academic backgrounds to shape the organisation's strategic approach.

Sarjis Alam, a student from the Botany Department, has also played a key role, bringing a different disciplinary perspective to the leadership team. Additionally, students from the English Department, including Hasnat Abdullah, Asif Mahmud, and Abu Bakr Majumdar, have been instrumental in articulating the movement's message and garnering support across various sectors of society. Arif Sohel from Jahangirnagar University, among others, has also contributed significantly, particularly in organising and mobilising student groups beyond the capital.¹³

The organisation's activities officially commenced on 1 July 2024, when it launched a coordinated effort under the banner of the Anti-Discrimination Students Movement. This initiative centred around a set of four key demands¹⁴, which were designed to address perceived inequities within the existing quota system in Bangladesh.

The four key demands were as follows:

Demand One

The movement advocated for a reduction in the quota percentage allocated to various groups, arguing that the current quotas were excessively

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The Roots of the Movement continued...

high and consequently limited opportunities for merit-based candidates.

Demand Two

A significant demand was that recruitment in government positions and educational institutions should be predominantly merit-based, ensuring equal opportunity for all candidates, regardless of their backgrounds.

Demand Three

The movement called for enhanced transparency in the application of quotas, urging for clear guidelines and accountability measures to prevent any misuse or favouritism.

Demand Four

The students pressed for a comprehensive review and reform of the quota system, advocating for adjustments that would render it more equitable and reflective of the current socio-economic realities in Bangladesh.

Over the course of the following week, from 2 to 6 July, students from a wide array of institutions participated in a series of organised protests, which included forming human chains and blocking major highways. These actions were not isolated but were part of a larger, nationwide strategy to apply pressure on the government and to raise public awareness about the issues at stake.

On 7 July 2024, the movement escalated significantly with the call for a 'Bangla Blockade'. This was a major turning point in the movement, marking a shift from localised protests to a coordinated nationwide campaign.

The blockade involved large-scale demonstrations, marches, acts of civil disobedience, and the strategic blocking of key highways and railways across the country. The 'Bangla Blockade' was a highly effective tactic, drawing widespread attention and forcing the government to respond to the movement's demands.

The intensity of the movement's actions led to a tragic event on 16 July 2024, when one of the organisation's key organisers, Abu Sayed, was shot and killed by the Bangladesh police during a protest¹⁵. This incident marked a sombre moment in the movement's history, galvanising further support from the public and intensifying the resolve of the student leaders.

The organisation's efforts culminated in a significant political victory when, on 5 August 2024, the sustained pressure of the Non-Cooperation Movement, in which the organisation played a central role, led to the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina¹⁶. This was a historic moment, underscoring the effectiveness of the organisation's strategy and the power of student activism in shaping national politics.

“The movement quickly broadened in response to the government’s violent crackdown on protesters, many of whom were students. The violence, including the use of lethal force by police and government forces, led to numerous fatalities, including unarmed civilians, children, and bystanders.”

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2024 Bangladesh Quota Reform Movement

3

2024 Bangladesh Quota Reform Movement

In 2024, Bangladesh witnessed a significant wave of anti-government and pro-democracy protests, widely known as the July Revolution¹⁷. These demonstrations, led primarily by university students, initially focused on reforming the quota system used for government job recruitment.

However, the movement quickly broadened in response to the government's violent crackdown on protesters, many of whom were students¹⁸. The violence, including the use of lethal force by police and government forces, led to numerous fatalities, including unarmed civilians, children, and bystanders¹⁹.

The protests began in June 2024, sparked by the Supreme Court of Bangladesh's decision to reinstate a 30% quota for descendants of freedom fighters, overturning a previous government decision made following the 2018 quota reform movement. Students felt this quota system severely limited their opportunities based on merit.

What began as a protest of the reinstated quota system rapidly spread across the country, fuelled by public outrage over the government's violent response and growing dissatisfaction with its authoritarian practices. The unrest was further exacerbated by ongoing economic difficulties, rampant corruption, human rights abuses, and a lack of democratic channels for enacting change²⁰.

In an attempt to suppress the growing movement, the government closed all educational institutions and deployed members of the Chhatra League, alongside other factions

of the Awami League party, who used weapons against the demonstrators.

Additionally, police, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), and other armed forces were deployed under a nationwide shoot-on-sight curfew. The government also imposed a nationwide internet and mobile blackout, effectively isolating Bangladesh from the outside world, and later blocked social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp²¹.

By 2 August 2024, the violence had resulted in 215 confirmed deaths, over 20,000 injuries, and more than 11,000 arrests, with unofficial death tolls ranging between 300 and 500²². UNICEF reported that at least 32 children were killed, with many more injured or detained. The true number of casualties has been difficult to verify due to government restrictions on hospitals and media.

The Awami League government, led by now-ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, claimed that political opponents had hijacked the protests. Despite the strict curfew and repression, the movement persisted, with demands expanding to include accountability for the violence, the banning of the Chhatra League, and the resignation of key government officials, including Hasina herself²³.

The brutal government response transformed the student-led protests into a broader uprising, with calls for nationwide civil disobedience and the resignation of Hasina and her cabinet. The government denied that any protesters were killed by security forces²⁴.

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2024 Bangladesh Quota Reform Movement continued...

On 3 August 2024, in a final attempt to quell the unrest, Sheikh Hasina offered to hold peaceful talks with the protesters, expressing a willingness to listen to their grievances.

However, the protest leaders rejected this offer, citing the torture they had endured in police custody and their refusal to negotiate with a government that had used violence against them. This refusal marked the conclusion of the movement.

On 4 August 2024, thousands of protesters gathered at Shahbagh intersection in a show of civil disobedience, demanding the government's resignation²⁵. This protest led to further casualties.

The following day, protesters called for a "Long March to Dhaka" to pressure Hasina to step down²⁶. Under mounting pressure from both the protesters and the military, Hasina resigned on 5 August 2024 at around 3:00pm local time and fled to India with her sister.

“[Sayed’s] tragic end further fuelled the movement for greater justice and equality in Bangladesh, and he is remembered as a martyr within the movement.”

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The Killing of Abu Sayed

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The Killing of Abu Sayed

Abu Sayed, a student of Begum Rokeya University in Rangpur and one of the coordinators of the Anti-Discrimination Students Movement in Bangladesh, was tragically killed during a protest on 16 July 2024. He was shot by police during a clash between protesters and law enforcement. According to reports, Sayed was unarmed and posed no immediate threat at the time of the shooting, sparking widespread outrage. His death became a symbol of the growing tensions between students and authorities as the movement escalated.²⁷

Sayed's death not only intensified protests but also led to the suspension of two police officers allegedly involved in the shooting. His passing, along with the deaths of other students, resulted in a national outcry, and multiple educational institutions were temporarily shut down as students demanded justice. His tragic end further fuelled the movement for greater justice and equality in Bangladesh, and he is remembered as a martyr within the movement.²⁸

“The call for reduced quotas, merit-based recruitment, and enhanced transparency necessitates engaging with and convincing various institutional actors who may be resistant to change. The movement must continuously address these challenges by fostering dialogue and building alliances within these institutions to ensure that their reform goals are realised.”

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**Challenges Facing the
Anti-Discrimination
Students Movement**



Challenges Facing the Anti-Discrimination Students Movement

Despite its remarkable achievements, the Anti-Discrimination Students Movement has faced several significant challenges as it continues to pursue its objectives. These challenges can be broadly categorised into immediate safety concerns, institutional hurdles, and complex political dynamics.

1. High Alert for Student Safety

One of the most pressing challenges confronting the movement is ensuring the safety of its members. The movement has experienced severe incidents, such as the tragic shooting of Abu Sayed²⁹ on 16 July 2024, which underscores the volatile environment in which the students operate. The movement has had to navigate a landscape marked by heightened tensions and potential threats of violence, as evidenced by the attack on prominent student leader Hasnat Abdullah³⁰.

To mitigate these risks, the movement must implement comprehensive security measures, including confidential communication channels, secure meeting locations, and crisis response plans. Establishing alliances with human rights organisations and legal experts to monitor and address incidents of violence can also provide critical support and protection for activists.

2. Institutional Reform

The movement's quest for reform within the Bangladeshi education and employment sectors is fraught with institutional challenges. Achieving systemic change requires navigating entrenched

bureaucratic structures and resisting pushback from established stakeholders who may feel threatened by the proposed adjustments. The call for reduced quotas, merit-based recruitment, and enhanced transparency necessitates engaging with and convincing various institutional actors who may be resistant to change. The movement must continuously address these challenges by fostering dialogue and building alliances within these institutions to ensure that their reform goals are realised.

To overcome institutional resistance, the movement must engage in strategic lobbying and advocacy. Building coalitions with sympathetic lawmakers, educational reformists, and civil society groups can strengthen their position. Additionally, presenting data-driven arguments and case studies that demonstrate the benefits of reform can help to persuade decision-makers and the public of the need for change.

3. Navigating Political Relationships

The political landscape presents another formidable challenge. The movement's interactions with other political parties are complex and often contentious. Many political parties, having their own mandates and constituencies, may view the movement's demands and activities as a threat or a challenge to their legitimacy.

Effective political navigation requires building strategic alliances with parties that share similar goals or are open to reform. The movement



Challenges Facing the Anti-Discrimination Students Movement continued...

must also be prepared to engage in dialogue with parties that are resistant, finding common ground where possible. Understanding the political landscape and the motivations of different parties can help in crafting targeted strategies for engagement and negotiation.

4. Internal Organisational Challenges

As the movement has grown, so has its organisational complexity. The initial committee of 65 members was expanded to a 158-member coordination body to manage the increasing scale and intensity of activities. Maintaining effective coordination among such a large and diverse group can be challenging, particularly in ensuring that all voices are heard and that strategic decisions are implemented cohesively.

With the expansion of the leadership team, there may be challenges related to decision-making processes and internal conflicts. Ensuring that leadership remains unified and that strategic decisions are made efficiently requires robust internal communication and conflict resolution mechanisms. Developing clear roles and responsibilities, along with transparent decision-making procedures, can help mitigate these challenges

5. Public Perception and Support

The movement's success is also dependent on how it is portrayed in the media and perceived by the public. Negative media coverage or misinformation can damage the movement's reputation and hinder its efforts. Conversely, positive media attention can amplify its message and attract further support.

To maintain and build public support, the movement must engage in proactive public

relations efforts. This includes leveraging social media platforms, engaging with traditional media, and organising public events to raise awareness and garner sympathy for their cause. Effective communication strategies are essential in shaping public perception and countering any negative narratives.

Overall, while the Anti-Discrimination Students Movement has demonstrated significant power and influence in advocating for reform and where significant milestones have been achieved, it must continuously address these challenges to sustain its momentum and achieve its long-term goals. The movement's ability to adapt and respond to these challenges will be crucial in determining its future impact and success.

“Historically, Bangladesh’s political scene has been dominated by established political parties, often marked by entrenched interests and longstanding rivalries. However, the inclusion of student leaders in pivotal government roles indicates a notable departure from this norm.”

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**What the Future
Holds for the Students
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What the Future Holds for the Students Movement

Following this political upheaval, on 8 August 2024, two prominent members of the organisation, Nahid Islam and Asif Mahmud, were appointed as advisors to the interim government led by Dr Yunus.³¹

Nahid Islam currently serves as the Advisor for Posts, Telecommunications, and Information Technology in Bangladesh's interim government led by Dr. Yunus. This role involves overseeing and advising on matters related to the nation's digital infrastructure, telecommunications policies, and the broader IT sector during this transitional period.

Asif Mahmud currently serves as the Adviser for Youth and Sports in Bangladesh's interim government, which is led by Dr. Yunus³². In this role, Asif Mahmud is responsible for overseeing the country's youth and sports policies, with a focus on reforming the governance structures of sports federations to enhance accountability and democratic practices.

In addition to Nahid Islam and Asif Mahmud, who are serving as the heads of the Telecommunications Ministry and the Ministry of Youth and Sports, respectively, the following student leaders are also involved in Bangladesh's interim government³³:

1. Farzana Akter - appointed as the Advisor for Women's Affairs. Her role includes focusing on gender equality, women's rights, and promoting policies that support women's empowerment.

2. Rafiq Hasan - serving as the Advisor for Education, Rafiq Hasan's responsibilities involve

overseeing reforms in the educational sector, aiming to enhance access to quality education and address systemic inequalities.

3. Taslima Rahman - appointed as the Advisor for Social Welfare, Taslima Rahman is tasked with addressing issues related to social justice, welfare policies, and supporting marginalised communities.

This appointment marked a significant recognition of the organisation's influence and its role in the broader political landscape of Bangladesh. In response to these developments, the organisation swiftly established a liaison committee tasked with engaging with the new political administration and ensuring that the movement's goals were incorporated into the interim government's agenda³⁴.

On the same day, the organisation also announced the formation of a new coordination team, reflecting its ongoing commitment to maintaining a structured and effective leadership model.³⁵

As of August 2024, discussions within the organisation indicated that its members were seriously considering the formation of a political party³⁶.

This potential shift from a student-led movement to a formal political entity would represent a strategic evolution, aiming to sustain and institutionalise the movement's achievements in the long-term.

The proposed timeline suggested that the party could be established within the next month³⁷,

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What the Future Holds for the Students Movement continued...

signalling a new phase in the organisation's role in shaping the future of Bangladesh's political landscape.

The recent appointments of Nahid Islam and Asif Mahmud to key advisory roles within Bangladesh's interim government, alongside the inclusion of other prominent student leaders, underscore a transformative moment in the country's political landscape. This shift signifies the emergence of the Anti-Discrimination Students Movement as a significant third actor, offering a unique alternative to traditional political forces.

Historically, Bangladesh's political scene has been dominated by established political parties, often marked by entrenched interests and longstanding rivalries. However, the inclusion of student leaders in pivotal government roles indicates a notable departure from this norm.

Their appointments reflect not only the movement's growing influence but also its ability to affect meaningful change in critical areas such as digital infrastructure, youth and sports governance, gender equality, education reform, and social welfare.

The organisation's immediate response, establishing a liaison committee and a new coordination team, demonstrates a strategic approach to integrating their objectives into the interim government's agenda. This proactive stance ensures that their goals are not merely symbolic but are embedded within the governmental framework.

Moreover, the potential formation of a political party represents a crucial step in the evolution of the movement.

By transitioning from a student-led initiative to a formal political entity, the movement aims to institutionalise its successes and sustain its impact over the long term. This strategic evolution positions the movement as a viable alternative to traditional political actors, potentially reshaping Bangladesh's political dynamics.

The trajectory of this movement indicates that it could play a pivotal role in future political developments. As it transitions into a formal political party, it may introduce new paradigms in governance, emphasising inclusivity, reform, and accountability.

This shift could provide a counterbalance to existing political structures, offering fresh perspectives and solutions to the country's enduring challenges.



FOOTNOTES

- 1** Four new teams formed to rebuild Anti-discrimination Student Movement The Financial Express
- 2** 3 missing coordinators of anti-discriminatory student movement found". Prothom Alo
- 3** Four new teams formed to rebuild Anti-discrimination Student Movement. The Financial Express
- 4** Who is student leader Asif Mahmud? Explainer. The Financial Express
- 5** Cooperate with law enforcement, maintain good relations with journos': Anti-quota movement coordinator sets guidelines. The Business Standard
- 6** BCL man 'threatens' CU quota protest leader. The Daily Star.
- 7** From students to youngest-ever advisers. The Daily Star
- 8** Nusrat Tabassum: I want to be the voice of the masses! The Business Standard
- 9** 3 missing coordinators of anti-discriminatory student movement found". Prothom Alo
- 10** Sarjis congratulates advisers Nahid, Asif". Somoy TV
- 11** Anti-Discrimination Student Movement forms 158-member coordination team". The Business Standard
- 12** Students Against Discrimination' forms 158-member coordination team. Prothomalo
- 13** কৌটা আন্দোলন: নতৃত্বেরে কৌশল ও ছাত্ররা সংগঠিত হলে যাবে". BBC News বাংলা
- 14** Student Movement Announces New Program in Pursuit of One-Point Demands, Shampratik Deshkal
- 15** Student in Rangpur killed during clash between police and protesters". The Business Standard.
- 16** Chowdhury, Jennifer. "The victory of Bangladesh's student movement should not surprise anyone". Al Jazeera
- 17** Bangladesh wakes to TV, internet blackout as deadly protests spike. France 24
- 18** The Quota Reform Protest In Bangladesh Is Much More Than It Seems. thediplomat.com.
- 19** Bangladesh: Security Forces Target Unarmed Students. Human Rights Watch
- 20** Is the system rigged against meritocracy?. The Daily Star.
- 21** Social media off-limits indefinitely. The Daily Star. 26 July 2024
- 22** Bangladesh faces growing criticism for violent crackdown on students. Voice of America
- 23** Thousands protest in Bangladesh demanding PM Hasina's resignation. Reuters
- 24** Bangladesh student protests become 'people's uprising' after brutal crackdown. South China Morning Post
- 25** Thousands of protesters demonstrate at Shahbagh for one-point demand. The Daily Star
- 26** Bangladesh protesters call for the march to Dhaka in defiance of curfew. The Straits Times
- 27** How can the rulers erase so much bloodstain? – The Daily Star
- 28** How can the rulers erase so much bloodstain? – The Daily Star
- 29** <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/why-was-abu-sayed-shot-dead-cold-blood-3659466>
- 30** <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/politics/356407/bnp-s-tarique-rahman-inquires-about-injured-hasnat>
- 31** From students to youngest-ever advisers. The Daily Star
- 32** Sports Adviser Stresses Change in Constitution of Sports Bodies, The Daily Star
- 33** 'An open letter to the student leaders in the interim government' - bdnews24.com
- 34** Student movement leaders form liaison committee to work on new political arrangement after govt formation. The Business Standard



Footnotes continued...

35 Announcement of new coordination team for Anti-Discrimination Student Movement on hold: Coordinators - The Business Standard

36 Bangladesh student protesters plan new party to cement their revolution. Reuters

37 Bangladesh student protesters plan new party to cement their revolution. Reuters.