

## Bangladesh July 2024 Movement and After: A Memoir

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### The humble beginning

They were there, a few of them, holding placards and posters, demanding that the quota system be revised. What triggered this was a High Court ruling in June 2024, which stated that thirty percent of all government jobs ought to be preserved for the descendants of the freedom fighters who had fought during the nation's liberation war in 1971. The trouble was that the government itself had doled out freedom fighter certificates quite generously, even to those who had no direct relation to the war of independence. More importantly, the putative steady growth in the nation's economy in the past two decades did not create as many jobs as had been anticipated, forcing the nation's educated youth to remain jobless years after their graduation. So, students concerned about their future decided to stage a protest, demanding that the High Court decision be reversed.

When it began, it was a small assemblage. Around twenty odd people stood close to Shahbag in central Dhaka, chanting occasional slogans. Initially, news outlets paid scant attention to this gathering, not just because the crowd size was modest but also because they did not want to draw the ire of Sheikh Hasina's government which treated any opposition against its policies as a hostile act to be suppressed violently through intimidation and often through torture as well. Journalists' lack of interest in the protest began to change when the number of protesters swelled in July 2024. As the regime's attitude became more and more antagonistic towards the protesters, general students' sympathy for the latter increased.

Nothing grows out of thin air. This quota reform movement too had its roots in the past grievances. In December 2008, when Bangladesh Awami League and its allied political parties won the national election by a landslide, people accused foreign governments of collusion and interference. Despite such allegations, the new Awami League term began with optimism. People expected that they would carry out large scale reforms and reduce corruption. Within three months of the establishment of the government, a mutiny broke out inside the

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Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) compound at Dhanmondi, resulting in the massacre of fifty-six army officers and dozens of ordinary citizens. This incident, which is often blamed on the then ruling party and its international patrons, ushered in years of unrest and draconian measures.

The government initially blamed the “Islamists” and “extremists” for the massacre and cracked down on those who it saw as a threat. How such rhetorical and political gestures fractured the country can be understood by looking into the differential direction that Shahbag and Shapla Chattar protests took. Yet, the government formed by Awami League and its allied parties was able to harness the widespread discontent because of the supposed economic windfall Bangladesh had experienced between 2009 and 2018. When unprecedented corruption and (illicit) capital flight and money laundering began to empty out the nation’s coffers and the post-Covid-19 reality stymied many of the economic initiatives taken by both public institutions and private individuals, the already existing discontent against the government began to congeal into resentment and defiance. The years since Covid-19 were marked by increased dissidence, not just from the opposition parties whose prominent leaders were either imprisoned or silenced but also from the ordinary people and small business-holders who could hardly keep their heads above water.

The Quota Movement thus redirected some of the concerns that had existed from before, particularly among the nation’s urban youth that was growing increasingly frustrated about its future. In July, the number of people joining the movement increased from twenties to hundreds. One distinctive feature of the movement was that many of the protesters were women. In fact, in cases, women did not only take part in the protests, they led them.

As the movement kept gathering momentum, some YouTubers voiced their support for the protesters. Other social media outlets, too, began to fill up with posts and news about the students standing up against the Hasina regime. Rigged elections, abductions, enforced disappearances, suppression, corruption, dwindling national reserve, and the transfer of an enormous sum of money to foreign bank accounts began to be discussed more openly on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter than had happened before. Yet, what turned the small urban protest into a national firestorm was the government’s heavy-handed response to the ‘quota reform’ protesters. On July 15, helmet-wearing goons of the ruling party’s student wing, Chatra League, attacked students with sticks, clubs, and iron rods. This attack had a visceral effect on the national psyche, turning a non-violent student movement into a national uprising. It eventually contributed to the ousting of the Hasina government.

My memory of July 2024 constantly takes me back to the image of a bespectacled female student, whose panic-stricken face is covered in blood oozing out from her head. I can't truly explain the lasting impression this photo had on me when I saw it for the first time. I knew I was going to be part of any movement that upheld dignity and justice but this female student's blood-soaked, panic-stricken face convinced me that time had come to shake off my own fears and take to the streets. But I wanted to do it my way. I did not want to be on the streets with my peers from the academic community. I rather wanted to be outside as an ordinary citizen not protected by class power and occupational privilege.

### **The eruption**

After 15 July 2024, the student protests spread in other campuses and cities. When students had protested demanding road safety in Dhaka in 2018, I stood with them, holding their hands to form a human chain that ran from one corner of Dhaka's Sat Gambuj Masjid (Seven-domed Masjid) Road to another. I watched, from my then office located on Road 4/A in Dhanmondi, how helmet-wearing goons unleashed themselves on the protesting students, injuring many of them. I also saw, first hand, how, when Awami League supporters attacked and bloodied a uniform wearing student from Dhaka City College, other students erupted in anger and attacked the attackers back. Invested in their cause, I went to Dhaka City College to see for myself what indeed was happening around the area. Being an educator, I could not ignore students' grievances against oppression and intimidation. As I had done on other occasions, I sneaked out of my house without informing anyone where I was heading and walked towards the Science Lab area where Dhaka City College is located.

The stretch from Star Kabab to Dhaka City College was full of broken bricks and fallen leaves. Near Popular Hospital, identity card-wearing students stopped me, asking me where I was heading. I crossed over to the other side of the road and moved closer to the overbridge between Science Lab and Elephant Road. I heard huge roars coming from the darkened road in front of Dhaka College. Stretching in front of me was a sea of people, protesters on the one side and police and supporters of the ruling party on the other – pitted against each other. They were throwing projectiles at one another. I climbed up the stairs of the foot-over-bridge to have a clearer view of the events unfolding near Dhaka College. Suddenly I heard several metallic sounds. Those of us who had stationed ourselves on the foot-over-bridge started scurrying towards the stairs, jostling to get down as quickly as we could. When I went back home hours later, I found

out from online news portals that two had been killed at Science Lab on that afternoon, one beaten and the other shot to death.

As the night progressed, I found out that more people had been shot and killed around the country that day and that protesting students had chased away the ruling party (Awami League) supporters from the residential halls of the major universities. The Internet was flooded with images and videos of students taking over hall rooms previously (illegally) occupied by members of Awami League's student wing. Then other videos and images began to surface, mostly of police brutality. Among them was one that later became a symbol of the whole movement. Abu Sayed, a student of Begum Rokeya University in Rangpur, slowly succumbed to death in public after being shot multiple times by the police. The viral video of Abu Sayed's killing had a chilling effect on ordinary people, many of whom had no interest in party politics. I watched the video just once and such was its effect that I could not muster enough mental strength to go back to it again.

The next day, after talking to some of my journalist friends who, like me, were sympathetic to the movement, I decided to go to the University of Dhaka campus with them to express our solidarity with the students. I hired a rickshaw to go to the university's Raju Vashkorjo (Raju Memorial Sculpture), where we were supposed to meet. After crossing Nilkhet, at the entrance to the university campus, I saw hundreds of policemen in their riot gears. With their armoured vans, they had created a blockade to restrict entry into and exit from the campus. I was not allowed to go in, not even on foot. As I turned my back and started walking to my rickshaw, I suddenly heard deafening explosions, continuously going off in succession. I noticed a scamper and heard the sound of heavy boots behind me. I quickly got on the rickshaw and asked the driver to pull towards Katabon Road so we could take a shortcut to Dhanmondi. On my way to that area, I saw a girl, most probably a student of the university, shivering and crying hysterically as her mother held her tightly. She held a suitcase, the size of carry-on luggage, in her hand. Her contorted face and hysteric crying gave me the impression that something very bad had happened. Half-an-hour later, when I met my friends in a popular café at Dhanmondi 27, I could sense, from their reluctance to go back to DU, that the events had taken an unexpected turn. Still, sitting in that café, I hoped that my friends would agree to accompany me to Raju Vashkorjo, where we were supposed to stand. In that festive atmosphere, surrounded by people who were chatting and enjoying their tea, I could not foresee that many of them would soon explode in grief and rage.

When I returned home that night, I learned from social media posts that the security forces that had been deployed at DU attacked the ordinary students.

The sources of the loud explosions that I had heard were sound-grenades and gunshots. Several days later, my brother showed me grisly images from his phone, images that still haunt me. There were several bodies, casually heaped on one another in a toilet as if they were animal corpses. These bodies bore marks of torture and extreme violence. Those photos were sent to him by the spouse of one of his friends, someone who was a faculty member of that university.

When the news of the attacks on public university students spread across the country, areas that had been previously untouched by the protests up until then exploded. Abu Sayed's death had already plunged the nation into a deep crisis. Curfews and indiscriminate attacks on students and civilians further shook the conscience of ordinary citizens. The 18<sup>th</sup> of July 2024 marked the turning point in the progression of the July movement, not just because private university students and low-income citizens joined it and tipped the scale of power towards the protesters but also because this day was the beginning of the indiscriminate, large-scale massacre of young people in the streets.

As protests spread around Dhaka, government forces shot not just from the ground but also from helicopters and rooftops, deliberately targeting and killing civilians. I heard from one of my ex-students, a journalist who works for a leading daily, that many of the protesters killed that day had been shot in the head, execution style.

As the news of the shooting of BRAC University, East West University, and Cambrian College students spread in the evening, things began to spiral into chaos around the country. In reality, the processions that took over the streets of Rampura, Banasree, and Badda areas had comprised of people from all walks of life, i.e. students, garment workers, rickshaw-pullers, homeless unemployed people, and small business owners. This means that, barring a few privileged souls cut off from the rest of the country, July protests drew support from large swaths of citizens belonging to different classes and communities. It came as no surprise that similar protests broke out almost everywhere, but none more severe than the ones that took place in Uttara and Jatrabari, both places experiencing intense clashes and high civilian casualties.

At night, the Dhanmondi area where I live went dark. As the police, Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), and Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) men took over the streets and alleys, the ever-present Dhanmondi crowd disappeared from sight. The fruit-seller who has a stall at the entrance of our alley folded his business, leaving some of his fruit cases in our house and the rest in the apartment building next door. As I was browsing through the online news portals that had been telecasting the news live, I suddenly realised that I could not watch what I was watching anymore. We were suddenly cut off from our friends and families.

As I sat in my room with my phone in hand, I realized that our nation had been plunged in acute darkness, a darkness made eerier by the restive movement of armoured vehicles and helicopters. In the eerie silence of the night, we heard the voices flung from megaphones, threatening people to stay indoors. Still, the terrifying news of a four-year old, shot dead at her balcony on the fourth floor of an apartment building in Uttara, reached us. I told my wife and daughter to stay away from the windows.

### **The beginning of the end**

For three nights of curfews and Internet blackouts, I twisted and turned in bed, worrying about the people I knew and cared about. One of the things that I learned was how to use VPN. It was not very effective but it still allowed us to keep tabs on the events on the ground. YouTube, I found out, was full of reels and images. I saw video footage of helicopters shooting randomly from above. I also read about the entrapped homeless children and women, some of whom were hit by stray bullets. I also saw the agile hands of Mir Mugdho (shot dead on July 18, 2024), reaching out for water. The news of his death kept circulating in our online circle. We were not just saddened and appalled; we were furious.

Born as we were after 1971, our generation had not seen a moment more violent and fractious than the ones that unfolded before our eyes. Nothing that we had seen or experienced before could be compared to July.

Hiding behind the shutter of a bank, choked by teargas, I had watched protesters clashing with armed forces near Dainik Bangla crossing during General Ershad's last few days in 1990. I remember me and a friend carrying a man, whose back had been riddled with rubber-bullet wounds, to a doctor. Yet, the level of cruelty that I witnessed in July 2024 plunged me into acute trauma, making me understand that the level of cruelty that I saw during that time period veered towards madness and that I would require therapy and care to recover from my psychological injury.

When the Internet came back temporarily, the first person I called was Nasir, a former student of mine who was at Dhaka Medical College at that time. I was worried about his safety because he had been given the responsibility of covering the news of the dead and the injured. When I asked him how he was faring, he broke down in tears, saying he had never seen so many bullet-ridden bodies in his life. It was his crumbled voice that gave me the first hints of the massacres that had taken place in Bangladesh between the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> of July 2024. Later, I came to learn that more than two hundred people had been killed in those three days.

Since the mainstream media did not cover the July movement properly, we had to rely on social media for information. It was a hobgoblin of real footage captured by the phone camera, truncated information gathered from particular groups, and unverified rumors circling in the virtual space. Yet, in the end, what we gathered from our online portals and WhatsApp messages proved more reliable than what the corporate newspapers printed and privately-owned (but government-linked) TV channels aired.

The days after July 21 saw more violence on the streets. The whole country turned into a war zone and ordinary people were swept into the acutely polarised political storm. Although it was risky to venture out, I took a stroll around my area nevertheless, mostly in the afternoons. There was a curfew outside and it was difficult to go very far, particularly from where I was at that moment. A few hundred meters from my house was the ruling party headquarters, which, at that time, was the hub of intense political organisation and hence heavily guarded as well. Protesters, during those days of intense conflict, often tried to move towards it because occupying it would be seen as a symbolic victory. This area was under intense pressure from protesters coming from both City College and Mohammadpur/Basila areas.

One afternoon, as I was walking down the road, I had to stop close to a furniture store located right across the street where the Awami League office was located. I heard roars in the distance and saw BDR lorries speeding through the main road. Then I saw Awami League supporters, armed with clubs and handguns, forming a column to chase out a protest rally that was approaching from Dhanmondi 27. The protesters came dangerously close to the office but had to disperse when a barrage of bullets and sound grenades were fired at them. I saw Chhatra League cadres, with clubs and bamboo sticks in hand, chasing down the disbanded protesters.

One of these protester-chasing cadres – a middle-aged woman – came and sat down on the pavement. She was panting heavily. Her male companions were sitting there too. “I have beaten them as hard as I could, as fiercely as I could,” she told them. “They’re gone now.” I could sense that what she was saying was true. But I also understood that she was visibly shaken by her experience. I was baffled seeing a woman doing what she was doing. But I also could sense that, much like her companions, she too was probably brought in from shantytowns located at Dhaka’s Hajaribag and Jhauchar areas where many footwear and garment workers lived. A lot of them lost their jobs in the economic turmoil during the last two years of the Hasina era. Unable to rely entirely on party cadres and law enforcement agencies to quell the protest, the ruling party

used money to lure in not just male goons but also struggling working-class women.

Although Awami League relied on these low-income people vie for dominance in the street, nationally the driving force behind the protests, alongside students, were also workers and low-income wage earners. If one looks closely into the list of July martyrs, one will be surprised to discover that a disproportionate number of the people killed by government forces were workers, drivers, shopkeepers, and small-business employees. It was clear that the protests were becoming more intense and deadlier. The videos that reached us were surreal. It seemed as though what was unfolding in front of our very eyes was grotesque content of horror movies.

The next few days were marked by intense political activities around the country. Since students were so heavily invested in the movement, their teachers began to publicly voice their discontent against the ruling government for killing and arresting so many students. North South University teachers organized a protest on the 31<sup>st</sup> of July. Our university, IUB, followed suit a day later. With a placard in my hand, I stood in front of gate number 4, forming a human chain with the rest of my colleagues.

### **The regime fell**

Despite the use of heavy weapons and deadly force on the ground, the movement continued to gain strength. It was also beginning to become clear that foreign embassies had begun to put pressure on the ruling party to cut down on its use of deadly force upon the protesters. The student organisers called a march towards the Shahid Minar on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August. I went there with Nasir. When we reached close to Dhaka University's Surja Sen Hall, we had to get down from our rickshaw. Hundreds of thousands of people had already gathered, making movement with a rickshaw impossible. As we walked towards the Shahid Minar, we saw men and women wearing Bangladesh's flag, chanting slogans demanding the resignation of the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. When we had finally managed to reach the foothills of Shahid Minar—we had to climb up the six-foot-tall corner walls to do so—we saw something that not one of us belonging to the post-1971 generation had seen. It was a massive gathering and people from all walks of life joined it.

Hundreds of rickshaw pullers had gathered at a corner. Standing on the passenger seat of their rickshaw, they were chanting slogans. I saw a man climbing up a thirty-foot-tall electric pole to hoist the Bangladeshi flag there. There were marchers with *dhhol*, a local drum, and other instruments. As they chanted 'chi-chi-chi Hasina' (shame-shame-shame Hasina), their instruments joined in

synchrony. We walked out of that place, my head abuzz with the thought that this might be the end of it all. Little did I know that I had more to see, more to experience.

The 4<sup>th</sup> of August 2024 turned out to be the most violent of all the days we had passed since the 15<sup>th</sup> of July 2024. I woke up with the sound of something breaking. I jumped out of my bed and asked my wife and daughter to stay inside our bedroom because it was better protected than the other rooms of our apartment. When I looked outside, I saw a full-fledged war. Myriads of protesters, with bricks, bamboo sticks, and projectiles in their hands, were moving towards Dhanmondi 3/A, where the ruling party's office was located. There were frequent bangs of gunshots, sound grenades, and teargas shells. I rushed downstairs to the second floor where my father-in-law had been alone in his apartment. I had to lower my head and literally bend myself to the ground to avoid being hit by the bullets that were being shot randomly. Sitting by my eighty-year-old father-in-law, I watched the events on the ground from a close distance.

This clash that began in the morning continued until the afternoon. Many of the protesters were school-going teenagers. I also noticed a reinforcement that came in from the madrasas located further inside Jigatala. There were several madrasas and orphanages in Hajaribag and Jigatala post office areas. These kids, most of whom in their early teens, had probably come from those institutions. Much later, in the evening, I heard from my neighbors that two students, both teenagers, were killed in that clash. Both, I was told, were shot, one in the chest and the other in the head.

When the clashes were going on, I phoned my younger brother to tell him to stay indoors. I called over and over again but could not reach him. An hour later, he phoned me back, saying that he was out on the streets. He would try to go back home soon. My heart stopped beating for a moment. He has five daughters, not one yet reaching adulthood. I couldn't bring myself to think what my nieces would feel if anything bad were to happen to him.

Two days later, when I visited him in person, he said that he and his two best friends had gone out to join a protest in Shahbag. Suddenly, Arman, who had been a friend since his infancy, began to lose his balance. "Faruq, I feel I've been hit," he told my brother, as he fell down on the road. My brother's other friend was bleeding from his face. He was hit right under his eyes by a rubber bullet. When I met him a week later, I noticed that his face was riddled with tiny little wounds that made his face resemble a leopard's. One shrapnel went so deep that doctors here could not pull it out. He had to go abroad to save his eyes.

The photo that my brother showed me had Arman lying in a hospital bed. Right above his pelvic bone, in the soft part of his belly, was a perfectly

round dark mark, the size of a marble. Clear and surgical, the wound looked as though it had been caused by a sniper bullet. Arman was in the hospital for months. It took him six months to be able to walk straight. It is estimated that close to a hundred people died on 4 August 2024 alone, most from bullet wounds. It was also reported that more than a dozen policemen had died in the clashes. This was the first time so many law-and-order men had been killed by the wrath of protesters. In the evening, through our WhatsApp groups and Facebook messages, we got to know that people from all around the country were asked to march to the capital city.

The next day, the 5<sup>th</sup> of August, was the “March to Dhaka” day. People from around the country began to walk to the Prime Minister’s residence. The indiscriminate shootings and killings of the preceding days had created an atmosphere of entrenched animosity and hatred. As protesters began to move, millions marching towards the capital, some of the forces involved with the party in power shot at them, killing many. Unaware of the events on the ground, I got out to celebrate when the news of Sheikh Hasina’s fall and flight reached me. I was close to Dhanmondi 27 when I called Nasir to find out his whereabouts. Instead of being jubilant, he was sobbing. “I’m at the morgue, sir. There are more dead bodies today, more than what it was yesterday. All shot, shot mostly in the head.”

### **The day after victory**

On my way back, I saw the Awami League office at Dhanmondi 3/A burning. I returned home quickly, for I was fearful that chaos might ensue. I also wanted to stay home and be with my family. As I walked back, I saw millions of people on the street, all of them celebrating the fall of the regime. It looked like a carnival. The gathering was so large that its tail end was not visible even after an hour. The celebrations on the streets, I later found out, were peaceful and jubilant everywhere. There were several retributive acts that took place that night, some too disturbing to recount here.

Such eruptions of retributive violence were not entirely unexpected. Weeks of indiscriminate shooting and killing, it needs to be borne in mind, had made these violent reactions inevitable. Still, after Hasina’s ousting, if the opposition political leadership had wanted to, they could have saved at least some lives. Later, after looking into newspaper reports, I came to understand that the number of people killed on and after August 5 was astonishingly high. It saddened me that, instead of being patient, some people decided to take up the burden of justice upon their shoulders. A bad taste lingered in my mouth. Still, I

was happy. There were happiness and positive feelings in the air and I soaked up those same feelings as I watched people celebrate the fall of the regime.

I spent the first night with excitement and optimism, thinking that we would get to see the changes that we were waiting for. The economy, I hoped, would bounce back, creating opportunities for the youth who had fought so hard to forge a better future for themselves. The lack of security that hounded ordinary Bangladeshis in the preceding months and years, I hoped, would be remedied. Expressing one's views in public would not be as dangerous as it had been during Hasina's time. I hoped that people would not be subjected to extrajudicial killing and abduction. When the news of widespread destruction and looting reached us, we became frightened. In the absence of any force to protect us, how would we save ourselves from robbers and looters? We stayed awake all night, keeping our eyes on the surrounding buildings. I kept moving about, looking through the windows and checking the alley in front. I went to bed only after I had heard the Fazr azan (the call to Fazr prayer).

We spent the next few months after August 5<sup>th</sup> in extreme insecurity. Dhanmondi, at night, turned into an easy target of dacoits and vandalizers. We saw videos of young men with cleavers and knives in hand, breaking into people's houses. There were also reports of rape and assault. The clips of some of these incidents were circulating on Facebook and YouTube, plunging us into further insecurity. At night, instead of sleeping, we took to guarding our area. In some of the adjacent buildings, committees were formed to protect the apartments from dacoits. In the walled government quarters in front of our house, I saw men and women, with batons and bamboo sticks in hand, guarding their premises. It was only in the morning that they stopped doing what they were doing.

As I am writing this memoir, almost sixteen months have passed since July 2024. My memories, like autumn leaves, have started peeling away from their roots and stems. But every time I think of that month, I am overcome by conflicting emotions. I feel extremely proud that I was a part of something much bigger than myself. I also feel distraught. Not one of the major demands has been met yet, nor one major promise has been fulfilled. No perpetrator of mass atrocity has faced justice for their crimes in a real sense. Women, who once led the movement, have been subjected to frequent jest and ridicule. Public harassment and intimidation of women have increased at an alarming rate. People who played no part in the movement and held important administrative and academic positions in the previous government, are holding even more important positions in the present (interim) government too. And bureaucrats, who have been the most trusted allies of the Hasina administration, are also the most

trusted allies of the present administration. But the thing that hurt me the most was that no major step was taken to reform the nation's ailing education sector.

In post-August 5, 2024 Bangladesh, when I hear a politician speak, young or old, I see Arman's face, his three daughters' panic-stricken face. The image of heaped up dead bodies of folks shot in their heads begin to swirl around me. I think of the bandaged men, women, and children twisting and turning in their hospital beds. I hear the mournful grieving of the family members who have lost their dear ones. As politicians debate what we can or can't do under the present constitution, I think of the events that propelled us to this moment. And I feel acutely distraught. I do not want to believe that this is the end of the spirit of July 2024, a month which subjected us to acute trauma as it brought us hope. I also do not want to give up on our shared dream of a discrimination free Bangladesh. But then a part of me reminds me of the events on the ground, the fractiousness, and quest for retribution that have replaced our necessity to carry out sweeping economic, academic, and social reforms. Unable to find comfort inside, I place my ears as close to the window as I can. "Things will be alright," some optimistic voices from the street assure me. But the cool November breeze, stale, polluted, and dry, disputes: "There's not much we can do now. It is winter, a little too late for the warmth of changes."

20 November 2025