

# THE UNLIT FLAME: WHY ABRAR FAHAD'S KILLING FAILED TO IGNITE A REVOLUTION LIKE THE JULY UPRISING IN BANGLADESH

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## Abstract

This working paper inquires why the killing of Abrar Fahad by Bangladesh's then-ruling party affiliates and the protests that followed the event did not turn into a mass uprising or revolution like the 2024 July Uprising that toppled the authoritarian Sheikh Hasina government back in 2019 despite the existence of various favorable structural advantages. Drawing on autoethnography, digital ethnography, and interviews with key student leaders, the study situates both events within similar structural contexts of repression, corruption, and economic strain and explains why one turned into a revolution and one did not. One argument is that the Abrar Fahad protests lacked various key preconditions to trigger a mass uprising a revolutionary will, revolutionary consensus, revolutionary coalition etc. The findings advance theoretical understanding of how agency and strategy can transform protest into revolution, offering insights for scholars and practitioners of contentious politics.

**Keywords:** Bangladesh, Social Movements, July Uprising, Revolutions, Abrar Fahad

## Introduction

The rich literature on the causes of social movements suggests that both structural reasons like economic crises (Della Porta and Parks, 2016) and political opportunity (Bloom, 2014) play a role in generating social movements. However, other scholars have pointed to resource mobilisation (Overby & Ritchie, 1991), relative

deprivation (Gurr, 1970), humiliation and moral outrage (Jasper, 1998) and many other factors as the initial causes of social movements. While it cannot be denied that each of these factors possibly play a role in forming movements, I would like to argue that too much emphasis has been provided on structural features and more emphasis must be given towards micromobilisation processes (McAdam, 1986). The everyday interactions of people can create issues like relative deprivation and humiliation that lead them to join a movement that may also turn into a revolution. In this article, I would like to focus on two social movements in Bangladesh, one of which turned into a political revolution and the other limited itself. In the latter part of the article, I will explore why these movements met their respective ends.

The two movements are: the protests following the killing of Abrar Fahad of BUET (2019) and the July Uprising that ousted the authoritarian regime of Sheikh Hasina (2024). I was a participant in both of these movements, the prior directly and the latter virtually. As such, one research method I will rely upon in this article is autoethnography. The second method I will use is digital ethnography through the interview of key student leaders who were at the forefront of both of these movements. By analysing their inputs and detailing my own experience, I would like to answer the following question: What caused the two movements: structural features or individual experiences/emotions? A second research question is: Why did the July Uprising turn into a political revolution, but the Abrar Fahad protests did not? I argue that micromobilisation processes played a more important role than structural causes of social movements in the making of the political revolution of 2024. Based on this, I theorise that agency is more important than structure in terms of generating periods of contentious politics and guiding them towards revolution.

### Literature Review

Whether structural features are more salient features that give rise to social movements or revolutions, or if micromobilisation processes do so, is an ongoing debate in the field. The structuralist schools have been professed by several scholars, including Skocpol in her pioneering work *States and Social Revolutions* (Skocpol, 1979). Scholars writing on revolution much later have continued on this theme, with Goldstone (2001) writing, “State breakdown is the sine qua non of revolution (p. 142).” He argues that revolutions happen when governments are vulnerable and elites are divided. Davies (1962), the proponent of the relative deprivation theory, suggests that a period of economic decline after a period of economic development may trigger revolution. To expand on this, we may include corruption

and inflation and other indicators to show that a country, like Bangladesh, is going through economic, even if relative and not absolute, decline. In later parts of this paper, we will look into structural features that show whether there was a decline. But what can be said for certain is that there may be some veracity in Shultziner's (2018) claim that elections which are carried out as a ritual to perpetuate the regime also present a window of vulnerability for authoritarian regimes. In that vein, both the Abrar Fahad protests and July Uprising happened after the controversial elections of 2018 and 2024 which were marred by irregularities and violence (Safi et al., 2020; Transparency International Bangladesh, 2024). The question remains, then, if there were economic preconditions and regime vulnerability present during the Abrar Fahad protests, why could it not grow into a large-scale political revolution like the July Uprising?

The answer to this may be present in the work of the scholars who are more closely aligned with the micromobilisation school of revolutions and social movements. A crucial part of this school is the framing tasks theory which posits that how a movement frames itself is crucial in determining its future (Benford and Snow, 2000). How movement leaders frame themselves determines how resonant they would be to their constituency and how powerful they would become overall (Benford and Snow, 2000). Framing tasks can make people formulate the “sudden perception of injustice that spurs rebellion” (Davies, 1962). Proper framing can ignite the existing preconditions to create a powerful social movement.

Therefore, social movements and revolutions are not mere byproducts of structural changes; framing tasks and other micromobilisation features matter equally if not more. McAdam and Sewell (2001) for example, say: “Events do not merely reflect structures—they reconstitute them.” However, not all instances of oppressive or violent events are transformational. An event has to be framed and mobilised in order to initiate mass action. That, once more, is a function of organisational capacity and activist strategy beforehand. This dynamic relationship between structure and micromobilisation is further supported by Goldstone's (2001) position that “structure defines the terrain; contention animates it (p. 148).”

Following this logic and adding from Della Porta (2020) that movements become revolutions when the participants and leaders not only seize opportunities, but construct them, we can analyse the Abrar Fahad protests as an instance of the failure to do so. Why that happened will be discussed in later parts of this article. On the other hand, the strategic decisions and the overall revolutionary character

of the July Uprising were such that leaders of that movement were able to more successfully construct moments that led to transformative events and backfire due to repression which amplified the movement into a mass uprising that amounted to a political revolution. They were not just able to smell the gasoline, they were able to light the spark.

### Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative research structure through the use of digital ethnography and autoethnography. I write about my own experience of the two key movements and also conduct key informant interviews of student leaders from various ideological leanings and backgrounds, ranging from students involved with direct party politics to students to students who are politically agnostic. The rationale behind my sampling is partly rooted in convenience, but I try to mitigate bias by inviting comments from people from all sides of the spectrum, including those who do not align with my personal political leanings. However, the sample of the interviews I have done is too limited and could still be biased. I have used my own experience of participating in the two movements, both of which I was sympathetic towards. But I accept that limitation and try to be as reflexive as possible in the interviewing process to make sure I do not put words in the mouths of the respondents. The limitations of this working paper will be further mitigated through the use of more ethnographic fieldwork in Dhaka next year and more extensive interviewing of movement leaders.

### Discussion

#### **What happened with the Abrar Fahad Protests (2019)**

Abrar Fahad, an engineering student at Bangladesh's top engineering university BUET was brutally beaten to death by members of the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) in late 2019 (Dhaka Tribune, 2019). When this happened, I was present in Bangladesh working as a journalist at Dhaka Tribune and ran my own online magazine named Muktipotro. When I first got the news of Abrar's murder, it was the dead of night. I did not break the news but I wrote what was possibly one of the first feature stories on the background of Abrar's killing, detailing his Facebook posts against Indian hegemony over Bangladesh and the Hasina government's genuflected attitude in negotiations. The story instantly went viral. On the next day, I was on the streets in the Dhaka University and BUET campus to monitor the situation of the student movement and soon after, I was invited to

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speak at a rally organised by concerned university teachers, students and parents. Although I did not fit any of the above-mentioned categories, I gave a speech there where I said the following:

*“I write too, kill me too. I speak too, kill me too. I think too, kill me too. (...) It is time to stand up to the organisational leader of the BCL [Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina] and challenge her eye-to-eye and say ‘How dare you?’”*

Someone made a video of the speech and it instantly went viral, getting millions of views online. The editor of Dhaka Tribune got a phone call the next day instructing him to fire me and I was told to either shut my mouth and work in secret or leave. I handed in my resignation and fully devoted myself to organising a movement. I was aided by my college friend Mashqur Ratul who managed the grassroots and I served as the face. However, we were not able to create a strong movement that could lead to large changes and challenge the regime which was no less authoritarian than in 2024.

Why were we not able to generate a revolution back then? Scholars may point towards structural reasons such as political instability and lack of contention over power structures (Tilly, 1978) as well as structural breakdowns in state institutions (Skocpol, 1979). However, the regime was already exposed as dictatorial, undemocratic, unjust and corrupt in 2019. The inflation rate was 5.48 per cent (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2020) and the unemployment rate was approximately 4.4 per cent (World Bank, n.d). Further, Freedom House rank for Bangladesh was 45 out of 100 (Freedom House, n.d.) and polity score was 6, classified as an autocracy (World Population Review, n.d.). One could argue that this was better than 2024, when the inflation hit a 12-year high, but it was still pretty bad.

After the cooptation of the 2018 quota reform movement through the “allowing” of the leading organisation of the movement to win two seats in the DUCCSU (Dhaka University Central Students Union) and creating a spectacle where the leader of the student group that led the movement met Hasina and called her motherly and the brutal suppression of the youth-led Road Safety Movement through the use of indiscriminate violence, the Hasina regime was exposed as brutal. The 2018 election, which had only happened a few months before the Abrar protests was highly controversial due to vote rigging and ballot stuffing, which was reported by national and international media (Khalid, 2018) and people knew that the AL regime was in power through undemocratic means. Although maybe the “Secret Prisoners of Dhaka” report (Netra News, 2022) which showed the secret detention

centers of the regime where dissidents were tortured along with other report of high corruption that came out in the year and the time preceding the 2024 uprising dealt a more serious blow to the regime's reputation, the reputation was in a pretty bad shape in late 2019 as well. Why then did we fail to sustain the movement? The answer lies in the structural features of the movement as well as the micro-mobilisation processes. When I gave the (in)famous speech, my friend Ratul was in the crowd monitoring the whole situation. He had been active in party politics in Bangladesh since 2015 and had participated in the No VAT movement, quota movement and Road Safety Movement as a major organiser of those movements. Using those movements as learning opportunities (his words), he wanted to create a movement on this issue using me as the face. He was also in talks with a number of opposition parties for them to join us. However, they promised to join but never did. The main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), reportedly withdrew its active support because "they were not ready to launch a complete anti-India movement." Some other smaller political organisations like the BCOSP, the organisation that led the quota movement, expressed interest initially (and even held meetings with us to plan the movement) but backed off at a later stage for similar reasons to the BNP. The leftists were eager to join, but they wanted to maintain a separate platform from us and the centre to centre-right parties. Meghmallar Bosu, now the president of the Dhaka University Students Union, said the following about why they remained separate and did not create a united front:

It was perceived primarily as a BUET issue. Moreover, the government took enough steps to make sure it stayed out of scrutiny. The primary stakeholders were BUET students. So it was up to them to frame it. Since the primary impulse was to blame 'politics' for the whole issue, it couldn't formulate demands other than getting rid of politics.

This inability to join forces and build alliances with ideological opponents to fight the common enemy has beleaguered Bangladeshi youth resistance politics for a long time. For the same reason, even before the Abrar Fahad protests, the anti-AL student groups failed to produce a unified front (panel) against the BCL in the DUCSU elections. Chayan Barua, a leader of the Swantantra Jote which fielded its own separate panel in the DUCSU elections, had the following comment about why that happened:

In summary, mutual distrust, leadership conflicts, and rigid ideological stances,

especially from the left, were the key reasons why a unified panel could not be formed against the Chhatra League in the 2019 DUCSU election. Moreover, based on their experiences from 2001 to 2006, the left-leaning student organisations harboured a deep mistrust towards the BNP. As a result, they were unwilling to form any kind of alliance with BNP-affiliated groups.

This hesitance in joining forces with other students who were not in their same ideology seemingly vanished during the July Uprising. This is because of the organisational structure of the Students against Discrimination (SAD), an umbrella network of all student groups organising the protest against the reinstatement of “unfair” quotas in public jobs after the 2018 quota movement led to its abolition. The SAD had students from both the left and the right. Student leaders like Umama Fatema, who has a background in leftist politics even became the organisation’s spokesperson after the revolution and many right wing leaders were also a part of SAD. The primary driving force of the SAD, however, seemed to be the DSF (Democratic Student Force). This is what had made the difference. DSF, a new independent student organisation launched on October 4, 2024 (Daily Sun, 2024), was able to form the SAD with leaders from around the political spectrum who could come to a “revolutionary consensus” that they needed to work together to oust the Hasina regime. More on this will follow in the next section.

Indeed, 2019 did not have great transformative events like the killing of student protesters by the police in broad daylight, which would be videotaped and spread widely on social media. Instead, surveys and research show that, though there were protest movements in previous years (notably in 2018, as with the road safety and quota reform movements), youth groups did not form a collective front in 2019 (Talukdar, Akter, & Mia, 2022). If, in 2019, the youth groups had not decided to act separately and had formed a unified political platform to extend their frame and transform it into a broader anti-regime position, things could have been different.

However, the brutal killing of Abrar Fahad itself could have been a transformative event in the first instance if the leaders of the movement were able to frame it properly and launch an all-out campaign against the BSL and AL, which would invite confrontation with the BSL and police that would generate further transformative events of repression and backfire. If something like that happened, the political parties like the BNP and BCOSP would be forced to align with the protest, just like they did with the July Uprising. But most of the student leaders of the protests did not have what can be called a “revolutionary will,” both within and outside of

BUET. For example, respondent four, a young leader of the protests who wished to remain anonymous, claims that most students were focused on getting Abrar's killers arrested and tried and demanded justice for some other similar occurrences on campus along with a permanent ban on campus politics which was seen as a system that produces criminal activity. They had no will for broader regime change. They did not think that broadly, and even if they did, Hasina and BSL seemed like too great a challenge. While BUET students focused on winning on their campus only by banning student politics in their vicinity, right-wing organisations like the Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS) was also unable to lead a protest even though Abrar was killed because he was tagged as an ICS member and therefore rendered killable (The Daily Star, 2025).

From a strategic point of view, the lack in these protests was a failure of framing tasks. The protests could not appeal to a broad-based constituency. Private University students for example, were not engaged at all. The response to his murder was predominantly focused on BUET as BUET imposed a ban on political activities on the campus and expelled 19 students at that time (The Financial Express, 2019). On the other hand, the July Uprising, from the starting point even, was able to appeal to all students (private and public) seeking public jobs. If the leaders of the Abrar protests could create a broad frame that could appeal to all students, the initial movement could be stronger. If it was framed as a movement for national sovereignty, a movement for dignity, a movement for river water rights, a movement for dignity in the borderlands and an end to border killings, a movement against Indian hegemony—the movement could have been much stronger. But everything happened like lightning and soon the BUET students made the whole movement an internal issue of their campus and demanded student politics be banned on campus. Why did they limit themselves to this demand? Arifur Rahman Kayed, another protest leader, explains:

Most of the students were afraid that they would lose everything if they demanded for broader changes. We did not want our movement to be diluted by regime change demands. We just wanted justice for Abrar Fahad. We did not mix with DU (Dhaka University) or anyone else because we thought doing so would divert the focus of the movement.

The limiting of the Abrar protests cannot purely be seen as a failure. It was limited by design and did not create a challenge to the regime as that was not its goal. But the reason it was not so was that Hasina seemed too large an opponent to directly challenge. But the experience of BUET in effectively banning the BCL

on their campus (along with other student political outfits) gave the general students the courage that the BCL too can be defeated. This is part of the reason why students felt encouraged to kick the BCL out of university campuses in the second half of the July Uprising and claim the campuses for themselves. Within two weeks of that, the AL regime was toppled.

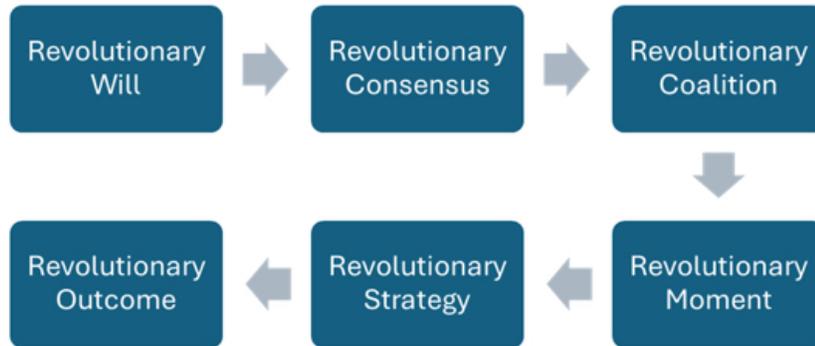
### **What happened with the July Uprising (2024)**

The July Uprising had a lot of factors working in its favour. But the strongest factor it had was its SMO (Social Movement Organisation). McCarthy and Zald (1977) argue that SMO is one of the biggest advantages a movement can have. But not only that, the SMO also had a revolutionary will and a revolutionary consensus among members of the constituent factions of the SAD. By 'revolutionary will,' I mean a shared inclination of movement leadership to pursue unflinchingly maximalist goals — here, overthrow of the Hasina regime — as opposed to incremental gains. This theory overflows but differs from political opportunity perception, revolutionary will is an inclination within the individual to seize or even build such windows. The process through which these revolutionary will and revolutionary consensus was reached would be the topic of future research on this topic. DSF, through the SAD, formed what can be called a revolutionary coalition. However, it must be admitted that the moment also worked in their favour.

Much like the Abrar protests, the July Uprising started right after another controversial election. There were widespread reports of corruption (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2025), human rights abuses (Human Rights Watch, 2025), inflation (Dhaka Tribune, 2024), unemployment (The Daily Star, 2025) and the government was largely geopolitically pressurised by the west (East Asia Forum, 2024) due to holding a dummy election (TBS Report, 2025) which was boycotted by the opposition. This contributed to what can be called the “revolutionary moment.” This revolutionary moment aspect is essentially structuralist and shaped by exogenous factors. But the other aspects are totally endogenous and the revolution would never happen in their absence. Structuralist features act like gasoline. If the surroundings are doused, one tiny spark is enough to send the whole place ablaze. However, even if there is less gasoline, a large enough spark can still create a fire and without the spark, all you get is a wet and smelly surroundings, which smells of trouble but nothing more happens. Structural features act as advantages but micromobilisation tactics, strategies, actions etc are so essential that they decide whether a protest would remain a protest or would

become a revolution.

In short, here is the process a revolutionary process follows:



Because the revolutionary coalition was ready and waiting for the opportune moment, the SAD was able to mobilise in a multifaceted way when their revolutionary moment came through the killing of Abu Sayed (Amnesty International, 2024). This moment can also be called a transformative event as the footage of his killing spread like wildfire, triggering nationwide mobilization (Roy, 2025). After this, the SAD employed a revolutionary strategy to gradually transform the frame (Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha [BSS], 2025) of the movement from a movement to reform job quotas to a movement for regime change, which led to the revolutionary outcome of the ousting of Hasina. If the moment did not come in 2024, it would come later. In fact, leaders of the SAD have said that they were originally targeted for 2026 (Prothom Alo, 2024) but took the opportunity they were presented with in 2024. While the moment is important, it can be manufactured as well. If there had not been the precursors to the moment, it would have passed without having been framed as a transformative event, just like Abrar’s murder passed without transformation. What are key are the will, the consensus and the coalition.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that, while structural features are important in setting the stage for a revolution, they, in themselves, are not enough to trigger a revolution, barring proper strategy, framing and the existence of various revolutionary elements. The analysis of the Abrar Fahad protests and the July Uprising exposes that while both had similar political opportunity structures and other structural

features, the latter turned into a political revolution while the former demobilised largely due to a lack of a revolutionary outlook, not a revolutionary precondition. In short, the presence and absence of certain micromobilisation processes can be decisive in determining if a social movement would evolve to a revolution or demobilise completely.

The structural features of corruption, inflation, unemployment etc were very high during both of these protests, albeit the latter one may have been presented with a somewhat graver situation. But it is visible that the Abrar Fahad protesters were not able to scale up their movement into a revolution largely because they lacked the political will, motivation and organisation to do so. This distinction between revolutionary will and political opportunity perception may help explain why similar structural contexts produced divergent outcomes. While Abrar Fahad protesters recognised grievances and some political openings, they did not possess — or develop — the strategic orientation and collective intent necessary to transform protest into revolution. This suggests that structural weakness alone cannot predict revolutionary outcomes. The July Uprising succeeded where the Abrar protests did not because it benefited from strong micromobilisation processes: coherent leadership, framing strategies, alliance-building, and what I have termed a “revolutionary consensus.” The Abrar Fahad protest did not become a revolution largely because it never wanted to be one. It was just about getting justice for a slain member of one’s university and a massive movement to oust the regime that produced that killing could not, for various reasons, be mobilised in that context. For the Abrar Fahad protests, there was gasoline all around, but the spark was missing. This spark was deferred until the advent of the July Uprising. The uprising, on the other hand, had multiple sparks and, because of that, was able to create one of the most widespread political movements in recent Bangladeshi history and came to be known as a political revolution.

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