

Youth for democratic resilience: Prospects beyond the degeneration of youth politics in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this research is to examine the role and nature of youth engagement in Bangladesh's democratic resilience. The current study utilized content analysis and in-depth interview approach to explore how Bangladeshi youth respond to democratic participation over a given time period. Youth were at the forefront of every democratic movement in Bangladesh prior to the 1990s, when the country was ruled by the military for fifteen years. Even when they resurrected democracy in 1990 through a bloody mass movement, it was envisioned that youth would be the primary driver for democratic consolidation. However, Bangladeshi youth, particularly students, have developed strong ties to political parties in the post-1990s era and serve as their primary source of mobilization under a party-political regime sometimes described as 'patriarchy', which obstructs meaningful youth involvement in politics. The youth have been heavily controlled by the party structure as a result of their party affiliation, and the space for discussion of their democratic rights has also been curtailed. Due to a lack of space for raising voices, youth have expressed their outrage at the structure through street protests in recent years, providing a glimmer of hope for democracy. Apart from these synopses, this paper concludes by making some recommendations based on the findings of the interviews in order to nurture youth resilience and, in turn, contribute to the strengthening of Bangladesh's democracy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Youths are generally more reformist and anti-establishment because they are less risk antipathetic. Studies show that youths are becoming disengaged from conventional political participation (Pontes et al., 2017; Henn & Oldfield, 2016), where youths are crucial to consolidating democracy in the 21st century. Generally, scholars hold that the youths, especially the students, in Bangladesh have epitomised their spirit in the most democratic movements (Mohammad, 2016; Khasru et al., 2015; Maniruzzaman, 1988). Students fought for the right to speak their own language, risking their lives in 1952 (Hannan, 2000; Nair, 1990). They also spoke

out against the military dictatorship in 1969 and for the fight for freedom in 1971 (Matin & Rafique, 1991). When the hope of popular democratic rule was ruptured by some unforeseen military coups and counter-coups after independence (Maniruzzaman, 1975), students came to the forefront of democratic resilience in 1990 (Kabir, 1999; Khan, 1993). However, student politics in the post-1990s took a reverse turn in its nature.

Student politics has become increasingly clientelistic and opportunistic in recent years. There is hardly any academic investigation regarding the changes and reduction of youth involvement in politics after the 1990s. It is time-honored to have the answer to the questions: What factors have influenced this turn? Is there any difference in the nature of the youth uprisings in Bangladesh? How does the degeneration of youth politics affect democracy? After a more nuanced observation of the nature of the democratic uprisings of youth under agent-structure theory, this paper shows that youth played a vital role as independent agents in the pre-1990s. However, in the post-1990s era, young people were no longer free agents, but were heavily controlled by the political structure. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the democratic spirit of the youth has not been annihilated. We are persuaded through the example of 2018's Road Safety Movement, Quota Reform Movement, VAT movement, and DUCSU Election in Bangladesh that when youths were given their democratic rights to express their opinions freely with meaningful participation, they would be in a major position to address fundamental challenges and be able to uphold a resilient democracy.

Now, Bangladesh also has a large young population, in which children and youth comprise about half of the country's population (The Daily Star, 2015). Nowadays, in many places around the world, populist, fundamentalist, and radical movements find their breeding grounds, particularly among young people (Annan, 2016; Shekhovtsov & Pomerantsev, 2016; Daimond, 2015; Lust & Waldner, 2015; Norris, 2014), disillusioned with the current state of affairs. Hence, a momentous query is whether this large population group would create a habitable, peaceful, tolerant, and safer world, or might be a counter-agent of these. We must, therefore, re-tune our focus to youth. Young people should be involved in global dialogues and pronouncements on issues that affect everyone. This study argues that addressing the "divide" or "disconnect" between youth and their government is critical for the resilience of democratic institutions.

In the following sections, this paper describes the theoretical framework and then clarifies what democratic resilience and resilient youth mean. This paper briefly assesses the nature of youth engagement in politics from 1952 to 1990; it then discusses the present scenario of youth portraying the perception of youth in the current political culture and identifies the challenges to making youth resilient. We conclude by reemphasizing that policies directed at youth must recognize their resilience aspects by smearing proactive methods to escalate their involvement in making democracy resilient in this century.

2. METHODOLOGY

In this study, we conducted content analysis of reputable secondary data sources and corroborated them with rigorous interviews. In general, content analysis is employed as a research technique for assessing relevant information sources such as credible books, research journals, texts in a variety of formats, newspaper articles, and other internet sources. Such content analysis is critical in our study since there is a wealth of significant literature on democracy and youth politics in Bangladesh. As a result, in order to have a thorough understanding of the issue, we were obliged to conduct exhaustive historical content assessments of the pertinent literature, taking the time period into account. Additionally, we interviewed fourteen members of various professional groups in Bangladesh, including intellectuals, youth representatives, and policymakers. These in-depth interviews took place between March and October 2019 and were extended due to the lengthier conversation than expected under normal circumstances. We chose these three stakeholders and gathered data in order to gain a variety of perspectives on the subject of our study and to devise strategies for enhancing youth resilience for democratic consolidation in Bangladesh. All embracing, we employed a hefty methodology to amass sufficient data for our investigation.

3. ROLE OF AGENTS AND STRUCTURE IN SHAPING DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

Youth for democratic resilience could be understood via an agent-structure lens in Bangladeshi politics, with youth serving as a critical instrument for influencing the form of democracy. The agent-structure discourse explores two truisms about social life: 1) people and their organizations are autonomous actors whose actions contribute to the reproduction or modification of the society in which they live; and 2) society is composed of social relationships that shape the interactions between these autonomous actors (Wendt, 1987). Individuals' agency refers to their capacity to act autonomously and make their own choices. According to Jason and Howarth (2008), the fundamental premise of methodological individualism in social theory is that the only

agents are individuals who act. According to structuralists, structure is the intermittent systematic ordering that impacts or limits accessible options and opportunities.

When human actors and state structures are considered as interconnected and mutually influencing entities, the question becomes how these entities affect one another and the nature of power-holding. For example, a political party may use a specific program and election manifesto to attract the vote bank or human agents. In this case, the agents are free to vote for any party. They are allowed to choose their representatives and to direct the structure in whatever way they like. Human agents may direct the party toward the policy that is most favorable to them and serves their interests best. On the other hand, a structural approach would take into account the linkages between variables, thereby explaining power relations. In this case, the structure can both constrain and enable the agents' possibilities. We can consider social rules in a society where the social lives of individual agents are largely determined by the society's overall structure.

In the social sciences, there is considerable discussion about the relative importance of agents and structure (Dowding, 2008; Glynos & Howarth, 2008; Wendt, 1987) and whether agents define the structure or the structure defines the agents. The observation of Bangladeshi politics reveals that the involvement of agents and structures in determining the form of politics is critical, even though this study discovers that their interaction varies over political timeframes. According to Katsiaficas (1997) and Moniruzzaman (1988), students were the primary source of resistance in any undemocratic state in pre- and post-independence Bangladesh, particularly during the 1952 Language Movement, the 1971 Freedom Fight, and the 1990-1991 Anti-autocratic Movement. By reviewing the post-1990s movement, it is clear that the nature of youth politics has shifted. Since 1991, the debasement of student politics has been seen most clearly in their role as opportunistic party stooges. Student activists—particularly those linked with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (hereinafter BNP) and the Awami League (hereinafter AL), the two most prominent political parties in what has been termed as a two-party system—are no longer viewed as a source of resistance, but are fully absorbed into the operations of their respective political parties.

We examined the nature of youth political engagement from the 1952 Language Movement to the present, focusing on the agent and structural roles in Bangladesh. This time range was chosen to demonstrate the varying nature of youth involvement in democratic resilience and to shed light on their current reversal role. However, in the post-1990s era, the nature of youth engagement in politics has shifted. In the late 1990s, it was intended to enhance democratic institutions. However, Bangladesh is an exception in this instance. In Bangladesh's post-1990s democracy, the youth's role as a young political wing in establishing the structure has devolved into that of party stooges.

The youth acted as an important agent for designing the political structure in the pre-1990s period in Bangladesh. For instance, young students, specifically the university's students, predominantly led the language movement in 1952. The youth, as independent agents, had left their lives to save the mother language and the democratic rights of the people. Here, the agents, the youth, played an independent variable to change the structure. The latter's freedom struggle in 1971 was also tremendously supported by the young people in Bangladesh. In post-independence Bangladeshi politics, the youth played a major role in national politics. One of them, ASM Abdur Roob, and Tofael Ahmed, are now in major positions in the national politics of Bangladesh.

The role of the youth as agents in designing the structure of the nation was vital, and these agents played an important role in keeping democracy resilient. The Community of Democracy (2018) finds that a resilient youth population may trigger the values and ideals of democracy better than any other group of people. The long movement against the military dictators proves how youth are important for making democracy live in Bangladesh. Until military withdrawal in 1991, more than a dozen people sacrificed their lives to save democracy. Many scholars opine that the movement in 1990-91s was mostly led by young students rather than by the mainstream political parties (Hannan 2000; Alam 1995; Baxter, C.1990). Now the interesting thing is that the youth as an important agent who redesigned the nation's structure for safeguarding democracy in the pre-1990s era, in the post-1990s politics, the role of young agents in politics has become opportunistic and also clientlike. The two prime political parties, namely the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), strongly hold their students' political wings. The AL holds the 'The Chattro (student) League' and BNP holds 'The Chattro Dall'. These youth political wings provide 'protocol' (political support) for the party and party members, whereas in reciprocity, the political parties deliver them money and political shelter (Sukeyns 2018). In this connection, Moeten Koch Anderson (2013) argues the relationship between the party and their student wing becomes the relation of exchange, including

the circulation of money, so central to contemporary student politics in Bangladesh. The political structure strongly maintains the movement of youth involvement in politics now.

4. CONCEPTUALIZING RESILIENT YOUTH FOR DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

Resilience, though its meaning varies in different fields or subject areas, is the capability of individuals to cope with change, adversity, or risk (Yao & Fabbe-Costes 2018; Stewart, Reid and Mangham, 1997). In psychology, it denotes the ability to adapt to a shock (Krystal & Neumeister 2009) by strengthening self-esteem, personal competence and tolerance (Haddadi & Besharat, 2010) whereas in environmental science it means the ability to regain original equilibrium after a disruption (Gunderson et al., 2002; Holling, 1973). According to Manciaux et al. (2001) resilience is a person or group's ability to pursue self-development in a difficult life situation. But the question is what does resilience mean when applied to democracy? When we use the word 'resilience' applied to democracy, it commonly means the ability to deal with complicated challenges, cope with pressure, and recover from crises. But it is not an auto-generated process, rather it is needed to nourish, prompt and endorse unceasingly. Building resilience among young people is a crucial precondition to make democracy resilient. Resilient social systems are compliant (can adjust itself in response to the system), ground-breaking (able to change in order to more efficiently mark the challenges), can get well from challenges and are malleable (able to absorb stress or pressure). The way a society treats its young people is a vital indicator of its quality of life. Resilient youth are cautious about democratic rights and responsibilities and hold the government to be accountable to the masses which helps to defy governments from being authoritarian. To foster resilience in youth, they are needed to involve with meaningful participation, to educate, and integrate into the democratic practice (Wang, 2012) for building future liberal resilient democracy.

By degeneration of politics, it is meant the changing pattern of the role of the agent for democratic consolidation just after the 1990s. Bengali nationalism behaved like an infant before the partition in 1947. Nobody could raise a voice against any injustice, oppression and persecution. But, this weak sense of nationality burst into strong backlash in the form of 1952's language movement and 1969's mass upheaval. Consequently, we observed successive movements protesting the injustices against Bengali youths throughout the time spanning from 1952 to 1990. We can entitle the continuity of these movements as 'The Generation of Politics'. Ironically, in 1990 afterward, the youth sided with dissenting political groups in the political arena of Bangladesh. They resort to a system that we can overtly label 'Party Politics'. This resulted in the 'fighting shy of' attitude even towards the blunders and perverted political ideology of their respective parties. Thus, this constant attitude of their cognizant negligence towards the injustice after 1990 can be rightly termed as 'The Degeneration of Politics'.

5. NATURE OF YOUTH INVOLVEMENT IN DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE IN BANGLADESH

The path to the true political development of Bangladesh was not linear and smooth; rather, it went through political ups and downs. Students in Bangladesh have a long history of leading the nation forward along with mainstream political parties in order to make democratization a success. Students' activism in Bangladesh throughout the 1950s and 1960s, according to Talukdar Maniruzzaman (1988), was unparalleled in terms of intensity, continuity, and concern anywhere in the world during that time. Historically, mostly after independence, low rates of matriculation and the country's high poverty rate made students especially privileged and destined to be part of the political elite, and they responded with heroic leadership based upon the nation's universal interests (Katsiaficas, 2012). But it is interesting to see that the nature of youth engagement in the democratic movements has been observed differently in the three phrases, e.g., 1947 to 1971 experienced a nationalist nature in youth involvement, phase 1971 to 1990 can be characterised as resistant and from 1990 to present can be characterised as opportunistic.

5.1 Democratic aspirations in pre-independent Bangladesh: Framing the national identity

Students are the heroes of Bangladesh's national mythology, with their patriotism and dedication to the nation being a source of pride and reverence (Christianson, 2013). It has been seen that the youth activism in politics from 1947 to 1971 in Bangladesh was based on a nationalist movement and their sacrifices were as though movement for the whole nation collectively not only for a particular political party. The language movement was the first significant student mobilization in East Pakistan that led to the establishment of 'students' as a distinct and endowed political class and established the framework for future elucidations of the role of students as a protector of democracy. Rahman (2017) argues that the Language Movement was grounded from the middle class and lower middle-class family background students. The young students succeeded in convincing the East Pakistani people that their language identity is more important than the religious identity

on which the Pakistani state was founded in 1947. In fact, the Language Movement secularised the political atmosphere of East Pakistan. It is worth observing that there were very few students' political organizations in East Pakistan but after the Language Movement, there had been formed many student political wings, predominantly led by liberal nationalists. They led political movements collectively though they have ideological differences. For instance, the mass upsurge against military ruler Ayub Khan in 1969 and the liberation movement in 1971 when the students and their political identity turned from street protests to military training for struggle and eventually Bangladesh gained independence. In those years, the political identity of students became increasingly articulated as the 'defenders of democracy. Students played leading roles in anti-dictatorship struggles against Ayub Khan's tenure (Hannan, 2000; Maniruzzaman, 1988).

5.2 1990's democratic uprising: Restoring democracy

It was envisioned that there would be a sound political and social system in independent Bangladesh. But the newborn state was shocked by the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975 and several coups and counter-coups during the period of 1975-1982 (Baxter & Rahman, 2003). General Ziaur Rahman became the main state actor after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Following the assassination of Ziaur Rahman, Lieutenant General Hossain Mohammed Ershad grabbed power through a military coup in 1982 and continued to rule the country based on martial law until 1985. He tried to civilize his regime and formed a political party, the Janadol that was used as an instrument to transform himself from a military dictator to a civilian leader. Democratic rights were continuously curtailed at that time. For instance, under Ershad's rule, the presidency was given complete executive power; the unicameral National Parliament became a rubber-stamp institution controlled by Ershad's Jatiya Dal coalition partner; press freedom was eliminated, and political parties were unable to organize any protest against this.

At a stage, in the early 1990s, young students raised their voices and took the role of securing democratic rights in the later times. Mohammad Khushbu, in his memoir of the period, describes that across the campus students 'burst into fits of anger' (Khusbu, 1991). Alam (1995), Umar (1992), and Maniruzzaman (1992) have all put forth accounts arguing for the centrality of students in the campaign to bring down the autocratic dictatorship.

It is to be noted that the 1990's democratic uprising was a long-time movement and it was so challenging to carry on such a movement with mass support for a long time. Nevertheless, the democratic spirit of the Bangladeshi students helped to continue this movement until the consolidation of power from the military dictator (Wilkinson, 2000). The heroic protests and resilience of the students resulted in the termination of undemocratic rule and ushered the path of democracy once again in 1991. However, in the post-1990s era, student activism is so fragmented and they become the party instrument for political resource grabbing.

5.3 Youth politics in the post-1990s era: Degenerating youth politics

After the 1990s, the character of student politics in Bangladesh has shifted significantly from its former form. As indicated previously, youth engagement in politics was nationalistic from 1947 to 1971 and reformist from 1971 to 1990. It was hoped that youth would be more resilient during the democratic renaissance of the post-1990s. However, this glimmer of hope has not been vigilantly bloomed till today. Since then, student politics has devolved into a farce, with political party activities losing its ideological focus. The majority of prominent political parties have student wings in both tertiary and secondary educational institutions (in many cases, they also have student wings in 'A' level institutions); for example, AL has Chatra League and BNP has Chatra Dal. The most striking feature is that the ruling party's student wing wields control everywhere, whether at the municipal level or in colleges and universities. Kuttig (2019) opines "...after each national election, the student wing of the party in power takes control of campuses and suppresses all political activities of the opposition. This transfer of power is often accompanied by violence, not just inter-party but also intra-party rivalry over control and position".

Bert Suykens (2018) estimates that between 2002 and 2013 educational campus violence amounted to 17 percent of all political violence in Bangladesh. The unity among student political wings has interspersed with factional rivalries. The student political wing of the ruling party is a fair supporter of their party activities or decisions (Suykens, 2019) and they act as 'party cadre' (muscleman for power politics). Kochanek (2000) and Komal (2010) describe that student politics in Bangladesh has deteriorated, become opportunistic and nothing more than a party-political instrument. Student politicians are involved in many relationships of patronage with party leaders and government officials in order to obtain state resources and party favors. (Jackman, 2018; 2019).

One of Dhaka University's youth representatives expressed his concern about contemporary youth politics as follows: -

"There is no place for general students in youth politics now but they need to maintain a strong connection with senior political 'big brothers' in the educational institutions, also called 'Bhai Politics'. Students have to hear unquestionably the order of political senior brothers. True youth political representatives are not growing due to this complex circle of patron-client political culture" (Personal Interview, August 21, 2019)

Patriarchal dynastic leadership succession is another important hindrance to generating new leadership in this country. A liberal resilient democracy appeals to a more participatory, accountable, and human-centric political culture. The young students are now inter-separated through factional rivalries, and they like to demonstrate their standpoint on issues in accordance with their party-line. Ideological differences between the two political parties caused a highly polarized society and party conflicts over ideologies made the youth more partisan. Along with partisanship and polarisation, state institutions were badly politicised. As a result, the agents became less interested in reshuffling undemocratic structures.

Despite tremendous economic improvements over the past couple of decades, Bangladesh's institutions had also remained weak. Continuous institutional weakness and ineffectiveness worked as a binding constraint for protecting core democratic values. Other setbacks facing the institutions include irregularities, corruption as it cannot hold accountable. It is generally acknowledged that institutional weakness makes previous reforms irrelevant. Youth also become less enthusiastic to participate in protests when their country's civilian institutions are feeble. A unified democratic movement is rare in the post-1990s era where all young students have performed unitedly though some recent uprisings show that students had to come out in the streets to raise demands to the structure. It is evident by this uprising that if the youths are given space for raising their voice for democratic rights, democracy would be institutionalized early in developing countries like Bangladesh.

6. RECENT STUDENT UPRISINGS: YOUTH SHOWS ANGER TO THE STRUCTURE

6.1 Instinctive road safety movement of 2018

Youth fought for authoritarianism or for independence in the pre-1990's era which can be intertwined as resistance and sacrifice, but now they are becoming more concerned about the whole national matters along with citizens' rights i.e. health, education, and welfare etc, if they are given space for raising their voice. If they are not given the space, they will become a strong agent for changing the structure, therefore, become violent many times.

The very recent popular youth uprising of the 'Road Safety Movement' can be illustrated by this statement. It is also called the 'August Student Protest' in 2018, which is not just like any other students' protest that has been experienced before. This movement was ignited by a tragic accident in July 2018, in which two college students were killed and several others injured in a collision between two unlicensed buses. The killing of people in road accidents has become a normal incidence in Bangladesh in recent years. But the government had not taken sufficient efforts to prevent the fatal traffic collision. Huge protests erupted in the aftermath of the accident, with demands for safe roads and justice for the students who were killed. Students gathered on roads and highways as a part of the protest and also performed traffic police responsibilities, such as verifying whether vehicles have valid registration papers and drivers have valid licenses (Rahman, 2018). Even one of the government ministers left his car following the agitating students who stopped the car for invalid paperwork (Qayum, 2018). Students claimed a remarkable penalty for this unforeseen accident and for safe roads for the general people. For a few days, they used to control the traffic system and did the job that regular traffic police were unable to do. When police forces started firing tear gas and rubber bullets towards the students, the movement concluded in causing harm to several students and lost their peaceful appearance. Their placards show some amazing 'slogans' where it is written that 'not road, reconstructing the system' (Haque, 2018). Political analysts explained the slogan of state reconstruction as the reflection of the lack of accountability in the system of governance and the absence of rule of law (Riaz, 2018a). According to Kugelman, a South Asia expert at the Washington-based Woodrow Wilson Centre, the road safety protests were a manifestation of time-honored resentments toward administration and government policies (Islam, 2018).

However, this movement compelled the policymakers to revise the 'Road Transport Act'. The students succeeded to form the democratic role in the absence of any socio-political agents like political parties or others that might perform actively in the national crisis. Many student leaders from the ruling party, the

Awami League, participated directly in the movement. Though they have specific party affiliation, they also ran the mass popular movement directly or indirectly. So, it is important to recognise that all youth have a resilient spirit for democracy but lack sufficient democratic socialization for which they become a weak agent in the formation of the structure.

6.2 Quota reform movement: Formation of collective demand

The quota is generally considered as affirmative discrimination which is usually put in place to ensure fair access to education, employment and livelihood opportunities for the less privileged minority groups among all the population of a country. For example, in Bangladesh, there was a fifty-six percent quota for government jobs where thirty percent of the seats were reserved for the progenies of the freedom fighters of the 1971's liberation war, ten percent as 'Zilla quota', ten percent for women, five percent reserved for the minority groups in Bangladesh and one percent for the people with physical disabilities.

But this quota system leaves only forty-four percent of chairs for candidates who do not belong to any of these groups. This segment argues that there should not be such a large percentage of quota after the passing of fifty years of independence. They also oppose the system, saying that many government posts would remain vacant if candidates from these selected groups failed in the recruitment test. It is discovered that such occurrences resulted in vacancies in government jobs reaching as high as 811 in the 31st Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) examination and 723 in the 34th BCS examination (Mahmud & Shovon, 2018). This is not a new phenomenon; rather, university students and job candidates have been vehemently opposed to the quota system, claiming it should be reformed. However, this demand had gotten an ultimate appearance in July 2018, students from several universities staged a peaceful protest demanding reform of the quota system. They succeeded in creating a platform as an agent to raise demand on the structure. In the first stage, this movement was limited to only in Capital, Dhaka in which thousands of students gathered in the Dhaka University area at Shahbag while others from different universities assembled on their respective campuses. The movement had a blowout across the whole country, especially in the universities and other educational institutions, within a week.

At a time, the structure tried to subdue this movement through a state-sponsored attack on the students. After this clash, the movement was gone in fire and more students joined in it committed to bringing their demand in truth as they prospered to create a platform. Notably, even the women and some of the progenies of freedom fighters agreed to reform the existing quota system. The youth agent thrived to form a common collective demand to the system that brought triumph to this movement and in the last stage, the quota was abolished in government jobs (The Independent, 2018).

6.3 No VAT on education

Private universities now occupy an essential position in the field of higher education in Bangladesh. Over the last couple of decades, these universities have been playing a role in filling the gaps created by the shortage of seats in public universities. That is why, the government should recognise the role of private universities in creating and disseminating knowledge, and extend assistance to ensure higher education rather than narrow down the scope for education. But Abul Maal Abdul Muhith, former Finance Minister from January 2009 till December 2018, proposed a 15 percent tax on private universities while placing the budget for the 2015-16 fiscal in Parliament (Islam, 2015). The government then imposed a VAT of 7.5% on tuition fees of all private universities in the budget of that financial year. After that, students from different private universities took to the street vehemently opposing the government's unequal and exclusionary national education policy (The bdnews24.com, 2015).

The students demanded that the government should play a cooperative role with the private universities instead of playing a regulatory role. As well as, the government should not impose any income tax on private universities; rather it should extend assistance by declaring stimulus packages to reduce the financial burden from expensive education. Students pointed out that the door of education might be closed to the poor and low-income people. Even the educationists expressed their concerns about the government's decision to levy a tax on education. According to them, VAT on education is discriminatory as it will stifle the higher education of children from fixed-income families. Students as agents had been staging protests for the cancellation of VAT imposed by the structure. As a result, their continued protests made the government bow down by withdrawing a 7.5% tax imposed on all private universities (Prothom Alo, 2015). This issue, VAT on Education, knocked the throne of government. Students reacted sharply against the unequal structure. The very connotation of 'investment in education' triggered a sharp response from the students.

6.4 DUCSU election

Democracies can remain healthy and resilient only when there is meaningful participation of youth. Dhaka University Central Students' Union (DUCSU) is a students' union and is simply known as the student governance body of the University of Dhaka. One of the aims of this union is to ensure students' active participation in the university's decision-making process and national education policy debates. According to the constitution, the university's Vice-Chancellor will act as the president of the union and the other 25 posts must be directly elected from the student representatives.

DUCSU, known as the second parliament of Bangladesh, is a space of hope not only for the students but also for the common people of the country for the historically significant role it played in Bangladesh. DUCSU as an agent had previously performed the revolutionary role to unite all students against autocratic structure, to raise voices against injustices and to influence mass people to fight against the undemocratic rule. Since 1990, for fear of such a revolutionary role, successive governments have been deliberately unwilling to hold DUCSU elections. To secure their power, they chose to repress students' voices. Even Dhaka University Order, 1973, specifically speaks of student union representation in different facets of running the university (President's Order, 1973). Unfortunately, this was being continuously ignored until 2019. For decades students took to the streets, then came the Supreme Court's order, finally, the DUCSU elections were held in 2019, after being inactive for almost three decades (The Daily Star, 2019). Nurul Haque Nur got elected as a Vice President of DUCSU who was a candidate of Bangladesh General Students' Rights Protection Council (BGSRPC), a group having no affiliation with any political party (The Daily Star, 2019).

Moreover, students understood that the participation of youth is essential for a vivid and resilient democracy. Democratic resilience also requires the meaningful participation of youth. The success of this last election was that it broke the cycle of exclusion of students' voices from university governance and restored democratic resilience. The DUCSU elections itself was a tremendous achievement because it broke 28 years of stagnant structure. Students as agents are no longer silent, they have managed to force the structure to do the right thing. Youth in democratic activities has recently changed the political scenario of Bangladesh.

7. PRESENT YOUTH SCENARIO AND CHALLENGES

Bangladesh is now enjoying the major youth segment of its population. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), about 17% (aged 15-24 years) of the total population is youth in Bangladesh (BBS, 2018). The National Youth Policy (2017) estimated that the youth population (aged 18-35) constitutes above 33% of the country's total population (BBS, 2015a). So, democratic resilience could have been stronger if the ideas and insights of these huge numbers of people were utilized. But, if we see the perception (Figure 1 shows) of the young people to the present political system in Bangladesh, we can observe that youth people with higher consciousness are less interested in politics and they distrust political institutions.

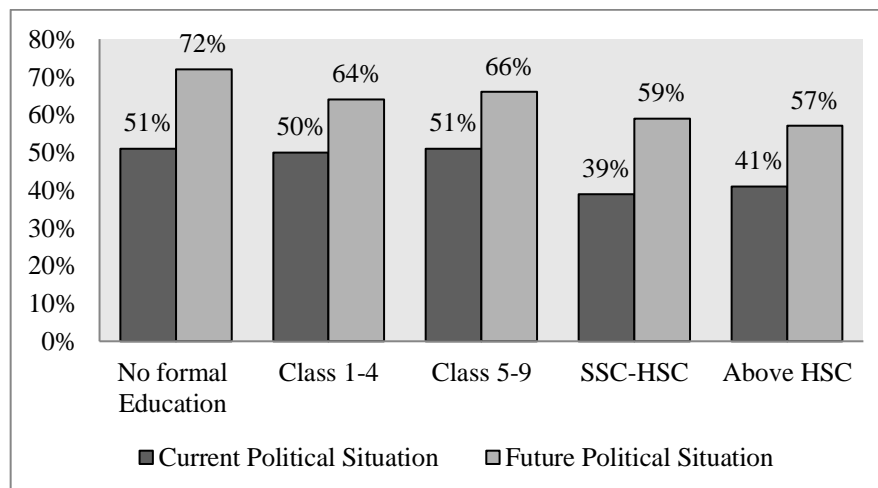


Figure 1: Optimism about Current and Future Political Situation among Youth in Bangladesh.

The prime challenges with youth are their involvement in terrorism and violent extremism. Terrorist groups target young people, especially the university and post-secondary education students are being recruited for terrorism (BIPSS, 2017). A university professor at Dhaka University shares his concern as-

"Bangladesh has seen rising religious extremism in the past few decades, particularly in the Holly Artisan bakery attack in 2016 where most of the attackers were youth and were tertiary-educated students. It was believed that the madrasah (religious institutions) background students usually convert to extremism which has proved totally wrong with such attacks. Most of the terrorist groups are trying to recruit young people for violent activities washing their minds. We need to be cautious about this and set a policy to engage youth people in more productive work" (Personal Interview, September 15, 2019).

Another challenge is drug addiction. Youth aged 18-25 years are more prone and vulnerable to drug addiction (UNODC, 2018). Providing a healthy and sound environment for youth in politics can result in generating stability, predictability and responsible conduct in democratic societies in the long run. This could be done by associating youth with meaningful political debate and interaction.

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The United Nations General Assembly (in resolution A/62/7) emphasized the importance of promoting democracy in particular, with an emphasis on youth participation in the political process. Youth are disengaging from traditional political involvement and developing a skepticism of political institutions, according to studies (Pontes et al., 2017). In this context, it is critical to re-calibrate the youth in order to construct a robust democracy in the twenty-first century. This article discusses Bangladeshi youth and their role to the country's democratic emergency. Indeed, youth participation in the current political process is quite different from that of the pre-1990s. Youths are now less receptive to national democratic issues than they were before to the 1990s. However, it is critical to understand that the democratic spirit of youth has not waned. To strengthen democratic institutions, it is necessary to cultivate a culture of democratic participation, particularly among the youth population.

Our interview findings urge three-fold ways for effective and meaningful participation of youth for democratic resilience. Firstly, party affiliation should be minimized for resilience building. Institutional capacity building is also important to make democratic resilience sustainable. Government should enable the youth to participate in decision-making. Secondly, reducing the gap between agents and structure can lead to a successful democratic venture. It can also demand youth-led participation where they effectively take part in regular political decision-making. Thirdly, Youth's ideas should be prioritised, their insights should be utilised and their voices should be heard for revamping the structure. The aforementioned insights that we derived from our interview findings can resuscitate the lost spirit of youth to bring democratic resilience back into the state. Governance-related institutions should be more developed to play a pivotal role in the maintenance of a democratic culture. Political institutions should bring not only transparency but also generate multiple points of access to decision-making for the youths. The others emphasize the coordinated action, progressive and substantive involvement of youth people in this whole process to achieve the overall goals. It is important to ensure that young people have equal and optimal access to information so that they can acquire knowledge about the real concept of democracy and politics. Equal opportunity emphasizes the participation of youth in democratic decision-making at the national level. Our study found that the prime hindrance for Bangladesh is to build the confidence of today's youth in democratic institutions. Distrust in political parties, frustration with the political process and the perplexity of democratic decision-making are creating negative perceptions among the youth. The UN World Programme of Action for Youth calls to improve all-inclusive and integrated national youth policies through consultation with youth organizations. The policy advisors stretch on creating a common platform for youth participation in the democratic process by proper education about democracy with the same opportunity for boys and girls. Youth need to be informed about public policymaking, trained up to be effective leaders and guaranteed to get access for creating their true empowerment and resilience among them. Young people are principally the reagent of social, political and economic culture attuned to liberty, freedom and democracy. Justice and freedom are often a challenging scuffle that needs the forte, sacrifices, precision and courage of youth to be attained.

Today's youth are committed to ensuring that human rights, the rule of law, equality, and fundamental freedoms are completely upheld in their efforts to improve democracy, create inclusiveness, and increase societies' resilience. Policymakers must respond in order to support youth initiatives and ensure democratic participation chances. The ultimate goal should be to aid the development of policy decisions that support and facilitate young people's political involvement, enabling them to combat the repressive conditions inhibiting their healthy transition into adulthood. This study makes a compelling case for the fact that in the twenty-first century, youth frequently engage in a variety of democratic platforms. Prioritizing the wishes and platforms of youths, as well as their understanding, should be a priority in establishing and preserving

democratic practices. Minor increases in youth participation in democracy will have a significant impact on the sustainability and integrity of democratic processes and infrastructure. This study will contribute to a better understanding of the role and nature of young engagement in fostering democratic resilience between 1952 and the present. Additionally, this study will aid in the computation of pertinent findings and the dissemination of current information. According to this study, before to 1990, Bangladesh's youth had the liberty to make their own political and civic decisions because they were not constrained by party structures. As a result of the political structure's authoritarian nature, a reformist attitude toward military rule developed. It would be an extremely interesting field of research to evaluate the current political nature of youth and whether they are migrating from an opportunistic to a reformist orientation, as demonstrated in recent movements such as the quota reform and road safety movements. Again, additional research could be conducted on how to rehabilitate, educate, and mobilize the youth's awakened spirit for the purpose of greater democratic stabilization.

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Notes

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