

BREAKING THE CHAINS OF FEAR: CIVIL SOCIETY'S ROLE IN DEFYING AUTOCRACY AND SHAPING BANGLADESH'S 2024 JULY REVOLUTION*

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Introduction

■ Civil society has long been a driving force behind political transitions, often critical in resisting autocratic regimes and advocating for democratic reform (Diamond 1994). The 2024 July Revolution in Bangladesh epitomizes this dynamic, showcasing how CSOs can mobilize grassroots movements and civil resistance to challenge oppressive rule. This revolution, fuelled by widespread activism, marked a pivotal moment in Bangladesh's struggle against autocracy, demonstrating the power of collective action even under severe repression. Similar autocratization trends have been observed globally, from Bolivia to Turkey, where ruling parties consolidate power by undermining democratic institutions and silencing dissent (Riaz 2023).

The political landscape in Bangladesh before the revolution was dominated by an entrenched ruling party that suppressed opposition, curtailed freedoms, and imposed widespread censorship. The political environment is highly manipulated by the hostility between secularism and religious influence, which notably affects CSOs' operations in Bangladesh. The ethnic composition of the population, with its diverse communities, also plays a vital role in forming civil society's involvement, often muddling enlistment across different social groups. Additionally, religious and ethnic identities have sometimes been co-opted by political parties to acquire influence over CSOs, further confusing their efforts. This governance created growing social and economic inequalities, heightening public discontent. The often-contentious liaison between political parties and CSOs, where CSOs are repeatedly seen as intimidation to the regime's legitimacy, worsens this environment, complicating their work even further.



Civil society, with its history of championing democratic values, emerged as a central actor in opposing this authoritarian regime, culminating in the July Revolution—a movement defined by grassroots activism and solidarity across diverse social groups. Globally, civil society is recognized as a cornerstone of democratic movements, often operating independently of the state to influence policy and advocate for social justice (Edwards 2014). Autocracy, in contrast, concentrates power in the hands of a few, suppressing political freedoms and dismantling democratic institutions (Linz 2000; Svobik 2012). Political revolutions, such as the July Revolution, occur when popular movements seek to dismantle oppressive regimes, often triggered by government repression, restricted media freedoms, and rising inequality (Skocpol 1979; Abbink–Pezzini 2005).

Leading up to 2024, Bangladesh endured prolonged authoritarian rule marked by censorship, suppression of dissent, and systemic inequality. The transformation gained motion through the 'anti-discrimination student movement' against the government job quota system, also known as the 'Quota Reform Movement,' which vibrated across various sectors of society. The government's crackdowns on the current student movement and labor organizations exemplified its authoritarian nature, fuelling widespread dissatisfaction (Riaz 2016). Against this backdrop, civil society became a unifying force, galvanizing resistance through strategic mobilization and grassroots activism (Lewis 2011). The revolution gained momentum through student-led anti-discrimination protests, resonating across various societal sectors. These protests became the nucleus of a broader democracy movement, rallying civil society organizations to challenge the government's authoritarian policies. Unlike previous uprisings, the July Revolution was notable for its strategic organization, inclusive coalitions, and innovative use of digital platforms. Civil society leveraged these tools to bypass censorship, amplify its message, and connect diverse social groups in a unified front against oppression.

The strategic approach of CSOs during the revolution underscores their pivotal role in fostering solidarity and resistance. Building networks that coupled disparate social groups created an organized movement capable of challenging state power. Digital platforms played a transformative role, allowing activists to organize and communicate despite state efforts to silence dissent. CSOs leveraged digital activism, transparency initiatives, and grassroots organizing to sustain the movement (Sakib 2020; Schnell 2023). These efforts made the July Revolution a landmark event in Bangladesh's political history and an important case study for understanding civil society's potential to drive democratic transitions under repressive regimes (Howard 2010).

This current study utilizes a qualitative approach combining focus group discussion, expert interviews, and secondary data analysis to explore and document the historical significance of civil society's role in the July Revolution and its contributions to broader discussions on democratic transitions. The findings highlight how grassroots movements supported by CSOs can act as catalysts for political change, even in repressive contexts (Keane 2020). The revolution illustrates the resilience



of civil society, which, despite facing severe repression, succeeded in undermining the moral authority of an autocratic regime. By analyzing the successes and challenges these organizations face, this study underscores the need for continued support for civil society in repressive environments. It advocates for creating inclusive platforms where civil society, political parties, and governmental institutions can collaborate to prevent authoritarian backsliding and foster sustained democratic progress (Huntington 1991).

This study explores two key questions: How did civil society influence the July Revolution? and what role did civil society play in resisting autocratic rule in Bangladesh through digital platforms? These questions form the backbone of the study, guiding the investigation into how CSOs navigated fear, repression, and censorship to mobilize resistance and advance democratic change. The study's primary objective was to assess CSOs' contributions to the anti-discrimination student protests that united diverse groups, transcended party affiliations, and ultimately challenged an authoritarian regime. While this approach has been the focus of much worldwide civil society discourse, the challenges CSOs face in Bangladesh—such as political overthrow, ethnic and religious tensions, and limited access to resources—are crucial to understanding the dynamics of the July Revolution. These protests became a focal point of public discontent and a direct challenge to autocratic legitimacy. To achieve this, the research pursues three specific aims given below.

- 1) Analyse how CSOs mobilized public support and spearheaded resistance against autocratic rule.
- 2) Examine CSOs' strategies to counter fear, repression, and censorship.
- 3) Evaluate the broader impact of civil society on political transitions, democratic movements, and public empowerment during the revolution.

The study seeks to illuminate how CSOs facilitated political change in a repressive environment by addressing these objectives.

Literature Review

Civil society organizations (CSOs) role in political transitions has been widely debated, particularly in autocratic or semi-autocratic contexts. As intermediaries between the state and the public, CSOs are often portrayed as catalysts for socio-political transformation. This review explores key civil society theories, examines global case studies, and identifies gaps addressed in this study, focusing on Bangladesh's 2024 July Revolution.

Civil society's impact on democracy has long been studied. Tocqueville highlights how civic associations foster social cohesion and enable collective action, strengthening democratic values (Tocqueville 2002). Similarly, Putnam's (1993) social capital theory emphasizes civic networks' role in promoting trust, cooperation, and good governance. His analysis of Italy demonstrated that regions with robust civil networks had better governance outcomes.



In *Bowling Alone* Putnam (2000) linked declining civic engagement to weakened social cohesion and diminished collective action. The concept of 'political opportunity structures,' developed initially by Eisinger (1973) and later expanded by McAdam (1999) and Tarrow (2011), highlights how CSOs use political openings to organize and challenge authoritarianism, while Tilly (2004) underscores their role in collective action. Bermeo (1997) argues that CSOs erode authoritarian rule through sustained activism and protests, mediating between the state and the public. These frameworks are critical to understanding CSOs' role in promoting democratic transitions.

CSOs have played decisive roles in global political transitions, which Huntington explained in his article on Democracy's Third Wave started in the late twentieth century (Huntington 1991). During the third wave of democracy, the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, youth groups and digital activists coordinated protests against Hosni Mubarak's oppressive regime, leveraging social media to amplify dissent (Tufekci 2017). Though Egypt's democratic transition faltered, the movement showcased CSOs' ability to challenge authoritarian structures. Other examples include Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution and the Euromaidan Revolution in 2014 (Diuk 2014). Youths-led CSOs, including students, NGOs, and opposition parties, planned mass protests against electoral fraud, advocating for fair elections and reforms (Wilson 2005; Kuzio 2006). Coalition-building and non-violent resistance were key to their success. In addition, the second wave of democratic transitions in Central and Eastern Europe, known as color revolutions, has notably contributed to the collapse of the post-communist authoritarian regimes in the face of opposition CSO mobilization (Way 2008). Similarly, in Hungary, internal dynamics made by CSOs fuelled the series of Round Table Talks, and debates between outgoing and incoming political elites, and external support materialized the peaceful and non-violent transition to democracy from authoritarian soviet influence in 1990, which enabled Hungary to form an independent democratic third republic (Dayioğlu 2024). However, this process initially started through the profound Hungarian Revolution in 1956, which was the first successful step in the democratic transition (Furlow et al. 1996; Matthews 2007).

In Latin America, CSOs helped dismantle dictatorships in Chile and Argentina during the late 20th century. Grassroots movements in Chile, particularly the student protests of 2006 and 2011, demanded educational reforms and political accountability, pressuring governments toward democracy (Donoso 2016). Argentina's mass mobilizations similarly propelled the country from authoritarianism to democratic governance (Oxhorn 1994). However, not all CSO actions foster democracy. Some inadvertently strengthen authoritarian regimes through inaction or factionalism (Hellmeier–Bernhard 2023). In Bangladesh, CSOs have sometimes aligned with political factions, undermining their independence (Tasnim 2017). Repression forced many activists into exile, paralyzing domestic civil society and limiting its effectiveness, though the movements for democracy had not ended.



In the recent era, digital platforms have transformed civic engagement, particularly for exiled Bangladeshi dissidents. Social media enables activists to maintain connections with their homeland, amplify voices internationally, and mobilize against authoritarianism (Kabir 2021; Torres–Beltran 2023). Exiled activists advocate for foreign intervention, reflecting their shifting networks and international engagements (Esberg–Siedhoff 2022). These platforms helped to disseminate personal and practical narratives and foster civic participation by capturing a broader audience (Murru 2017), gaining external support, and fostering internal dynamics to uphold the spirit of revolution.

The July 2024 up-ringing initially called an ‘anti-discrimination student movement’ sometimes it was called the ‘Quota Reform Movement,’ initiated by students, marked a turning point in Bangladesh’s political landscape—these protests targeted reforming government job quotas. However, the government’s attitude, rhetoric, and excessive force on the protesters ignited the united diverse social groups and galvanized public support to turn the movement into a revolution. People from all social classes, political parties, groups, CSOs and their all-out initiatives, digital activists, and grassroots organizations become actively engaged to sustain the revolution with a one-point demand to oust the autocrat Prime Minister (Schnell 2023; Sakib 2020). The efforts from all sides including CSOs highlighted the importance of transparency and accountability in mobilizing anti-corruption campaigns against the autocratic government (Landell–Mills 1999). In this case, social media has become a powerful tool, enabling CSOs to bypass state censorship and reach broader audiences (Roy 2019). However, challenges like clientelism and repression complicated these efforts, requiring nuanced strategies for effective mobilization.

Despite extensive CSOs’ roles in political changes, literature and research on Bangladesh’s civil society is limited. The literature highlights the crucial role of CSOs in assembling civic resistance yet also warns of co-optation risks and varying degrees of success in achieving lasting democratic transitions (Bermeo 1997; Tufekci 2017). While past movements like the 1990 pro-democracy protests have been studied (Uddin 2006; Katsiaficas 2011), there is little analysis of how modern CSOs confront autocratic governance. This gap is evident in the context of digital activism, youth-led movements, and student protests, all central to the 2024 July Revolution. Unlike earlier movements, the Revolution showcased a high level of coordination among diverse actors and strategic digital platform use.

While existing literature has focused on the international role of CSOs in challenging autocratic regimes, it is equally central to examine the local socio-political context within which these organizations function. Bangladesh’s political dynamics, characterized by a fusion of religious, ethnic, and political complexities, influence how CSOs can operate, mobilize, and advocate for change. The internal political conflicts, particularly between secular and religious factions, often complicate the ability of CSOs to present a unified front against authoritarian rule.

This research examines how CSOs supported the July Revolution and navigated repression, contributing to understanding political change in South Asia.



Building on frameworks from Tocqueville, Putnam, Tarrow, and others, it situates the Revolution within global civil society dynamics. The study underscores CSOs' transformative potential in repressive regimes, offering lessons for democratic transitions worldwide. Addressing gaps in existing literature highlights how modern CSOs can adapt to evolving political landscapes and act as catalysts for democratic transition and ousted autocrats.

Comparative Perspectives

The role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Bangladesh's July 2024 Revolution mirrors similar movements in other countries, offering compelling comparative insights. This study adopts a comparative lens, examining how CSO-led mobilizations in Ukraine, Myanmar, and Hong Kong share similarities with Bangladesh's revolution, particularly in digital activism and coalition-building. After years of stagnation under Hasina's autocratic regime, Bangladeshi CSOs were revitalized by the digital mobilization of diverse societal groups. This shift, catalyzed by anti-discrimination protests and the job quota reform movement, underscores how digital platforms can reignite civic action in repressive contexts.

Bangladesh's movement has striking parallels with Myanmar's anti-coup protests of 2021. During Myanmar's Burmese Spring Revolution, CSOs resisted military rule and organized nationwide demonstrations characterized by marches, chants, and potent symbolism (Thorner 2024). However, repression took a heavy toll, with leaders arrested, exiled, or driven underground. Like Bangladesh, Myanmar's protests were marked by mass arrests, internet shutdowns, and violent crackdowns, yet the involvement of students, youth, and professionals provided critical momentum for nonviolent resistance (Kyaw 2024).

Similarly, the July 2024 Revolution in Bangladesh shares key characteristics with Hong Kong's pro-democracy protests of 2019–2020. Hong Kong's CSOs were pivotal in mobilizing mass demonstrations, exemplified by the anti-extradition protests led by the Civil Human Rights Front. Various professional groups, including medical staff, lawyers, and airline workers, independently organized rallies to amplify their demands (CEC China 2022). As in Bangladesh, social media became an essential tool for organizing protests and engaging international allies, demonstrating the power of digital connectivity in modern movements.

Sudan's civil uprising of 2018–2019 offers another pertinent comparison. The movement that ousted Omar al-Bashir saw grassroots organizations and professional associations, particularly those led by doctors and lawyers, play a transformative role. Decades of military rule had weakened Sudanese CSOs, but their resurgence during the protests proved pivotal. The Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) coordinated national efforts, while local resistance committees ensured widespread participation. These grassroots strategies fostered resilience and a shared sense of purpose among protesters, mirroring the decentralized but cohesive nature of Bangladesh's 2024 uprising (Zunes 2021).



The Arab Spring of 2011 also serves as a historical touchstone. For example, civil society groups in Egypt leveraged social media to bypass state-controlled media and coordinate massive protests against Hosni Mubarak’s regime (Tufekci 2017). This blueprint of digital mobilization informed CSOs worldwide, including those in Bangladesh, as they utilized similar strategies to galvanize public action and circumvent government repression.

The Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004–2005) further highlights the strategic role of civil society in challenging authoritarianism. Ukrainian CSOs were central to organizing protests against electoral fraud, effectively combining grassroots mobilization with international lobbying to sustain their efforts (Kuzio 2006). They also fostered a collective identity among diverse groups, a dynamic echoed in Bangladesh, where CSOs challenged the legitimacy of the 12th National Election on January 7, 2024. Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) reported widespread electoral violations, including excessive campaign expenditures averaging Tk 1.5 crore per candidate (TBS 2024). This prompted prominent CSOs to spearhead protests demanding fair elections, underscoring the parallels between the two movements.

These comparative perspectives reveal a recurring theme: CSOs, even under repressive regimes, can galvanize public dissent through innovative strategies, grassroots organization, and digital mobilization. Whether in Myanmar, Hong Kong, Sudan, Egypt, or Ukraine, civil society has consistently been a cornerstone of resistance, and Bangladesh’s July 2024 Revolution exemplifies this enduring legacy.

The following table presents the comparative outlines of different revolutions throughout the world:

Protest/ Revolution	Country	Opposing or Ousting Ruler	Key Issues	Role of CSOs
Myanmar Spring Revolution	Myanmar	Myanmar Army	Long-standing military rule, ethnic conflicts, economic inequality, lack of political freedom, and human rights abuses.	Coordinated nationwide protests, launched a Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) involving civil servants and healthcare workers, supported armed resistance by ethnic groups, and aided the formation of People’s Defence Forces (PDFs).
Hong Kong’s Pro-Democracy Protests	Hong Kong	Hong Kong Government (under Chinese influence)	Erosion of autonomy, lack of democratic reforms, controversial extradition bill, police brutality, and concerns over Chinese influence.	Organized mass protests, led civil disobedience campaigns, occupied public spaces, initiated general strikes, and conducted international advocacy efforts.



Protest/ Revolution	Country	Opposing or Ousting Ruler	Key Issues	Role of CSOs
Sudan's Civil Uprising	Sudan	Omar al-Bashir's regime, later the Transitional Military Council (TMC)	Authoritarianism, economic hardship, corruption, ethnic tensions, and human rights abuses.	Facilitated mass protests, spearheaded civil disobedience and general strikes, formed resistance committees, and leveraged international advocacy.
Arab Spring (Anti-government Protests and uprising)	Multiple Countries (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen)	Authoritarian regimes	Authoritarianism, economic hardship, corruption, lack of political freedom, human rights abuses, and social inequality.	Mobilized mass protests, utilized social media for coordination, led uprisings, and engaged in varying levels of CSO and political movement involvement.
Egypt's 2011 Revolution	Egypt	Hosni Mubarak's regime	Authoritarianism, economic hardship, corruption, lack of political freedom, and police brutality.	Organized mass protests (e.g., Tahrir Square), leveraged social media for mobilization, conducted general strikes and engaged in widespread civil disobedience.
Ukraine's Orange Revolution	Ukraine	Viktor Yanukovich's regime (alleged electoral fraud)	Electoral fraud, Russian influence, political corruption, and lack of democratic reforms.	Orchestrated mass protests, promoted civil disobedience, boycotted elections, and garnered international pressure and observation.

This above comparison underscores how CSOs in various autocratic settings—such as Myanmar, Sudan, and Egypt—employ similar tactics but face different contextual challenges. In Bangladesh, the intersection of secularism and religious identity introduces a unique complexity, as political and religious factions are often intertwined with CSOs’ work. The religious-secular divide, specifically, has shaped the contours of civil society activism, sometimes acting as a barrier for CSOs that are perceived to challenge the religious norms prevalent in society.

The 2024 July Revolution offers a powerful example of how civil society can erode authoritarian rule through collective action, strategic mobilization, and innovative use of technology and social media. Its lessons extend beyond Bangladesh, offering a framework for understanding how civil society can foster democratic transitions in repressive contexts worldwide. By building solidarity networks, challenging oppressive power structures, and advocating for inclusive governance, civil society remains an essential force in the global fight for democracy and human rights.



Secondary Data Analysis: A systematic approach was applied to collect and analyze secondary data from 2013 to 2024, incorporating diverse sources to ensure a comprehensive understanding of Bangladesh’s political landscape. The data sources included media reports from domestic and international news outlets, documenting key events, public reactions, and government responses. Civil society publications such as press releases, policy briefs, and protest materials were examined to capture advocacy efforts and narratives. Social media content, particularly posts from activists and civil society organizations (CSOs), was analyzed to understand digital mobilization strategies. Additionally, academic studies and government documents provided scholarly insights and official perspectives on political developments (Corti et al. 2019).

The study specifically considered journal articles, crime reports, human rights reports, electronic and print media reports, and police statistics that detailed various aspects of political affairs, conflicts, student movements, state oppression, and human rights violations. Particular attention was given to reports on state-sponsored crimes, attacks on journalists, Islamic scholars, minority communities, CSO members, teachers, human rights activists, NGO workers, social media influencers, and political dissidents. The 2013–2024 period was chosen as it represents Bangladesh’s full transition into an authoritarian regime, although signs of this shift have been evident since 2009.

Analytical Framework

The study employed content and thematic analysis to systematically interpret data from secondary sources, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and Expert Interviews (EIs). Content analysis was used to categorize and interpret data, identifying recurring themes and patterns to uncover underlying meanings. This approach ensured a structured examination of media reports, policy documents, social media content, and government publications.

Thematic analysis was applied to explore qualitative insights from FGDs and EIs, focusing on key themes such as strategies for mobilization and public engagement, resistance to repression and censorship, digital activism, and the broader influence of civil society on political transitions. The study provided a nuanced understanding of political resistance and advocacy efforts by examining how activists and organizations navigated challenges.

The analysis followed an iterative process, where insights from one method refined and complemented the interpretation of others. Integrating multiple data sources ensured a comprehensive and cohesive understanding of the evolving political landscape (Braun–Clarke 2006).



Results

This study reveals the critical role civil society organizations (CSOs) played in the 2024 July Revolution in Bangladesh. Based on FGDs, expert interviews (EIs), and analyses of secondary sources, the study identifies how CSOs' strategies, challenges, and achievements in catalyzing and sustaining the revolution, which led to significant political change, are discussed below.

Rising Tensions and Development of the Movement

1. Initiation of the Movement (January–June 2024)

Political instability has plagued Bangladesh since colonial rule (1757–1947) and the Pakistan era (1947–1971), deeply affecting society. Economic crises, poverty, unemployment, and corruption fuel ongoing unrest (Peiris 1998). Conflicts stem from ideological clashes, weak institutions, power struggles, labor disputes, and corruption, which criminalize politics and obstruct good governance (Ahmed 2004; Bateson 2012; Daly 2002; Priyangika 2000; Wight 1978).

Under British rule, Bengalis in East Bengal faced discrimination as a "non-martial" race, while Pakistan's oligarchic state denied them fundamental rights (Choudhury 1972). The struggle for equality led to the 1971 Liberation War, but these ideals remain unfulfilled (CPD 2011; Khan 2014; Turk 2023). However, the country was on the democratic track until 2006, starting from 1991, and then it became vulnerable again. From 2007–2008, Bangladesh was ruled by a military-backed caretaker government and entered a non-democratic process. This caretaker government arranged a national election at the end of 2008 and handed over the power to the newly elected government in 2009. But, unfortunately, since 2009, Bangladesh has faced increasing autocracy, with non-participatory elections (2014, 2018, 2024) undermining public trust (Paris 2022). Political violence peaked in 2013, causing 750 deaths and 30,000 injuries in 3,800 incidents (Suykens–Islam 2015). The 2018 election saw killings, disappearances, and mass arrests, worsening human rights abuses (Aljazeera 2018; Safi et al. 2018; Schlein 2019; Vaughn 2020).

Over 13 years, 2,644 people died from state-sponsored abuses, and millions faced false charges (Human Rights Watch 2023a; Odhikar 2022a, 2022b, 2023; Rahman 2023; The Daily Star 2023). Rising tensions before the 2024 election (ACLEDD 2023) have fuelled political intolerance, urban unrest, corruption, favoritism, restricted freedoms, and abuse of power (Human Rights Watch 2023a, 2023b). A significant number of human rights activists, religious leaders, minority people, journalists, political leaders, teachers, students, and members of CSOs were thrown in prison for expressing their thoughts, that against government oppression. Most importantly, in the last 15 years, people of Bangladesh from all classes and professions, including all media and journalists, lost their freedom; the country was just seized by a few people under the authoritarian rule of the Prime Minister.



Therefore, CSOs and all other stakeholders waited for a common event or platform to revolt and restore the democracy and freedom of the country (*EIs*). Finally, the abuse of the government job quota system severely affected meritorious job seekers, and fuelled student agitation and a movement for quota reform. Students from all levels, public and private universities, and schools and colleges, became actively involved with this movement. CSOs, including other social groups and political parties, utilized the opportunity and became instrumental in supporting and accelerating the movement, shaping key moments, and responding to events in different phases (*EIs*). In early 2024, CSOs like Odhikar and Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) warned of eroding civil liberties, including threats to press freedom and judicial independence (FGD-2). Advocacy intensified in March, targeting international stakeholders. Human Rights Watch amplified CSOs' concerns, calling for scrutiny of Bangladesh's democratic practices. Grassroots efforts began to grow. Small-scale protests against political corruption, discrimination, and speech restrictions laid the groundwork for more significant movements. Advocacy campaigns and CSO-backed student groups slowly raised public awareness (FGD-3). However, the government did not consider student demand and movement as a serious issue because they learned that they could manage everything by using excessive force, threats, filing false cases, and mass arrests when necessary.

Consequently, by May, public engagement surged as CSOs broadened their coalition to include labor unions and university students. Mass protests became common, fuelled by digital mobilization through online platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp, which bypassed state-controlled media. This surge was driven by expanding state repression, particularly the restoration of a debated job quota for freedom fighters' descendants, political rhetoric, and attacks on students in different places, which sparked national outrage (The Hindu Bureau 2024).

2. Heightened Repression and Counter-Strategies (July 1–25 2024)

In early July, student-led blockades disrupted transportation networks. On July 15, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina sparked outrage by likening protesters to 1971 war collaborators, escalating tensions. Violent clashes followed, with six deaths on July 16 and over 300 injuries across campuses. Amid heightened repression, the government shut down schools, universities, and internet access while imposing censorship. Students organized a nationwide "shutdown," and CSOs shifted to encrypted communication tools like Signal and VPNs to evade surveillance. International attention grew as organizations like Amnesty International and the United Nations condemned state violence. From July 1 to July 25, over 2,000 protesters were arrested, and police brutality intensified, with dozens killed in clashes (FGD-2). Despite repression, CSOs maintained their efforts. Decentralized coordination allowed them to sustain momentum, documenting abuses and rallying international support. On July 21, the Supreme Court ruled against the quota reinstatement, but the decision failed to appease protesters, who rejected the new government circular (The Hindu Bureau 2024).



3. *Pinnacle of the Revolution (July 26–August 5, 2024)*

The movement peaked in late July, with widespread protests despite nationwide curfews and internet shutdowns. Diplomats from 14 Western countries condemned the excessive use of force. The government restored limited internet access but banned social media on July 28 (The Daily Star 2024b). On August 1, the government banned *Jamaat-e-Islami* (political party) and its *student wing*, accusing them of links to terrorism. Meanwhile, six arrested protest top leaders were released. Students issued a one-point demand on August 3, calling for Hasina's resignation and the formation of a "national government." Violence surged on August 4, with deadly clashes in Dhaka and 21 other districts, resulting in over 93 deaths. In Sirajganj, a mob killed 13 police officers, sparking further chaos. The government imposed an indefinite curfew, but protesters called for a final march to Dhaka (Star Digital Report 2024). On August 5, more than tens of thousands defied the curfew and gathered near the Prime Minister's residence. Overwhelmed by the scale of dissent, the army allowed protesters to advance. Later that day, Sheikh Hasina resigned and fled to India. The army chief announced the formation of an interim government, marking the revolution's conclusion (Adler 2024; Reuters 2024).

Strategic Role of Civil Society in Bangladesh's July 2024 Revolution

Mobilizing Public Protests and Demonstrations: Civil society organizations (CSOs) such as Odhikar, Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), and Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) played a critical role in mobilizing public protests. These organizations formed a coalition that united student groups, labor unions, and women's movements to challenge the government's legitimacy. A "ripple effect" strategy was employed to coordinate protests across various demographic and professional groups, as explained by a CSO leader (Els-1). While mobilization endeavors were indeed facilitated by the collective action of different societal sectors, the political, religious, and ethnic tensions that have long existed in Bangladesh were constantly at play. For instance, religious groups often found themselves in direct opposition to CSOs advocating for secular democratic principles, further complicating the efforts of CSOs to unite various groups. By ensuring peaceful yet impactful demonstrations, the coalition garnered widespread support. The involvement of student unions, labor groups, and intellectuals further broadened the movement's base and sustained its momentum (FGD-2).

Lobbying for International Support: CSOs also engaged in advocacy to internationalize their cause, highlighting the government's repressive actions. They effectively contacted global human rights organizations, diplomatic missions, and international media. This approach attracted international attention and heightened pressure on the government to address demands, demonstrating the effectiveness of coordinated global lobbying efforts (Els-2).



Media and Digital Strategy: Social media and independent journalism were indispensable to the CSOs' strategy. Following the unlawful arrest of student leaders, CSOs launched widespread media campaigns, which sparked public outrage. Both traditional outlets, such as newspapers and television, and digital platforms, including WhatsApp and Facebook, were used to disseminate information, counter state narratives, and sustain the movement's momentum. Social media, in particular, proved vital in mobilizing the youth, enabling real-time updates, and organizing flash protests (Tufekci 2017).

Legal Assistance and Human Rights Monitoring: To counteract government crackdowns, CSOs set up legal aid networks for detained activists and systematically documented incidents of state violence. This documentation informed international human rights bodies about the government's abuses, ensuring the regime's actions were scrutinized globally.

Resistance to Autocracy

Civil society organizations (CSOs) displayed remarkable resilience in countering the government's repressive tactics during the revolution. Despite facing censorship, arrests, intimidation, and violence, they adopted strategic measures to sustain the movement and expose the regime's autocratic practices. Overcoming government censorship proved to be a significant challenge. Authorities restricted access to media and digital platforms, attempting to suppress the dissemination of information. However, CSOs effectively circumvented these restrictions by employing encrypted messaging apps, virtual private networks (VPNs), and decentralized communication systems. These strategies allowed activists to coordinate protests and maintain the flow of information, ensuring the movement's continuity even in the face of severe blackouts (Diamond 2019).

The regime's use of arrests and intimidation against protest leaders was another major obstacle. In response, CSOs established robust legal support systems, such as a pro bono network organized by human rights lawyer Sara Hossain, to defend detained activists (Els-4). Rapid response teams were also formed to monitor police actions and provide necessary assistance, ensuring that protest leaders could continue their work despite threats. These efforts played a crucial role in maintaining the morale and cohesion of demonstrators (Lewis 2011). The physical attacks on activists and leaders, particularly in June and July, posed yet another challenge. CSOs created emergency hotlines and evacuation protocols to address this, enabling threatened members to relocate to safe locations. Such measures minimized disruptions and reinforced solidarity within the movement.

Prominent voices in Bangladeshi society have long criticized the Awami League government's authoritarian practices. Dr. Kamal Hossain, an eminent jurist, condemned the government's corruption and called for its removal, emphasizing the suffering caused by its autocratic misrule (Prothom Alo 2021). Human rights activist



Sultana Kamal highlighted the need for a society rooted in justice and dignity, envisioning a future where human rights prevail over violent power struggles (Prothom Alo, 2024). Similarly, Mahfuz Anam, editor of *The Daily Star*, lamented the party's detachment from the people, observing that the Awami League has strayed far from its revolutionary roots (Anam 2024).

Economists and intellectuals have also criticized the government's policies. Dr. Anu Muhammad highlighted the regime's preference for elite interests over public welfare, describing its development agenda as unsustainable and unjust (*The Daily Star* 2024d). He further condemned the unprecedented bloodshed during the movement, noting the government's failure to suppress the protests, which drew spontaneous support from across society (*The Daily Star* 2024a). Academic and artist Naeem Mohaiemen emphasized the regime's consolidation of power through media suppression and boycotted elections, underscoring the autocratic nature of governance since 2014 (Mohaiemen 2024). Journalist Shariar Ibrahim detailed systematic repression tactics, such as extrajudicial killings and judicial manipulation, which dismantled political opposition while fueling public support for non-political protests (Ibrahim 2024).

The legitimacy of the Awami League's rule came under intense scrutiny during the protests. July's demonstrations highlighted mass killings, detentions, and disappearances, raising grave questions about the regime's political mandate. Filmmaker Mostofa Sarwar Farooki likened the government to a Nazi-like force, warning of its potential for destruction if left unchecked (*The Daily Star* 2024c). Prominent economists and organizations have further criticized the regime's autocratic tendencies. Dr. Iftekharuzzaman of Transparency International Bangladesh described the parliament as a "puppet show stage" due to its lack of active opposition (Islam 2016). Renowned economist Rehman Sobhan criticized the country's elite-dominated and deeply unjust society (*Dhaka Tribune* 2017). Dr. Badiul Alam Majumdar of Shujan highlighted the absence of political accountability, noting how restrictive laws undermined freedoms and violated people's rights (Islam 2016).

International organizations such as Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) have documented Bangladesh's democratic decline. Since 2014, the country has been labeled a "flawed democracy", with observers frequently describing the regime as highly autocratic (Ibrahim 2024). This resistance to autocracy in Bangladesh illustrates the resilience and creativity of civil society in challenging authoritarianism. Through innovative strategies, legal advocacy, and unwavering determination, CSOs have resisted repression and laid the groundwork for future democratic reforms.

Public Engagement

Engaging Urban Youth and Students: Recognizing the disillusionment of urban youth and students with the lack of democratic freedoms and uncertainty



of getting a job due to the quota system, CSOs designed targeted social media campaigns to mobilize this demographic. The campaigns resonated with young audiences, fostering solidarity and participation (FGD-2).

Digital Mobilization: Social media emerged as a powerful tool for CSOs to expand their reach to everyone to join the movement. Activists employed hashtags, viral videos, and live streams to engage with a broader audience, especially young people disconnected from traditional forms of activism. These digital initiatives created a sense of community and maintained the movement's momentum, even when physical gatherings were disrupted due to government crackdowns (Els-3; Tufekci 2017). CSOs devised pointed social media campaigns to mobilize bred millions of online engagements, with hashtags like #QuotaReform and #Bangladesh-Protests trending nationwide, drawing significant participation from students and professionals alike (Sakib 2020).

Mobilizing Intellectuals and Academics: CSOs actively engaged influential academics, artists, and intellectuals, emphasizing the necessity of collective resistance. Public figures endorsed the movement, participated in rallies, and used their platforms to critique the regime, enhancing the protests' legitimacy and broadening their appeal (FGD-3).

Discussion

The study summarizes in this discussion how CSOs in Bangladesh undermined autocratic power, empowered citizens, overcame challenges, and contributed to a global dialogue on democratic struggles.

By orchestrating protests, leveraging media, and building cross-societal coalitions, civil society organizations (CSOs) in Bangladesh galvanized widespread support, leading to the regime's eventual collapse.

Impact on Autocracy

The mobilization of civil society was central to weakening Bangladesh's autocratic regime. Through coordinated protests, international lobbying, and digital campaigns, CSOs played a crucial role in challenging the government and pushing for tangible changes in governance. Large-scale demonstrations, particularly those led by students and youth organizations, disrupted the government's narrative and exposed the fragility of autocratic control when confronted with unified public resistance (FGD-3). The research underscores the importance of civil society in maintaining accountability and facilitating democratic transitions (Carothers 1999; Diamond 2008). CSOs in Bangladesh framed the discourse around democracy, human rights, and anti-discrimination, which drew international attention and amplified pressure on the government.



This pressure resulted in significant government concessions, such as the call for early elections, as reported by a CSO leader (Els-5). These outcomes highlight how organized civil society can destabilize autocratic regimes and create fractures in their power. Participants in the focus group discussions noted that these concessions included reducing censorship and lifting restrictions on assembly, signaling shifts toward democratic practices.

The July Revolution also demonstrated civil society's ability to influence governance, setting precedents for civic activism that would have long-term effects. A key achievement was the resignation of prominent government officials, signaling the collapse of the autocratic structure. Scholars like Schock (2005) contend that nonviolent resistance can have lasting effects on political systems, creating conditions for the re-emergence of democratic values.

The aftermath of the revolution, marked by increased political engagement and international support for democratic reforms, underscores civil society's role in challenging autocracy and reshaping political dynamics. However, the revolution created only a temporary democratic opening. The future of Bangladesh's political landscape depends on whether civil society can sustain its momentum and continue holding the government accountable (FGD-2). This mirrors patterns seen in other countries, such as Egypt and Ukraine, where civil society's influence in post-revolution governance has been more limited (Tufekci 2017; Kuzio 2006).

Role of Fear and Empowerment

One of the most significant impacts of Bangladesh's civil society was its ability to dismantle the culture of fear imposed by the autocratic government. Authoritarian regimes often rely on fear to suppress dissent, using threats of violence, imprisonment, and censorship to create a sense of powerlessness among citizens. However, as Scott (1990) suggests, fear-based governance is regularly challenged by collective civic action. In Bangladesh, CSOs were crucial in empowering citizens, offering platforms for individuals to voice grievances and collaborate despite the looming threat of repression.

Through strategic communication, CSOs highlighted stories of courage and resilience, effectively reducing the perceived risks of participation. They built solidarity networks and encouraged broader participation in the movement (Carothers–Brechenmacher 2014). Empowerment, in this context, was both symbolic and practical. Focus group participants reported that seeing community leaders, students, and intellectuals publicly speak out against the regime diminished the widespread fear of retaliation. Visible acts of defiance and public solidarity eroded the government's psychological control over the population, shifting the power dynamics.

Through education and solidarity, empowerment fostered an environment where citizens felt encouraged to act, as Scott (1990) describes, in the face of power, thereby establishing a culture of resistance.



Digital platforms and social media played a vital role, allowing CSOs to circumvent traditional censorship and reach a broad audience. By amplifying the protesters' stories and emphasizing the struggle's collective nature, CSOs turned fear into solidarity, making it easier for citizens to resist without feeling isolated (Tufekci 2017).

This empowerment was particularly evident among urban youth and students, who played a central role in the revolution. The ability of civil society to mobilize these groups was crucial in overcoming government oppression. Their participation fuelled a new generation of activists who were less intimidated by the regime's threats, thus sustaining the momentum of the revolution despite government crackdowns.

Limitations and Challenges

While the revolution highlighted the strengths of Bangladesh's civil society, it also exposed several limitations and challenges. These included internal divisions, financial constraints, and harsh government repression. Focus group participants noted that CSOs often faced resource shortages, exacerbated by government crackdowns that restricted funding access and led to the frequent arrest of leaders.

Internal divisions also posed challenges. While many groups were united in their opposition to the autocratic regime, they differed in strategies, goals, and methods of resistance. Some organizations favored nonviolent protest, while others advocated more confrontational tactics, leading to internal conflicts that sometimes hindered the movement's cohesion.

Externally, the regime's repression was a significant obstacle. Violent crackdowns, mass arrests, internet blackouts, and media restrictions severely limited the CSOs' ability to organize and mobilize effectively. However, civil society's adaptability allowed it to continue its efforts, using underground networks and encrypted communication to circumvent these restrictions (Lewis 2011).

The immediate goal of ousting the autocratic government was achieved, but the findings suggest that CSOs lacked a coherent strategy for post-revolution governance. This uncertainty following political victory is not unique to Bangladesh. However, it mirrors other revolutionary movements' challenges, where the revolution's triumph often leads to confusion about the future direction (Kuzio 2006).

Broader Implications

The July Revolution in Bangladesh has had far-reaching implications for understanding the role of civil society in challenging autocratic regimes, both locally and globally. It demonstrates that even in intense repression, CSOs were crucial in facilitating political transitions. Through effective organization, grassroots mobilization, and framing the narrative of resistance, CSOs rallied support against the autocratic regime.



This experience aligns with global movements such as the 2011 Arab Spring and Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution, where civil society was central in organizing mass protests and advocating for democratic reforms (Kuzio 2006; Tufekci 2017).

Bangladesh's revolution also underscores the transformative power of digital tools in modern civic resistance. CSOs leveraged digital platforms to communicate with local and international audiences, ensuring transparency and amplifying their impact. This mirrors the findings by Shirky (2011) and Tufekci (2017), who argue that digital communication empowers civil society by offering alternative platforms for organizing and spreading information, even under conditions of censorship.

On a global scale, this case highlights the growing importance of CSOs in resisting autocracy and advancing human rights from Sudan to Hong Kong (Howard–Hussain 2011). Despite facing severe repression and resource limitations, Bangladesh's civil society showed how collective action could weaken authoritarian regimes, offering broader lessons for democratic movements worldwide. It suggests that when supported by digital platforms, civil society can be a potent force for political transformation.

While the July Revolution sparked immediate political change, it also raised questions about the long-term sustainability of civil society's impact. The revolution's success highlights the need for civil society movements to balance short-term mobilization with long-term institutional reform to ensure lasting democratic change. The challenge is ensuring these changes lead to a stable and enduring democratic system. This lesson is vital for other regions where democratic freedoms are threatened (Bermeo 1997). The Bangladesh revolution illustrates that civil society can drive significant political change despite severe government repression, emphasizing its continued role as a key force for democracy and human rights.

Conclusion

This study has found that CSOs played a pivotal role in overthrowing Bangladesh's autocratic regime during the 2024 July Revolution, culminating in the departure of long-standing leader Sheikh Hasina. The findings exhibit that CSOs were focal on mobilizing public dissent, challenging state repression, and shaping the revolution's trajectory. By leveraging grassroots protests, digital tools, and international advocacy, they successfully challenged autocratic rule and played a central role in one of Bangladesh's most significant political transitions. They created space for collective action, empowered citizens, and fostered a culture of resistance, even amid harsh repression. The revolution's success also highlights the importance of creating inclusive platforms for dialogue between civil society, political parties, and governmental institutions. This factor is particularly crucial in Bangladesh, where ethnic, religious, and political fault lines often hinder collaborative efforts.



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