

July 30, 2024

History's Key Role in Bangladesh Students' Deadly Protests

By: Samata Biswas

In their struggle against authoritarian rule, Bangladesh's students rely on their history's many artefacts.

To better comprehend the magnitude of the [violent protests](#) that have rocked Bangladesh, a look into the nation's past is necessary.

As thousands of young men and women confront armed police on the streets in their fight over job quotas, laying siege to some of Dhaka's historically and politically sensitive landmarks, they have sent a clear message to the Awami League government that they are prepared also to “[excavate the politics of memory](#)”.

This reclamation of the past had shaped many of the Bangladeshi people's struggle – against the brutal Pakistani regime and then finally against their own brand of military dictatorships and political autocrats – and found reflection and resonance in their attempt to reclaim the nation 53 years after its birth.

|| The current protests are sure to change the way politics is done in the region.

At the heart of the latest round of conflict is the reservation of government jobs for freedom fighters (*muktijoddha*) and their descendants. This quota was originally set at 10% before being scrapped by the Hasina government in 2018, only to be raised to 30% via a High Court order in June. As violence spiralled, the Supreme Court hurriedly stepped in on 21 July to [scale back the 'quota' to 5%](#).

At the time of writing, nearly 200 protesters have been killed and thousands more injured in the clashes. While there is no certainty about what comes next, or whether the present government will be able to regain the trust and confidence of the Bangladeshi people, the current protests are sure to change the way politics is done in the region.

The students' agitation, coupled with the large and vocal Bangladeshi diaspora generated a new rhetoric of political articulation that speaks in the name of the nation.

Falling back on history

[Commentators](#) agree that Hasina's loose remark on the protests in a 14 July press conference on who deserves reservation in jobs – [descendants of freedom fighters or razakars](#) (East Bengali militia which colluded with the Pakistan army during the liberation war) — united and mobilised the protesters to occupy the streets.

The memory and legacy of the muktijoddhas form the central leitmotif in Bangladesh's history – the genocidal violence that Bangladesh encountered in 1971 often obfuscating the memory of the 1947 Partition's convulsions that gave birth to Pakistan and India. Any reference, vocal or written, to razakar, is antithetical to the idea of Bangladesh and is understood as invective.

Hasina's mocking reference to the students as razakars had an unexpected consequence. Thousands of youngsters changed their social media handles to razakar, and they raised slogans against this deliberate attempt to malign and insult their legitimate demands.

|| The appropriation of the term razakar enabled young people to overcome what they considered to be the restrictive legacy of the liberation war, and helped frame their own political subjectivities.

They asked, who named them razakars? Is it anyone other than the dictator, against whom they agitate? This bout of creativity implicated the PM as an authoritarian ruler and delegitimised the epithet.

The terrible memories of the past were resurrected. Bangladesh's celebrated author [Muhammad Zafar Iqbal](#), proclaimed in an open letter that he would not set foot on Dhaka University campus ever again, lest he has to encounter the new razakars.

But for others, the appropriation of the term *razakar* enabled young people to overcome what they considered to be the restrictive legacy of the liberation war, and helped frame their own political subjectivities beyond the shadow of 1971 and the 1952 [language movement](#), also led by university students, protesting the Pakistani establishment’s refusal to recognise Bangla as an official language.

This is echoed by the students’ proclamation “[we have not witnessed 1971](#), we have not witnessed 1952, but we are witnessing 2024, our freedom struggle.” University and college students were at the forefront of both 1952 and 1971 struggles, making history by [unfurling the national flag even before the declaration of independence](#).

|| “We have not witnessed 1971, we have not witnessed 1952, but we are witnessing 2024, our freedom struggle.”

Occupying streets and public spaces was a key students’ strategy in the past as it has been more recently. In 2018, school students took up the cause of [road safety](#) – after the death of two students in traffic accidents – by occupying streets as part of a collective agenda to reform the nation.

In the ongoing agitation, the universities and their associated hostels turned into centres of intense student activity and planning, as they did during the language movement, the liberation war and the 1990 agitation that brought down then military strongman General H.M. Ershad.

The universities of the past – as they are in the present – were spaces where students of both genders were attacked and sheltered. They were also the institutions that were first to be shut down by the authorities to nip the demonstrations in the bud.

Flag as a symbol

Bangladesh’s storied national flag has been ubiquitous by its presence in the [images](#) associated with the ongoing demonstrations.

On both Instagram and Facebook, video clips show the protesters holding aloft the flag, in marches, demonstrations, or sit ins. Others show the students standing precariously on the edge of flyovers, makeshift podiums and foot-over-bridges, waving the flag as lanyard straps holding their university identity cards dangled from their necks.

The makeshift wooden coffins, containing the bodies of the student ‘martyrs’, were draped in the flag. In one evocative image they are seen placed along a tree-lined road in a university, a gesture which governments usually reserve for those who fall in battle and for persons of national importance.

|| The timeline describes the youth of today as direct descendants of those killed more than 70 years ago, engendering a new narrative of nationalism.

The flag and national icons also enter the domain of images created in support of the demonstrations. A much-circulated photograph of two young women being baton-charged by a policeman was placed in a green-red background, right in the middle of the red circle that occupies the centre of the Bangladeshi flag.

Internationally acclaimed photographer Shahidul Alam changed his profile picture on Facebook to a digital portrait of Abu Sayed, the unarmed youth who took a [volley of bullets](#) on his chest.

In the image, Sayed stands with his arms outstretched, as he did a few moments before he fell, at the centre of the flag’s blood red circle, the red bursting into drops of blood.

In another image, Facebook user Bishadsindhu juxtaposed the photo of a group of students who had climbed atop a university building with a photo of the *Aparajeyo Bangla* (Undefeated Bengal), a statue at Dhaka University’s Faculty of Arts, which commemorates the 1971 freedom fighters. The caption reads, “Life imitates art, history repeats itself” and leaves nothing to the imagination. It also places the protesting youth in the lineage of the freedom fighters.

In another instance, Facebook user and influencer RJ Ridoy juxtaposed the names of young men slain in the 1952 language movement (Rafiq, Salam, Barkat, Shafiur, Jabbar—commemorated in numerous songs on both sides of Bengal), with those of students killed in 2024 (Syed, Asif, Rafi, Wasim, Adnan), alongside a black and white collage of their photos. The timeline describes the youth of today as direct descendants of those killed more than 70 years ago, engendering a new narrative of nationalism.

The death of the students has at once outraged and moved millions in Bangladesh and beyond.

The spot where Abu Sayed fell, on the road in front of Begum Rokeya University in Rangpur, now bears a display board that proclaims it as ‘*Shaheed Abu Sayed Chatter*’ (Martyr Abu Sayed Square). The Science More (intersection) near Dhanmondi on New Market Road in Dhaka is now *Shaheed Rafi Chatter*, available for anyone to search on Google maps.

These gestures are creating a new strand of national memory, a new frame with which the student and youth demonstrations will be viewed now and in the future.

Samata Biswas is an assistant professor of English at The Sanskrit College and University, Kolkata, and a member of Calcutta Research Group (CRG).

Originally published under [Creative Commons](#) by [360info](#)TM.