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## YOUTH, IDENTITY, AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF STUDENT ACTIVISM IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES OF BANGLADESH

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### ABSTRACT

*Historically, student activism in Bangladesh has played a vital role in the struggles for democracy, merit, representation and national identity, but the quotidian activities through which university students construct their political identity are not well understood. This study studies student activism at the public universities of Bangladesh as an environment for young political engagement, identity development and state-society conflict. It asks how students at public universities negotiate partisan affiliations, ethical claims, campus hierarchies, digital media, and institutional hazards in their political participation. The primary aim is to examine the relationship between student activity on public residential colleges and young identity, as it pertains to broader democratic goals, career apprehensions, ideological affiliations, and experiences of fear or solidarity. The research is grounded in a qualitative framework with ethnographic orientation. It utilises the analysis of documents, published accounts of movements, institutional records, constitutional principles, reports on repression and academic literature on youth politics, collective identity and social movements. The theoretical framework combines collective identity theory, political socialisation, resource and relational approaches to activism, and the everyday state perspective. These methods help to explain why the Bangladeshi student action cannot be construed only because of the influence of parties or a culture of spontaneous protest. The results reveal that public universities are significant political venues, as residential life, union practices, emblematic campus locations, and internet communication create fertile circumstances for mobilisation. Simultaneously, hall-based favouritism, factional violence, surveillance, administrative closure and repression regularly distort participation and constrain the parameters of citizenship available to students. The article argues that student activism in Bangladesh is to be seen both as a democratic resource and as a contested institutional activity through which students gain political knowledge, make moral claims on the state and imagine political futures beyond the college campus. More democratic engagement means safe campuses, reliable student union elections, protection of dissent, open hall governance, and more recognition of students as political agents, not security threats.*

## 1 Introduction

Public universities in Bangladesh hold a unique position in the nation's political consciousness. They are not solely educational institutions; they also serve as historical venues of mobilisation, ideological discourse, and leadership development. The recollection of the language movement, anti-authoritarian insurrections, student union politics, and current protest cycles has endowed campuses with a lasting symbolic significance in the nation's democratic existence. The Dhaka University Central Students' Union has historically been referred to as the "second parliament," with the evolution of student representation intricately linked to broader discussions on democracy, state legitimacy, and political succession in Bangladesh (University of Dhaka Central Students' Union, 2025; Government of Bangladesh, 1972).

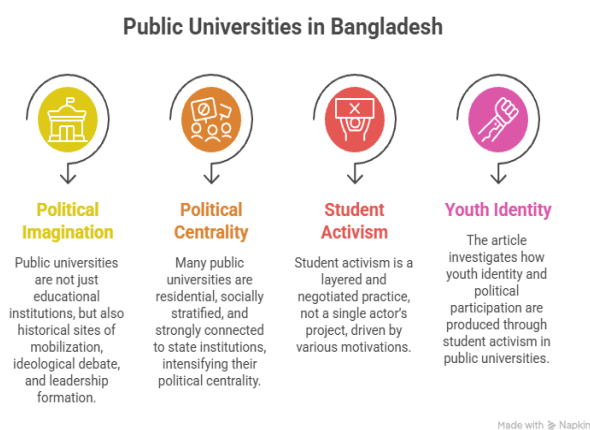
The political centrality is heightened in public universities due to their residential nature, social stratification, and strong linkages to state institutions. Students do not merely attend courses; they reside in dormitories, wait for limited resources, navigate hall administration, encounter factional territoriality, and forge friendships and alliances in libraries, cafeterias, dormitory hallways, tea stalls, online forums, and protest demonstrations. Political understanding in this context is acquired through daily practices as well as through formal ideologies. Student identity is consequently influenced by class aspirations, regional affiliation, meritocratic discontent, gendered

experiences, and peer acknowledgement, rather than solely by party affiliation or electoral ambitions. Campus activism, in ethnographic terms, constitutes a social arena wherein youth acquire insights into the mechanisms of power, the regulation of discourse, and the manifestation or peril of dissent (Bourdieu, 1986; Jeffrey, 2010; Wedeen, 2010). The present relevance of the subject became particularly evident during the quota protests and the ensuing July revolt of 2024. What commenced as unrest around public-service recruitment quotas and expanded into a nationwide anti-authoritarian movement, initially and symbolically spearheaded by students. Public universities emerged as initial organisational hubs, but digital communication broadened campus protests into a national network. Government actions including the closure of universities, imposition of curfews, implementation of communication outages, arrests, and widespread violence. Subsequent enquiries by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights determined that the repression entailed extensive and grave violations, with numerous casualties comprising students and youth (OHCHR, 2025; Reuters, 2024a; Reuters, 2024b).

The politics of student movement in Bangladesh cannot be comprehended solely via instances of dramatic insurrection. Amid significant protest surges exists a complex quotidian realm characterised by hall management, committee establishment, educator-student patronage, symbolic marginalisation, informal regulation, digital communication, and calculated quiet. Students at public universities engage in politics for several motivations: ideological dedication, affiliation with organisations, defiance against coercion, pursuit of representation, apprehension regarding employment and meritocracy, ethical indignation, or the aspiration to transform campus culture. These motivations frequently intersect. Student activism is more accurately perceived as a multifaceted and negotiated endeavour rather than the initiative of a solitary person (Melucci, 1996; Mische, 2008; Tarrow, 2011).

This study examines the formation of young identity and political engagement through student activism in Bangladesh's public universities. Instead of viewing students as a uniform entity, it analyses how activism

**Figure 1. Public Universities in Bangladesh**



arises from disparate campus conditions influenced by historical context, violence, ambition, and symbolic conflict. It enquires into the processes by which students emerge as political subjects, the ways in which organisational structures and quotidian environments facilitate involvement, the impact of digital networks on mobilisation, and the role of public university campuses in linking youth politics to national democratic prospects. The paper examines student activism not merely as protest action, but as an experiential process wherein students assert recognition, navigate anxiety, and conceptualise citizenship (Bayat, 2010; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015; Reuters, 2024c).

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Public Universities as Sites of Political Socialisation**

Youth politics research repeatedly stresses that colleges are important sites for rehearsal, testing, and embodiment of political identities. Public universities matter because they bring together formal education, residential life, organization, public representation, and proximity to political authority. The stratification is historically extremely pronounced in Bangladesh. In the political lexicon of the country, student unions, particularly DUCSU, have always enjoyed quasi-parliamentary standing, with college leaders often making the leap to national politics. Even when the formal operations of student unions are disrupted or co-opted by partisan interests, the institutional memory of past revolutions shapes the understanding of action of future generations (University of Dhaka Central Students' Union, 2025; Tarrow, 2011). In this context, political socialisation encompasses more than the curricular or ideological structures. Both geographical and relational. Managing the hall, controlling access to rooms, controlling common areas, being visible in famous places such as Madhur Canteen or the Raju Memorial Sculpture and participating in slogans, marches, commemorations and internet organization helps students understand the nature of political power. These routines teach kids who can speak, who can fill space, who can be punished. Activism at public universities socialises students into the pragmatic values of politics: alliance, loyalty, risk, discipline, recognition, and dissent (Blee & Taylor, 2002; Wedeen, 2010; Wood, 2003).

The literature shows the ambiguity of campus political socialisation. It can help to democratise public life by creating habits of organisation and protest, but it can also prolong domination through patronage and coercion. In Bangladesh student politics has been often a bi-directional interpretation. Campus associations are lobbying for rights, fees, quotas and national issues but hall-based political dominance has limited prospects for equal participation. Understanding this paradox is important to understanding the political vibrancy and institutional fragility of public universities (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001; University of Dhaka Central Students' Union, 2025).

### **2.2 Youth Identity, Belonging, and Collective Action**

A secondary body of literature underscores that activism relies not solely on grievance but also on group identity. Students engage in movements not solely due to material discontent, but because they perceive themselves as integral to a morally significant collective. In Bangladesh, concepts such as merit, dignity, anti-discrimination, resistance, and generational justice have acquired significant prominence throughout recent protest movements. These words facilitated the transformation of individual irritation into a collective identity, connecting concerns about unemployment, aspirations for education, and democratic discontent into a unified political discourse (Melucci, 1996; Mische, 2008; Reuters, 2024a).

The identity of youth on campus is influenced by disparate social positioning. Students at public universities originate from diverse locations, socioeconomic backgrounds, genders, and linguistic environments; nonetheless, the campus frequently consolidates them into a competitive and symbolic closeness. Residence halls, reliance on scholarships, coaching culture, and the prestige associated with government work all influence students' perceptions of success and exclusion. The 2024 quota movement demonstrated the amalgamation of meritocratic discontent and political animosity into a comprehensive generational identity, especially since students perceived governmental narratives as condescending or offensive (Reuters, 2024a; Reuters, 2024b; Le Monde, 2024). Simultaneously, communal identity persists in a state of instability. Students may categorise themselves as general students, activists, organisers, hall residents,

departmental colleagues, or advocates of certain organisations. These identities fluctuate in response to events and hazards. From an ethnographic perspective, this is significant as involvement is frequently context dependent. A student may eschew official party identification yet nevertheless participate in a march, provide refuge for protesters in a hall, disseminate information online, or contribute resources to a movement. Youth politics include more than just visible membership; it involves informal alliances, reputational dynamics, and ethical stances during crises (Bayat, 2010; Jeffrey, 2010).

### **2.3 Organisations, Unions, and Repertoires of Participation**

Bangladeshi student activism has traditionally taken place through formal and informal organisational channels. Student unions, party-affiliated factions, issue-oriented platforms, and temporary coalitions are all important. The long-term breakdown of regular union elections has sapped the authority of institutional representation, but it has not eliminated student politics. They have made participation into hybrid formats: committees in halls, coalitions on issues, social media groups, platforms for protest, and interim coordinating frameworks. The rise of Students Against Discrimination in 2024 demonstrated how fast such networks could grow when they leveraged existing campus issues and symbolic traditions (Students Against Discrimination, 2024; Reuters, 2025; AP News, 2025).

Student participation repertoires include processions, sit-ins, class boycotts, highway blockades, symbolic occupations, slogans, press briefings, poster campaigns and hallway meetings. These forms are methodical. They use existing protest templates in Bangladesh, while adapting to modern media environments. However, recent advancements pointed out that blockades and visual slogans were important, but also encrypted texting, Facebook live streams and photo dissemination were equally as important for coordination and identity construction (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015; Abir et al., 2025). But organisational structure is an important determinant of legitimacy. Conventional, representative unions enable involvement through dialogue and accountability, whereas partisan monopolies frequently turn politics into instruments of surveillance or coercion. The July uprising led to DUCSU elections in 2019 and in 2025, testifying to the

ongoing desire for representative student unions, notwithstanding major disagreements concerning fairness, ideology and governance (University of Dhaka Central Students Union, 2025; 2025 Dhaka University Central Students' Union Elections, 2025).

### **2.4 Digital Media and Hybrid Mobilisation**

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### **2.5 Violence, Patronage, and Restricted Citizenship**

A persistent collection of research on Bangladesh indicates that student politics is frequently influenced by

power dynamics within resident halls and by party-affiliated patronage. Participation is thus inequitable not solely due to varying levels of political engagement among students, but also because some possess greater safety, superior connections, or enhanced institutional protection than their peers. Reports on ‘guest room’ procedures and hall control illustrate a political culture characterised by coercion, recruiting pressure, and reputational discipline manifesting in daily dormitory life (Chhatra League’s Guest Room Practice, 2025).

The recent rounds of protest have exacerbated this issue. When state and party-affiliated entities perceive students as security threats instead of political interlocutors, the scope of acceptable citizenship significantly diminishes. The OHCHR’s investigation into the 2024 repression, together with concurrent reporting by Reuters and other media, reveals that students and youth experienced a significant portion of the violence, incarceration, and intimidation linked to the state response (OHCHR, 2025; Reuters, 2024b). This literature is significant as it redirects focus from activism as a romantic endeavour to activism as perilous social labour. Students frequently organise in circumstances where expression may result in expulsion, injury, restriction of access to facilities, arrest, or jeopardization of future job prospects. Political engagement in these contexts is invariably intertwined with apprehension.

## 2.6 Ethnography and the Study of Campus Politics

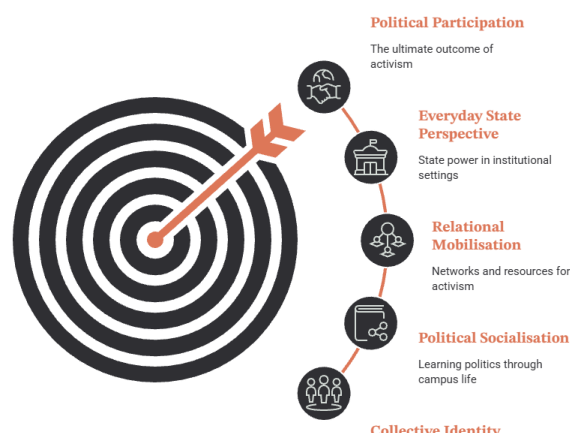
A body of literature on Bangladesh has long indicated that student politics is often shaped by power relations within the resident halls and party-affiliated patronage. Participation is thus inequitable not only because of differences in political activity among students, but also because some have more safety, better connections, or stronger institutional protection than others. Reports on ‘guest room’ procedures and hall control reflect a political culture of coercion, recruiting pressure and reputational discipline in daily life in the dormitories (Chhatra League’s Guest Room Practice, 2025). The latest protests have made this problem worse. When state and party-affiliated actors view students as security threats rather than political interlocutors, the space of acceptable citizenship is drastically narrowed. The OHCHR’s examination of the 2024 repression, as well as simultaneous reporting by Reuters and other media, suggests that students and youth suffered a

disproportionate amount of violence, detention, and intimidation related to the state reaction (OHCHR, 2025; Reuters, 2024b). This literature matters because it moves the focus from activism as a romantic pursuit to activism as dangerous social work. Students often organise in situations where expression could lead to expulsion, injury, denial of access to facilities, arrest or the risk of future employment chances. In these situations, political engagement is always bound up with apprehension.

## 2.7 Theoretical Framework

This study combines collective identity theory, political socialisation, relational approaches to mobilisation, and the everyday state perspective to explain how student activism in Bangladeshi public universities produces political participation. Collective identity theory is useful because student mobilisation depends on more than shared grievance. Students must come to understand themselves as a recognisable public with legitimate claims. They need a moral language through which private frustrations about jobs, insecurity, and exclusion become publicly meaningful. Terms such as merit, anti-discrimination, dignity, resistance, and justice function not merely as slogans but as identity bridges, connecting students from different departments, halls, and regions into a shared political subject (Melucci, 1996; Mische, 2008; Abir et al.,

Figure 2. Factors Influencing Student Activism in



2025). Political socialisation theory helps explain how universities become training grounds for citizenship. Students in public universities do not learn politics only from textbooks or party manifestos. They learn it from elections, union absences, commemorations, slogans, teacher patronage, queueing, hall dominance, discipline, and protest. These experiences teach them what kinds of authority exist, what counts as courage, and what forms

of dissent are possible. In Bangladesh, where student unions have symbolic national importance but uneven institutional continuity, campus political learning is especially shaped by contradiction: democratic memory on one side, coercive control on the other (University of Dhaka Central Students' Union, 2025; Jeffrey, 2010).

Relational and resource-based accounts of mobilisation explain why some frustrations become organised activity while others remain private unhappiness. Students require networks, stable surroundings, communication channels, and symbolic resources. Public institutions facilitate numerous circumstances, as residence halls and social places promote strong relational connections. Digital media has changed this environment dramatically, allowing quick shifts between the physical and the virtual. Resources are not simply enabling; they are also restricted. Hall spaces, student offices, banners, and access to safer protest routes can be inequitably distributed. Participation is affected by the availability of networks and institutional inequalities (Tarrow, 2011; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015; Students Against Discrimination, 2024).

The daily state viewpoint adds another dimension by showing that state authority is experienced not only in ministries or elections, but also in common institutional contexts. Students experience the state on campus through university management, police presence, allotment of housing, disciplinary threats, communication outages and the management of protests. In the 2024 revolution, the students' experiences of closures, curfews, arrests and fatal repression transformed campus grievances into a broader assessment of the nature of the state. This explains how a quota movement could turn into a democratic rebellion. When students saw administration, policing and party-affiliated coercion as interwoven components of the same political system, participation gained a larger ethical perspective (OHCHR, 2025; Reuters, 2024a; Reuters, 2024b).

Viewpoints collectively show that student activism in Bangladesh is not just a representation of youth culture or simply an instrument for political partisanship. It is a mixed political terrain. Daily campus experiences indoctrinate students into politics, activated through relational frameworks, instilled with importance through collective identity, and either radicalised or limited by recurrent interactions with state and quasi-state authority. This idea allows for the understanding of activism as a lived democratic behaviour under uneven institutional frameworks.

## 2.8 Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to examine how student activism in public universities of Bangladesh shapes youth identity and political participation in everyday campus life and in moments of wider national mobilisation. The study is guided by two specific objectives:

- i. To identify the institutional, organisational, spatial, and socio-cultural conditions through which students in public universities become political actors.
- ii. To analyse how identity, digital mediation, partisan competition, repression, and representational claims influence democratic participation, legitimacy, and activist subjectivity among students.

## 3 Methodology of the Study

### 3.1 Research Design

This research employs a qualitative framework with an ethnographic focus, utilising document analysis and interpretive synthesis. The design is suitable as the article examines lived politics, identity development, quotidian activities, and symbolic actions rather than solely quantifiable event counts. Ethnographic approach enables the analysis of campuses as social environments where activism is generated through spatial dynamics, interpersonal interactions, collective memory, and perceived risks.

### 3.2 Data Collection

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### 3.3 Data Analysis

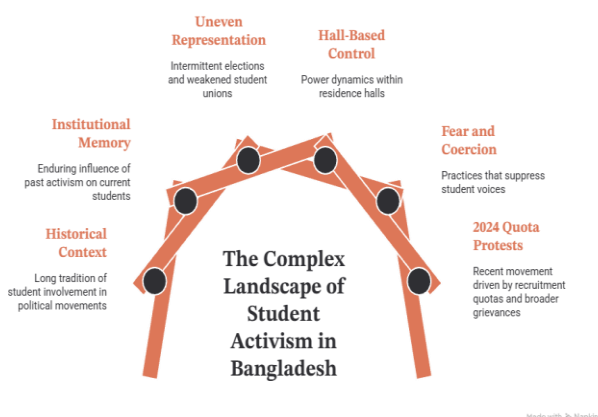
Documents were analysed thematically and comparatively. Key themes encompassed political socialisation, collective identity, hall culture, unions, digital media, fear, repression, symbolic space, and post-uprising institutional transformation. Themes were analysed through the integrated frameworks of

collective identity, political socialisation, relational mobilisation, and the daily state perspective.

### 3.4 Contextual Analysis

The student activism milieu in Bangladesh cannot be separated from the long political history of public colleges. Dhaka University and other public institutions have been major symbolic sites in critical political events such as language and autonomy struggles and anti-authoritarian mobilisations. DUCSU's own self-perception as a representative student organization is an important part of its past. Its website and constitutional statutes still portray it as an essential venue for student speech and historical narratives acknowledge its role in important national political events. These past matters because future generations of students will not find politically neutral universities; Students arrive at universities already saturated with memories of movement, partisan stories and expectations of their civic duties (University of Dhaka Central Students'

**Figure 3. The Complex Landscape of Student Activism in Bangladesh**



Union, 2025).

Representational campus politics has had a patchy institutional continuity. DUCSU elections did not take place for long periods after 1990, and other campuses also faced similar disturbances. " This mitigated the mundane representation while keeping the competitive nature of the partisans. Lack of regular, legitimate student-union elections sometimes transposed authority to hall-based governance, party-affiliated cronyism, and informal hegemony. Thus, public colleges became bastions of democratic memory, continuing to exist even in the face of constriction of daily involvement by

repressive political structures (University of Dhaka Central Students' Union, 2025; 2019 Dhaka University Central Students' Union Elections, 2019).

Residence halls hold significant importance in this context. They serve not merely as lodging facilities; they function as political arenas wherein inclusion and exclusion are orchestrated. Reports on "guest room" procedures detail coercive initiation, pressure, and surveillance within university dormitories, particularly at Dhaka University. Such actions are analytically significant as they illustrate how activism is influenced by commonplace infrastructures of fear. A student may opt for silence, alliance, or protest not solely due to philosophy, but also because access to lodging, sustenance, safety, peer networks, and academic structure may hinge on hall authority (Chhatra League's Guest Room Practice, 2025).

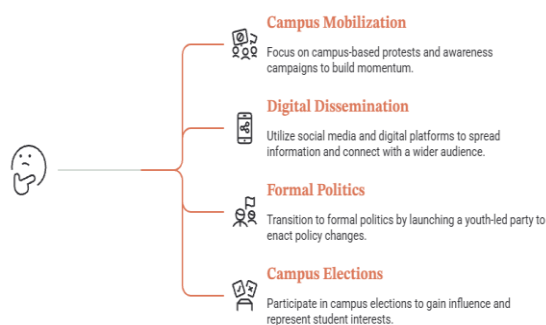
This context establishes the profound importance of the 2024 quota protests. Public discontent with recruitment quotas coincides with elevated youth fear around employment, meritocracy, and impeded mobility. Reuters indicated that students perceived the quota issue within the broader context of opportunity and equity, but further analysis connected the protests to more profound discontent with authoritarian governance and diminishing democratic freedoms. Public universities were among the initial organisational venues where these complaints were transformed into concerted action, and the movement's proliferation was influenced by campus-to-campus emulation, symbolic communication, and digital transmission (Reuters, 2024a; Reuters, 2024b; Le Monde, 2024).

The intensification of state response further altered the context. University closures, curfews, internet blackouts, incarceration of organisers, and the shooting of demonstrators became campus politics inextricable from the national crises. Events, such as the assassination of Abu Sayed from Begum Rokeya University, were symbolic as they encapsulated the movement's ethical assertion into a visual and emotional representation of governmental violence. The OHCHR's subsequent investigation determined that extensive and grave violations transpired throughout the July–August 2024 crackdown, encompassing excessive force, arbitrary detention, and maltreatment, with students and youth significantly represented among the victims (OHCHR, 2025; Killing of Abu Sayed, 2025). Students Against Discrimination platform emerged as an umbrella alliance of student-led activists from different

universities and political backgrounds. The rapid growth suggested that public university activism had moved beyond traditional party structures, notwithstanding the residual presence of established partisan organisations. Later reports from Reuters and AP said members of the movement entered the world of formal politics by helping to create a new youth-led party in 2025. The shift from college mobilisation to party establishment showed both the possibilities and the obstacles of translating protest legitimacy to institutional politics (Students Against Discrimination, 2024; Reuters, 2025; AP News, 2025).

**Figure 4. How to effectively address recruitment quotas and broader societal issues?**

How to effectively address recruitment quotas and broader societal issues?



The mood on campus after the revolt was still unsettled. The decline of the Awami League's dominance on many campuses helped alternative student alliances to arise, but it did not end rivalry. The DUCSU election of 2025 was held as an important post-uprising event but reactions to the election also exposed new divides, accusations and ideological realignments. Old unions re-emerged, but in a radically altered political climate, influenced by the memories of oppression, a generational demand for democratic renewal, and anxieties about the nature of the organised student politics that would replace the previous regime (2025 Dhaka University Central Students' Union Elections, 2025; Reuters, 2025).

This is an issue which deserves attention within the greater demographic context. Bangladesh is a young country, and its public colleges remain attractive to students who link higher education with social mobility, reputation, and access to government or professional employment. College politics are not just about student well-being; they also touch on larger ideals of citizenship, merit, and democratic possibility. Student

activism is important in public institutions because these colleges are places where young people have close contact with the state and where national political futures are constantly imagined, contested and dramatised (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2022; Reuters, 2024a).

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Identity Formation and Activist Trajectories

The findings imply that student action in Bangladeshi public universities is best understood as a process of political emergence. Students don't often arrive at university with a fully formed activist persona. Identity is constructed via experience of injustice, friendships, participation in organisations, campus life, a culture of commemoration and sudden crises. Others do so openly and through formal organisations, others through issue-specific platforms, some only after witnessing intimidation or repression. The result does not show a single student political typology, but a range of activist trajectories subject to different dangers and levels of opportunity for expression (Jeffrey, 2010; Wedeen, 2010).

One important finding is that meritocratic desire has become a key identity connection. The 2024 movement showed how fears about quotas and jobs can be framed as a bigger question of dignity, fairness and citizenship for a generation. The conversation provided a way for students from different backgrounds to recognise themselves as part of a shared political community, even if they previously held opposing views on campus. The identity was built through collective interpretation and deprivation (Reuters, 2024a; Le Monde, 2024; Abir et al., 2025). The results show that moral legitimacy is important. Students gained political importance when they were viewed as advocating not only for their personal interests but for a broader community harmed by exclusion and authoritarianism. This is one reason public university action always exceeds the confines of campus and gains national significance.

### 4.2 Spaces, Organisations, and Repertoires of Participation

Certain settings and organisational structures affect student engagement. Infrastructure nodes that promote activism include residence halls, eating facilities, central monuments, departmental courtyards, and online platforms. Some environments create cohesion and some create hierarchy. Hall chambers can be a haven for

organisers or a place where they are exposed to intimidation. Symbolic places on campus can consolidate protest, while committee rooms might distribute favours or loyalties. To get involved you must have access to political space and intellectual commitment. Results show activism at public colleges is currently operating through hybrid repertoires. While digital media has become crucial to rapidly disseminate, make visible and coordinate in a decentralised way, protests, sit-ins, class boycotts, symbolic occupations and press releases remain fundamental. Students Against Discrimination quickly grew using a mix of conventional protest tactics, modern communication channels, and a narrative of broad student legitimacy (Students Against Discrimination, 2024; Siddiqui & Roy, 2025). The involvement is vulnerable to the fragility or interruption of institutional representation. Students mobilise quite successfully in crises but, in the absence of unions or when they are distrusted, they lack sustainable channels for representation thereafter. That makes it more difficult to consolidate after the protest.

#### ***4.3 Fear, Violence, and the Politics of Legitimacy***

A third important finding is that fear is crucial to student politics in Bangladesh. Participation takes place in the shadow of coercion, surveillance, organisational punishment, administrative intimidation and sometimes, explicit state brutality. Together, the guest-room culture reports, media coverage from July 2024, and the OHCHR investigation point to the fact that students often work in settings where physical safety is not guaranteed (Chhatra League's Guest Room Practice, 2025; OHCHR, 2025). But terror does not just paralyse politicians. It can also create ethical clarity and community outrage. The deadly attack on plainly unarmed students and the treatment of organisers during the crackdown increased the legitimacy of the student movement from the public perspective. Public university activists were reframed from simple campus participants to symbolic representatives of democratic harm and rebellion. This shift explains the swift national recognition for the movement (Killing of Abu Sayed, 2025; Reuters, 2024c).

#### ***4.4 Digital Mediation and Organisational Flexibility***

Digital mediation did not substitute campus politics; it heightened it. Students spread emotive evidence, tactical updates and symbols of solidarity using social media,

but the most effective digital communication was rooted in existing networks of trust on campus. So organisational flexibility was a fundamental strength of modern campaigning. Depending on danger and opportunity, students might move between formal leadership, anonymous coordination, and issue-based public identification (Abir et al., 2025; Siddiqui & Roy, 2025). This adaptability also changed the culture of leadership. Contemporary student mobilisation often used networked spokespeople, interim coordinators and distributed symbolic authority rather than relying entirely on established party formations. The structure enabled the movement to adapt in times of arrests and shutdowns, but it later created problems of representation and institutionalisation.

#### ***4.5 From Campus Protest to National Political Imagination***

The most important finding is that public university engagement in Bangladesh continues to be a conduit between the experiences of young people and national political prospects. Students were mobilised not just to improve college life, or to change quota laws. During activity many made wider claims about constitutionalism, accountability and the democratic fate of the nation. Those associated with the movement went on to form a youth-driven political party later, signalling a change from student-based activism to nationwide political ambitions, although the transition has been disputed and fragile (Reuters, 2025; AP News, 2025). This is not to say that every student activity is intrinsically democratic or liberating. Public universities remain open to capture by factions, ideological marginalisation, and new forms of hegemony. The 2025 DUCSU election and the reorganisation of student coalitions following the uprising indicate that the discontinuation of one form of campus governance does not necessarily result in pluralistic participation. Still, the evidence suggests that public universities remain the key institutional space in Bangladesh for youth to translate personal grievances into a collective political vision (2025 Dhaka University Central Students' Union Elections, 2025; University of Dhaka Central Students' Union, 2025). This broader picture rests anthropologically on common experiences. Not only historical literature, but also songs, martyr posters, assemblies, collective fear, mutual support and recollections of contacts with authoritative persons all reinforce the notion that "students can transform the

nation.” It is important because it makes the nation experientially relevant in campus politics. Students meet the state in their hallways, on the streets that surround the school, in police blockades, in compliance mandates, and in the recognition, they receive when they speak as a generation. In this respect, student activism is an educational paradigm of citizenship and a repertoire of protest.

## 5 Recommendations

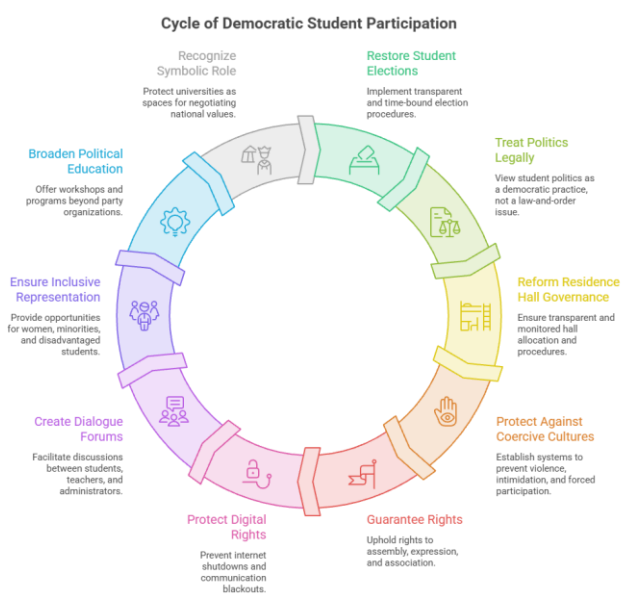
There are several suggestions to make public universities in Bangladesh safer, more representative and institutionally accountable and to increase democratic student engagement. Student-union elections should be re-established and formalised in public colleges with clear, predictable and time-bound rules. Representative student bodies diminish the climate of informal domination and hall coercion.

Student politics should be seen by university administrations as a legitimate engagement in democracy and not a perennial law and order problem. Security-based responses breed mistrust, and prompt clashes beyond institutional settings. Reforming Residence Hall governance is needed. Hall allocation, disciplinary procedures, and access to the common room should be documented methodically, transparent, and subject to independent monitoring to avoid political membership from becoming an informal currency for survival. Universities should have strong protections against coercive hall cultures, including confidential complaint processes, outside review committees and sanctions for violence, intimidation and forced political participation.

Public authorities should protect the rights to peaceful assembly, speech and association on campuses, in line with constitutional principles and international human rights standards. The events of 2024 highlight the severe democratic consequences of militarised or excessive approaches to student protests (Government of Bangladesh, 1972; OHCHR, 2025). We need digital rights protection. Shutting down the internet and disrupting communications threatens not only protests but also academic continuity, emergency communication and public accountability. Public institutions should create structured discussion groups with students, teachers, administrators and neutral facilitators to address complex issues such as hall security, representation, fee policy and protest

management. Women students, minority students, and students of underprivileged regional or socioeconomic origins should have a major opportunity for leadership and representation. It is a mistake to think that the use of universal language in a movement is enough to ensure inclusiveness. Campus political education should not be monopolised by political party organisations. Workshops, memorial forums, debating unions, constitutional literacy initiatives and student research activities can extend democratic engagement beyond political conflict. Future improvements in campus politics must appreciate the symbolic value of public universities in national affairs. Student activism always goes beyond the limits of the institution, because universities are one of the few places where young people may freely explore issues of merit, justice and citizenship. Thus, protecting such sites is a democratic imperative rather than an administrative burden (University of Dhaka Central Students’ Union, 2025; Reuters, 2025; AP News, 2025).

Figure 5. Cycle of Democratic Student Participation



## 6 Conclusion

This essay is an anthropological study of student activism in Bangladesh's public colleges, examining youth, identity and political engagement. Public universities are important sites for this process because they combine residency, symbolic authority, institutional memory, and proximity to state power. Halls, canteens, classrooms, internet networks and protest routes allow students to understand the allocation of power and the visibility of political claims.

The major argument is that the student activism in Bangladesh is marked by the contradiction between democratic education and authoritarian governance. Campus activism creates solidarities, moral frameworks, and organisational competencies that equip students to challenge injustice and foresee greater political possibilities. On the other hand, patronage, party appropriation, espionage and repression often distort participation and make citizenship unequally available. The 2024 quota campaign and the accompanying July turmoil provided a vivid illustration of both sides of this issue. Students engage in activism through daily contacts, symbolic acknowledgement, internet communication, and repeated confrontations with authorities on and off campus. Participation is therefore relational and contextual, not just ideological. As a result, the future of student politics in Bangladesh should not be conceived as a binary between depoliticised campuses and violent factionalism. A more democratic approach is available.

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