

History of student protests IN BANGLADESH

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Why do students rise with fearless fury, their impassioned yells echoing through the streets? What drives the youth to fight an entrenched status quo with such unyielding determination? The recent eruption of student protests is not an isolated episode; it is a fiery addition to a storied legacy of defiance and courage. As we delve into the history of student activism, we witness a proud past that has relentlessly defined Bangladesh's path to progress.

1952 Language Movement

"Urdu and only Urdu," said Jinnah, on a visit to East Pakistan. With this decree, an attempt was made to silence 64 percent of the population. This action, in the words of writer Abul Mansur Ahmed, would've left East Bengal's educated society "ineligible" for government jobs and chained progress.

At the dawn of this injustice, the students of Dhaka University (DU) became the dawn breakers. On February 21, defying Section 144, they brought out rallies and demonstrations. The government's bullets, intended to silence, instead turned Salam, Barkat, Rafiq, Shafiur and Jabbar into martyrs. 29 students fell that day. The news spread like wildfire, leading to a complete halt of shops, offices, and public transport as the nation united in grief. The students' blood wrote a tale of sacrifice, inspiring generations and securing Bangla's rightful place as a state language.

1962 Education Movement

Fresh from their Language Movement victory, students faced a new foe in Ayub Khan's Education Commission and its regressive policies.

Labelling education a "product," the Commission pushed privatisation, mandated Urdu and discarded free primary education. Against these recommendations, Dhaka College became the focal point of dissent.

On February 1, students called for a strike. Even a field cannon placed to intimidate them couldn't silence their spirits. Scattered protests, class boycotts, and hunger strikes followed. After a historic meeting at the DU Cafeteria with representatives from all colleges, students declared a nationwide strike for September 17. The procession at Dhaka saw students, workers, rickshaw pullers, and boatmen marching together in unison. As police opened fire, bullets claimed Babul, Golam Mustafa and Waziullah, etching their sacrifice into history. Ultimately, the Pakistani government yielded to the students' demands.

1966 Six Point Movement

In 1966, amid growing disparities between East and West Pakistan, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman introduced the Six Point Movement, a plea for East Pakistan's autonomy.

Rising again, students championed the Six Points with rallies, strikes, and pamphlets. They played a crucial role in educating the masses on the significance of these points.

Braving police brutality and arrests, their cries echoed throughout the nation, compelling authorities to heed their demands. Though rejected, the seeds of defiance eventually sprouted into roots of independence, ingraining self-governance into the national psyche.

1969 Mass Uprising

As Ayub Khan's military rule tightened, economic wounds deepened and frustrations peaked. Arrests of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and other Bengali leaders relit the protest's vigour. With tensions simmering, the students, supported by the political might of the Awami League and the National Awami Party, once more became the vanguards of change.

The tragic martyrdom of Amanullah Asaduzzaman in January solidified their commitment. Mass demonstrations, strikes, and brutal confrontations led to further casualties, claiming 61 lives. Among the martyrs was Matiur Rahman

respected intellectual – was murdered by Ershad's cadres. Dhaka skipped a heartbeat on December 6 as hundreds of thousands of people poured through the streets. Autocracy crumbled and parliamentary democracy was restored, with one more win for the students.

2018 Road Safety Movement

4,200 deaths, 16,100 injuries, 2,400,000 unlicensed drivers. When a reckless bus ploughed into the sidewalk, Rajib and Dia, two school students, were killed.

The hashtag "#WeWantJustice" trended on social media as agitated students, mostly aged 15 to 19, orchestrated a powerful yet peaceful protest. They smoothly managed traffic, checked documents, and symbolically enforced rules, even on officials who had been "above the law." Students' efficiency even embarrassed the authorities, highlighting their chronic failures. Declaring a nine-point demand, students called for capital punishment in cases of reckless driving.

What began with restraint soon escalated as goons clashed with students, injuring over a hundred. Enduring smokes of tear gas, rubber bullets, and restricted mobile network, the youth outcry led to legislative victory. Most of the changes that were promised, however, were not delivered

2013 & 2018 Quota Reform Movement

Shahbagh was the stage for the Quota Reform Movement in 2013, where Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) aspirants were galvanised to demand change. It quickly garnered support from universities across the country but was crushed under police crackdown. Their initial success was short-lived.

By 2018, the movement experienced a resurgence. Hundreds of students gathered at Shahbagh, calling for a drastic reduction of quotas reserved for the descendants of freedom fighters. To quell the movement, police deployed tear gas, water cannons, and batons against the demonstrators. Goons were also seen attacking the protestors, wounding over 160 students from Dhaka University.

In a display of widespread solidarity, students nationwide boycotted academic activities and took out processions. Private universities also joined. They blocked crucial highways and thoroughfares, disrupting daily life and compelling governmental attention. Their efforts bore fruit when former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, despite criticising their tactics, acknowledged their grievances in Parliament, leading to a cancellation of all quotas.

Very rarely, if ever, have students stood on the wrong side of history. Never have they faltered in the face of tyranny, nor have they failed in place of victory.

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Mallik, a student of class nine. In February when Sergeant Zahurul Haq – a Bengali nationalist – was murdered in captivity, an unprecedented uproar engulfed the nation. Government buildings were torched and students escalated their fight, forming the February 15 Bahini – the first armed opposition in the struggle for autonomy. The uprising triumphantly ended with Sheikh Mujib's release and Ayub Khan's resignation.

The students' involvement thus continued through the liberation war, and were at the heart of the fight for freedom.

1990 Anti-Authoritarian Movement

When General Ershad's authoritarian regime caused pervasive corruption and repression, students again led the charge. Cries from campus rallies and sit-ins pierced the air, drawing cross-party support from BNP, Awami League, and leftists.

Protests intensified when Dr Shamsul Milon – a well-