



© Rayhan Ahmed/Wikimedia Commons

CASE STUDY

February 2025



The Spring of Dakha

How did students turn a revolt into a revolution?

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
POLITICAL CONTEXT IN 2024	4
STUDENT DEMONSTRATIONS : FROM PROTEST TO REVOLUTION	5
REPRESSION FUELS REVOLT: A CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS	8
HASINA'S ESCAPE AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A TRANSITIONAL GOVERNMENT	11
CHALLENGES FACED BY THE TRANSITIONAL GOVERNMENT	13
CONCLUSION	14
SOURCES	15

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh, which gained independence from Pakistan in 1971 after a war, has experienced several decades of alternating authoritarian and democratic regimes, punctuated by multiple military coups. Political tensions between the dominant parties—mainly Sheikh Hasina's Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)—have shaped the political landscape, often marked by violent conflicts and allegations of electoral fraud.

Sheikh Hasina, leader of the Awami League, has been in power since 2009. Her regime has been characterized by relative political stability but also by growing accusations of authoritarianism. In recent years, power has become increasingly centralized around Hasina, accompanied by allegations of violent repression against the opposition.

In 2024, an unforeseen event disrupted the political landscape: a revolution led by students, sparked by protests against a quota system perceived as unfair in public employment, as well as growing frustration over rising youth unemployment. This article examines the motives and methods of a student-led movement that, in a remarkably short time, managed to overthrow an authoritarian regime.



© Wikimedia Commons/Rayhan 9d

Victory march after Sheikh Hasina's escape on August 5, 2024

POLITICAL CONTEXT IN 2024

A climate of repression and democratic crisis

General elections in Bangladesh took place on January 7, 2024, and were once again marred by accusations of fraud and violations of democratic rights. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party and other parties staged months of demonstrations demanding Sheikh Hasina's resignation before the vote. Some 25,000 opposition members, including the entire local BNP leadership, were arrested in the ensuing crackdown, according to the party. The government, for its part this figure to 11,000. Sheikh Hasina declared after the elections that "*the BNP is a terrorist organization*".¹

As a result, Hasina's party ran with virtually no rivals, but avoided fielding candidates in some constituencies, to prevent the legislature being branded a one-party institution. Voters also reported that they had been threatened with confiscation of their government benefit cards needed to access social payments if they refused to vote for the ruling Awami League Party. International observers highlighted the numerous irregularities that marred the electoral process. The US State Department, followed by the European Union, expressed regret that all parties were not represented and declared that "*these elections were neither free nor fair*".²

By 2023, the Bangladeshi government had passed laws restricting freedom of expression, notably the Cyber Security Act (CSA). This legislation has been criticized for its repressive provisions, under the guise of combating the dissemination of false information, for the increased surveillance of online activities it enables. Amnesty International has expressed its concern, pointing out that the CSA "*threatens the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of association and freedom of expression and privacy in Bangladesh*"³ These concerns were echoed were rejected by a large part of the population, but demonstrations were systematically put down by force, and surveillance of dissidents was stepped up.



Sheikh Hasina in Kotalipara in 2023

1 Le Monde, *Bangladesh votes in election boycotted by opposition*, 7/01/2024

2 Idem.

3 Amnesty international, *Bangladesh. Le gouvernement intérimaire doit rétablir la liberté d'expression au Bangladesh et abroger la Loi sur la cybersécurité*, 8 /08/2024

The judiciary has also been criticized for its **collusion with the executive**. Charges against opposition activists are often referred to as "ghost cases". These charges include incidents that never took place, exaggerations of events or prosecutions of absent or deceased individuals, notably for alleged crimes in 2013 and 2018.

The government has influenced certain judicial decisions to eliminate political opponents. For example, in July 2023, a meeting of senior civil servants issued directives to judges to ensure swift convictions of BNP leaders, with a view to making them ineligible for future elections.⁴

Opponents of the regime : The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its claims

The BNP, led by Khaleda Zia, is the main opposition party. The latter criticized the authoritarian management of Sheikh Hasina's government, and organized several demonstrations to demand an end to repression and a return to a more transparent democratic system. The opposition is calling for the abolition of political imprisonment, the protection of civil liberties, and the repeal of laws that favor the political hegemony of the Awami League Party.



freemalaysiatoday/

Demonstration led by the BNP and its allies against Hasina's repressive policies, in 2023

4 Visualiser la corruption, *Le système judiciaire est-il une arme au Bangladesh ?*, publié le 2/01/2024

STUDENT PROTESTS: FROM PROTEST TO REVOLUTION

The student protests that erupted in 2024 began by challenging the quota system for public-sector jobs. This system, introduced in the 1970s, reserved a proportion of civil service jobs for specific groups (descendants of Bangladeshi liberation war veterans), according to ethnic origin, gender and geographical region.

Its aim was to ensure balanced representation of the different communities in the government and civil service, but it has aroused growing anger, particularly among young graduates who are struggling to find employment and feel penalized by recruitment based on social criteria: the country's youth unemployment rate exceeds 40%, and the government's resistance to changing the system has fuelled feelings of injustice and frustration, in a country where half of the **170 million⁵ inhabitants are under 27 years of age**. The civil service opened only 3,000 positions a year to the more than 400,000 university graduates.

The problem was particularly severe for young people, many of whom struggled to find work after completing their studies. Their options were either to emigrate for employment abroad or to remain and take up precarious jobs as street vendors.

Bangladeshi researcher Naomi Hossein explains that "*many them have the skills to find work abroad, but they are determined to stay and serve their country*"⁶

This unfolds against a backdrop of severe poverty, with an average GDP per capita of \$2,625. While Bangladesh's rapid economic growth has elevated it to middle-income status, it has not eradicated the burden of undernutrition, which disproportionately affects young children—more than 30% of whom are malnourished. Compounding these challenges, the country faces annual cyclones and recurrent outbreaks of dengue fever and cholera.

Formation of the student movement

Leaders of the student movement in Bangladesh, including Asif Mahmud and Akhtar Hossain, formed the Ganatantrik Chhatra Shakti (GCS, Student Democratic Force) coalition in 2023 to fight quotas in the civil service. The organization counted 50 active members, and set out to be **independent of traditional political parties**.

It was founded on the campus of Dhaka University, **initially to focus exclusively on student demands**. From the outset, it was under surveillance by the intelligence services, and Akhtar Hossain was both attacked by the student wing of Sheikh Hasina's party and arrested multiple times for his political activities between 2021 and July 2024.

5 RFI, *100 jours après la révolution au Bangladesh, un bilan du gouvernement transitoire mitigé*, publié le 22/11/2024

6 Révolution Permanente, Santiago Montag, "*Analyse. Comment les étudiants bangladais ont renversé la « Dame de fer d'Asie »*", publié le 7/08/2024

GCS has adopted several strategies to mobilize students:⁷

- **Press conference and public statements**

The organization used press conferences on the university campus to announce its formation and objectives, attracting media and public attention.

- **Rallies and demonstrations**

Marches and rallies, human chains, were organized on the Dhaka University campus to raise awareness and encourage students to join the movement.

- **Use of social media**

GCS communicated extensively on **Facebook**, sharing press releases, announcing rallies and relaying images of student actions.

Their Facebook account **documented the regime's abuses**: repression of political opponents, unfair trials, threats and torture of relatives, etc., and relayed the concerns of human rights organizations.

They also publish **interviews that amplify the students' voice**, notably during the boycott of the January 2024 elections, the outcome of which they felt was a foregone conclusion due to the maneuvers of the single party. The organization also denounced the expulsion of students for political reasons, violence perpetrated by members of the Chatra League, including

an attack during a seminar at Dhaka University, injuring 7 people, and the intimidation that drove a young student at Jagannath University to suicide, and more generally condemned administrative harassment and abuse of power.

- **Direct contact with the students**

The members of the movement come from **the university benches** and have never ceased to exchange with the student community, to discuss their concerns and promote a democratic political culture, by raising awareness of the issues at stake in elections



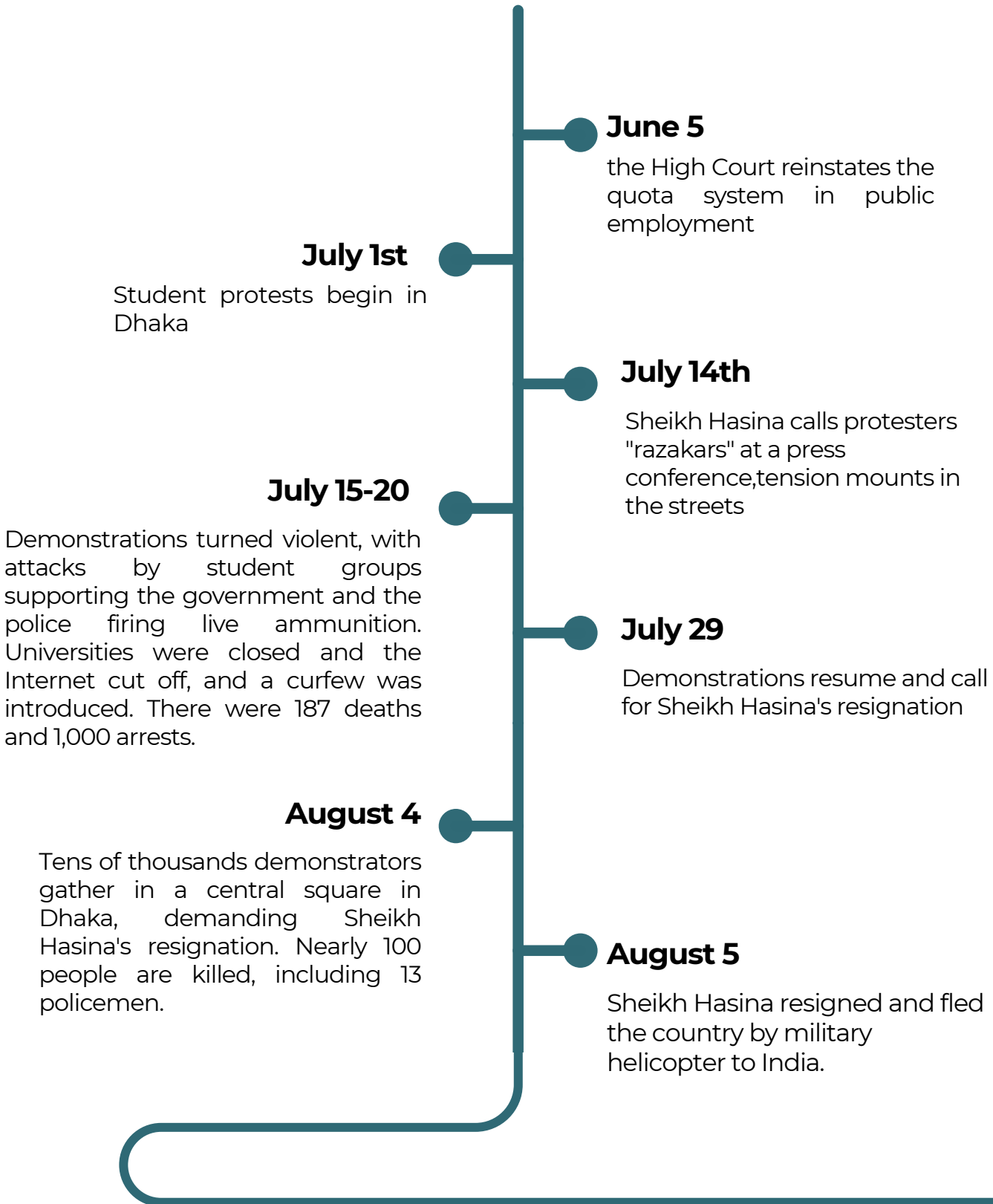
© Wikimedia Commons/ Rayhan 9d

Student rally on July 11, 2024

Through these various modes of action, the Student Democratic Force has actively fought against university injustices stemming from the dominant influence of the ruling party's affiliated student union. By highlighting instances of injustice, its mobilization efforts have allowed GCS to establish itself as a significant force in Bangladesh's student political landscape.

⁷ Barta 24, "La technologie est la colonne vertébrale d'un pays", mis en ligne le 4 octobre 2024

REPRESSION FUELS REVOLT: A CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS



Tipping points

Sheikh Hasina's anti-demonstration rhetoric, reinforced by police repression and attacks on demonstrators by groups affiliated to the ruling Awami League Party, ultimately fueled a mass movement against the government. The protests evolved into a broader uprising, with demands for systemic change and growing pressure for Sheikh Hasina's resignation.

At first, "protests broke out in a few public universities, but the ranks of demonstrators were sparse. Until two events rallied the stream of discontented people: the publication a journalistic investigation showing that the civil service entrance exams (on which, at this stage, 44 The most important of these is a television appearance by Mrs Hasina, during which she referred to the demonstrators as "rajakar" a pejorative term for Bangladeshis who collaborated with the Pakistani army during the 1971 war, accused of crimes against humanity against civilians in East Pakistan at the time

"Following this provocation, students from all over the country came out of their dormitories [...] chanting slogans such as: Who are you? Who are you? Razakar, Razakar!" and "Razakar [Demanded rights and became a Razakar]"⁹

8 Le Monde diplomatique, "Bangladesh, aux racines du soulèvement", Nafis Asan, publié le 1/10/2024

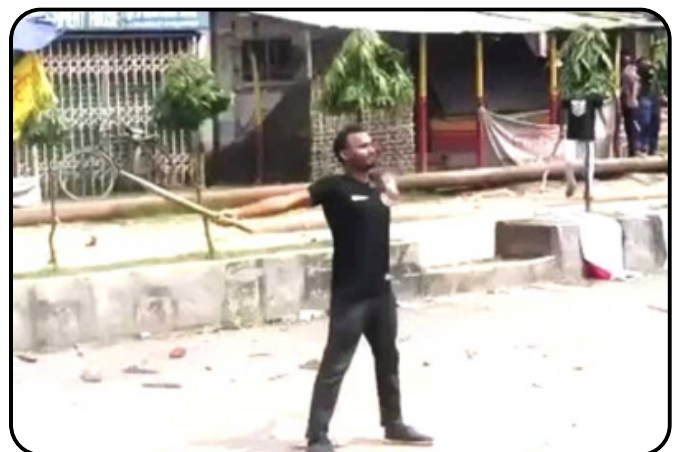
9 The Daily Star, The 'Razakar' back and forth: Who said what?, publié le 15 juillet 2024

10 Révolution permanente, idem.

Until then, the movement's strategy had been based on mass demonstrations and non-violent resistance, before these two tipping points." *The radicalization of the protests rapidly intensified. Hatred of the government led to attacks government buildings and public infrastructure, turning the streets into war zones. In these bloody clashes, the solidarity of street workers was essential, like the Rickshaw drivers who helped transport the wounded.*"¹⁰

During the long protests, students occupied the streets, regulated traffic and guarded public buildings after popular attacks. In response to the repression, they strengthened their solidarity network and used social networks to broadcast crucial videos, such as that of death of student **Abu Sayed**.

This highly symbolic video, which went round the country, strengthened the movement's resolve: alone facing the police, he opened his arms in a gesture of defiance, and was shot several times in the chest. The movement's method of resistance, combined with the moral legitimacy acquired on the ground, was a major catalyst in the government's downfall.



Abu Sayed in front of the police

At the beginning of August, after five weeks of demonstrations, further violence claimed 77 lives, bringing the total number of deaths during the protests to 238. The government then decided to deploy the army on the streets of Dhaka in an attempt to quell the movement.

Nevertheless, the protests continued until Sheikh Hasina fled. A report by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) published on February 12, 2025 estimated that *It is estimated that "up to 1,400 people may have been killed between July 1 and August 15"¹¹ and that "thousands more were injured", mostly by the security forces, and that 12% to 13% of the victims were children. The HDCH accuses Sheikh Hasina's government of having pursued "an official policy of attacking and violently repressing demonstrators and sympathizers, raising concerns of crimes against humanity requiring urgent and thorough investigation".¹²*

What drives such perseverance in the face of repressive violence? Is it the backdrop of extreme poverty, compounded by one reform too many? The sense of having nothing left to lose? Or the anger stoked by Sheikh Hasina's repression and anti-protest rhetoric? Perhaps all of the above. The powder keg was already there—it only needed a spark to ignite.

While graduate students in other countries often leave in search of better opportunities, Bangladeshi youth remain steadfast in their determination to drive change. The latest provocations and polarizing rhetoric of the "Iron Lady" pushed tens of thousands onto the streets, until the protests fractured the illusion of an unshakable Hasina.

In addition to authority of the forces of law and order during the street clashes, the protests also affected the sector on which Sheikh Hasina had built her credibility: *"The former prime had based her ability to govern on high growth rates, of the order of 6% per year over the past 15 years. This rate was mainly due to textile exports. The textile sector, workers' intervention in the movement and pressure from manufacturers were key factors in Hasina's downfall. Widespread blockades, roadblocks on major routes, Internet and communication breakdowns have undermined the fragile just-in-time textile supply chain, on which 80% of the country's exports depend. The sector recorded losses of \$58 million in just a few days. Hundreds of factories closed for fear of being vandalized, and several were set on fire. Manufacturers fear that their workers will join the protest¹³ movement and further affect production."*

11 Rapport de l'ONU, "Bangladesh: UN report finds brutal, systematic repression of protests, calls for justice for serious rights violations", publié le 12/02/2025

12 Idem.

13 Révolution permanente. idem.

HASINA'S ESCAPE AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A TRANSITIONAL GOVERNMENT

On August 5, **Hasina resigned and fled the country by military helicopter to India**. This precipitated the resignation of the Chief Justice and paved the way for a transitional government. On October 17, 2024, the International Crimes Tribunal of Bangladesh issued an arrest warrant for Sheikh Hasina for her alleged role in these events. **Army chief Waker-uzZaman announced the formation of a government with the opposition**, led by Muhammad Yunus, in line with the opposition's expectations, and thus excluding the party.

Muhammad Yunus is internationally renowned for pioneering microcredit through his Grameen Bank. As a Prime Minister, he led to the introduction of **social and economic reforms**, including economic inclusion programs aimed at reducing poverty and creating opportunities for unemployed youth. He also advocated for support networks for small businesses and fostered partnerships with international organizations to drive social innovation.



Mohammad Yunus in Woodstock in 2014

Ralf Lotys/wikiquote

Symbolizing the major role played by students in overthrowing the regime, **two of the movement's leaders, Asif Mahmud and Akhtar Hossain, joined the interim government set up** after Sheikh Hasina's resignation. Asif Mahmud, a former linguistics student and one of the founders of Ganatantrik Chhatra Shakti, is Minister of Sports and Youth, while Akhtar Hossain, a law student, has been appointed Minister of the Environment.



Demonstrators destroy Hasina's father's house, February 6, 2025

Free Malaysia Today

As of February 2025, the interim government's record remains mixed. While reforms have been initiated, their implementation has been sluggish, hindered by the extensive damage inflicted by the previous regime on the justice system, media, and police. After an initial wave of optimism, the public—especially young people—is growing impatient, frustrated by the slow pace of change. Nonetheless, progress has been made in the realm of justice: the arrest of those responsible for the summer massacres has served as a crucial symbolic milestone, though the absence of Sheikh Hasina continues to cast a shadow over these efforts.

Tensions between his supporters and the opposition movement continue to threaten civil peace. **Six months after from the former leader, protesters destroyed several buildings linked to her family**, after learning that she was due to address her supporters on Facebook India. Following the unrest, the Bangladeshi police *announced on Monday February 10 that they had arrested more than 1,300 people in a vast operation dubbed "Demon Hunt" aimed at of gangs suspected by le government¹⁴ of being linked to the former 14 Minister".*

The capital has regained a certain freedom of movement, and **demonstrations are now held on average two or three times a day**, marking a major change for Bangladeshis, who are now free to assemble and express themselves without fear arrest.

However, the interim government is being criticized for its **delay in holding elections**, its management of the economic and social crisis, and **its downplaying of violence against religious minorities**. Yunus and his allies wish to proceed first with electoral and constitutional reforms holding elections, but pressure is mounting, and with it the demand for an electoral timetable. Some analysts even believe that this slowness **could lead to a military takeover.**¹⁵



Free Malaysia Today

Demonstrators in Dhaka on July 29, 2024

14 Le Monde, *Au Bangladesh, plus de 1 300 personnes arrêtées dans une opération de police*, publié le 10/02/2025

15 RFI, *100 jours après la révolution au Bangladesh, un bilan du gouvernement transitoire mitigé*, 22/11/2024

CHALLENGES FACED BY THE TRANSITIONAL GOVERNMENT

The Yunus-led transitional government faces a series of complex challenges in bringing about a genuine democratic transition in Bangladesh. These include:

National reconciliation and consolidation of the rule of law:

After years of repression, it is essential to restore citizens' confidence in public institutions. Yunus must not only guarantee the independence of the judiciary, but also solve the problems linked to the corruption that plagues the administration and the judicial system.

With regard to the electoral process, Yunus mentioned in his televised speech that **parliamentary elections should be held between late 2025 and mid-2026, following major reforms**. He stressed the need for an accurate electoral roll, with the aim of avoiding any manipulation of the electoral process. He also emphasized the creation of a tradition where first-time voters will ensure 100% participation in elections, thus guaranteeing true legitimacy for future elections.

Managing community and social tensions :

Minorities, particularly Hindus, have long faced discrimination. The government is under pressure to ensure fair representation and protection of the rights of all religious and ethnic communities. Community tensions linked to resources, land rights and the social integration of minority groups require particular attention.

Economic reconstruction and job creation

Bangladesh's economy has been hard hit by years of political instability. **Youth unemployment**, a factor in launching the revolt, calls for far-reaching economic reforms.

International relations and regional diplomacy

Bangladesh is in a complex geopolitical position, particularly relation to India and Myanmar. **The management of Rohingya refugees** and border tensions with India over water resources are major challenges for Yunus.

CONCLUSION

Bangladesh is going through a historic period of political and social transition, marked by the irruption of youth into the political process. Sheikh Hasina's government, previously firmly entrenched in power, was destabilized by student protests that transformed discontent into a broader revolution. The GCS movement made its mark with **simple, mass actions** (demonstrations, human chains, punching actions), amplified by **active communication**.

Textile workers' participation in the student movement also helped to sway and then topple the government, jeopardizing the country's **main economic sector**, of which Sheikh Hasina was so proud.

The fate of the students who fell victim to the repression of the single party catalyzed the desire for change, and the movement was able to use them as **symbols of a martyred youth**, who also constitute the country's reservoir of civic energy. It's worth highlighting the steadfastness of this movement, despite the violence of the repression up until Sheikh Hasina's capitulation. As a result, the violent repression of the demonstrations **fuelled the feeling injustice and amplified the revolt**. The challenge for the transitional government will be to transform this revolution into an opportunity to restore democratic principles and establish the rule of law.

Sources

- Le Figaro, *"Bangladesh : Les manifestations étudiantes et la répression gouvernementale"*, 16/07/2024.
- RFI, *Le Bangladesh : une révolution imprévue des étudiants*, 18/07/2024.
- Le Monde, *La fuite de Hasina et l'ouverture d'une ère de transition*, 22/08/2024.
- Le Monde, *Bangladesh votes in election boycotted by opposition*, 7/01/2024
- Le Monde, *Au Bangladesh, la genèse d'une révolution étudiante*, 19/08/2024
- Asia Pacific Foundation, *"La crise politique au Bangladesh : un tournant pour la démocratie"*, 23/08/2024.
- The Diplomat, *Bangladesh : The Students' Revolution and Its Impact*, 17/07/2024.
- BBC News, *Bangladesh's Political Crisis: Students Lead a New Revolution*, 16/07/2024.
- Al Jazeera, *Protests in Bangladesh: Students Clash with Police Amid Quota Reforms*, 15 /07/2024.
- Le Courrier, *Le Bangladesh prévoit des élections législatives d'ici la fin 2025 ou la mi-2026"*, 16 /12/2024.
- Amnesty international, *Bangladesh. Le gouvernement intérimaire doit rétablir la liberté d'expression au Bangladesh et abroger la Loi sur la cybersécurité*, 8 /08/2024
- Barta 24, *La technologie est la colonne vertébrale d'un pays*, **publié le 4/10/2024**
- *Bangladesh, une jeunesse qui ne tire pas assez les fruits du développement ?*, Rapport de l'Ambassade de France au Bangladesh, 8/08/2024
- Al Jazeera, *How Bangladesh's 'Gen Z' protests brought down PM Sheikh Hasina*, 7/08/2024
- Visualiser la corruption, *Le système judiciaire est-il une arme au Bangladesh ?* 2/01/2024
- Le Monde, *Au Bangladesh, plus de 1 300 personnes arrêtées dans une opération de police*, 10/02/2025
- Rapport de l'ONU, *Bangladesh: UN report finds brutal, systematic repression of protests, calls for justice for serious rights violations*, 12/02/2025