Civil Resistance and Student Activism in the Political Struggles of Bangladesh (1947-1971)

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Abstract

The political history of Bangladesh has been significantly shaped by student-led campaigns of civil resistance, understood as political action relying on nonviolent methods and tactics. In the long struggle for independent Bangladesh, civilians from diverse sections of the society embraced nonviolence as a strategy to challenge oppression and injustice. Yet, the account of nonviolent struggles has received less treatment in the literature. This paper is an attempt to analyze students' nonviolent movement activism in Bangladesh from historical perspectives. In the events of civilian struggle in pre-independence Bangladesh (1947-1971), student activism became catalytic in forwarding popular demands, including establishing Bangla as the mother language, autonomy and self-rule, and independence. This paper investigates to what extent students as social actors could help mobilize broad-based civil resistance in the context of contention between power holders and civilian protesters. The analysis is informed by theoretical insights from resistance and protest movement studies. In this vein, this paper engages the political process approach to examine student-led civil resistance in the political history of Bangladesh. The data source includes published articles and books. Based on an extensive review of the secondary sources, the findings suggest that students' strategic choice of nonviolent political action generated great appeal among ordinary civilians. It helped transform ordinary people's power into social power which ultimately formed a base of mass resistance and helped to bring about significant socio-political changes in the political landscape of pre-independence Bangladesh.

Key words: Bangladesh, Civil resistance, Student, Struggle, Protest movement, nonviolent

Introduction

Political struggles have been a fundamental and persistent characteristic of the society and politics in most colonial countries of the South Asian region. Bangladesh is known for its civilian's passion and sacrifice for important socio-cultural and political agenda.[1]The pre-independence political history of Bangladesh has conjured

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1 Sumanta Banarjee, "Radical and violent political movements", Paul R. Brass, (ed.). *Routledge handbook of South Asian Politics India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal*, (Routledge New York, 2010).

up waves of the active struggle of different groups who often treated them as marginalized in many directions i.e., cultural, economic, and political. They constituted peasants, students, teachers, lawyers, politicians, and wider sections of people, together representing vocals on behalf of ordinary civilians. Ever since the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 to the period before Bangladesh wins freedom in 1971, the political landscape of undivided Pakistan saw a flurry of political protest, contestation, and defiance against the political authority or power holders to raise voice for great causes: establishing language rights, self-rule, autonomy, and independence. On many occasions, such resistance movements typically followed nonviolent methods, including protest and persuasion, noncooperation, and nonviolent intervention.[2] The strategy of nonviolent collective action became a reliable mode of people's political struggle in the then eastern wing of Pakistan (present Bangladesh).[3]

Students, particularly public university students, are considered as a significant political force.[4] Lipset argues that students are the emerging elites—the status which they acquire by virtue of their higher academic training at the university level.[5] Student activism has significantly impacted the political arena in many countries in the past century. To mention, Turkey, Korea, Japan, and Thailand in which student demonstrations brought down the dictatorial regime and change in governments, to indicate student power.[6] Nowadays, student activism has been diverse and robust. Their spontaneous responses to different political crises and events have prompted them to involve in more and more protest movement activities, instead of being mere participants.[7]

Student movement serves as a powerful unit in the struggle for political transformation. There were a remarkable number of such events in the twentieth century in many Asian countries and across the globe: in India, Gandhi led the nonviolent movement that played a crucial role in ending British colonial rule; in the

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[2] Kurt Schock, *Unarmed insurrections. People power movements in non-democracies*. (University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

[3] Ishtiaq Hossain, "Bangladesh civil resistance in the struggle for independence," Maciej J. Bartkowski (ed.), *Recovering nonviolent history: civil resistance in liberation struggles*. February, (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2013).

[4] Jungyun Gill and James DeFronzo, "A comparative framework for the analysis of international student movements", *Social Movement Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 2009, pp. 203-224.

[5] S. M. Lipset, "The possible effects of student activism on international politics," Lipset S.M. and P.G. Altbach, (eds.), *Students in Revolt*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969).

[6] Philip. G. Altbach, "The transformation of the Indian student movement", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 6, No. 8, (August 1966), pp. 448-460.

[7] M. L. Weiss, E. Aspinall and M. Thompson, "Introduction: Understanding student activism in Asia, M. L. Weiss and E. Aspinall (eds.). *Student activism in Asia: Between protest and powerlessness, (*Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), pp. 1–32.

Philippines the two-decades-long dictatorship of Marcos was ousted in just four days of active resistance involving students; in Ukraine the Orange Revolution brought an end to the corrupt regime in less than two months; and student and youth-led nonviolent civil resistance led to the removal of long term dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt in a matter of weeks.[8]

The early scholarship on student politics in developing countries tended to view student protest activism in relation to nationalist and independence struggles.[9] Students protest activism remained integral to every transformative moment of political life in Bangladesh.[10] This has been evidenced in the country's political history by the events related to people's struggle for language (1948-1952), the massive upsurge against the martial regime of Ayub Khan in 1969, and the formative phase of liberation war of 1971.[11]Nearly in every protest mobilization, the student community, particularly the university students, have been appeared as a leading actor to run protest activity very spontaneously and effectively than any other social group does. Thus, student force has occupied an important place in the academic and public discussion.

The literature on civil resistance studies has concentrated on the practice of resistance by different groups. For example, recently, a handful of literature demonstrates women's power, explaining women's action of civil resistance and unpacking the important intersection between gender inclusion and nonviolent social movement.[12] [13][14]Schock identifies that labor movements, indigenous people's movements, and the movements of the environment and peace activists have been broadly presented in the literature.[15] Yet, protest activism by students has remained underrepresented in

8   Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, "Understanding nonviolent resistance: An introduction" *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 50, No. 3, 2013, pp. 271–276.

9   Seymour Martin Lipset and Philip G. Altbach (eds.), *Students in revolt*. Vol. 14. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969).

10 Bert Suykens, "What do we know about student politics in Bangladesh?, *Resistance, Accomodation, Cooptation and Sacrifice (1947-2019)," Conflict Research Group,*(Ghent University, 2019).

11 Md. Moynul Haque, *Civil resistance in Bangladesh: A study on students' participation and activism in the Shahbag Movement*. PhD Dissertation, (Germany: Bielefeld University, 2023).

12 Erica Chenoweth, "Women's participation and the fate of nonviolent campaigns: A report on the women in resistance (WiRE) data set," *One Earth Future Foundation*, (Broomfield Colorado, 2019), pp. 1-37.

13 A. M. Codur and M. E. King, "Women in civil resistance", M. M. Kurtz and L. R. Kurtz (eds.), *Women, war and violence: Typography, resistance and hope*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2015), pp. 401-446.

14 A. N. Costain "Women's movements and nonviolence", *PS: Political Science and Politics,* Vol. 33, No. 2, 2000, pp. 175–180.

15 Kurt Schock, "The practice and study of civil resistance," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 50, No. 3, 2013, pp. 277-290.

civil resistance literature. We know very little about whether and how students are involved in civil resistance and act out a form of claim-making activism.

Student-led resistance struggles are clearly a manifestation of collective action that follows a process of frame alignment. There are also resources and opportunities around which an active protest mobilization takes place. The Bangladesh case is no exception to this spectrum. Against this backdrop, this paper takes the task to explain historically significant resistance struggles through a political sociology framework. In doing so, it will examine the contention between power holders and student protesters considering two components of social conflict theory. Firstly, the injustice model explains the asymmetry of power relations with respect to the economic, moral, political, or social order and provides a broad banner for framing civil resistance activism. Secondly, the mode of authority's response that provides an opportunity of the likelihood of resistance intensity.

This article brings to light the existence and trajectory of nonviolent organizing and defiance where popular demand has not commonly been addressed, with student's high concentration in it. It also tries to explicate diverse issues that brought students into claim-making politics. This paper will take a historical tour to underscore the inception of student political prominence in the protest landscape in erstwhile East Pakistan. The article investigates to what account student as a social actor could help to alter power relations as well as mobilizing broad-based civilian resistance in the context of contention between power holders and civilian protesters.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section briefly discusses the key concepts such as civil resistance, and student activism. It then analyses student-led civil resistance struggles in the East Pakistan during the period between 1947 and 1971, informed by theoretical insights from political sociology. The final section summarizes the author's key arguments.

Conceptual Discussion
The concept of civil resistance

Civil resistance is a significant type of political action that represents the active struggles of ordinary people.[16] It is understood as a collective action undertaken by people to prosecute conflict by nonviolent means. Over the past hundred years, the tactics used in civil resistance, including mass rallies, strikes, human chains, boycotts, political non-cooperation, sit-ins, and other forms of civil disobedience,

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[16] Adam Roberts and Timothy Garton Ash (eds.), *Civil resistance and power politics: The experience of non-violent action from Gandhi to the present*, (Oxford University Press, 2009).

have proven to be successful weapon in the hand of marginalized communities, the governed, powerless, and plebeians.[17]

The concept of civil resistance is a composite of two words: 'Civil' refers to ordinary people or unarmed citizens. A civilian is also an individual who chose to act, intentionally or motivated by others, in a situation of injustice or in extreme threatening circumstances, such as police crackdown and ruthless repression by the powerful. The term 'resistance' suggests struggle through the non-institutional channel, disobedience, non-cooperation, and refusal; although resistance may be a form of self-activity, or it can also be a brave response to ordinary people.[18]

Civil resistance refers to non-routine political acts of civilians engaged in asymmetric conflicts with opponents that rely on the use of nonviolent methods.[19]It entails an active fight against situations of injustice, oppression, discrimination, and tyranny. It is a political action that operates within the bounds of non-routine and non-institutional channels– that is, an act that operates outside of channels controlled by authorities. It is nonviolent in that the primary challenge to the target opponents does not involve physical violence or threat of violence.[20]

The concept of civil resistance started to develop from the past hundred and fifty years. The remarkable upsurge of nonviolent resistance significantly took place in Asian countries in 1980s and 1990s. Zunes[21]argues that it is in the third world where nonviolent insurrection or the people power "have overthrown authoritarian regimes, forced substantial reforms." In South Asia, the term civil resistance is popular for its moral (principled) dimension, which is built upon Gandhi's pacifist philosophy of *Satyagraha*– translated as truth force or soul force.[22] Gandhian approach to nonviolence received much academic merit due to its success in the revolutionary protest to end the British colonization. It left far-reaching consequences, for that in the subsequent time of Gandhi, South Asian countries have followed his philosophy as basic tenets to practice nonviolent action. The same is true in the context of many

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[17] Asef Bayat, "Plebeians of the Arab spring." *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 56, No. 11, 2015, pp. 33-S43.

[18] Erica Chenoweth, *Civil resistance: What everyone needs to know,* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

[19] Kurt Schock, *Civil resistance today*, (John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

[20] Sharon Erickson Nepstad and Lester R. Kurtz, (eds.), *Nonviolent conflict and civil resistance*, (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2012).

[21] Stephen Zunes, "Unarmed insurrections against authoritarian governments in the third world: A new kind of revolution," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 1994, pp. 403-426.

[22] Sharon Erickson Nepstad and Lester R. Kurtz, (eds.), *ibid*.

countries of this region, where the transmission of nonviolent ideas and tactics brought impetus to advance great causes–freedom, democratization, and justice. For Bangladesh, it is reasonable to believe that Gandhian approach remained the sources of motivation for nonviolent action due to the country's geographical proximity and previous affiliation with the Indian subcontinent.

Student activism

The concept of 'activism' refers to a contentious and non-conventional form of claim-making politics in which protest, demonstration, and boycott campaigns are commonly used tools. The notion of activism emanates from the broader concept of political participation, understood as the set of actions that are directed to modify or change the current state of affairs.[23] This research understands activism as the act of protest by people to influence the authority and or government decisions exclusively through non-institutional channels.

The starting point for defining student activism is Altbach's framework. Following Altbach's conceptual toolkit, Luescher-Mamashela[24] understand this way: "Student activism is the collective public expression of ideas by students aimed at creating politically public debate on a topic and seeing to bring about significant (moderate, radical or even revolutionary) socio-cultural and political change." The space of activism among students is no longer limited to the institutional and educational boundaries. Student protest behavior is widely observed on political streets. Viewing in this line, student activism in Bangladesh is mainly understood as some form of protest which is related to extra-university factors and broadly includes local, national, social, and political concerns.

Weiss Aspinall and Thompson's[25] definition of student activism is helpful for this study. They define student activism as "collective action by university students directed toward (and often) against the ruling regime." Following Corning and Myers[26] this research tends to understand student activism as one kind of protest behavior of advocating and forwarding a political cause, mobilized on the street via a

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23 M. Quaranta, "Protest and contentious action," M. Wagner, D. Morisi, W. R. Thompson, and R. Dalton, *Oxford research encyclopedia of politics*. (Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 353-358.

24 T. M. Luescher-Mamashela, "Altbach's Theory of Student Activism in the Twentieth Century: Ten Propositions that Matter," Burkett, Jodi, (ed.), *Students in Twentieth-Century Britain and Ireland*, (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2018).

25 M. L. Weiss, E. Aspinall and M. Thompson, *ibid*.

26 Alexandra F. Corning and Daniel J. Myers, "Individual orientation toward engagement in social action", *Political Psychology*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 2002, pp. 703-729.

large array of tools and resources including technology and cultural motivation. More precisely, student activism denotes students' efforts to advance, obstruct, or direct social and political change or to make improvements in society and change society. Forms of student activism are diverse, ranging from, but not limited to, public speeches, boycotts, strikes, rallies, street marches, sit-ins, slogans, banners, posters, and displayed communication.

Literature Review and Rationale for Research

Protest activisms have long been the key subjects of social movement research. The literature in civil resistance studies–e.g. Chenoweth and Stephan [27], Nepstad[28] and Schock[29]– mainly concentrates on (a) success and failure at the country level, looking into why civil resistance campaigns become successful in bringing major political reforms e.g., regime change in some countries while failure in other countries; and (b) effects on democratic quality: democratic stability of post-transition regime and society i.e. countries that experienced transition through nonviolent resistance, there was a relatively higher level of democracy and chances of reversal is less likely.[30] While the extant literature deal with the macro-level output of movement activism, the outcome resulting from student-related activism in civil resistance is no less important subject to inquiry.

Civil resistance scholars argue that people from different sections of society are likely to participate in the campaigns of nonviolent protest.[31] Research highlighting students' participation in civil resistance is a recent enterprise, although it has not grown enormously. Very few scholars have explored student's link to civil resistance movements explicitly. Dahlum's [32] study claims that students show intrinsic preference to participate in nonviolent protest. It further argues that all over the world civil resistance protests have been largely organized and effectively operated by the educated young group, mostly university students. This argument can be a departure point to study student-civil resistance connection. Yet we know very little about the

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[27] Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan. *Why civil resistance works: The strategic logic of nonviolent conflict*, (Columbia University Press, 2011).

[28] Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Nonviolent revolutions: Civil resistance in the late 20th century*, (Oxford University Press, 2011).

[29] Kurt Schock, *Civil resistance: Comparative perspective on nonviolent struggle. Social Movements, protest, and contention*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

[30] Felix S. Bethke and Jonathan Pinckney, "Non-violent resistance and the quality of democracy," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 38, No. 5, 2021, pp. 503-523.

[31] Erica Chenoweth and M. J. Stephan, *ibid*.

[32] S. Dahlum, "Students in the street: Education and nonviolent protest", *Comparative Political Studies,* Sage Publications, 2018, pp.1-33.

student dimension of civil resistance in specific country context: whether and how student involve in civil resistance campaigns.

Scholarship of both student movement and sociology of higher education have noted a considerable degree of involvement by students in protest movements about both education-specific concern, e.g., tuition fees increase; wider political issues such as regime transformation, democratic reform, and the conservatism of the ruling party; global concern such as austerity policy, climate issue; and concern about social justice, gender rights, and corruption.[33] Scholars have expounded on the spontaneous protest by students erupted in many new democracies, particularly located in the third world countries.[34] While early scholarship on student politics in developing countries tended to view student protest activism in relation to nationalist and independence struggle,[35] the recent scholars on student activism broadly explained student's large-scale protest movements linked to claim-making politics.[36]

The impressive growth of higher education level students' protest action seems to reflect a new type of student citizens[37], who are highly conducive to acting collectively to express voices, ideas, make demands on authority or hold authority accountable; who remains interested in socio-political affairs, and strongly favors basic democratic and egalitarian values, but is critical of conventional systems of representation and mediation, and prefers to participate in more horizontal ways.[38] Such phenomenon has presented clear evidence that students prefer to take part in politics in a more informal pattern rather than being completely alienated from it.[39]

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[33] Raluca Abăseacă, and Geoffrey Pleyers, "The reconfiguration of social movements in post-2011 Romania", *Social Movement Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2019, pp. 154-170.

[34] David A. Snow and Dana M. Moss, "Protest on the fly: Toward a theory of spontaneity in the dynamics of protest and social movements", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 79, No. 6, 2014, pp. 1122-1143.

[35] P. G. Altbach and S. M Lipset, *ibid*.

[36] Lorenzo Cini and César Guzmán-Concha, "Student movements in the age of austerity, The cases of Chile and England," *Social Movement Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 5, 2017, pp. 623-628.

[37] Manja Klemencic, "What is student agency? An ontological exploration in the context of research on student engagement", M. Klemencic, S. Bergan, R. Primožic (eds.), *Student engagement in Europe: Society, higher education and student governance*, Council of Europe Higher Education Series, 20, (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2015), pp. 11-29.

[38] L. Hustinx *et al*., "Monitorial citizens or civic omnivores? Repertoires of civic participation among university students," *Youth & Society*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2012, pp. 95–117.

[39] R. Brooks, "Student politics and protest: An introduction," R. Brooks (ed.), *Student politics and protest: International perspectives*. First edition, Research into Higher Education (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

Scholars of student movements have paid much attention to covering narratives of worldwide moderate and revolutionary student movements. [40] But the theoretical insights from civil resistance literature to student movement are still limited in numbers. Moreover, the previous works on popular uprisings concentrated on the role of indigenous groups, the middle class, and above all, the role of subaltern classes are mainly focused. However, the role of students in civil resistance movements has remained understudied.

The Asymmetric Situation Leading to Civil Resistance in the Pre-Independence Period

The resistance and injustice model developed by David V. J. Bell back in 1973 in his seminal book *Resistance and Revolution* helps to explain why people resist in certain social circumstances. The central argument of this theory according to Bell,[41] "all instances of resistance behavior are rooted in and rationalized in accordance with a sense of "injustice", with respect to the economic, moral, political or social order, for which the government is assumed to be at least partially responsible." The main concern of this theory is to find the unjust situation that drives people to react and engage in resistance. This injustice argument can be further expanded by relating it with people's perception of deprivation thesis. People tend to resist when a gap opened, between the material conditions they expected and the material conditions that actually prevailed in the society they live.[42] This perception of deprivation serves as a motive to call a situation unjust.

To understand conditions that contribute to framing a large-scale civil resistance, it is important to understand the dynamics of contention and the process through which people's demands are channeled and the responses are addressed. The pre-independence political landscape of Bangladesh was overshadowed by asymmetric conflict between the west Pakistani power holders and ordinary civilians of East Pakistan. Asymmetry is conceptualized as a diverse political, economic and socio-cultural situation which would present in the state of Pakistan. Three key asymmetric issues which led to firmly belief that people are subjugated, and injustice is entangled

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[40] Jungyun Gill and James DeFronzo, "A comparative framework for the analysis of international student movements," *Social Movement Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 2009, pp. 203-224.

[41] D. V. J. Bell, *Resistance and revolution*, Boston, (USA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973).

[42] Marnie L Sayles, "Relative deprivation and collective protest: An impoverished theory?", *Sociological Inquiry*, Vol. 54, No. 4, 1984, pp. 449-465.

everyday life, were i) power asymmetry, ii) asymmetry in economic situation, and iii) asymmetry in socio-cultural practices.

Centralization of power of the ruling elites of West Pakistan set the background of unusual political turmoil which continued until Bangladesh freed from second colonial aggression. Political power by the meaning of Bengali people's accession in important government decision was hardly ensured. Absence of Bengali representation in governmental structure designed by central leadership made governance more autocratic which ultimately gave rise to a coterie of bureaucrats and ignored popular East Bengal politicians from the institutional politics practice. Examples of political power asymmetry were at the administrative level, the provincial government of East Bengal remained under the subjugation of West Pakistani power elites. Due to overwhelming majority in civil service, there emerged a sense of paternalistic guardianship among Pakistan bureaucrats which engendered the relationship between two regions.[43]

Bangladesh has been economically exploited to the utmost by the West Pakistan. It was a land of abundance wealth including sand, sugar, and stock of medium and large-scale manufacturing industry. But the profits generated from this part were brought to the West Pakistan. Bangladesh was treated by the West Pakistan as a milch-cow and milked her until it becomes dry. Moreover, the foreign aid received to alleviate poor situations of millions was distributed inappropriately. Infrastructure facilities were underdeveloped in East Pakistan compared to its west counterpart. Capital accumulation and the growth of money market in the Bengali inhabited wing of Pakistan were purposively constrained, leading to asymmetric situation in the economy.[44]

There was an effort to cultural regimentation of Bengali people. The process started with imposing dominant society's value and culture in dominated society in the purpose of creating a subject political culture. An attempt to make Urdu language as *lingua franca* of Pakistan attests to this fact. Even, asymmetry in the issue of choosing one common state language appeared due to significant linguistic difference of the two wings. Bengali, the majority (56 percent) spoken language is virtually unknown in West Pakistan, whereas Urdu is similarly unfamiliar in East Pakistan. Moreover, the common perception underlying in the minds of West Pakistanis is that the people of East Bengal are inferior and bad Muslims who are

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[43]   A.M.A Muhith, *Bangladesh. Emergence of a nation*, (The University Press Limited, 1992).
[44]   Ghulam Mustafa and Adil Nawaz, "The separation of East Pakistan: Socio-economic factors," *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies,* Vol. 2, No. 1, 2014, pp. 45-51.

closely allied with Hindu culture. These narrow views of cultural treatment broadened the gap and were ultimately responsible for the emergence of tumultuous episodes of social conflict.[45]

The division of power, economy and culture that characterized the confrontational politics of pre-independence Bangladesh was outlined in the Election Manifesto of Pakistan People's Party 1970 which read as follows:

> Pakistan is geographically separated into two parts, of which the Eastern was a major producer of exportable wealth at the time of partition. The Central Government's expenditure, however, was mainly in the western part. Political power also lay in the west on that account and because of the presence of an opulent feudal class. The development schemes were so made or implemented by the Central Government that the private sector under these schemes fell into the hands of a small number of businessmen, who neither had their original homes in West Pakistan or had chosen to settle ther ...The result was that East Pakistan was submitted to the ruthless exploitation. ...We must frankly recognize that the unity of the nation has been gravely imperiled. It is no remedy to brand the victims of exploitation as traitors because they are driven to protest against the treatment they receive. Nor does it help to improve matters by insulting them as bad Muslim.[46]

The routine treatment of injustice and subjugation by the West Pakistan intensified sense of grievances among the people of East Pakistan. The notion repertoire of collective action was in the making because of street protest politics of East region. Moreover, regular pretest movement had been the pattern of collective claim making and the strategic means through which aggrieved people's demand is heard. As such, East Pakistan became traditionally known as political and East Bengal people, in the political scene, have been known as the active political people.

The Political Process of Students' Resistance Activism

Protest movement analysis drawn from different geographical locations suggest that students protest occurring in peripheral countries of the global south has specific socio-political context; the same context does not necessarily explain the protest mobilization in the countries of the global north. Examining third world countries student protest mobilizations, Kapstein and Converse [47] find a link between institutional weakness and student protest mobilization. Most third-wave democracies are characterized by weak institutions, including inefficient state

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[45] Rounaq Jahan. *Pakistan. Failure in national Integration*, (The University Press Limited, 2001).

[46] Talukder Moniruzzaman, *The Bangladesh revolution and its aftermath* (The University Press Limited, 2009), p. 14.

[47] E Kapstein, N. Converse, *The fate of young democracies*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

apparatus and ineffectual political parties. The institutional incapability to respond social needs of its citizen breeds social discontent, resulted in protest and resistance mainly called by students. In such institutional weakness context, students are seen by the society as legitimate political actors as well as change agents, mandating them to participate directly in politics. Luescher [48] also uses this perspective while theorizing contemporary student activism. He contends that student mobilization arising in specific socio-political context indicates the vitality and representativeness of student body as effective social and political force. The rise of student movement activism and students as leading actors in the protest politics of the pre-independence era fits this argument.

In late 1947, surprisingly, students came to the spotlight with the language issue.[49] They brought up the language question to the political debate. Meanwhile, student politics was influenced by a common issue that dominated the pre-partition political landscape. In December 1947 Fazlur Rahman, the Central Education Minister of Pakistan, presided at an education conference in the capital city of Karachi. This conference aimed to create an elite class that would determine the quality of the new state. An all-agreed proposal was passed stating Urdu would be the state language of Pakistan. No sooner had the news published on 6 December in a local newspaper called Morning News, than students from different educational institutions of Dhaka city sharply reacted with discontent to this announcement.

Generally, a student movement arises in a situation when there is a strong feeling of frustration concerning institutional structure, government's policies or programs which directly affects them. The hegemonic attempt to impose Urdu as state language sparked resentment among Bengali speaking people in East Pakistan. Students at Dacca University were beginning to form an All Party State Language Committee of Action.[50] The public anger got so intense that students organized a series of protests between 1947 and 1948 at the Dhaka University campus in response to demand their language rights. The Bengali students of East Pakistan (present Bangladesh) had a legitimate reason to expose in protest struggles. Out of sixty-nine million people in Pakistan, forty-four million people speak Bengali languages who were the inhabitants of East Pakistan. So, establishing Bangla as a

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[48]   T M Luescher, *ibid*.
[49]   Badruddin Umar, "Language movement", Sirajul Islam (ed.), *History of Bangladesh 1704-1791*, Vol. 1, Political History, Third Edition, (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2007), pp. 352-382.
[50]   S M S Alam, "Language as political articulation: East Bengal in 1952", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 1991, pp. 469-487.

state language was justified on the ground that the majority of the people of the state speak this particular language.

Unfortunately, the central government of Pakistan failed to discern the Bengali people's spirit of linguistic nationalism, the language feelings embedded in the greater community, and to recognize the Bangali language in state affairs.[51]However, Pakistani ruling elites took this sporadic protest event very lightly. The language question was neither purely academic nor simply a cultural issue; students' initial protest made it highly political.[52] To quote Rashid (2021: 167)[53] "In Pakistan the question of state language was not just a matter of customary political discourse…the Bengalis' demand for making their mother tongue Bangla as one of the state languages of Pakistan turned into a movement." Less than 7 months, the language issue became the principal agenda with which students were largely mobilized for the first time with greater spontaneity and with shared emotion.[54] Few political actions in the second half of the twentieth century in erstwhile East Pakistan have laid a solid foundation of students claim-making politics than the *Bhasha Andolon* (language movement) of 1952.

Civil resistance grows out of a systematic way which sociologist Kurt Schock called it 'political process'. The political process approach has three essential components. The first element is collective action frames. The argument suggests that group action is the *sine qua non* for resistance to occur. For the people to engage in collective action there must be cognitive liberation, that is, people must perceive a situation which is unjust to them and subject to change through collective action. Successful collective action frames are conditioned with frame alignment—the process through which movements link individuals in the oppressed population with their interests, goals, activities and even ideologies.[55]

Bengali people felt that the language with which they were intricately connected by their social habitus and upbringing no longer was appropriate to the arbitrary decision of West Pakistan ruling elites. It thus provided a sense of purpose for

[51] Rafiqul Islam, *The Bengali language movement and the emergence of Bangladesh*, *Contributions to Asian Studies*, Vol. 11, 1978, pp. 142-152.

[52] Mohammad Hannan, *Bangladesher chatro andoloner itihash 1830-1971*, Fourth edition, (Dhaka: Agami Prokashoni, 2013).

[53] Harun-or-Rashid, 2021, *ibid*.

[54] Samantha Christiansen, *Beyond liberation: Students, space, and the state in east Pakistan/Bangladesh1952-1990*, Ph.D. Dissertation, (Massachusetts: Northeastern University, Boston, 2012).

[55] Kurt Schock, *Unarmed insurrections, People power movements in non-democracies*, University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

engaging in the movement decisively.[56] Undoubtedly, the language movement was broadly shaped by students' active involvement. The previous history of the organization-based student activism provided much dynamism for the movement.[57] Moreover, a sense of injustice caused by the deliberate denial of the mother language status prompted students to become more vocal. Students had projected their role in different categories: conscious section, intelligentsia, civil society, and powerful activist force.[58] Dhaka University students were predominantly recruited to steer the movement activism.

The growing student activism had evoked awareness among other educational institutions across the capital and the Eastern part at large. Many students from different schools, colleges, and universities were engaged in sympathy protest demonstrations and related activities. Students were mobilized around the premise of the Prime Minister's residence at *Bardhaman House* (currently Bangla Academy, which is situated at the close proximity of Dhaka University campus) demanding Bengali to be given the status of the state language of Pakistan immediately. Christiansen[59] argues that the "first real physical test of the political identity of the students" was observed on 26 February 1948. Many students from different academic institutions including Dhaka University, Dhaka Intermediate College, Dhaka Medical College, Jagannath Intermediate College, and many other institutions came to form a mass mobilization at the Dhaka University premise to support the language cause. A State Language Action Committee was formed on the presence of students.

One of the important elements of the political process is political opportunities and constraints. The theory implies that the intensity of civil resistance is largely shaped by both political opportunities and constraints. Two types of opportunities and constraints can be identified: responses by authorities to political action, and relations to elites and third parties. Authority's response can be diverse: they can ignore the civilian dissents, conciliate, reform, or suppress. Each of these response influences mobilization. Elite divisions can create political opportunities for disruption. Moreover, segments of the elite that are inferior relative to the power of other dominating elites may be likely to support the challengers if doing so increase their position. In addition, support from third parties substantially increases the opportunity for groups to resist the authority.[60]

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[56] William van Schendel, *ibid*.
[57] Talukder Maniruzzaman, *ibid*.
[58] S. M. Khasru and M. T. Zami, "Student politics in Bangladesh: A historical overview," Imtiaz Ahmed and I. Iqbal (eds.), *University of Dhaka: Making, unmaking, remaking*, (Prothoma Prokashan, 2017), pp. 49-69.
[59] Samantha Christiansen, *ibid*.
[60] Kurt Schock, 2005, *ibid*.

The authority's response in the context of the language movement (1947 to 1952) is characterized by repression operationalized through institutional and legal measures. Student's agitation reached a new height following the statement of Governor-General Mohammad Ali Jinnah on 21 March 1948. Jinnah made it very explicit that Urdu shall be the state language of Pakistan. Many students stood up against this proposal shouting No, No. This event was a valiant exposure to defy supreme political authority which subsequently motivated many other students to become united on the language question. In a meeting arranged on the evening of 24 March with students of the Language Action Committee, Jinnah remained assertive on his side, reiterated the same decision that there can be one state language, and that language can only be Urdu. Mr. Jinnah's emphatic support for Urdu was greeted with bold protest from students.[61] The language controversy reached a new phase in 1952. There had been an intense argument and counterargument presented by students in favor of language and defense of their political stand until Jinnah become convinced. Either way, that assertive behavior of students baffled Mr. Jinnah.

Yet, student resistance was remarkably constant even though the ruling regime imposed an embargo on people mobilizing outside in large numbers. This period witnessed a series of movement campaigns including protests, strikes, boycotts, slogans, and other forms of civil disobedience under the auspices of student organizations against language injustice. [62] In an attempt to foil the student movement, the regime's security forces ruthlessly crushed the protesters. The police and para-military forces shot tear gas, bullet, and baton-charged. The police also attacked student hostels. Several gunshot innings were resorted to undermining the student's counterattack. As a result, hundreds were injured, thousands were arrested, and few students were killed namely Salam, Barkat, Rafiq, and Jabbar.[63] Nonetheless, students' collective action translated into a force more powerful during the event. The mounting pressure generated by the movement forced the regime to pass a motion to recognize the Bengali language as the official language of East Pakistan. This moment came in 1954 when Bengali people achieved their language status. The language right was officially ratified in Pakistan's 1956 constitution.[64]

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[61] S M S Alam, "Language as political articulation: East Bengal in 1952", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 1991, pp. 469-487.
[62] Mohammad Hannan, *Bangladesher chatro andoloner itihash 1830-1971*, Fourth edition, (Dhaka: Agami Prokashoni, 2013).
[63] Mahmudur Rahman Manna, *Bangladesher chattro rajnity otit, bortoman abong vobissot*. Third edition, (Dhaka: Rukkushah creative publishers, 2015).
[64] Afroza Anwary, "Frame alignment and the dynamics of the national language movement of East Pakistan: 1947-1956", *Journal of Asian History,* Vol. 45. No. 1 and 2, 2011, pp. 163-191.

This success was brought about by the intense pressure of the language movement and the nonviolent defiance and mobilization of students and the public alike.

Following the language movement, students developed a strong structure of agitation capacity against West Pakistani regime. One example of student defiant behavior was the protest Ayub Khan's insertion of some undemocratic provision. On 7 August 1959, he promulgated Election Bodies Disqualification Order (EBDO) which imposed serious restrictions on political leaders and tried to regulate student campus activism. The student community sharply defied the order. In 1962, Ayub Khan declared an education policy based on the recommendation of the Shariff Commission. The policy attempted to reinstated English as compulsory medium of instruction and Urdu to be the state language. Students of East Pakistan denounced the education policy and launched a movement what we now know as the 1962 Education Movement.[65] Several student organizations including Bangladesh Chatro Union, Bangladesh Chatra League, Chatra Shakti, Students Federations observed hartal and picketing. They adopted nonviolent protest strategies, including peaceful demonstrations, writing petitions, and organizing campaigns to solicit support from the wider public. Although there were moments of tension and some confrontations with the police, the students remained committed to nonviolent methods of action. They believed in the power of collective action to bring about change without resorting to violence. Students' contentious protest the Ayub regime resulted in killing and arrest.[66] Yet, the student education movement was successful to put pressure on the government to pause on the implementation of the educating policy of the Shariff Commission.

Bengali students rose against the autocratic regime of Ayub Khan in 1969. This upsurge was aimed at self-autonomy of Bengali people in East Pakistan. Despite the sudden close of political activity at the national level during the military regime, however, the Dhaka University campus itself provided an arena where students could mobilize and operate. By the 1960s, students at Dhaka University already developed as an active resistance force to state policies. Christiansen[67] aptly referred to this period of activism as 'Golden Years' of student power as they successfully ousted the military regime of Ayub khan through the 1968-69 mass upsurge campaign. This

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[65] Badruddin Umar, "Language movement", Sirajul Islam (ed.), *History of Bangladesh 1704-1791*, Vol. 1, Political History, Third Edition, (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2007), pp. 352-382.
[66] Lelin Azad. *Unasatturer ganaabhyuthan: Rastra Samaj Rajniti*. (Dhaka: Jatiya Sahitto Prakash, 2019).
[67] Samantha, *ibid*.

episode of student protest was marked an important moment of flourishing students as a critical political voice and cemented the place of Dhaka University as the heart of resistance as well as a definitive political arena. While the language movement was a clear manifestation of popular drive to influence the state power, the 1969 mass upsurge had a particularly substantive effect on solidifying East Pakistan's position in terms of bearers of political expressions and representation.[68]

The anti-Ayub movement was strengthened by the participation of many more people from different occupations. A combination of student protests, worker strikes, and mobilizations by teachers and lawyers turned out to be an increasingly powerful display of mass movement.[69] General strikes, meetings, and street demonstrations were filled with constant agitation in Dhaka. The number of people joining the protest against the Ayub regime increased day by day; from forty thousand to fifty thousand participants were counted in a day. On 20 January, the military authorities planned to crack down on the resistance with open fire. A well-known student political activist on campus named Asaduzzaman alias Asad was at the forefront of the procession which had started to march from the *Amtolla* to the General Secretariat. The police firing caused the immature death of Asad. His breathless body fell on the street. As police retreated, his body was brought to campus. Asad's death touched so deeply on other students and the wider public alike, had a profound impact on the movement mobilization. In a mass gathering the next morning, protestors declared deceased Asad as martyrs, holding Asad's bloodied shirt, and took an oath that his life sacrifice would not go in vain. East Pakistan was completely occupied with student protests which collapsed the normal fabric of civic life. Moreover, the government had virtually lost control overruling the Eastern province.

Ayub Khan had to retreat from his position as the month of chaos and disorder were going spiral. He was forced to free all detainees of the Agartala Conspiracy Case. Ayub chooses a safe passage to exit from power. And finally, in March 1969 he conceded defeat and ousted from power. Maniruzzaman[70] put the phenomena in this way "The fury of the Bengalis finally brought about–the fall of the Bastille." Thus, a long student resistance fomented locally saw the victory of student power over military dictatorship. The 1969 mass upsurge event demonstrates the nature of students' political activism and the varying scale of mobilization. The campaign directed to step down the Ayub government had strengthened student political

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[68]   William van Schendel, *op. cit.*

[69]   Tareq Ali, *Can Pakistan survive? The death of a state*, (England, 1983).

[70]   Talukder Maniruzzaman, *ibid*.

identity, particularly Dhaka University students. Notwithstanding the victory, the aftermath was unpleasant. There was still cold tension because the person had just altered through the mass uprising; the power structure remained the same. Another General Yaha Khan inherited the previous regime. He started to act like his predecessors, blowing bubbles of promises of general elections so that a civilian government could be installed and a new constitution of Pakistan could be framed.

The recurrence of civilian-based political struggle in the pre-independence era was followed by another campaign in 1971 to attain a maximalist political goal—the independence. This time, Bengali people were organized on the principle of nonviolence–civil disobedience and non-cooperation. The non-cooperation movement was enforced by student leaders from *Swadhin Bangla Chatro Sangram Parishad* (Independent Bangladesh Students Movement Action Council) which was formed on 1 March with a determination to establish an independent Bangladesh. On 2 March in a mammoth gathering of students at *Amtolla*, they hoisted a national flag of Bangladesh, showing strong determination to fight for independence. The resistance mood of ordinary people was subsequently reflected through the parade on the streets resounded with slogans like *Joi Bangla*! (Glory to Bengal), *Jago Bangali Jago*! (Wake up Bengali, Wake up), No compromise, Action Action!, Assembly or Street? Street, Street!, and so on.

In response to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's call for the non-cooperation movement, people from a different section of the society took up stern protest activism. The civic life in Dhaka city came to stand still: public transport stopped their daily route operation, Business and offices were shut down, bank and other financial institutions were walkouts from credit operation, Bengali officers working in the secretariat refused to cooperate with their Pakistani superiors, the Bengali cabin crews in Pakistani Airlines at Dhaka airport refused to operate flights from Karachi transporting Pakistani military soldiers to East Pakistan. The Bengali employees at the radio and television station took up a protest by broadcasting patriotic songs and poems.[71]

The middle-class people spontaneously put up resistance to the Pakistan army by stopping food supplies to their barracks; peasants blocked roads and placed barricades on the rail lines to prevent military vehicles from invading the villages and towns. There was a call for boycotting of all economic goods manufactured by West Pakistani-owned factories in East Pakistan. Making this economic non-cooperation effective, people started to use indigenously woven clothes called *khaddar*, the strategy which Gandhi adopted during the civil disobedience movement in India. On

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[71] Ishtiaq Hussain, *ibid*.

the political activist's side, maximum efforts were taken to stay nonviolent throughout the movement campaigns. The party activists were strictly ordered not to be influenced by any provocation or greed. As such, the month of March 1971 saw the spectacular events of nonviolent resistance.

The collective form of nonviolent action was a signifier for Bengalis' emancipation and their independence. However, subscribing to the nonviolent methods of protest did not bring destiny alone. The West Pakistani elites including Bhutto's noninterest in conceding towards power transfer failed. Mounted political polarization between Bengali demands and Pakistani leaders led to a cruel military attack on the Bengali people.[72] Unarmed civilians including students were forged to go to armed struggle as a response to a violent attack by the Pakistani army on 25 March.[73] Ordinary people fought with all their possible strength and finally won over the opponent forces. A new nation state Bangladesh was born on 16 December 1971.

The student movements in the period between 1947 and 1971 in East Pakistan was marked by a wave of nonviolent student-led movements that played a key role in shaping the erstwhile political landscape of East Pakistan and ultimately contributed to the emergence of Bangladesh. The nonviolent protests, despite being suppressed by regime violence, demonstrated the power and efficacy of civil resistance and student power of mass mobilization. The student-led movements showed that even in the face of brutal force, nonviolent mode of action could challenge the legitimacy of an authoritarian government and inspire larger societal movements for rights and freedom.

Conclusion

The student version of civil resistance has represented the Bangladeshi mode of struggle against entrenched power several times in the country's recent political history. This has been evidenced by the events of the 1952 language movement, the education movement 1962, the Six-Point movement in 1966, the mass upsurge movement 1969, and the liberation struggle of 1971. The foregoing analysis shows that the pre-independence political landscape was marked by student activism that emerged because of people's rising against diverse issues including bad regime experiences, discriminatory attitudes to Bengali language and culture, colonial education policy, entrenched military rule, and recognition for majority's electoral opinion.

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[72] M. Rashiduzzaman, "The political evolution of Bangladesh*", Current History*, Vol. 76, No. 446, April 1979, pp. 164-167.

[73] Caf Dowlah, *The Bangladesh liberation war, the Sheikh Mujib regime, and contemporary controversies*, (USA: Lexington Books, 2016).

This research suggests that historical events of student mobilization took place following a political process framework. The student protestors successfully drew attention to the wider public and link individuals in the oppressed population with their interests, goals, activities, and even ideologies. They created an injustice frame and value clusters that were frequently amplified by the activists. The collective frame was utilized to arouse cognitive liberation, that is, people must perceive a situation that is ill-fated to them and subject to change through collective action. Bangladesh has thus experienced a strong history of civil resistance which was led by students. The analysis explored that students as potential political forces transformed the political history of Bangladesh by embracing a series of unarmed protest strategies, including mass rallies, boycotts, strikes, slogans, sit-ins, long marches, and political noncooperation in the public spaces of the city. Student-led civil resistance activism centered to campus or square represents the communicative platform of public interest and association of social power critical to fighting against an adversary.

There is commonality across various uprisings between 1947 and 1971 in the erstwhile East Pakistan. Nearly all these events successfully engaged broad-based civilian participation which was made possible due to students' support; they share a common dimension of student power; and students stood against the entrenched power relations, institutional structures or government policies. Therefore, it is vital that student activism during mass movement in Bangladesh is not overlooked.

The strategic logic of why civil resistance works is grounded on the argument that broad-based people's participation matters for effective resistance struggles. Yet, scholars have not clearly identified which actor is counted as instrumental to movement participation. The key assumption this paper offers is that students can spearhead the act of civil resistance more systematically than other groups can do by virtue of their disposition toward politics, which they develop from their experiences while confronting the socio-political reality around which they live. This research attempted to develop a relational theory of civil resistance that advocates student involvement and as triggering dimensions of participation in civil resistance context. It answered how and to what extent civilian mass movements recorded in the political history in Bangladesh, are linked to students' political activism.