

PERCEPTION ANALYSIS OF NONVIOLENT PUBLIC PROTESTS IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract

Public protests challenging powerful authorities or regimes have been notable features of democratic politics worldwide. There seems to be an increasing tendency among civilians to attend protest mobilizations by relying on nonviolent forms such as sit-ins, slogans, marches, human chains, demonstrations, petitions, and hunger strikes while resisting the adversary. Given the frequent display of public dissent, the conceptual underpinning of this type of protest action is often misconstrued. We know very little about the nature, form, organization, and effectiveness of the unarmed version of contentious political action. This research investigates to what extent people understand nonviolent public protests. In so doing, this study collects opinions of various groups of people to understand nonviolent protest movements in Bangladesh. The data is collected using a survey questionnaire. The findings of the study suggest that nonviolent action is a strategic option for ordinary civilians in Bangladesh. It further shows that the knowledge of the efficacy and potential of nonviolence is not broadly shared, which is why the power of nonviolence is far from acceptable to many groups. The result reveals that nonviolent protest is popular among urban-centric movement organizers and educated young activists, especially students. The study also finds that people envision nonviolent action as a reliable protest tool that can yield significant social and political changes in Bangladesh. These findings can be a good reference for future studies on Bangladesh's social movements, contentious politics, and collective action.

Keywords: Nonviolence, Protest, Public, Bangladesh, Movement

Introduction

The public expression of political discontent has been a recurring feature of politics in developed and developing countries. The twenty-first century started with massive public discontent over the global financial crisis leading to protest movements in the western world, triggered by the Occupy-type movement in 2008 in the U.S.A

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(Belyaeva, Albert and Zaytsev, 2019). Subsequently, the world witnessed the Arab Spring in 2013—a phenomenon of nonviolent civil resistance—that engulfed most of the Middle East and North African countries, aimed at regime transformation (Chenoweth, 2013). Public protests had also broken out in Europe, particularly in Greece, Spain, and Portugal in response to structural inequalities of capitalism (Della Porta, 2015).

In developing countries, people's unarmed version of protest has become a regular phenomenon for decades (Zunes, 1994). Particularly in India, public protests emerged in 2011 against various aspects of corruption (Chowdhury and Abid, 2019). The recent political landscape of Bangladesh is also largely dominated by mass public protest events, for example, the Shahbag Movement in 2013. The movement was triggered by a group of young blogger students and activists primarily demanding the capital punishment of war criminals (Murshid, 2013). The Shahbag movement brought a new definition to public protest in Bangladesh, a country where protest activism is typically understood as politically coloured violent action, unrest, fear and destruction, and injury or death (Sajjad and Hårdig, 2017). Never in its recent history had Bangladesh witnessed such a 'critical social moment' (Shariff, 2019) characterized by innovative nonviolent protest activism as Shahbag (Haque, 2016).

Even after the Shahbag movement, there has been an increasing tendency among the ordinary public to wage protest and resistance by nonviolent means. To mention some events, private university students agitated in 2015 to ban the government's decision of 10% vat on education. Their movement followed nonviolent intervention by occupying main streets in different locations in the capital city. It continued for up to six days culminating in accepting students' demands (Rahman, 2017). Then in 2016, students at a public university (Jagannath University) in Dhaka started to press the demand for student hostels. They followed the same pattern of protest mobilization, mainly in the form of sit-ins, slogans, marches, and demonstrations, culminating in securing the government's positive response to their demands, although partially. Again, in February 2018, a group of students from different higher education institutions came to unite in a massive protest. The protesters took to the streets holding banners and chanting slogans and asking for the government's intervention to remove quota discrimination in public jobs. In the subsequent time in July 2018, there was a huge student demonstration for road safety. This time school, college, and university students alike took part in the campaigns. The protest techniques they adopted were like previous campaigns, combining nonviolent civic disruption (Jackman, 2019). The concomitant rise

of protest phenomena across the country has provoked scholars to formulate the idea of movement society¹ wherein protest publics are considered to be the most constitutive political force. According to Mahony and Clarke (2013), “protest publics” are a citizen actor of social change; often appeared as protagonists of protest movements, largely participated by youth and use only nonviolent actions (as cited in Chowdhury and Abid, 2019, pp. 51).

The pattern of public protest in third-wave democracies is mixed. The perception that violence is the pattern of the protest movement for the oppressed people remained a dominant part of the explanation of popular uprisings in most of the post-colonial societies in South Asia, including Bangladesh (Banerjee, 2010). The tendency to overemphasize violence for producing social and political change creates a bias in social conflict studies (Schock, 2005). Violent resistance may become the ultimate response to prolonged frustration of people (Gurr, 1970), but it cannot be the only path of struggle against power holders or authority. There is also an alternative nonviolent position that supports protest and persuasion without violence (Bell, 1973).

Civilian-based nonviolent action has represented the Bangladeshi mode of protest struggle against entrenched power a number of times in the country’s recent political history (Hossain, 2013). The mass mobilization of unarmed people in important national calls remained a crucial factor in creating a large-scale civil resistance in both the pre and post-independence eras. This has been evidenced by the events related to people’s struggle for language in 1948-1952, the massive upsurge against the martial regime of Ayub Khan in 1969, the liberation struggle of 1971, and the pro-democracy movement in the 1990s. Arguably, Bangladesh was never distanced from civil resistance activism (Hossain, 2013). Ordinary people found nonviolent action as a reliable mode of protest to demand autonomy, self-rule, and justice.

Most recently, the 2013 Shahbag movement added a new chapter to this spectrum. With this event, Bangladesh has undergone a new kind of development in the democratic protest movement, which is characterized by a rising level of people’s participation in extra-institutional channels. Since then, ordinary people have tended to occupy streets or public places to express their demands, which has now become a regular fashion. Over the last couple of years, Bangladesh has witnessed an astounding manifestation of protest by students, teachers, human rights activists, and many others who consider themselves oppressed in many directions. Surprisingly, the strategy of the protest movements is mostly nonviolent in the

form of sit-ins, slogans, human chains, singing, earth drawing, and candlelight vigil, to mention a few techniques. More specifically the movement organizers use nonviolence as a strategy to achieve demands.

Research on the efficacy and potential of civilian-led nonviolent protest has grown enormously worldwide. The study of nonviolent action has become a focused sub-discipline of political science in many western universities. However, there is no such attention to the teaching, training, and research on this subject in the academic community in Bangladesh. Moreover, people's perception of this alternative mode of political action seems loosely constructed. There is a tendency to fit nonviolent action as something like passive resistance which is a misnomer of the concept. It is, therefore, important to understand the current knowledge and perception of people about nonviolent public protest.

The contribution of this research article to existing scholarship on protest movement is, therefore, the following: drawing on information from various groups, including the ordinary public as well as participants in resistance campaigns, this research will provide a general analysis of the conceptual underpinnings of nonviolent resistance activism of Bangladesh. The analysis is expected to serve as a reference point for emerging protest movements to pay attention to some of the effective strategies critical to start an uprising. This research has offered ways of conceptualizing people's actions in the context of nonviolence.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section contains a literature review, providing a short description of the existing research on nonviolent public protest. Then the methodology section will inform about the research process, including the sample selection and data collection method. It also briefly touches upon the research limitations. A conceptual part comes next. It clarifies the two guiding concepts of this research: nonviolent action and public protest. It then moves to the analysis section, presenting the findings from data information. The concluding section provides a summary of the main findings of this research.

Literature Review: The Research Landscape of Nonviolent Public Protests

Nonviolent action has become an important academic field of study over the last fifty years. Numerous scholars from the fields of sociology, political science, history, anthropology, and peace and conflict studies have contributed to the conceptual and theoretical development of nonviolent action. However, there is still unanimity among scholars about what nonviolence is and what is not. Schock (2003) argued that the term 'nonviolence' is often misconstrued and misunderstood.

A group of scholars in this field has held the view that nonviolent action is associated with passivity—action based on ethical principles, neutrality, or the total avoidance of conflict (Nepstad and Kurtz, 2012; Seidman, 2000). Contrary to this argument, some theorists argue that it is an “active political action” (Schock, 2003, pp. 705; Zunes 1994, pp. 403) that involves an active process of bringing political, economic, social, emotional, or moral pressure to bear in the wielding of power in contentious interactions between collective actors (as cited in Schock, 2003). Some authors further state that nonviolence is a bourgeois tactic that entails nothing more than negotiation, compromise, and gentle calls for change (Nepstad and Kurtz, 2012, pp.xii).

In an edited book *Civil Resistance and Power Politics*, Adam Roberts and Timothy Garton Ash clarified what nonviolence is. The author points out that nonviolent action is largely synonymous with civil resistance and political power. They further argued that nonviolent resistance “involves a range of widespread and sustained activities that challenge a particular power, force, policy or regime—hence the term resistance” (Roberts and Garton Ash, 2009, pp. 2).

Scholars of social movement and revolution began turning their attention to nonviolence research enterprise very recently (Schock, 2015). Sidney Tarrow has argued that the strategy of nonviolent action is “one of the most successful innovations in contentious politics in the twentieth century” (Tarrow, 2005, pp. 107). Engler and Engler’s (2016) study *This is an Uprising* shows that civilian-based nonviolent revolt is shaping the twenty-first century. The recent uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa and popular collective action that broke out at the height of the current global financial crisis, in the form of Occupy Wall Street movement, for example, demonstrate, once again, the greater appeal and the ongoing topicality of this type of political action (Atack, 2012). Nepstad and Kurtz (2012, pp. 9) in the book *Nonviolent Conflict and Civil Resistance* added, “The world is periodically taken aback by the remarkable and swift power of nonviolent civil resistance.”

Empirical research on nonviolent public protest has increased in recent decades. Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan’s book *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* is one of the early attempts to test theories of nonviolent resistance empirically. The authors explicitly compared aggregate data of 323 major nonviolent and violent resistance campaigns from 1900 to 2006 and proved the hypothesis that nonviolent action is indeed a more effective strategy than violent resistance (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011). Iain Atack in his book

Nonviolence in Political Theory argues that “Nonviolent political action has played a significant role in achieving social and political changes in the last century and continues to be a vital feature of many campaigns for democracy, human rights, and social justice” (Atack, 2012, pp. 1).

Nepstad and Kurtz’s (2012) treatment of this issue provides the salience of nonviolent political action in toppling communist regimes in Eastern Europe. In the article *We Have Bare Hands’ Nonviolent Social Movements in the Soviet Block*, Smithey and Kurtz (1999) substantiated the issue by exploring a dramatic example of civilians’ protest movements that contributed to the transformation of the former Soviet USSR from 1998 to 1991. Nonviolent action has been central to bringing great political transformation in other parts of the world as well. George Katsiaficas’s (2012) two-volume book *Asia’s Unknown Uprisings* documented the swift overthrow of the dictatorship in nine Asian countries from 1986 to 1992. Stephen Zunes in his article *Unarmed Insurrections against Authoritarian Governments in the Third World: A New Kind of Revolution* asserts that people power-led movements “have overthrown authoritarian regimes, forced substantial reforms” (Zunes, 1994, pp. 403).

Scholars’ contribution to nonviolent action in Asian perspective has been considerable in numbers but no substantive focus on the Bangladesh case is found. Regional scholars tend to characterize popular uprisings in Bangladesh as violent insurrections (Banarjee, 2010). However, some works merely chronicled Bangladesh as a country where nonviolent action brought political transformation². However, these sources do not provide any systematic and detailed explanation. In fact, very few scholars have contributed to exploring the nonviolent characters of civilian protest movements in Bangladesh.

Yet, Ishtiaq Hossain’s (2013) study *Bangladesh Civil Resistance in the Struggle for Independence* is an important contribution to this topic. It is probably the first academic work written in the English language, which introduces Bangladesh’s cases of nonviolent action to international academia. The author successfully unpacked the unarmed aspects of Bengali people’s struggle in the pre-independence period. Yet, this study seems incomplete in relation to the theoretical explanation of why and how nonviolence work in the political landscape in Bangladesh. The latest large-scale civilian movement in the political arena was the 2013 Shahbag movement. Haque (2016) in the article *Nonviolent Action and the 2013 Shahbag Protest: A Theoretical Analysis* posit the claim that the Shahbag movement turned out to be a huge mobilization of people from various segments of society due to the

methods it followed. The study finds that the protest was organized on the principles of nonviolence; the challengers used various nonviolent methods such as sit-ins, slogans, candle-light vigils, marches, petition, and earth drawing, to mention a few. Yet, the topic of nonviolent action should be studied comprehensively in the academia and policy circle to understand its merits in the Bangladesh context.

Research Methodology

This research aims to provide an overview of the current knowledge on nonviolent protest action in Bangladesh. More specifically, it attempts to understand people's perceptions of nonviolence. This research undertook a descriptive survey method (Gray, 2004). The data collection was carried out between December and January 2019. The field location was in Dhaka city.

For the survey, this research has used a random sampling method (Dawson, 2002) to select samples from diverse groups, including selected academics, students, professional classes, practitioners, and movement activists. The reason for choosing this sampling method is due to the fact that sometimes selected respondents were not found available and not willing to respond impartially. The sample included 72 individuals. Among the total respondents, 19 percent were female, and male respondents accounted for 81 percent.

The research suffers from a few limitations. Firstly, the data collection method did not incorporate any techniques—an in-depth interview method, for example—for gaining a deeper understanding of the topic under study. The total number of the sample is not enough for generalization. As there was a time limitation, the researcher could not manage to conduct the survey with more people. As a result, this research is charged with a lack of validation. Another important drawback of this research is the process of survey question formulation. The questions asked to respondents were derived little from the existing literature. This is partly because the literature on nonviolent types of public protest in Bangladesh is relatively scarce.

Conceptual Framework

Before embarking on analytical reflections, it is relevant to spell out the underlying terms and concepts of this research. The section below provides a brief elaboration on concepts, *i.e.*, nonviolence or nonviolent action, and public protest.

Nonviolent Action

Nonviolence is a technique of waging protest and struggles without violence or

threat of violence (Chenoweth, 2021). As a mode of protest action, nonviolence has gained increased importance throughout the world over the past hundred years (Roberts and Garton Ash, 2009). The tactics used in nonviolent action, including mass rallies, strikes, human chains, boycotts, political non-cooperation, sit-ins, and other forms of civil disobedience, have proven to be a successful weapon in the hands of marginalized communities in many parts of the world (Dudouet, 2008; Schock, 2005). Nonviolent action provides reliable tools for advancing important and globally significant causes, such as self-autonomy, democratization, worker's rights, protection of the environment, and social justice (Sharp, 2010; Atack, 2012).

Scholars assume that nonviolence is ideological (Seidman, 2000) and is “only for total pacifists, that is, those who, for religious or moral reasons, refuse to use any form of violence under any circumstances” (Nepstad and Kurtz, 2012, pp. xii). The pacifist orientation of nonviolence is associated with a positive value, virtue, or philosophical view guiding life. It is the nonviolence of conscience. Pacifism refers to an individual belief system built on the moral guideline of rejection of dependency on armed force or against war (Robert and Ash, 2009; Fiala, 2018).

Schock (2005, pp. 7) opposed the pacifist orientation of nonviolence and argues that “there is nothing passive or evasive about nonviolent resistance, as it is an active and overt means for prosecuting conflicts with opponents”. Pioneer scholar of the field of nonviolent conflict Gene Sharp points to the pragmatic dimension of nonviolence. It is a kind of active political action (Sharp, 2010) that takes shape as a spontaneous response by people to an unjust social and political situation (Jahanbegloo, 2014). Nonviolence is a kind of political action adopted by people who reject passivity and submission, and who see the struggle as essential. It is one response to the problem of how to act effectively in politics, especially how to wield powers effectively (Sharp, 1973).

Public Protest

In this research, the term ‘public’ refers to a group—having loosely connected or not been previously in contact with other members of that group—who mobilize in a space of contention, *e.g.*, the street to “discuss on a common concern over which they do not agree” (Crossley, 2002, pp. 28). Following Mahoney and Clarke (2002), the public is an entity who “are always mediated and emergent “rather than being pre-existing, readily identifiable and available to be mobilized”; they are called into existence or summoned” (as cited in Chowdhury and Abid, 2019, pp. 51). There are three categories of public found to be mobilized on the street,

thereby participating in contentious protest action. The ‘object public’ is one who is immobilized and his or her grievances and demands are often represented by someone else. The second category is the ‘audience public’ identified as choice-bearers; they are relatively mobilized but their choice and programs are subject to decisions by others. Hence, they are partially autonomous entities. The third category is the ‘agentic public’ who “is imagined to be autonomous, reflexive, creative, and self-organized; have the capacity to exercise choices; and transcend any kind of imposition or mediation” (Chowdhury and Abid, 2019, pp. 51).

The typical disagreement among social movement scholars is that a protest is not an individual action. For example, it is not a protest if a single individual carries out a silent sit-in action. In the academic sense of the term, protest refers to a group behaviour or collective action (Opp, 2009). It is less likely that one person can exert influence over political, social, and cultural processes (Della Porta and Diani, 2006). Therefore, an act of protest is a joint action of individuals, where joint refers to the “coordinated actions of several individuals” (Opp, 2009, pp. 38). In arriving at a working definition of protest, this research consults with different scholars’ views. It agrees with Karl-Dieter Opp, who defines protest as “joint (*i.e.*, collective) action of individuals aimed at achieving their goal or goals by influencing decisions of a target” (Opp, 2009, pp. 38). Following Opp’s footsteps, protest can be defined as collective action by many people temporarily occupying multiple locations (Leeuwen, Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2016), including physical and online sites, which are directly or indirectly related to advancing claims. Quaranta (2017) defines protest as a form of political behaviour, occurring outside of the formal political channels intending to challenge the status quo or decisions that are seen as unjust, through several practices such as demonstration, human rally, petitions, sit-ins, occupations, boycotts, blocking traffic, and strikes, to mention of the few.

The public protest comes in mainly two varieties *i.e.*, institutional, and extra-institutional—also regarded as illegal or non-institutional protest (Bayley, 1969). The institutional category of protest includes voting, petitioning, and other forms that are operated in formal political channels. Public protest is extra-institutional when it is operated within the bounds of informal channels. People mobilization on the street to demand rights, and freedom is a manifestation of this kind of public protest. Public expression of extra-institutional protest assumes two varieties: violent and nonviolent. Violent illegal protest is characterized by riots, assault, maiming, killing, damaging, and destroying persons and property through bombing and firing (Govier, 2008)—which intends to harm others with intention (Johansen,

2007). Nonviolent protest is described as a form of illegal behaviour, using nonviolent techniques to prosecute direct conflict with the opponent eschewing physical violence.

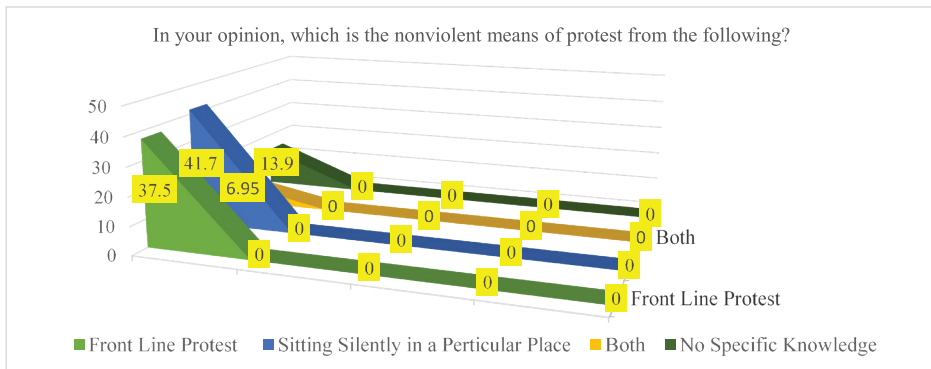
Survey Findings

The subsection below discusses the result based on the information obtained from the survey questionnaire. The section captures how people view nonviolent public protest, reflecting on their understanding of the meaning, tactics, efficacy, and dynamics of the nonviolent type of political action.

General Understanding of the Nonviolent Protest

The respondents were asked to give their opinion on nonviolent protest action. The objective was to know whether people are aware of any sort of nonviolent protest activity or not.

Figure 1: People's Understanding of Nonviolent Protest

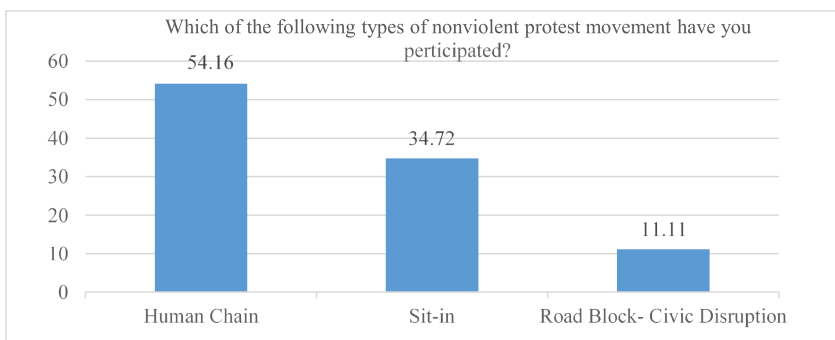


Most of the respondents consider sitting silently in a particular place as a common type of nonviolent protest. This group consists of 41.7 percent. On the contrary, 37.5 percent see front-line protest as a means of nonviolent movement; 6.95 percent consider both types and 13.9 percent have no specific knowledge about the topic. The analysis suggests that the public view of modes of nonviolent action varies considerably. Some people considered sitting silently in a particular place as one of the tactics of nonviolent action. However, a majority group of people tends to identify fore-front activities in mobilization as an alternative to nonviolent action.

People’s Experience with Nonviolent Tactics

Scholars have identified different methods of nonviolent action. For example, Gene Sharp (1973) identified 198 methods. The commonly used tactics are reflected through a sit-in, human chain, and or occupying a particular place.

Figure 2: People’s Choice of Nonviolent Methods

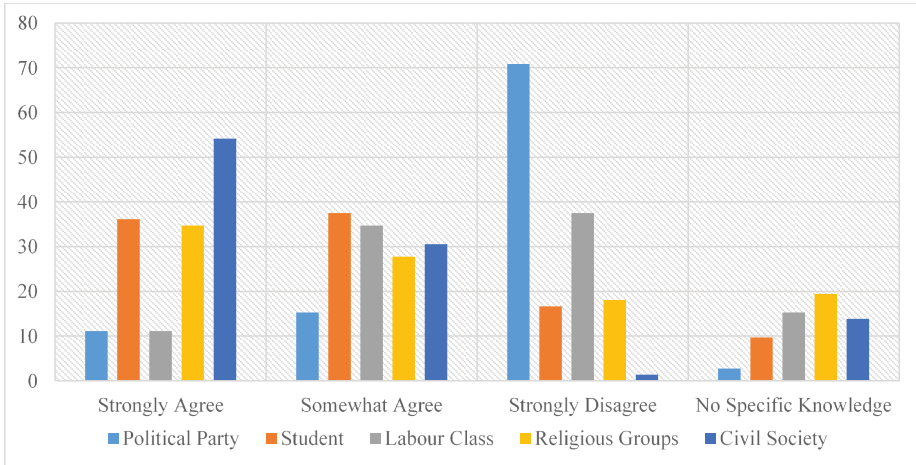


The data illustrates that Bangladeshi people consider human chain as a reliable form of protest. The growing interest of ordinary civilians to organize a human chain has become a regular fashion. The highest percentage of respondents (54.16 percent) held their opinion that they freely joined human chain events on different occasions. Human chain by holding banners and placards has become a protest ritual in Bangladesh. Another preference for people doing public protests is the method of a sit-in. It is a method of action through which a large number of people can gather in a particular place and wage protest slogans. Nearly 34.72 percent of respondents answered that they took part in it. Although roadblock is a segment of nonviolent civic disruption, only 11.11 percent of people mentioned that they have joined such events.

The Practice of Nonviolence by Different Groups

In Bangladesh, the actors involved in political contention are included but are not limited to, political parties, students, labour groups, religious groups, and civil society organizations. It is necessary to understand which group practices nonviolent means of protest strategy while prosecuting conflict. People were asked to express their views on the question concerning the practice of nonviolence.

Figure 3: People’s Perception of the Practice of Nonviolence by Different Groups

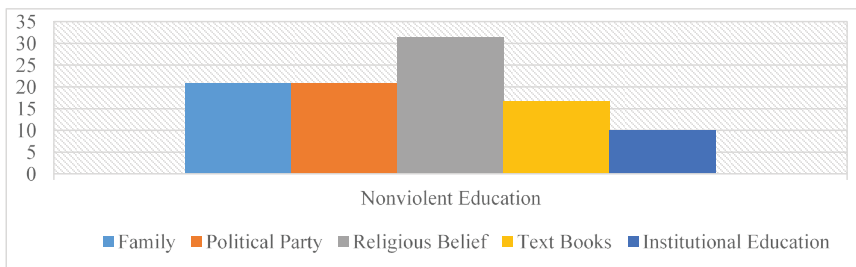


The result shows that the majority of the respondents strongly agreed that civil society has good records of practicing nonviolence, whereas political parties rarely practice the nonviolent form of protest strategy. This was substantiated by the highest number of respondents (70%) who expressed strong disagreement on this point. There is a correlation between student and nonviolent action. About 40% of respondents agreed that student groups tend to practice nonviolence. Similarly, the labour class and some religious groups have the tendency to adopt nonviolence as a tool of protest. However, there are few respondents who do not have any specific knowledge of the role of various groups’ involvement in nonviolent activism in Bangladesh.

Sources of Knowledge on Nonviolence

It is assumed that institutions play a crucial role in inculcating the values and practice of nonviolence.

Figure 4: People’s View on the Sources of Nonviolent Education



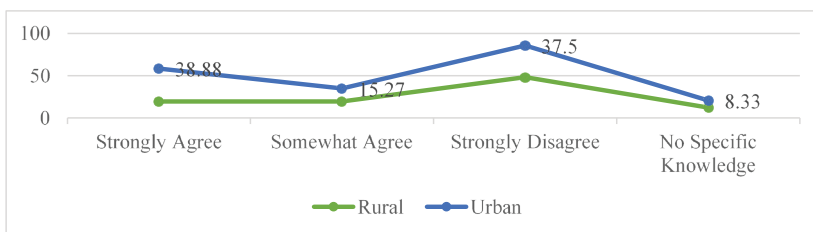
The bar chart provides information about four different sources of knowledge that

help educate people’s minds about nonviolence in Bangladesh. It shows that 31.46 percent of people think that the primary knowledge of nonviolence is shaped by religious belief. It implies that every religious orientation pays special attention to a non-killing attitude and avoids harmful activities and violent retaliation. So to speak, people’s knowledge of nonviolent behaviour can be shaped by religious scriptures. Among other social institutions, the family is considered the second influential place where the teaching of nonviolence, peace, and tolerance is imparted. About 20.86 percent of respondents held their opinion to favour the claim. A similar percentage of people expressed their opinion that a political party has to do with disseminating nonviolent ideology and philosophy. The chart also shows that the opportunity of the academic way of gaining knowledge on nonviolence seems to be relatively little. According to the data, 16.82 percent of people think that textbook offers very little knowledge on nonviolence whereas only 10 percent gives credit to academic institutions.

Spatial Concentration of Nonviolent Protest Mobilization

In recent decades, civilian protest movements are unfolding in both urban and rural spaces. It is to note that significant public places, for example, plazas, streets, squares, and university campuses, have become the epicentre of protest mobilization. Therefore, attention is paid to understanding a comparative view of the protest concentration in rural and urban areas.

Figure 5: Spatial Concentration of Nonviolent Protest Between Rural and Urban Areas

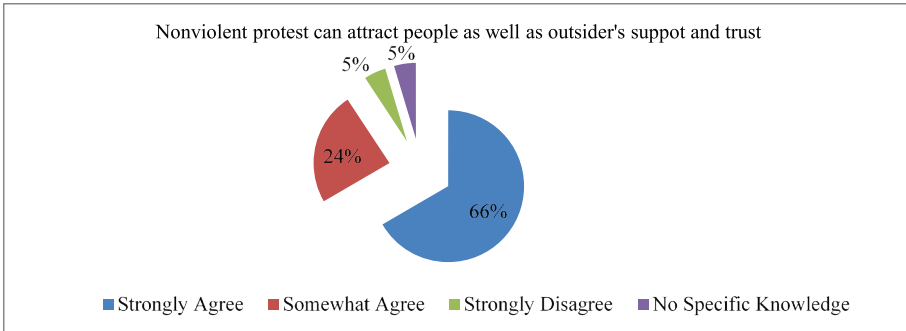


The survey result shows that the nonviolent protest movement is mostly urban-centric. The majority of the respondents (38.88 percent) strongly agreed on the point that nonviolent protests are likely to unfold quickly in urban areas. In the case of rural space, however, the result did not find a similar range of opinions. Only About 15.27 percent of respondents somewhat agreed and nearly 37.5 percent of people strongly disagreed on this issue. Besides, 8.33 percent of respondents are found who have no specific knowledge of this subject.

Third-Party Support for Nonviolent Campaign

Nonviolent type of protests can attract mass support from outsiders. The external linkage provides good impetus to the protesters to initiate public protest on a large scale.

Figure 6: People's Perception of Getting External Support and Trust

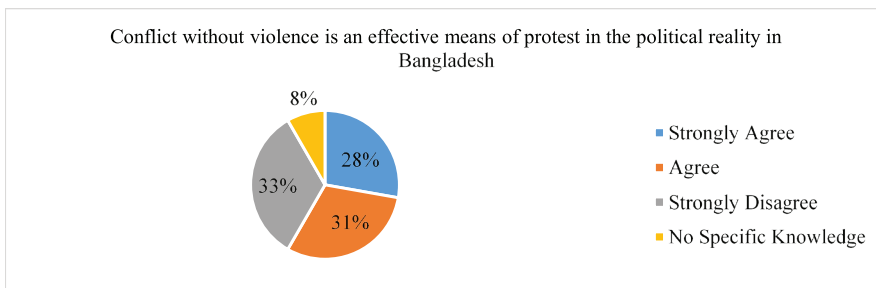


In the pie chart shown above, about 66 percent of the total respondents strongly agree with the view that it is easy to attain peoples' support and trust for the nonviolent protest movement. People easily express their solidarity with movements that are violence-free and in which the threat of violence is absent. In addition, 24 percent of respondents expressed somewhat agree. The rate of disagreement on this statement is only 5 percent. A similar percentage of respondents who have no specific knowledge of it were found.

Power of Nonviolence over Violent Action

The perception that violent action remains the force more powerful to achieve quick results has now been challenged by the notion that nonviolent action can also bring intended protest outcomes very quickly (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011). The politics of Bangladesh is often characterized as violent. Violence is often credited as the tactical weapon of change or bringing about political transformation. However, violence can never be an overarching tool to prosecute conflict. There are also alternative nonviolent behaviours through which ordinary people can confront political authority and express their grievances against the authority. The following figure is used to check this reality in the Bangladesh context.

Figure 7: Perception Concerning Nonviolent Action as Effective Tool over Violent Tactics

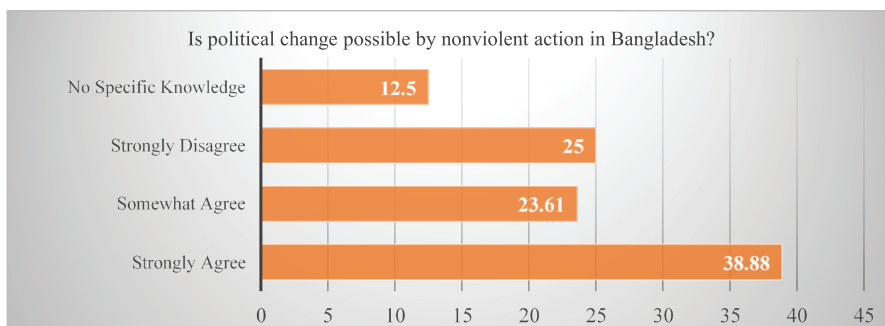


Reflecting on this observation, the survey result illustrates that 31 percent of respondents agreed that nonviolence can be an effective way of protest. In conjunction with that, about 28 percent of people strongly agreed on this point. In contrast to this view, there is about 33 percent of respondents surveyed with this statement expressed that they strongly disagree with the notion that Bangladeshi public protest cannot be violence-free. A little percentage of people (about 8 percent) hold no specific knowledge on this point.

Potentials of Nonviolent Action to Bring Social and Political Change

Nonviolent action has been used to bring about major social and political transformations across the world. Bangladesh has witnessed nonviolent people power in many critical junctures in its recent political history. However, this claim cannot be justified with only objective analysis. Therefore, subjective views concerning the potential of nonviolent action help readers to understand more clearly.

Figure 8: Effectiveness of Nonviolent Action for Political Change



The data illustrates that most people believe that significant social and political

change is possible through nonviolent civil resistance. About 39 percent of respondents strongly agreed on this point. Moreover, about 24 percent of people somewhat agreed with this statement. However, there is also disagreement found among respondents. About 25 percent of the total respondents strongly disagree with the statement. This means that nonviolent action can be a benefactor component of protest but not the only way that guarantees a significant change. The result also found about 12 percent of respondents have no specific knowledge of the potential of nonviolent action as agents of change in Bangladesh's society and politics.

Concluding Remarks

Public protest in Bangladesh is characterized by both violent and nonviolent action. This research has paid attention to only the nonviolent form of people's political action. The paper has analysed various opinions collected from a range of survey data and tried to contribute to some of the pressing areas of nonviolent study and practice in the context of Bangladesh. It shed light on the state of nonviolent knowledge among the public, the dynamics of nonviolent methods, and people's perception of the efficacy and potentials of nonviolent action for political change.

Nonviolent action has dual conceptual dimensions. On one edge, nonviolence has a philosophical basis. It is understood as something related to a moral act; that is, people practice nonviolence as a way of the good life. This conception hints at a normative explanation. On the other spectrum, nonviolence is understood as a pragmatic political action. People's perception of nonviolence is conflated with both optimistic and pessimistic concerns. The surveyed people have found nonviolence as an alternative pathway to conflict. They are well-informed about the global perspectives of civilian protest movements. They tend to support big mobilization for any social cause that typically starts with sit-ins, slogans, and other forms of violence-free tactics.

Bangladeshi people's struggles were never distanced from nonviolence. Going back to the political history of Bangladesh, even further back to the colonial era, ordinary people of this land embraced nonviolent tactics while confronting social injustice and relative deprivation. The wave of nonviolence swept across the society and politics in Bangladesh during the periods of 1950s, 60s and 70s when ordinary people were fervently fighting to establish self-autonomy and independence.

Nonviolent movement mobilization is often influenced by a large section of people, hence, constituting social power as an alternative to political power. It is a safe strategy for ordinary people who believe in the gradual change of a situation. In fact, middle-class people are more likely to embrace the peaceful and nonviolent method. Different groups, including civil society, are in a habit to wage protest movements relying on nonviolent methods and tactics. The educated class in Bangladesh tended to engage in nonviolent protest activities. For example, in the popular protest of the language movement in 1952, the anti-autocracy movement in 1969, pro-democracy movement in the 1990s, and the recent private university student's No VAT movement, the educated class including students, teachers, lawyers, and professionals remained actively supported and took part in peaceful demonstrations by occupying main street or educational campuses. The current study finds that students demonstrate an intrinsic preference for a nonviolent mode of political action. This is not to be overlooked students' involvement in violent acts in the context of the opposition movement.

On the question of the current use of nonviolent protest tactics, the result found that the political party is sceptical about the use and practice of nonviolence, viewing it as inherently a slower strategy in terms of achieving quick results. The perception analysis suggests that there is little consensus among significant political actors about the power of nonviolence. It is not yet considered as a practical means to a political end. Political parties are reluctant to credit any significant change agents in a society. The growth of parallel institutions, *i.e.*, the non-institutional civic mobilization, is often subjected to high suspicion. Moreover, no such people-supported protest movements—that go against the interest of political forces—are nationwide highlighted and supported. Political party officials are not ready to be subsumed under civilian force, therefore, popular movements relying on nonviolent methods are still considered unpopular in the traditional political circle.

The institutional base of nonviolence education is primarily the family. There can be other sources, including educational institutions (schools, colleges, and universities), social, cultural, and religious organizations, etc., where the teaching of nonviolence can be imparted. A person's interaction with these civic networks can educate the mind towards good deeds; misguidance can equally cause social ill and violence. In the higher education level in Bangladesh, however, there are no such courses as peace education and nonviolence. But supplementary course like value education is included in the syllabus of some higher degree levels as well as elementary level. For example, at the primary level, the religion course teaches morality, values, and tolerance.

The spatial concentration is an important dimension to understanding the efficacy and potential of nonviolent action in Bangladesh. History attests that popular movements in the decades the 1950s, 60s, and 80s were all mostly directed from the Dhaka university campus. In addition, new urban public places, including the Press Club premise, Racecourse arena, Paltan Maidan, and Shahbag roundabout, have become popular mobilization epicentres where aggrieved people collectively wage a struggle against power holders, political authority, or other opponents. It is quite astonishing that urban civic mobilization has now become a frequent phenomenon in which nonviolence remains a tool of protest.

Nonviolence alone does not claim to be a potential tool to bring social justice, let alone social movement. This is very hard to establish the claim that Bangladesh's politics and society are shaped by the acts of nonviolence. Nevertheless, the study findings bring hope for future movement organizers in the sense that the majority of people considered nonviolent forms of action as an effective tool for public protest aiming at social and political change in Bangladesh. Nonviolence attracts external support, thereby, utilizing resources, and opportunities that help to flourish a momentum political activity paving a new route to politics. Most importantly, the politically conscious civilians living in the city can be the harbinger of this change. The study report supports this claim.

In conclusion, it can be argued that political protest organized in a nonviolent format renders big support from all strata of people who do not belong to formal political channels and are powerless. The people's power concept in collective action in Bangladesh has materialized through the regular protest participation of people in city life. Nonviolent contentious politics is not an exception; rather it has become a norm of political agitation. A culture of nonviolent protest politics can be a mechanism of change in contentious politics in Bangladesh.

Notes

1. Meyer and Tarrow (1998) conceptualized movement society arguing that social protest as a mode of public action has become a part of the conventional repertoire of participation and that it has become a perpetual element in modern life, instead of being sporadic. According to movement society theorists, as the civic involvement in public protest expanded, the protest techniques are also diffused and become more institutionalized (Soule and Earl, 2005).

2. The Global Nonviolent Action Database serves as an important source of nonviolent events (visit <http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/search/node/bangladesh>). Stephen Zunes's study on unarmed resistance against the authoritarian regimes in the third world revealed that nonviolent action played significant role in the transition period in Bangladesh (See Zunes, 1994, pp. 405). Similarly, Chenoweth and Stephan recorded nonviolent campaigns against the military rule in the period 1989-1990 which attended partial success (See Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011, pp. 235).

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