

# Exploring Students' Perception of Democratic Consolidation in the Post-July 2024 Movement in Bangladesh

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines university students' perceptions of democratic consolidation in Bangladesh in the aftermath of the July 2024 Movement, a landmark moment in the nation's democratic trajectory. Emerging from widespread student-led mobilization, the movement renewed debates on institutional accountability, civic freedoms, and democratic reform. Against this background, the study aims to explore how university students interpret the meaning, progress, and future prospects of democratic consolidation in post-movement Bangladesh. Despite growing scholarship on democratic consolidation in Bangladesh, limited attention has been given to youth perceptions in post-movement political contexts. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, it combines a quantitative survey of 300 students selected through simple random sampling from five major public universities with 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted via snowball sampling among active participants in the movement. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis. This methodology assesses attitudes toward political stability, institutional trust, civic rights, participatory governance, and reform priorities, while also capturing the nuanced views students attach to their political experiences. The findings reveal that students are cautiously optimistic about the democratic process and broadly agree that electoral and constitutional reforms are essential for strengthening institutional accountability. A strong emphasis is placed on political stability and the rule of law as prerequisites for democratic resilience. However, skepticism persists regarding the consistent protection of civic freedoms and the effectiveness and impartiality of democratic institutions. They conceptualize democratic consolidation not merely as a formal arrangement but as a dynamic process requiring credible institutions, participatory governance, and sustained reform. This study contributes by amplifying student voices as essential indicators of Bangladesh's democratic trajectory, highlighting both the promise and challenges of the post-July democratic future. Overall, the study concludes that democratic consolidation in Bangladesh is an evolving process that requires continuous reform and stronger civic engagement.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Democratic Consolidation, July 2024 movement, Bangladesh.

## INTRODUCTION

The July 2024 Movement in Bangladesh marked a historic turning point in the country's democratic trajectory. What began as the call to reform the exclusionary quota system later turned into a wider fight against oppression, as well as a quest to renew democracy (Chowdhury, 2025). To most, the movement was not just a protest over the failure of the government, but also the desire of the people to have a new social contract based on accountability, participation, and justice. The involvement of the students was particularly significant, which restored an old tradition in Bangladesh when the youth took a decisive role in the establishment of national politics. Student activism has been used as an agent of democratic change since the Language Movement of 1952 up to the anti-autocracy movement of 1990 (Haque, 2025 and Ghosh, 2024).

The July 2024 Movement did not occur in isolation; rather, it is the most recent chapter in the repeated cycle of democratic aspirations and authoritarian reversal in Bangladesh. After the parliamentary system was restored in the year 1991 following the mass uprising against General Ershad, Bangladesh came up with a caretaker system of government in 1996 with the aim of having a credible election (Khan, 2015). Nevertheless, the Awami League

government abolished the caretaker clause through the Fifteenth Amendment in 2011, and this event led to the controversial elections in 2014 and 2018, which were full of irregularities and boycotts (ibid).

During Sheikh Hasina's 15-year rule (2009-2024), democratic backsliding intensified through media suppression, enforced disappearances, and the politicization of state institutions (Riaz, 2021). Earlier crises like the 1975 military coup, the 2007-2008 military-supported caretaker government and repeated cycles of party confrontation are just some examples of a long-standing dynamic in which electoral victories have failed to translate into consolidated democracy. In this regard, the mass movements of 1969 and 1990 resonate with the July 2024 student-led uprising, but it is still unique because it lacks a leader, is digitally organized and includes cross-class mobilization. These characteristics created an unprecedented window of opportunity for genuine institutional reform under the Yunus-led interim government.

The July 2024 uprising re-awakened this heritage and the young people played a significant role in fighting against authoritarianism. During the movement, the main centers of student participation and mobilization were served by some public universities all over Bangladesh, as these universities carry a reputation for being politically conscious, socially engaged, and historically tied to urban popular struggles. Their involvement in the July 2024 movement is also evidence of how far mobilization by students had spread across the country and the long-term political significance of university campuses in Bangladesh. The opinions of these students are critical to understanding how the future generation sees the democratic consolidation in Bangladesh.

Against this background, the central research question guiding this study is: How do students perceive the process of democratic consolidation following the July 2024 Movement in Bangladesh? The primary objective of this study is to explore how university students perceive the process of democratic consolidation in Bangladesh in the aftermath of the July 2024 Movement. Since the students have been a key stakeholder in the political changes of Bangladesh in the past, understanding their perspectives offers valuable insight into the current democratic process in Bangladesh. This study attempts to analyze how students understand the concept of democratic consolidation and relate it to the broader political developments following the movement. It also seeks to determine their trust in democratic institutions like the judiciary, parliament and Election Commission, and to understand how they evaluate the effectiveness of such institutions in promoting transparency, accountability and the rule of law.

Furthermore, the paper examines the attitudes of students on the important aspects of democracy, such as political stability, civic rights and participatory governance in an attempt to establish how these aspects influence the perception of the students towards democratic developments. The research attempts to obtain the expectations of the students on how to create a more solid and inclusive democratic system by determining the reforms that the students perceive as the most important ones, which include electoral and constitutional reform, and strengthening of the legal institutions.

Ultimately, the present research will foster a better comprehension of how the youth citizens in Bangladesh will visualize democracy in the post-July 2024 situation, offering the scholars, policymakers as well as civil society actors with crucial knowledge of the aspirations and interests that will shape the future of Bangladesh democracy.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH GAP

Following the wave of transitions from authoritarianism in Southern Europe and Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s, scholars began to shift their attention from the question of how democracies emerge to how they survive and stabilize. One of the most influential definitions of democratic consolidation is offered by Linz and Stepan (1996), who argue that democratic consolidation occurs when democracy is “the only game in town”, which is reflected through stable institutions, adherence to the rule of law, and normative commitment to democratic principles by citizens (Linz and Stepan, 1996). Similarly, Diamond (1999) portrayed the consolidation as the process of strengthening the institution and practice so that democracy becomes resilient against authoritarian retreat (Diamond, 1999).

Whereas Linz and Stepan (1996) focus on the role of institutional stability and normative commitment in the establishment of democratic consolidation, Merkel (1998) extends this framework by introducing the

multidimensional model where the constitutional, representative, behavioral, and civic dimensions are emphasized. This idea indicates that democratic consolidation cannot be achieved through institutional survival only but also internalization of democratic norms in society (Merkel, 1998).

Under this wider institutional and normative understanding, democratic consolidation can also be conceived in the form of its time fulfillment and feasibility. In this regard, Sorensen (1993) called democratic consolidation the end and the final phase of democracy. At this democracy level, all democratic institutions have been put in place and the new democracy has been able to transfer power to another party (Sorensen, 1993).

Scholars have also talked of how these frameworks are applied in the South Asian contexts. Shin (2020) believes that the experience of democratic transitions in countries like Afghanistan and Bhutan demonstrates institutional development imbalance and structural challenges that are inherent and occur more often in the post-conflict and fragile political settings. Equally, Croissant and Lorenz (2012) show how incomplete political unions can consolidate and destabilize democratic institutions, based on the institutional design, elite collaboration and the sustainability of coalition formations (Croissant & Lorenz, 2012). The views indicate that the issue of democratic consolidation in Asia strongly depends on the political formations and the behaviour of the elite.

Comparative scholarship in the study of democratic consolidation also suggests that a variety of modern democracies are characterized by the features of hybrids, i.e., by the existence of electoral continuity and executive domination, as well as limited civil freedoms. Cases of Latin America and Southeast Asia prove that institutional persistence does not always result in substantive democratic deepening. In this regard, the scholars have explained regimes as competitive authoritarian, defective, or electorally constrained democracies. Placing Bangladesh within this broader comparative framework allows for a more nuanced interpretation of student skepticism, as similar tensions between formal democratic structures and limited civic freedoms have been observed globally. This comparative engagement strengthens the theoretical grounding of the present study by situating Bangladesh within wider debates on democratic resilience and backsliding.

Democracies in the region are usually inclined to have characteristics of either a hybrid or a defective democracy. In Bangladesh, the concept of “illiberal democracy” of Zakaria (1997) is especially appropriate as the governments elected democratically, starting to disregard the constitutional limits of their authority and depriving their citizenry of the most basic rights and freedoms, i.e., the absence of electoral competition, has been traditionally accompanied by the restriction of civil liberties and the lack of the rule of law. This framework gives us a context of the cautious optimism and cynicism that students in our study expressed about the issue of democratic consolidation.

Since returning to parliamentary democracy in 1991, Bangladesh has maintained a democratic form, yet the political crisis, election disputes, and public mistrust of the political organization have made the fragility of its democratic structure (Ahmed, 2011 and Rahman, 2009). An example is the 2014 and 2018 elections, which were tainted by fraud claims, but this has led to a high level of distrust in the political system (Rahman, 2009). This background helps us understand why students are skeptical about the impartiality of democratic institutions in the post-July 2024 period. Similarly, Parini and Othman (2014) suggest that democratic consolidation is elusive, with poorly functioning governments, confrontational politics within the various parties, and the failure to provide indigenous democratic practices, so that democracy has become more of a cosmetic democracy and not substantive.

In this context, an understanding of active political agents, especially the students' views, sheds light on both the promise and pitfalls of the democratic future of Bangladesh. The central role played by the students in certain historical movements like the Language Movement of 1952 and the anti-Ershad protests of 1990 depict how the students have continued to play their part in bringing about democratic change in Bangladesh. In recent studies, researchers such as Jahan (2018) and Nasrin and Rahman (2019) also highlighted that the mobilization capability of the youth has constantly determined the country's democratic milestones.

The literature on democratic consolidation in Bangladesh has mainly focused on the performance of the institution, the integrity of elections, and the political conduct of the elite, and has mostly ignored the contribution of the citizen worldviews, especially youth, to the future of democracy. This neglect creates a significant

analytical gap since democratic consolidation is no longer a structural or procedural phenomenon, but rather a strongly social phenomenon, which depends on attitudes of the population, trust, and involvement. Focusing on five historically significant universities that have long stood at the center of student-led political mobilization across Bangladesh, the goal of the research is to adopt the perspectives of university communities that have traditionally shaped grassroots democratic activism in both the capital and regional contexts.

In particular, it gives insights into the progress of democratic consolidation in Bangladesh after July 2024 and how the next generation sees the process of achieving sustainable democratic governance. By emphasizing on the perception of the students, this study will attempt to establish how the young people view the future of democracy in Bangladesh, particularly after such a significant political ascendancy. Their perception of political trust, democratic governance, and the future of democratic consolidation will be a valuable insight into the current impediments in the progression to full-fledged democratic consolidation. In this context, students are not only passive recipients of political change but also active participants whose views shape the democratic discourse in Bangladesh.

## METHODOLOGY

The research uses a combination of both quantitative and qualitative research designs. This design was informed by the fact that the perceptions of democratic consolidation are complicated phenomena that cannot be sufficiently analyzed based on one methodological approach. Whereas quantitative tools can be used to map general attitudinal trends, qualitative methods can be used to provide a better understanding of experiences lived and subtle meanings students attach to their political realities (Creswell, 2014). Both approaches together, thus, allow developing a more holistic picture of how the youths comprehend the meaning and development of democratic consolidation in the post-movement period.

The study was conducted on students from five public universities: Dhaka University (DU), Jagannath University (JnU), Jahangirnagar University (JU), Rajshahi University (RU) and Chittagong University (CU), which have traditionally been involved in politics and gained momentum in the country through their participation in political movements. Since these universities have actively participated in the July 2024 Movement, students of the five universities will be a key population to study the perspectives of young people in terms of democratic development.

A total of 300 students participated in the quantitative survey, selected through simple-random sampling to ensure representation across different academic levels and disciplines. A simple random sampling technique was chosen to make sure each student has an equal probability of selection, and therefore gave the chance of having a diverse and representative sample, similar to faculties and academic years. The survey incorporated closed and open questions aimed at evaluating the opinions of the students concerning the democratic consolidation, institutional trust, civic rights and participation in politics. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the responses in order to determine the general trends and variations of perceptions.

In order to supplement the survey results, the qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews with fifteen students using the snowball sampling method. Snowball sampling was adopted due to the fact that it will enable the researcher to recognize and connect with the interviewees who were directly or indirectly influenced by or engaged in the July 2024 Movement. Such a methodology enabled the researcher to engage with some of those individuals who were directly or indirectly affected or were part of the July 2024 movement. The interviews involved the understanding of the participants on the meaning of democratic consolidation, their evaluation of the post-movement political processes as well as their future expectations of democracy in Bangladesh.

Qualitative data had been analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved coding and grouping of responses, to determine common themes and trends in democratic governance, institutional performance, and priorities of reform. The thematic analysis was selected due to the possibility of identifying data patterns and understanding the attitude on broader political issues, such as the effectiveness of democratic institutions and the rule of law.

The secondary data like books, scholarly journal articles, research reports and valid media publications were also used as part of the study in addition to the primary data to place the perceptions of the students in the broader

theoretical and historical context of democratic consolidation. The secondary data offered a wider context in which the perception of the students in this research would be placed within the available literature on the concept of democratic consolidation, political trust, and youth activism in post-authoritarian settings. Such triangulation of the results of the survey, interview data, and secondary literature made the results reliable and valid and ensured that the analysis was conducted on the basis of the empirical evidence as well as the depth of the concept.

The analysis is guided by key theoretical frameworks of democratic consolidation, particularly Linz and Stepan's (1996) institutional approach, Merkel's (2004) multidimensional model, and Schedler's (2001) distinction between democratic deepening and avoidance of breakdown. These conceptual frameworks led to the coding and categorization of the themes including institutional trust, political stability, civic freedoms, and reform priorities so that empirical results could be viewed through a theoretical lens.

In general, this methodological approach helped the study to develop a multidimensional viewpoint of how the university students perceive and assess democratic consolidation in Bangladesh following the July 2024 movement, combining statistical representation and interpretative insight.

While this study focuses on five major public universities, this selection is theoretically grounded. Historically, these institutions have served as mobilizing hubs of political activism in Bangladesh especially in the times of a key democratic movement, including in 1952, 1990, and the July 2024 Movement. As a result, the research does not focus on achieving statistical generalizability but targets politically active groups of students. However, subsequent studies can expand this examination of private universities, regional institutions and the marginalized students to offer a more detailed insight into how the youth perceive various socioeconomic and political settings.

## CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSION

### Democratic consolidation

The conceptual meaning of democratic consolidation refers to the process by which a new democracy matures, stabilizes, and becomes resilient against a return to authoritarianism (Schedler, 2001). It involves strengthening democratic institutions, ensuring the rule of law, and cultivating a culture of democratic values among citizens. Schedler (2001) embraced a classical conception of democratic consolidation that consists of two meanings: positive (Completing and deepening) and negative (Avoiding breakdown and erosion). The positive perception of democratic consolidation implies that a regime is stable and most likely to persist. This is, however, not forever and always- consolidation does not guarantee success forever (Hood, 2010). Thus, the negative conception also comes into the limelight that pointing to the avoidance of democratic breakdown or erosion. Overall, both perspectives describe the process by which a new democracy becomes stable enough that a return to authoritarian rule is unlikely (Gasiorowski and Power, 1998).

Linz and Stepan (1996) have extensively contributed to the understanding of democratic consolidation, particularly through their seminal work, "Toward Consolidated Democracies". They define democratic consolidation as the point at which democracy becomes "the only game in town," a concept that encompasses behavioral, attitudinal, and constitutional dimensions (Linz and Stepan, 1996). However, democratic consolidation complies with a democratic regime; thus, a return to non-democratic rule is no longer likely (Gasiorowski & Power, 1998).

Diamond (1996) put forth an argument that democratic consolidation is conditioned by a two-tier development process, one is the development of a civil society sphere and another is a rich associational life that fosters attributes like tolerance, moderation, and willingness to compromise, among citizens (Diamond et. al. 1997). Linz and Stepan (2001) argue that three conditions are necessary for democratic consolidation: first, a functioning state is required, as democracy cannot exist without it. Second, a smooth transition to democracy is essential, where even free elections must be free of authoritarian influence. Finally, elected officials must govern within constitutional limits; any violation of these limits undermines democracy, turning the regime into a pseudo-democracy (Linz and Stepan, 2001).

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### What does democratic consolidation mean to students?

In exploring student perceptions of democratic consolidation, the study reveals both alignment and divergence from established academic definitions. Linz and Stepan (1996) define consolidation as the point at which the democracy is the only game in town, which means that the democratic norms and institutions are so established that it cannot turn back to the authoritarian form of governance. Diamond (1999) introduces the institutionalization of the democratic practice as consolidation and Merkel (2004) mentions that it is multidimensional; it involves constitutional, behavioral and civic dimensions. However, students tend to interpret democratic consolidation through a more pragmatic lens.

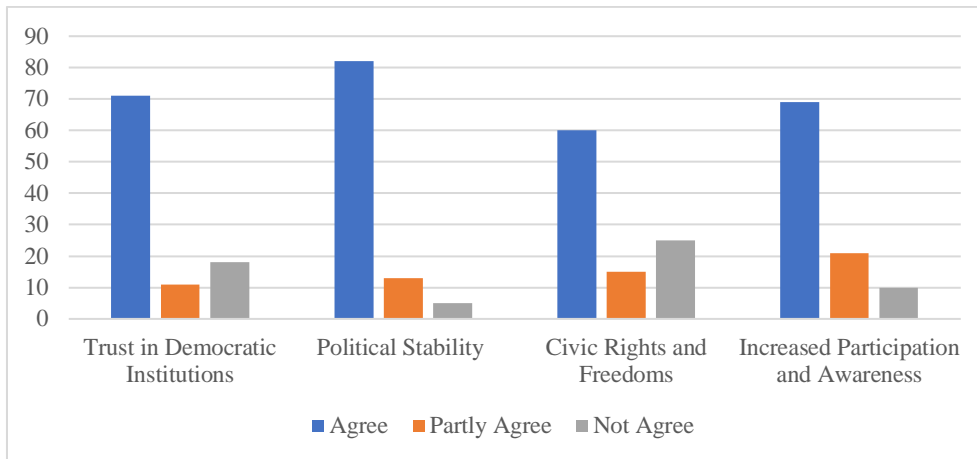


Figure 1. Students' View on the Concept of Democratic Consolidation

To examine the perspectives of the students on democratic consolidation, the graph shows that there are high levels of support and skeptical opinions on the conception of democratic consolidation in the post-July 2024 movement in Bangladesh. The four major areas evaluated, which comprise trust in democratic institutions, political stability, civic rights and freedoms, and greater involvement and awareness, indicate a divergent result of agreement among the students.

The most supported dimension is political stability, with 82% of the students agreeing that it is an important factor relating to democratic consolidation. The percentage of those who disagree with this is only 5%, which is compared to the 13% who are in some way in agreement, and this indicates that there is a general agreement that political stability is the basis of a working democracy. This overwhelming consensus implies that students consider a stable political environment as a key to maintaining the practices of democracy and continuity in the governance process. The focus reflects a post-movement political context of uncertainty where stability is seen as a prerequisite for maintaining democratic gains. Tasmia, 24, a Political Science student and youth political activist, says,

After experiencing the uncertainty surrounding the 2024 movement, I feel that political stability has become essential for sustaining democracy. Without a stable environment, democratic institutions cannot function properly, and people begin to lose confidence in the system (Interview with “Tasmia,” 2025).

Likewise, there is a high level of trust in democratic institutions, with 71% of students expressing trust in democratic institutions, indicating strong support for their legitimacy and 11% partly. Even though the proportion of people who do not agree is comparatively lower at 18%, it still indicates a strong degree of distrust in the democratic institutions in a section of the student population. The division also shows that students generally support democratic institutions, but there is still a concern about their reliability and incorruptibility. As one interviewee expressed:

Democratic consolidation is the process of changing our political awakening into a stable and responsible government. My experience with the July Movement made me understand that democracy does not only lie in

ousting a regime, but also ensuring our institutions, such as the Election Commission, judiciary, and media, are not manipulated. True consolidation would be achieved when individuals have trust in such systems and they feel that their voice is being heard and not necessarily through protest (Interview, 2025, Participant 1, Graduate student and protest participant, Dhaka University).

Nevertheless, the level of agreement declines significantly when it comes to civic rights and freedoms, with only 60% of students having positive opinions and 15% students having mixed opinions. The highest degree of disagreement (25%), among the other four areas, indicates that a number of students doubt the effectiveness of consolidation in securing and broadening civic rights, which aligns with broader debates on defective or illiberal democracy, where institutional frameworks coexist with limited protection of civil liberties.

Lastly, the concept of increased participation and awareness gains the support of 69% of students, but 21% provide partial support, and 10 percent disagree. Although this refers to the massive support of the idea of increased democratic participation, the amount of opposition is so large that it questions the true effectiveness of the practices. Some students might consider increased awareness and engagement to be inadequate to produce a significant democratic change or progress.

Overall, the discussion shows a strong similarity in the attitude of students towards the importance of political stability and confidence in democratic institutions, reflecting the institutional dimension of democratic consolidation highlighted by Linz and Stepan (1996), where the durability of democracy depends on public trust in political institutions and political stability. Nevertheless, the more diverse answers that were given in terms of civic rights and freedoms, in terms of participation and awareness, indicate that students are still skeptical of how democratic consolidation is manifested at the practical level. These lessons are useful in shedding light on the problems of strengthening democracy and the constant necessity to eliminate the so-called loopholes between democracy and practice.

### Students' opinion on safeguarding democracy in the post-July 2024 movement

This section examines the opinions of students on the possibility of protecting democracy in Bangladesh after the July 2024 Movement. It observes how they feel the reforms and measures needed to make the institutions of democracy in the country stable and sustainable in the long run. Dwelling upon such main points as electoral integrity, constitutional fortification, and the rule of law, this section can point out the priorities students think are necessary to preserve democracy and avoid relapsing into authoritarianism. These views are summarized in the analysis below, which gives a better insight into the student attitude towards how to safeguard democracy in the post-movement environment.

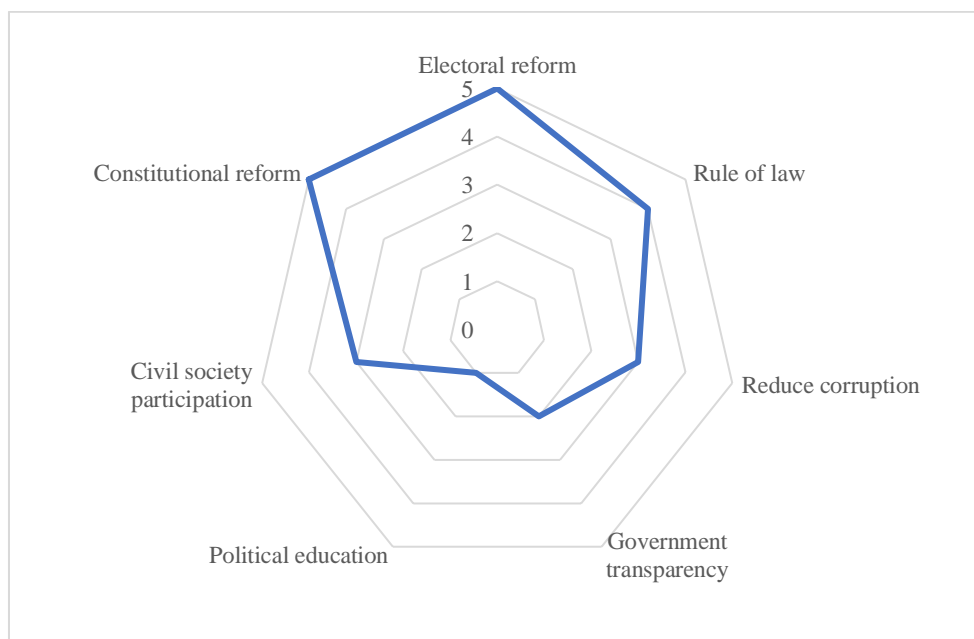


Figure 2. Student Priorities for Strengthening Democracy After the July Movement

The graph provides insights into the democratic changes that students view as the most crucial to the future consolidation of democracy in Bangladesh in the context of the post-July 2024 situation. It involves the use of a radar chart using a priority score of 0 to 5, with a higher score indicating a higher perceived importance.

Among the priorities identified by the students, the electoral reform and constitutional reform represent the most eminent ones that receive the highest marks at 5. This excessive focus on electoral reform highlights the opinions of the students that an effective and open electoral system is the key to revitalizing democracy in Bangladesh. With the history of electoral disputes, corruption and allegations of irregularities in the country, the free and fair elections are viewed as the foundation of the democratic system by the students. Their strong endorsement of electoral reform signals an urgent need for changes that would ensure the legitimacy of electoral outcomes and restore public trust in the political process. According to Rabeya Khatun, who is identified as an undergraduate student of Sociology, reports that,

I think the most important reform is fair elections. People have lost trust in the voting system because of irregularities and corruption. If the Election Commission works independently and people believe their votes really count, democracy will be much stronger (Interview, 2025, Participant 4, Protest Participant, Jagannath University).

With electoral reform, the constitutional reform also proved that the students realized that it is necessary to revamp and ensure that the constitutional framework is strengthened in order to protect democracy. The constitutional reforms are regarded as the key to making sure that democratic norms and principles are incorporated into the legal and institutional framework of the state. Endorsing the constitutional reforms, students reveal the necessity of the structural provisions that would help avoid the concentration of power and ensure a more accountable political system.

The rule of law also became a major priority and the score was around 4. This indicates the strong belief by the students that a well-functioning and unbiased judiciary, together with a strong legal system, is important in a democracy. To the students, the rule of law is necessary not only in the safeguarding of individual rights but also in the establishment of institutional responsibility to help in avoiding authoritarian drift. The corruption reduction and civil society participation are placed between the hierarchy of democratic safeguards amongst the students, with a medium level rating of three. Such a position shows that, on the one hand, these factors are recognized as imperative to the reinforcement of democracy, but they are not perceived as the fundamental pillars compared to the electoral or constitutional reform.

The fact that the indicator of government transparency (score 2) is lower in the list of priorities indicates that students do not underestimate its role, but they might perceive it as a by-product of the more fundamental reforms. They probably view transparency as something that will automatically enhance when the institutional structures of governance, namely the electoral system, the rule of law, and the provisions of the constitution, are reinforced. Governmental transparency is thus treated as an objective of the long term, as opposed to taking the short term when compared to other forms of structural reforms.

Finally, the low value of political education or, at least, the lowest scoring value of 1 is quite revealing and, therefore, worth more analytical scrutiny. At face value, it implies that the political education among the students is perceived as secondary to the pressing institutional reforms in the form of electoral and constitutional changes. Another interviewee adds,

In my opinion, we need both reforms and education. Reforms to fix the system and education so people understand why democracy matters. Many people still think politics is just for the powerful. That has to change (Interview, 2025, Participant 5, Campus political activist, Rajshahi University).

Overall, the graph reflects a reform-oriented vision shared by students, whose primary focus lies on the foundational institutional change, or electoral and constitutional reform and the empowering of the rule of law, rather than the gentler approaches of political education, corruption reduction and involvement of the civil society, aligning with Diamond's (1999) argument that institutional strengthening is central to safeguarding democracy against authoritarian relapse. Their reactions highlight the practicality of the idea that a strong

democratic foundation, which is founded on strong institutions, is essential to a secure democracy in Bangladesh in the long term.

### Students' views on democratic progress in Bangladesh after the July movement

This part will assess the views of students about the progress of democracy in Bangladesh after the July 2024 Movement. It explores the perception of students towards the democratic development of the country with reference to both the chances of improvement and the challenges that still persist. The analysis shows what the students expect out of the democratic reforms, and what worries them about whether any meaningful change could take place. This section provides an idea about how optimistic or pessimistic the young people are about the future of democracy in Bangladesh by looking at their perception of the future of democracy in the country.

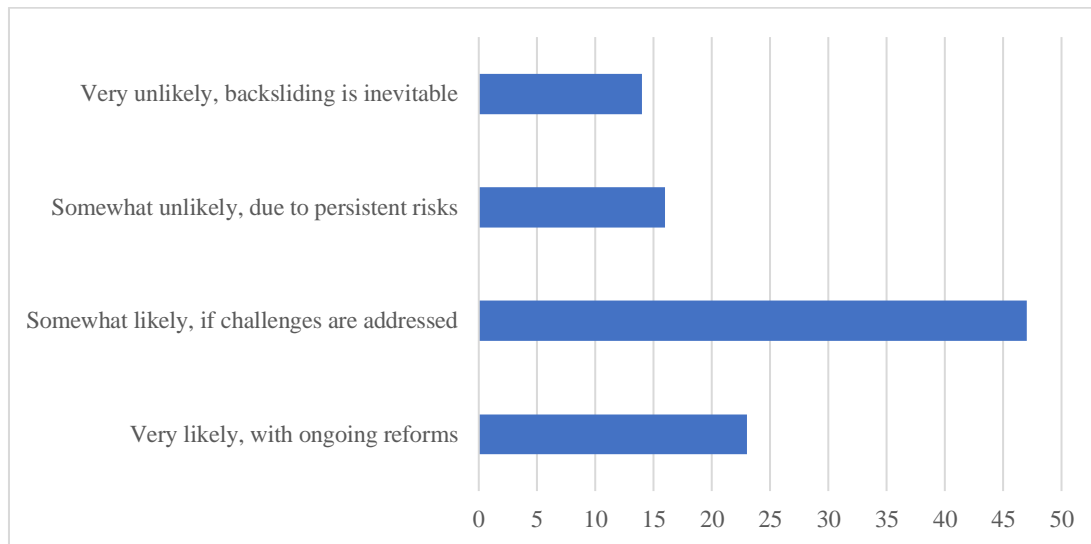


Figure 3. Perceptions of Democratic Progress in Post-July Movement

The chart provides a critical evaluation of the outlook of the democratic advancement during the post-July movement by a distribution of views that vary between apprehensive optimism to cynicism. The given analysis categorizes the possibility of democratic progress based on the perceived chance of success, considering the numerous obstacles and threats that can potentially affect the course of reforms. The reactions also indicate varying degrees of belief in the strength of the movement to produce sustainable democratic development, which highlights the complicated nature of processes that occur within the post-July political environment.

The highest percentage of respondents, 47%, fall into the category of “Somewhat likely, if challenges are addressed”, which implies that there is an overall view that it may be possible, but it depends on whether the challenges that are present are resolved successfully. Another 23% of the respondents view the prospect as the possibility that is "Very likely, with ongoing reforms," which is a more optimistic attitude, but one that acknowledges the need to continue to work on the reforms to make sure that success will be achieved. Such a group is a reflection of the opinion that, under the right and sustained political and institutional transformations, democratic progress could still be attained.

On the other end, 16% of the respondents consider democratic progress as “Somewhat unlikely, due to persistent risks”. This group recognizes that there are enormous obstacles that may sabotage any potential gains and implications that even though some progress may be possible, it may be limited due to systemic risks and barriers that still exist in the political arena. The lowest is the opinion of 14% of the respondents who feel that democratic backsliding is “Very unlikely, inevitable”. This group is quite pessimistic about the prospect of improvement and sees the status quo as one favoring retrogression over progress, suggesting that the inherent dangers of politics and institutions are too well established to permit any meaningful democratic change.

Altogether, the chart depicts a continuum of evaluations of the future of democratic developments of the post-July movement. Although most of the respondents are very optimistic but cautiously, there is a serious doubt

concerning the continuation of risks and issues that could curtail the achievement of democratic goals. According to the graph, although the democratic development seems to be a feasible premise, it depends on the capability to overcome the major political, institutional and societal challenges.

To quote one respondent, Noyon, a student activist and active participant in the July 2024 Movement at Jagannath University, states,

I believe that there has been some improvement, particularly, the way people are more conscious and expressive now. But real change takes time. The same old problems of corruption, political violence and no accountability are still there. So, I would say that we are going in the right direction, but slowly and with a lot of difficulties (Interview, 2025, Participant 6, Jagannath University).

Another interviewee adds,

I think it is a combination of hope and reality. The protests revealed that people want true democracy and not just a name. Corruption, absence of transparency, and poor institutions are still huge problems. It can be improved, but only when the people in power desire it to be (Interview, 2025, Participant 7, Frontline Protest Participant, Chittagong University).

This cautious optimism mirrors Schedler's (2001) dual conception of consolidation, which emphasizes both the prevention of democratic breakdown and the gradual deepening of democratic practices.

## Discussion

The findings of the study provide important insights into how university students perceive democratic consolidation in post-July 2024 Bangladesh, revealing a pattern of cautious optimism combined with persistent skepticism. This is indicative of a general tendency in post-transitional societies, as young citizens are becoming aware of the symbolic success of democratization and remain skeptical about the substantive success of democratization in daily political existence.

The practical orientation towards democracy is emphasized by the fact that the students put much emphasis on political stability and believe in democratic institutions as important elements of consolidation. In line with the argument of Linz and Stepan (1996) that consolidated democracies are those in which democracy becomes the sole game in town, it seems that the participants view stability and institutional reliability as prerequisites to the survival of democracy.

The fact that they laid emphasis on electoral and constitutional reforms also supports the argument by Diamond (1999) that institutional reinforcement and rule of law are also at the center of resilience against the dominance of authoritarian relapse. The emphasis of the students on structural reforms and not abstract ideals indicates that the students perceive consolidation not as a normative promise and obligation but as a functional process that needs credible institutions and transparent procedures. Such a shift of the normative ideals to institutional performance highlights a growing need for governance based on accountability, rather than the pursuit of symbolic democratic legitimacy.

However, the contradicting opinion on civic rights and freedoms shows an ambivalent attitude towards the quality of the democratic environment in Bangladesh. Although most of the students recognize that democratic rights are formally existing, a significant number of them doubt their practical application. This is a reflection of the multidimensional concept of Merkel (2004) that argues that not only constitutional and institutional stability is needed, but also internalization of democratic norms by civil society. The noted skepticism can therefore be seen as a manifestation of procedural democracy with no substantive empowerment, a theme that has been reverberated long in the literature on defective democracies (Merkel, 2004; Zakaria, 2013). To these students, constitutional pledges and the political reality are still characteristic of Bangladesh's incomplete consolidation. Similar trends are observed in other transitional or hybrid democracies where citizens focus on institutional reforms, but are still doubtful about the substantive realization of democratic rights.

The fact that the students gave the issues of electoral and constitutional reforms the first place in the priority list is consistent with historical issues regarding the electoral integrity and political accountability in Bangladesh. This preference is a sign of generational competence of institutional credibility as the basal pillar of democratic renewal, considering the frequent scandals accompanying national elections. The rule of law also indicates a concern on the part of the students with the principle of judicial independence and legal equality as inalienable keys to democratic governance.

The results are consistent with the framework by Linz and Stepan (2001), which states that the conditions of a functioning state and respect for constitutional boundaries are a precondition to the process of consolidation. The comparatively low ranking of political education and government transparency, conversely, shows that students might perceive them as the consequential but not the initiating factor of democratic change. This indicates a technocratic conception of democracy, or rather a more reformative and less formative conception of democracy, or a more pragmatic and perhaps disillusioned concept of democracy, which is concerned with the reform of structures more than with the cultivation of civic values.

This interpretation is further enhanced by the qualitative responses. According to many students, democratic consolidation means the involvement of political awakening in responsible governance with a specific focus on the necessity of institutional independence, transparency, and civic confidence. Their cogitations about the July 2024 Movement point to the fact that politics became not protest-oriented, but the desire to have stable democratic governance. This proves a generational turn: the perception of democracy as resistance is replaced by the perception of democracy as a long-term institutional activity. However, their fears of corruption, political manipulation, and low judicial independence demonstrate that they are still worried about the sustainability of their democratic dividends, which has been a theme of earlier literature comparing the democracy of Bangladesh as a hybrid or an electorally constrained democracy (Ahmed, 2011 and Parnini and Othman, 2014).

Besides, the rise of cautious optimism of democratic progress, with almost half thinking progress is somewhat likely if they deal with the challenge, indicates conditional belief in reform by students. This concurs with the twofold conception of Schedler (2001) of consolidation as something that prevents breakdown and at the same time entrenches democratic practices. The feedback shows that students, though recognizing the potentially transformative potential of the July 2024 Movement, are still conscious that, unless institutional and behavioral change are made, the issue of democratic backsliding will still be a significant threat. The fact, therefore, points to a paradox: the very young people who led a mass movement in support of democracy are also the ones who are skeptical of its entrenchment within the present political parameters.

These results are also consistent with other transitional or hybrid democracies in South Asia and elsewhere, where citizens often are very insistent on institutional reforms but are still not convinced that democratic rights can be substantively exercised (Shin, 2020 and Croissant and Lorenz, 2012). Nonetheless, the highly reform-oriented orientation of Bangladeshi students implies a more institutionalized way of consolidation rather than a situation with civic mobilization.

## CONCLUSION

The study reveals that the students view democratic consolidation not as a mere process, which occurs as a procedure and symbolism, but as a long-term process of institutional changes and political practices. Their strong emphasis on electoral and constitutional reforms, their support of the rule of law, and their institutional responsibility depict a practical understanding of democracy based on structural credibility and not rhetorical proclamation. At the same time, much distrust still remains with regard to civic freedoms, transparency, and inclusive participation thus highlighting the weakness of the democratic practice in the post-movement context. Students are cautiously optimistic: while many believe advancement can take place, they stress that substantive reform along with a long-term political will is essential in order to prevent falling backward. In general, the views of university students can help to understand the opportunities and the weaknesses of the democratic path in Bangladesh after July 2024. The students remain a central component of the development of the democratic discourse and accountability due to their historical involvement as active political actors. Their voices suggest that the process of democratic consolidation in Bangladesh is an emergent process that needs credible

institutions, responsive governance and long-term civic engagement in an effort to mobilize democracy into enduring democratic stability.

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