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BEYOND IDEOLOGY: HOW CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL MOVEMENTS ARE RESHAPING SOCIAL POLICY IN BANGLADESH

This article explores the evolution of contemporary social movements in Bangladesh since the 2013 Shahbag movement, paying particular attention to their engagement with social policy. Although Shahbag mobilised unprecedented public support for justice in war crimes trials, it also exacerbated the ideological divide between secular and Islamist groups within civil society. This polarisation has constrained the capacity of subsequent movements to build broad-based alliances and promote shared civic agendas. Drawing on documentary analysis and interviews, this study examines how recent movements, such as the 2018 quota reform protests, the road safety mobilisation, the anti-Rampal environmental campaign, and the anti-rape movement, have shifted their focus from ideological confrontation to concrete, issue-based demands. These demands focus on questions of public accountability, equitable access to resources, gender justice, environmental protection, and citizen safety. By doing so, these movements have brought the key themes of social policy such as redistribution, recognition, and state responsibility into the public sphere. In a context where formal mechanisms for participation remain limited, the paper argues that social movements increasingly operate as informal yet influential actors in shaping how the state defines and delivers welfare, protection, and inclusion. Rather than functioning solely as protest organisations, they are evolving into sites of policy engagement, civic negotiation, and democratic accountability. This shift signals the emergence of a more pragmatic and policy-oriented civil society in Bangladesh — one that engages with the state through focused demands for justice and institutional reform, rather than grand ideological claims. By tracing the trajectory from Shahbag to more recent movements, the article contributes to broader debates on the role of civic mobilisation in transitional democracies, highlighting the significance of protest in shaping the everyday architecture of social policy

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The Shahbag Movement, also known as the 'Shahbag uprising' or the Projonmo Chottor Andolon (Generation Square Movement), emerged as a large-scale protest in Bangladesh on February 5, 2013, quickly gaining national prominence (Ahmed, Paul 2013). It was sparked by public outrage over the sentencing of Abdul Quader Molla, a prominent figure in the Islamist political party Jamaat-e-Islami, who had been convicted of war crimes committed during the 1971 Liberation War. Protesters demanded the death penalty for Molla and called for Jamaat-e-Islami to be banned from political participation (Ahmed 2013). Driven largely by youth and coordinated through social media, the movement quickly drew thousands to Shahbag Square for sustained rallies and sit-ins (Roy Chowdhury, Abid 2019). In response, the government amended the International Crimes Tribunal Act[1] to allow appeals against lenient verdicts (Ahmed 2013). While initially seen as a broad call for justice, critics argued that the movement was soon co-opted by political actors, thereby weakening its original focus (Roy 2018). Others warned that it was deepening social divisions, particularly along religious and ideological lines (Zaman 2016). In contrast to Shahbag, a counter-movement emerged, namely the Shapla Square protests led by Hefazat-e-Islam, an Islamist pressure group. Launched on May 5, 2013, the protests centred on a 13-point charter of demands calling for stricter blasphemy laws, the suppression of atheist bloggers and the removal of the Lady Justice statue from the Supreme Court, which the organisers deemed to be idolatrous (The Daily Star 2013b).

The confrontation between the Shahbag and Shapla Square protests revealed a growing ideological and social divide within civil society. Shahbag articulated a vision of secular Bengali nationalism, largely mobilising urban, educated middle classes, while Hefazat-e-Islam drew support from rural, religiously educated segments of society, particularly through the nationwide Qawmi madrasa system (Wohab 2021; Riaz 2016). There is no documented evidence of crossover between participants of the two movements, reflecting their polarised ideological positions and the distinct socio-demographic profiles of their constituencies. As Zaman (2016) argues, the two movements represented 'two different publics' with mutually exclusive conceptions of the state. While disillusionment with the perceived secularism of Shahbag may have indirectly bolstered Hefazat's support base, the movements remained structurally and

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[1] The Tribunal, established in 2009, prosecutes crimes committed during the 1971 conflict.

ideologically antagonistic. The Shapla protests, marked by overt religious rhetoric and calls for Islamic governance, raised concerns about the erosion of Bangladesh's secular foundation and culminated in violent clashes with state authorities (Siddique 2013).

This paper examines how the Shahbag movement reshaped the relationship between the state, civil society, and social movements in Bangladesh, paying particular attention to its long-term implications for the field of social policy. While existing scholarship has explored Shahbag's immediate effects and its polarising legacy (Zaman 2016; Riaz 2022), this study examines how subsequent movements have shifted their strategies away from identity-based confrontation and to concrete, issue-specific demands. These new mobilisations — concerning employment quotas, road safety, environmental justice, and gender-based violence — highlight questions of redistribution, recognition, and state accountability. This positions them as informal yet influential actors within the domain of social policy.

The article addresses the following research question: how do contemporary social movements in Bangladesh shape the development of social policy through issue-specific mobilisation, and how does the institutional landscape of social policy, in turn, influence their strategies, demands, and sources of legitimacy? Based on Hickey and Bracking's (2005) framework of movements as informal policy actors and Ishkanian's (2022) concept of the civic recalibration of welfare politics, the study traces how four protest episodes — focused on public employment, road safety, environmental protection, and gender justice — transformed grievances into policy responses through discursive framing, media amplification, and reputational pressure. Drawing on documentary and media analysis, this study shows that, in contexts where formal participatory mechanisms are weak or absent, civic movements act as 'civic policy brokers': informal yet significant actors in the negotiation of policy claims, particularly in hybrid regimes. They not only advance concrete demands, but also reshape public understandings of fairness, accountability, and social protection.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design with a primary emphasis on documentary and media analysis, and supplemented by a small number of semi-structured interviews. The aim is to trace how civic movements in Bangladesh articulate policy-relevant demands and engage with state institutions in the context of a hybrid regime.

The core empirical material consists of 39 publicly available sources, including newspaper reports, investigative features, official circulars, social media posts and civil society statements. These sources cover the period from 2013 to 2023. These materials were identified using a selective, event-driven sampling strategy, focused on four key episodes of mobilisation: the quota reform movement, the road safety protests, the anti-Rampal environmental

campaign, and the anti-rape mobilisation. Sources were drawn from both domestic and international media outlets, including *The Daily Star, Prothom Alo, Dhaka Tribune, BBC, Reuters, The Guardian, Al Jazeera, and Global Voices*, as well as public documents issued by government bodies and NGOs. Materials that documented not only the occurrence of protests, but also how movements framed their demands, engaged the public, and provoked institutional responses were prioritised in the selection process.

Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework, all materials were coded inductively and analysed for recurring patterns of mobilisation, framing, and responsiveness. The coding process focused on four analytical dimensions: (1) the articulation of grievances and claims; (2) the tactical repertoire and mobilisation strategies; (3) the responses of state actors and the public; and (4) the shifts in the framing of social policy concerns. This enabled comparative process-tracing across the four movements, linking demands to institutional outputs and shifts in discourse over time.

To complement the documentary analysis, the study includes ten semi-structured interviews with participants and observers of the movements. Conducted online and in Dhaka between October 2020 and December 2024, these interviews focused on participants' reflections on the movement's goals, tactics, and engagement with policy issues. The interviewees were recruited using a snowball sampling method, starting with publicly known figures associated with the Shahbag movement and its aftermath. All participants were fully briefed on the purpose of the study and provided informed consent. The interviews were conducted in Bangla and/or English, recorded with permission, and anonymised for confidentiality.

While the media corpus provides the analytical foundation for the study, the interviews serve to contextualise interpretive claims, highlight internal tactical debates, and offer insight into how participants perceived their role in shaping policy discourse. The study also acknowledges the positionality of the researcher, given their prior involvement in civic initiatives related to Shahbag. To mitigate interpretive bias, the researcher maintained a reflexive field journal and engaged in peer debriefing throughout the research process.

Conducted between 2020 and 2024, this research provides a longitudinal perspective on the evolution of civic mobilisation during the post-Shahbag decade and the intersection of specific protest episodes with broader state–society dynamics in Bangladesh.

Political Opportunity, Transformation, and the Role of Civil Society

Theory on contemporary social movements emphasises the complexity and unpredictability of movement outcomes. As Gusfield (2000) and Suh (2014) point out, such movements often have unintended consequences, including outcomes that diverge from, or even undermine, their original aims.

Kolb (2007: 22) argues that movement achievements may erode over time, particularly when political contexts shift or institutional mechanisms remain weak. These insights help us to analyse not only the immediate consequences of the Shahbag movement, but also the long-term institutional and political dynamics that it set in motion, particularly in relation to the state and civil society. The literature has widely noted the fragility of redistributive policies in contexts lacking institutional accountability (Gough, Wood 2004; Hickey, Bracking 2005; Ishkanian 2022). In such settings, debates around fairness, entitlement, and the distribution of public resources become sites of political contestation. Social movements reveal how deeply embedded conflicts over legitimacy and justice shape the policy landscape by bringing these tensions to the surface.

Social movements do not emerge or operate in isolation. They interact with each other across time and space, borrowing narratives, methods, and identities, and often responding to the strategies and framing of other movements (McAdam 2013; Meyer, Boutcher 2007). Their trajectories are shaped by their dynamic relationships with society and the state, evolving through distinct phases (Christiansen 2011; Tarrow 1983). In some cases, sustained engagement and adaptation enable movements to fulfill functions typically attributed to civil society (Ishkanian 2022).

The outcomes of social movements are shaped not only by their own strategies or the responses of the state, but also by the emergence of countermovements. As Burstein et al. (1995) note, political change frequently stems from intricate interactions between different stakeholders. Influential movements tend to provoke organised opposition; for example, Hefazat-e-Islam arose in direct response to the Shahbag protests (McCright, Dunlap 2000).

The state plays a decisive role in shaping the trajectory of social movements by means of repression, co-optation, or support (Porta, Diani 2015). Endorsement by the state — whether through legal recognition, funding, or symbolic approval — can strengthen a movement by granting it legitimacy, visibility, and access to resources (Tilly 2017; Amenta, Polletta 2019). Such recognition protects movements from repression and signals to the broader public that their demands are valid. However, this support is ambivalent: while it may increase a movement's influence, it can also neutralise its radical goals and absorb it into existing power structures.

As social movements achieve their goals, they may transition from protest to institutional engagement, gradually adopting the characteristics of civil society (Jasper 2011; Nasibov 2021). This transformation typically involves moving from confrontation to collaboration with the state through negotiation, advocacy, or participation in governance. In authoritarian contexts, where open dissent is restricted, such adaptation becomes a survival strategy. Movements adjust and adapt their tactics, moderate their demands, and adopt the kinds of engagement that are typical of civil society actors (McCarthy, Zald 1977; Sotiropoulos 1995).

The concept of political opportunity helps to explain how social movements influence state action, particularly with regard to social policy. When external conditions — such as legal openings, shifts in elite alignments, or public discourse — favour mobilisation, social movements are more likely to challenge the way in which the state distributes rights, services, and welfare resources (McAdam 1996; Tarrow 1998). These opportunities do not have to be formal or permanent; instead, they reflect the ever-changing features of the political environment that influence citizens' ability to contest exclusion and demand redistribution (Meyer, Staggenborg 1996; Kitschelt 1986). In this sense, political opportunity structures are central to understanding how movements engage with and potentially reshape the social policy landscape.

Hickey and Bracking (2005) argue that when institutional channels are weak or unresponsive, social movements can serve as an alternative site for policy-making. This is achieved by formulating new claims relating to rights, recognition, and distribution. In Bangladesh, for example, such mobilisation reflects broader demands for institutional reform and social accountability. These movements are not only purely political; they also challenge the way in which the state defines fairness and allocates public resources. In this sense, social movements intervene in the domain of social policy by contesting how entitlements are distributed and which claims the state recognises.

From Protest to Policy Realignment: Civil Society, Ideological Conflict, and State Response

The Shahbag movement is an example of a typical transition from contentious mobilisation to institutionalised civic engagement. Initially sparked by demands for Abdul Quader Mollah to be given the death penalty, the protest gained traction due to its moral urgency and the state's tolerance of it (Hossain 2013; Arman et al. 2013). During the early phase, radical, transgressive claims were made, such as challenging judicial verdicts and calling for the political exclusion of Jamaat-e-Islami. Over time, however, the movement adopted broader normative goals, such as promoting secularism, justice, and democratic values (Zaman 2016), thus aligning more closely with the functions of civil society.

This shift was shaped by the state's dual response: it met key demands by amending tribunal law and carrying out executions, while repressing dissent once the movement began addressing wider issues. As Della Porta (2014) suggests, this reflects a broader pattern whereby states alternate between co-optation and repression, encouraging moderate forms of engagement while suppressing systemic critique. In the Bangladeshi context, these dynamics limited the movement's ability to effect deeper institutional reform, particularly in the areas of justice and accountability.

The year 2013 was a pivotal moment in the transformation of Bangladeshi civil society. The Shahbag movement catalysed a visible split between secular

and Islamist groups, reshaping the socio-political landscape (Zaman 2016). Although Bangladesh was founded on the principles of Bengali nationalism and secularism, successive governments gradually eroded these ideals by accommodating Islamist forces for political gain (Riaz 2004; Bhardwaj 2011). Prior to the Shahbag, civil society remained largely religious, but not overtly radical (Riaz 2022). The movement exposed and exacerbated existing ideological tensions, polarising public discourse and institutional alignments.

The Shahbag protests were widely interpreted as a revival of the ideals of secularism and nationalism rooted in the Liberation War, drawing on its symbolic repertoire and inclusive rhetoric (Sajjad, Härdig 2017; Ullah 2013). In contrast, Islamist groups viewed this mobilisation as a threat to religious values and responded by uniting around Hefazat-e-Islam, a network of madrasa-based activists who advocate for stricter religious control over public life. Their 13-point agenda included demands for blasphemy laws, gender segregation, and the exclusion of religious minorities (Mustafa 2013). This polarisation exacerbated the ideological divide within civil society and altered the boundaries of what is considered acceptable political discourse in Bangladesh.

Both the secular and the Islamist camps redefined their political narratives as claims to national legitimacy, with each portraying itself as the true embodiment of Bangladeshi identity (Sood 2013; Zaman 2016). This symbolic rivalry escalated into open conflict when parts of the Islamist bloc resorted to violent mobilisation against Shahbag supporters (Rezwan 2013a). The situation deteriorated further following the International Crimes Tribunal verdicts against Jamaat-e-Islami leaders, which were welcomed by secular groups as justice, but condemned by Islamists as politically motivated. Mass protests, led in part by Hefazat-e-Islam, culminated in violent clashes with state forces and civilians. Between 2013 and 2016, over 500 people were reportedly killed in politically motivated violence linked to these trials (De 2018). This period marked a crisis of cohesion within civil society, revealing the fragility of political consensus around justice and accountability.

Escalating violence put significant strain on state governance and contributed to a broader shift towards authoritarianism. A key driver of this shift was the state's attempt to contain unrest, particularly that instigated by religious groups. In response, the authorities adopted a dual strategy: on the one hand, they deployed repressive measures through security forces, and on the other, they accommodated certain Islamist civil society groups by offering them organisational recognition and expressive concessions. While this approach aimed to stabilise public order, it also reshaped the boundaries of civic participation and influenced the distribution of state attention and resources.

In response to the Hefazat-e-Islam's protest held in Shapla Square in May 2013, the state used heavy-handed tactics to suppress dissent. The police deployed tear gas, rubber bullets, and live ammunition, resulting in dozens of deaths (Hunter 2013). The government also suspended live broadcasts by Islamist media

outlets in an attempt to control public perception (The Daily Star 2013a). At the same time, it took legal and symbolic measures in line with the original demands of the Shahbag movement, including continuing the war crimes trials and banning Jamaat-e-Islami from elections (Hammadi, Burke 2013).

Yet, alongside repression, the state sought to appease Hefazat-e-Islam by making symbolic and material concessions (Rezwan 2013b). Bloggers linked to Shahbag were arrested under the ICT[1] Act for 'anti-religious' content (Omari 2013; Tusher, Mamun 2013), and the law was subsequently tightened to criminalise online dissent (Hussain 2013). In the following years, the government increasingly deferred to Islamist pressure: censoring publications, reforming school curricula, and providing financial support to religious groups — including Hefazat (Rezwan 2013b; Khan 2018; Nandy 2023; Ministry of Finance 2020). This dual approach of coercion toward secular actors and accommodation of Islamist demands gradually shifted the state's normative alignment and shaped public discourse.

The state institutionalised Hefazat's influence within the education and welfare systems by formally recognising Qawmi madrasa degrees as equivalent to master's qualifications and reallocating public funds to religious education (Sajen et al. 2017; Barry, Manik 2017; Ahmed 2024; The Daily Star 2018a). The removal of secular content from textbooks, alongside symbolic gestures such as the removal of the statue of Lady Justice (Safi 2017), further signalled the state's ideological convergence with conservative religious forces.

The state's dual strategy of suppressing secular dissent while accommodating Islamist demands fundamentally altered the concept of civic legitimacy in Bangladesh. Rather than resolving ideological tensions, this approach has led to the institutionalisation of selective participation and a shift in the normative foundations of public policy. The result was a realignment of social policy priorities, particularly in education, cultural representation, and rights discourse, towards more exclusionary, identity-based frameworks. This trajectory illustrates how authoritarian governance not only silences opposition, but also actively reshapes the boundaries of entitlement, recognition, and public inclusion, which lie at the core of social policy.

Contemporary social movements in Bangladesh: pragmatism, participation, and social policy

The Shahbag Movement marked a turning point in Bangladesh's protest culture. Led by young activists and rooted in secular and nationalist ideals, it introduced new forms of civic engagement, particularly through social media, non-violent tactics, and cultural expression. Although initially focused on

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[1] The Information and Communication Technology Act was passed by the National Parliament of Bangladesh in 2006 to regulate ICT services in the country. Cybercrimes are tried under this ICT Act. Through an amendment in 2013, the Act was further strengthened.

seeking justice for war crimes, the movement's broader impact lay in shaping the strategic repertoire of subsequent movements. Post-2013 mobilisations built upon Shahbag's use of digital platforms, symbolic action, and mass visibility, while also adapting to growing state hostility and political fragmentation (Tanjeem, Fatima 2023).

Quota Reform and Youth Mobilisation for Institutional Accountability

The 2018 quota reform movement signaled a change in the way people in Bangladesh were mobilised. Although it drew on the symbolic and digital strategies of the Shahbag movement, particularly the use of social media and appeals to nationalist memory, its focus and framing were different. Rather than pursuing ideological or identity-based objectives, the protests targeted a specific policy instrument: the public employment quota system. Protesters criticised the quota structure as exclusionary and incompatible with contemporary meritocratic expectations (Jackman 2021; Hasan et al. 2020). The demands were framed in terms of fairness and equal opportunity, reflecting growing public frustration with perceived inefficiencies in state resource distribution. The protesters' demands were centered on fairness, transparency, and equal opportunity, reflecting wider public frustration with inefficiencies in state resource distribution.

The movement gained traction rapidly through coordinated campus actions, nationwide demonstrations, and saturation coverage in the mainstream media. On April 10, 2018, *The Daily Star* reported that tens of thousands of students had joined rallies in Dhaka and other cities, calling for quotas in government recruitment to be reduced or reformed. In response, the government formed a review committee and, on October 4, 2018, the Cabinet Division issued a circular eliminating several categories of quotas for first- and second-class public service positions, while retaining provisions for ethnic minorities and people with disabilities (The Daily Star 2018b). Although the decision was subject to bureaucratic delays and was only partially implemented, it demonstrated the capacity of youth-led, issue-specific mobilisation to generate procedural responsiveness within the state.

Road Safety and Strategic Non-Partisanship in Civic Protest

The 2018 road safety protests erupted following the deaths of two schoolchildren in Dhaka who were struck by a speeding bus that was being operated without a valid license. This incident catalysed the mass mobilisation of school and university students, who demanded traffic enforcement reform, driver accountability, and safer infrastructure (Laignee 2018). Building on the experience of Shahbag, the students used social media to coordinate their activities and publicise their grievances, while employing peaceful and innovative protest tactics. Their actions, such as inspecting drivers' licenses and assisting pedestrians,

symbolised a call for citizen-led enforcement in the face of inaction by the state. In response to police repression, the protesters' disciplined conduct garnered widespread public sympathy and media coverage (Tanjeem, Fatima 2023).

Crucially, the mobilisation was marked by a deliberate rejection of partisan affiliation. As one student participant recounted: '*We were offered different kinds of assistance, from various logistics to manpower, by different sects of parties, but we knew the risk. We did not want to lose the grip and focus of the movement*' (Grade student, 16 y.o., Dhanmondi, Dhaka, 12th November, 2019). This strategic distancing from party politics helped to preserve the movement's legitimacy and broaden its appeal. Media coverage was overwhelmingly sympathetic, and in response, the government passed the Road Transport Act 2018, introducing stricter penalties for violations. However, enforcement remains uneven (The Daily Star 2019).

Environmental Protest and the Expansion of Social Policy Discourse

The anti-Rampal movement, which mobilised opposition to the construction of a coal-fired power plant near the Sundarbans mangrove forest, illustrates how environmental concerns have become a catalyst for civic engagement in Bangladesh. Focusing on the defence of ecological integrity, public health, and sustainable livelihoods, the movement united a diverse coalition of civil society groups, including environmental organisations, student associations, coastal residents, and urban professionals (Islam, Al-Amin 2019; Sharma 2014). By emphasising issues such as intergenerational equity, displacement risks, and ecological degradation, the movement transcended ideological divides and helped to establish environmental citizenship as a recognised dimension of civil society. The protests incorporated marches, public hearings, human chains, and petitions, as well as leveraging international solidarity networks to draw global attention to the Sundarbans.

Although the movement failed to halt the Rampal project, it generated sustained media coverage, provoked parliamentary debate, and prompted environmental impact authorities to review the project. In doing so, it broadened the scope of social policy discourse to encompass environmental justice, establishing the right to live in a safe and sustainable environment as an integral component of broader welfare and recognition claims. Gender Justice and Rights-Based Mobilisation against Sexual Violence

The anti-rape movement, which gained momentum in 2020, following a series of widely publicised incidents of sexual violence, marked a critical juncture in the articulation of gender-based claims in Bangladesh (Shewly, Gerharz 2021). As a non-partisan, rights-based mobilisation, the movement directly confronted the culture of impunity surrounding sexual violence head on, demanding structural reforms to address legal, institutional, and social failures in protecting women's rights. Rather than engaging in polarising narratives, organisers strategically prioritised demands for justice, bodily autonomy, and

institutional accountability. As one participant noted: '*Our aim was to avoid provoking unnecessary antagonism, as seen in the Shahbag movement, which inadvertently became entangled with Islamist opposition and was wrongly branded atheist*' (Female DU student, 21 y.o., DU campus, 12th October, 2020).

This quote underscores a deliberate tactical shift towards maintaining ideological neutrality in order to preserve unity and legitimacy. The protests, which included sit-ins, human chains, and digital campaigns, framed gender-based violence as a public crisis that required a policy response that went beyond mere moral outrage. Following this, the government introduced the death penalty for rape in amended criminal legislation, though this was criticised many activists as merely performative and deflective (Al Jazeera 2020; The Guardian 2020). Nevertheless, the movement expanded the scope of civic activism around social protection and gender justice, thereby reinforcing civil society's role in advocating for rights-based reforms and institutional responsiveness.

Civic Brokerage and Policy Shifts in a Hybrid Regime

Together, the four movements illustrate a broader transformation in Bangladesh's protest repertoire, shifting from ideologically polarised or symbolically driven mobilisation, as seen during the Shahbag movement, towards pragmatic, issue-specific activism that directly targets state institutions and policy processes. Whether the focus was on recruitment reform, public safety, environmental protection, or gender justice, these movements shared a strategic orientation of nonpartisanship, disciplined protest, and media-savvy mobilisation. By selectively engaging with institutional channels without full co-optation, they were able to act as informal brokers of policy accountability in a hybrid political regime.

These movements did not operate through formal policy platforms or electoral representation. Instead, they used symbolic legitimacy, public visibility, and normative pressure to push for administrative responsiveness, which Hickey and Bracking (2005) refer to as 'indirect inclusion.' This form of civic brokerage operates through issue framing, media amplification, and elite signalling. It often produces procedural outputs such as legal amendments, policy circulars, or regulatory reviews, even if full implementation remains uneven or contested.

Importantly, these movements have also redefined the scope of social policy. In contrast to narrow welfare framings, their claims for fairness, recognition, and state responsibility intersected with issues that had been marginalized in policy debates, such as road safety, environmental degradation, and gender-based violence. By doing so, they have positioned social policy as not only state-administered redistribution, but also as a contested field shaped by civic pressure and collective meaning-making.

Although none of these movements achieved systemic policy transformation, they all contributed to shifting the boundaries of public discourse and expanding the space for participation and making claims. Their trajectories reveal the constraints of activism under hybrid governance, as well as the potential for

micro-level accountability gains when protest is based on specific, widely recognised grievances. These cases, therefore, suggest that, even in restrictive environments, civic mobilisation can influence social policy agendas not by seizing institutional power, but by reframing the terms of governance and demanding responsiveness in areas where the state has traditionally held a monopoly.

Conclusion: Social Movements as Informal Actors of Social Policy

The Shahbag movement was a pivotal moment in Bangladesh's protest culture, showcasing the potential and limitations of ideologically driven mobilisation. Although initially hailed as a civic awakening centred on justice for war crimes, the movement inadvertently reinforced ideological divisions within civil society. Consequently, its legacy is mixed: while it demonstrated the capacity of citizen mobilisation to influence state action, it also illustrated the risks of basing collective demands on contested historical and identity narratives.

Subsequent movements, such as those focusing on quota reform, road safety, environmental protection, and gender justice, departed from this trajectory. They prioritised targeted, issue-specific demands over ideological confrontation, and adopted a pragmatic approach, employing disciplined tactics and public-oriented language. By doing so, they helped to reframe civic protest as a mechanism of accountability within a hybrid regime, rather than as a threat to order.

From a social policy perspective, these movements expanded the scope of what constitutes legitimate policy discourse. Their claims challenged the existing norms of entitlement, fairness, and recognition, and pushed the state towards greater procedural responsiveness. Although most of their policy successes have been partially or unevenly implemented, their cumulative effect has been to diversify the policy agenda and introduce new forms of civic pressure into welfare and protection governance.

Importantly, these mobilisations have helped to reshape civil society itself. Civil society in Bangladesh is no longer defined solely by NGO frameworks or elite advocacy; instead, it is increasingly animated by informal, youth-led, media-savvy actors who engage with the state from outside of formal institutions. Through symbolic legitimacy, digital amplification, and discursive framing, these actors act as 'civic policy brokers,' shaping policy responses and public expectations of state responsibility.

Future research should explore how these civic dynamics evolve over time, considering whether such movements consolidate into lasting platforms and whether their gains are institutionalised or reversed. It should also consider how they navigate the risks of co-optation and repression. As this article shows, civic mobilisation can play a decisive role in redefining the architecture of social policy even in restrictive environments — not by replacing formal processes, but by making them more visible, accountable, and subject to debate.

Acknowledgment

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