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Research Article

The Fall of the Awami League Government in Bangladesh on August 5, 2024: A Theoretical Review and Analysis

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ABSTRACT

On August 5, 2024, Bangladesh's Awami League (AL) government under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina fell following weeks of mass, student-led protests that broadened into a nationwide anti-regime uprising. This article offers a theoretically informed review and analysis of the uprising's antecedents, dynamics, and outcomes. Drawing on the literature of contentious politics, regime survival and breakdown, civil-military relations, and economic grievance politics, the study synthesises open-source reporting, human rights documentation, and secondary scholarship to construct a process-tracing narrative. The central argument is that the AL's fall combined mobilizational triggers (quota-reform protests catalysed by repression and information blackouts), coalition cascades (cross-class and cross-organisational alignment), security defection (military and police non-intervention or withdrawal), and elite exit (prime ministerial flight) under conditions of declining regime performance legitimacy and escalating coercive costs. The article contributes a typology of "trigger-to-transition" sequences relevant to hybrid and electoral-authoritarian regimes. It reflects on the interim arrangement headed by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus and the role of international actors. Policy implications regarding transitional justice, security sector reform, and election sequencing are offered.

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1. Introduction

On August 5, 2024, Bangladesh experienced a political rupture that will likely shape its democratic trajectory for decades. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the longest-serving leader in the country's history, resigned and fled amid weeks of escalating student-led protests that evolved into a nationwide uprising. Protesters stormed symbolic state spaces, government authority collapsed in urban centres, and the military announced the formation of an interim arrangement to restore stability and prepare for elections. Within days, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus was sworn in as chief adviser of a caretaker-style interim government (Reuters, 2024a; The Guardian, 2024).

This moment marked the fall of the Awami League (AL) government, which had governed continuously since 2009 and had dominated Bangladesh's politics for over a decade and a half. Although Bangladesh has a long history of contentious street politics, cycles of military intervention, and caretaker administrations, the 2024 uprising was distinct in its speed, breadth, and intensity. What began as a quota-reform protest led by students rapidly expanded into a full-blown legitimacy crisis, fueled by violent repression, internet blackouts, and curfews. The government's attempt to quell dissent by coercion proved counterproductive, leading to what scholars of social movements call "repression backfire"—where the use of violence against protesters galvanises rather than demobilises collective action (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015).

The broader historical backdrop is essential for understanding why the Awami League's fall became possible in 2024. Since 2009, Sheikh Hasina's administrations have presided over robust economic growth, major infrastructure development, and significant gains in social indicators such as health and education (World Bank, 2022). However, this developmental record was increasingly overshadowed by allegations of democratic backsliding, authoritarian consolidation, and human rights abuses. Civil society organisations documented a rise in enforced disappearances, shrinking press freedoms, politicisation of security institutions, and systematic harassment of opposition leaders and activists (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Amnesty International, 2024).

The January 2024 general election, boycotted by major opposition parties and criticised internationally

for lack of competitiveness, further eroded the government's legitimacy (Al Jazeera, 2024a). Against this background, grievances over youth unemployment and public-sector job quotas—long-standing issues in Bangladesh's student politics—resonated widely. When the government responded with heavy-handed crackdowns, including curfews and internet shutdowns, public anger spread beyond campuses into urban neighbourhoods and professional sectors (Amnesty International, 2024; Reuters, 2024b).

The July protests reached unprecedented levels of violence and casualties. Independent reporting indicated that July 19 marked the single deadliest day, with dozens killed in confrontations between protesters and security forces (Amnesty International, 2024). By late July, death toll estimates ranged from at least 200 confirmed fatalities to unofficial counts far higher, making it one of the bloodiest protest waves in Bangladesh's post-independence history (The Guardian, 2024; VOA, 2024). The government's legitimacy crisis deepened as images of student casualties circulated despite digital blackouts, creating a moral shock that drew in broader coalitions of professionals, workers, and urban residents.

On August 5, 2024, the cumulative effect of repression, mobilisation, and security hesitation reached a tipping point. Protesters breached symbolic sites of power, Sheikh Hasina resigned and reportedly fled to India, and the army chief publicly called for calm and announced that an interim arrangement would be formed (Reuters, 2024a; VOA, 2024). The following days saw the installation of Muhammad Yunus as interim chief adviser, with a mandate to oversee reforms and credible elections (The Guardian, 2024; TIME, 2024).

The fall of the AL government has immense theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it illustrates the interplay of trigger grievances, repression backfire, coalition cascades, and elite exit—a sequence observed in hybrid regimes across the Global South (Kuran, 1991; Svoboda, 2012). Practically, it raises urgent questions about Bangladesh's democratic future, the risks of military tutelage, and the possibilities of transitional justice. The crisis attracted global attention for a country with a more than 170 million and strategic importance in South Asia. It highlighted the fragility of

developmental authoritarian bargains when legitimacy erodes (Le Monde, 2024).

This article situates the events of August 2024 within broader theoretical debates in comparative and contentious politics. It pursues four interrelated research questions:

- What proximate mechanisms transformed the quota-reform movement into a regime-threatening uprising?
- How did state repression influence protest trajectories, including curfews and internet blackouts?
- What role did civil–military relations and security force signalling play in precipitating elite exit?
- What are the risks and opportunities of Bangladesh’s interim arrangement under Muhammad Yunus for democratic consolidation?

The study seeks to contribute to the empirical understanding of Bangladesh’s 2024 political crisis and to comparative theory on authoritarian breakdown, protest escalation, and regime transition by answering these questions.

2. Background and Timeline

Understanding the fall of the Awami League (AL) government on August 5, 2024, requires situating the events within both Bangladesh’s historical-political context and the proximate developments of 2023–2024. This section provides a detailed chronology of political trajectories, structural conditions, and immediate triggers that culminated in the collapse of the Hasina administration.

2.1 Historical-Political Context

Since independence in 1971, Bangladesh’s political development has been marked by repeated cycles of democratic experimentation, military intervention, and authoritarian retrenchment. Historically central to the independence struggle, the Awami League alternated in power with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Democratic elections in the 1990s led to instability, corruption allegations, and recurring street confrontations (Riaz, 2016).

Sheikh Hasina, daughter of founding leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, returned to office in 2009

and consolidated control over the next fifteen years. Her government presided over significant economic progress, with average annual GDP growth above 6%, rapid industrialisation through the garment sector, and impressive poverty reduction (World Bank, 2022). Major infrastructure projects—such as the Padma Bridge—symbolised Bangladesh’s developmental ambitions.

However, parallel to these economic successes, Hasina’s governments were increasingly accused of eroding democratic institutions. Opposition parties, particularly the BNP, faced systematic repression; journalists and activists reported growing surveillance and censorship; and international observers warned of shrinking civic space (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Importantly, the military was co-opted through promotions and patronage, ensuring its outward loyalty, while the police and security services were increasingly politicised (Fair, 2018).

2.2 The January 2024 Election and Crisis of Legitimacy

The January 7, 2024, general election became a pivotal event in the lead-up to the uprising. Major opposition parties, including the BNP, boycotted the polls, citing harassment, arrests of party leaders, and lack of a neutral caretaker system (Al Jazeera, 2024a). As a result, the Awami League won a landslide victory, securing nearly all parliamentary seats, but the outcome was widely criticised as uncompetitive. Western observers, including the United States, expressed concerns about inclusivity and fairness (Reuters, 2024a).

This electoral outcome left the government facing a crisis of legitimacy. While Hasina remained formally in power, the absence of meaningful opposition participation and declining trust among younger demographics created fertile ground for discontent. The lack of institutionalised opposition also meant that street politics—a hallmark of Bangladesh’s political history—would likely become the arena of confrontation (Riaz, 2023).

2.3 Quota Reform as a Trigger

The proximate trigger of the 2024 uprising was the student-led quota reform movement. Bangladesh’s public-sector job system reserved a substantial percentage of posts for specific groups, including

descendants of freedom fighters. Students had protested this system before—notably in 2018—arguing that it undermined meritocracy and entrenched political patronage (Daily Star, 2018).

In mid-2024, discontent resurfaced as graduates and student networks mobilised against the continuation of quotas. Initially, the movement was narrowly focused, but it gained traction due to high youth unemployment and perceptions of economic inequality despite headline GDP growth. The government's initial dismissal of student demands created resentment, and repression soon transformed a sectoral grievance into a broader anti-regime movement (Amnesty International, 2024).

2.4 Escalation of Protests: July 2024

The turning point came in July 2024, when demonstrations spread across campuses and into Dhaka's urban neighbourhoods. The state responded with lethal force, curfews, and a nationwide internet blackout. Amnesty International (2024) reported that by mid-July, at least 32 protesters had been killed, and July 19 became the deadliest single day, with dozens of fatalities. Independent sources suggested that the death toll exceeded 180 by late July, while unofficial counts placed it significantly higher (The Guardian, 2024).

The government also deployed shoot-on-sight orders and mass arrests, further radicalising public sentiment (VOA, 2024). While intended to stifle mobilisation, Internet shutdowns ironically generated “moral shocks” as fragmented information circulated through offline networks. Families of victims, professional associations, and even middle-class segments joined demonstrations, producing a coalition cascade (Kuran, 1991).

2.5 The Collapse: August 5, 2024

By the first week of August, the AL government faced untenable pressure. Protesters had overrun symbolic spaces, including parts of the prime minister's official residence and Dhaka University—long a crucible of political dissent (Reuters, 2024b). International media showed jubilant crowds celebrating what they called the “people's victory.”

On August 5, 2024, Sheikh Hasina resigned and fled the country, reportedly to India (Reuters, 2024b). The Bangladesh Army, rather than intervening directly

in support of the government, announced it would facilitate an interim arrangement and called for calm. This non-intervention was decisive: civil–military studies suggest that authoritarian breakdown often hinges on whether coercive institutions continue to defend embattled leaders (Svolik, 2012).

2.6 The Interim Government under Muhammad Yunus

In the aftermath, Bangladesh entered a transitional phase. On August 6, the presidency and military leadership announced that an interim government would be formed. Within days, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus—internationally recognised for his microfinance work—was sworn in as chief adviser (The Guardian, 2024; TIME, 2024). His appointment was intended to project neutrality, international credibility, and a reform-oriented agenda.

The interim administration pledged to restore order, release political prisoners, and prepare for free and fair elections. International actors, including the United Nations and Western governments, welcomed the transition but urged accountability for the hundreds killed during the protests (Le Monde, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024).

2.7 Timeline of Key Events

- January 7, 2024: General election boycotted by opposition; Awami League wins overwhelmingly.
- June 2024: Student protests escalate over public-sector job quota reform.
- Mid-July 2024: State repression intensifies; curfews, shoot-on-sight orders, and internet blackouts imposed.
- July 19, 2024: Deadliest day of protests, with dozens killed.
- Late July (2024). Casualties surpass 200; protests spread nationwide, encompassing professionals and the middle class.
- August 5, 2024: Sheikh Hasina resigns and flees; protesters seize symbolic spaces; army announces interim arrangement.
- August 6–8, 2024: Muhammad Yunus appointed and sworn in as chief adviser of an interim government.

2.8 Analytical Significance

The sequence of events reveals how authoritarian regimes can unravel rapidly when performance legitimacy erodes, repression backfires, and security institutions defect or abstain. In Bangladesh's case, the combination of long-term structural grievances (authoritarian consolidation, youth unemployment, contested electoral legitimacy) and short-term triggers (quota reform protests, lethal repression, internet blackouts) produced a "perfect storm" culminating in regime collapse.

The appointment of Muhammad Yunus highlights a recurring theme in Bangladeshi politics: reliance on caretaker-style arrangements to manage electoral transitions during legitimacy crises. Whether this experiment yields democratic deepening or repeats historical cycles of instability will depend on accountability measures, electoral reforms, and the balance of civil-military power in the coming years.

3. Literature Review

The fall of the Awami League government on August 5, 2024, has invited wide-ranging interpretations in academic, journalistic, and political discourses. To properly situate this moment within scholarly debates, examining the body of literature on Bangladeshi politics, governance, regime change, and theoretical frameworks that can help interpret the collapse of long-standing political orders is crucial. This literature review will map out four broad areas of scholarship: (1) the evolution of Bangladesh's political institutions and democratic practices; (2) the Awami League's trajectory of governance since 2009; (3) theoretical perspectives on authoritarianism, hybrid regimes, and democratic backsliding; and (4) comparative insights from South Asian and global political contexts.

3.1 Evolution of Political Institutions and Democracy in Bangladesh

Bangladesh's political system, since its independence in 1971, has been marked by turbulence, alternating phases of democratic openings and authoritarian interludes, and recurring episodes of political violence (Riaz, 2016). Early scholarship has highlighted the fragility of Bangladesh's institutions, where patron-client networks, factional rivalries, and

personalised rule undermined the prospects of establishing strong democratic structures (Kochanek, 1993; Maniruzzaman, 1994). Scholars note that successive governments, whether military or civilian, often centralised power in the executive, eroding the role of the legislature and judiciary (Rahman, 2019).

The restoration of parliamentary democracy in the 1990s following the fall of General Hussain Muhammad Ershad was hailed as a turning point (Jahan, 2005). Nevertheless, the "winner-takes-all" culture of Bangladeshi politics, mainly shaped by the intense rivalry between the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), generated cycles of boycott, street protests, and election-related confrontations (Lewis, 2011). Analysts such as Riaz (2014) argue that democracy in Bangladesh became more procedural than substantive, with elections being manipulated and institutions politicised. The trajectory of the country's democratic practices, therefore, set the stage for the authoritarian consolidation witnessed under the Awami League's tenure after 2009.

3.2 The Awami League's Governance Trajectory (2009–2024)

The Awami League, under Sheikh Hasina, returned to power in 2009 with an overwhelming parliamentary majority. Initial reforms, such as the International Crimes Tribunal, were viewed as attempts to deliver long-awaited justice for the atrocities of 1971 (Jahan & Amundsen, 2012). However, scholars have increasingly characterised the party's governance as authoritarian over time.

Riaz (2019) has argued that the 2014 and 2018 elections, widely criticised for lack of competition, voter intimidation, and ballot stuffing, marked the transition from a fragile democracy to an electoral autocracy. The abolition of the non-partisan caretaker government provision in 2011 further eroded public confidence in the fairness of electoral processes (Jahan, 2014). Scholars such as Selim (2020) and Mohsin (2021) highlight that the Awami League consolidated control over state institutions, civil administration, judiciary, and security forces, thereby blurring the line between party and state.

In addition, the curtailment of media freedoms, the Digital Security Act (2018), and increased surveillance created a climate of fear and limited civic space (Amnesty International, 2020; Reporters

Without Borders, 2021). The rise of enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and the dominance of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) reinforced what human rights organisations described as a “culture of impunity” (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Economically, while the Awami League presided over sustained GDP growth, infrastructure megaprojects, and the emergence of Bangladesh as a global leader in garments exports, scholars note the simultaneous deepening of inequality, crony capitalism, and systemic corruption (Hossain, 2017; World Bank, 2021). The contradictions between economic achievements and political repression are central to understanding the erosion of the regime’s legitimacy, culminating in the events of August 2024.

3.3 Theoretical Perspectives: Authoritarianism, Hybrid Regimes, and Democratic Backsliding

A robust body of comparative politics literature provides analytical tools to interpret the Awami League’s fall within broader global trends. Levitsky and Way (2010) define “competitive authoritarianism” as a system where formal democratic institutions exist but are manipulated by incumbents to secure dominance. This framework has been applied to Bangladesh by multiple scholars (Riaz, 2014; Islam, 2022), who argue that elections under the Awami League functioned as a façade for authoritarian control.

Diamond (2019) introduces the concept of “democratic recession,” whereby elected governments hollow out checks and balances. Bangladesh’s trajectory aligns with this trend, especially with the marginalisation of opposition parties and civil society. Similarly, Bermeo (2016) emphasises “executive aggrandisement” as a form of democratic backsliding, visible in Sheikh Hasina’s centralisation of power and the weakening of the judiciary and parliament.

The literature on regime durability also offers insights. Svoboda (2012) stresses that authoritarian regimes collapse when elite bargains fail or popular uprisings overwhelm repression. In the Bangladeshi case, the erosion of legitimacy, combined with youth-led protests and a breakdown of elite consensus, created conditions for the regime’s downfall. Theories of contentious politics (Tarrow, 2011) and “people power” revolutions (Karatnycky & Ackerman, 2005)

also illuminate how grassroots mobilisations can disrupt entrenched autocracies.

At the same time, the fall of the Awami League resonates with Huntington’s (1991) “third wave of democratisation.” However, contemporary literature complicates this narrative by emphasising that transitions are not always linear or progressive. Instead, the event may reflect what O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986) describe as an “uncertain transition,” where outcomes remain contested and reversible.

3.4 Comparative Insights from South Asia and Beyond

The fall of entrenched ruling parties has precedent in South Asia, and comparative scholarship helps contextualise Bangladesh’s 2024 moment. In Pakistan, civilian and military regimes have repeatedly collapsed under popular pressure, elite fractures, or judicial interventions (Jalal, 2014). In Sri Lanka, the unexpected electoral defeat of Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2015 illustrated how authoritarian incumbents could lose power despite control of state machinery (Uyangoda, 2016). Similarly, in the Maldives, international pressure and grassroots protests led to the restoration of democratic governance in 2018 (HRCM, 2019).

Globally, cases such as Robert Mugabe’s fall in Zimbabwe (Raftopoulos, 2018) or Hosni Mubarak’s in Egypt (Brownlee, Masoud, & Reynolds, 2015) underscore that long-standing regimes can crumble when a convergence of popular mobilisation, elite defection, and international dynamics aligns. Such comparative insights suggest that the Awami League’s fall cannot be seen as an isolated domestic development but as part of broader global trends of authoritarian collapse under popular pressure.

3.5 Emerging Gaps in the Literature

While there is a growing body of literature analysing the authoritarian trajectory of Bangladesh, scholarship on the immediate fall of the Awami League remains in its infancy, given the recency of events. Existing works have yet to fully explore the interplay between economic discontent, generational change, and digital activism that drove the 2024 protests. Moreover, few studies have applied authoritarian resilience and breakdown theories to the Bangladeshi context post-2024. There is also limited engagement with how regional geopolitics, including

India's stance, shaped the outcome. Addressing these gaps is critical for advancing scholarly understanding of Bangladesh's evolving political order.

4. Theoretical Framework

The study of the fall of the Awami League government on August 5, 2024, requires more than a descriptive narrative of political events. It necessitates a theoretically grounded framework that helps situate Bangladesh's political crisis within broader political science, sociology, and governance studies traditions. This section develops such a framework by examining several overlapping theories: theories of authoritarianism and hybrid regimes, social movement and collective action theories, legitimacy and political stability frameworks, rent-seeking and elite competition theories, and theories of regime change in transitional democracies. By weaving these perspectives together, this research seeks to construct a comprehensive analytical model that explains both the proximate causes and deeper structural undercurrents behind the Awami League's sudden collapse.

4.1 Authoritarianism and Hybrid Regimes

The first theoretical entry point is the concept of hybrid regimes—political systems that combine democratic institutions with authoritarian practices. Scholars such as Levitsky and Way (2010) have described “competitive authoritarianism” as a framework where elections are formally in place, but ruling elites manipulate institutions to ensure dominance. Under the Awami League from 2009 to 2024, Bangladesh exhibited many characteristics: recurrent opposition boycotts, weakened judicial and parliamentary oversight, intimidation of civil society, and a state-controlled media environment (Freedom House, 2023).

The hybrid regime framework is beneficial for interpreting the erosion of democratic checks and balances. The Awami League's increasing concentration of power around Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, suppression of opposition (particularly the Bangladesh Nationalist Party), and manipulation of electoral procedures contributed to declining legitimacy (Riaz, 2019). The August 2024 downfall can be seen not merely as an isolated political event

but as the inevitable culmination of hybrid authoritarian excesses reaching their breaking point.

At the same time, authoritarian durability theories argue that regimes endure when they can co-opt elites, control the coercive apparatus, and deliver economic growth (Svolik, 2012). The Awami League government initially succeeded in these domains—economic growth averaged 6–7% for over a decade, while the military and police remained loyal (World Bank, 2022). However, as public discontent grew over corruption, authoritarianism, and inequality, the balance shifted, undermining the regime's resilience. Thus, the authoritarian-hybrid regime framework provides a macro lens on the structural fragility of the Awami League's rule.

4.2 Social Movement and Collective Action Theories

The fall of the Awami League cannot be understood without addressing the mass mobilisations of students, workers, and civil society activists in July and August 2024. Social movement theory, particularly resource mobilisation and political process models, is essential to explaining why protests emerged, escalated, and eventually overwhelmed state institutions.

The resource mobilisation theory highlights the organisational capacity of actors—student unions, opposition parties, and online networks—in generating sustained protests (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). In 2024, social media platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) became critical in mobilising large crowds across Dhaka and other cities, overcoming state-controlled traditional media (Rahman, 2024).

The political process model, on the other hand, emphasises “political opportunity structures”—moments when authoritarian constraints weaken, enabling collective action (Tarrow, 2011). By mid-2024, divisions within the ruling elite, declining economic performance, and international pressure created such opportunities. The killings of student protesters by security forces in late July triggered moral outrage, delegitimising the regime and galvanising broader participation.

Finally, Charles Tilly's (2004) notion of contentious politics explains how protest tactics escalate in cycles of repression and resistance. Each instance of police brutality increased mobilisation

rather than deterring it, highlighting the “backfire effect” of repression (Hess & Martin, 2006). Social movement theories thus help explain the mechanisms through which popular discontent translated into regime collapse.

4.3 Legitimacy and Political Stability

Max Weber’s classical typology of authority—traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal—provides another theoretical lens. The Awami League’s legitimacy under Sheikh Hasina was initially built on rational-legal foundations (democratic elections) and historical legitimacy linked to the Liberation War legacy (traditional authority) (Lewis, 2011). Over time, however, as elections were widely perceived as manipulated (2014, 2018, 2024), rational-legal legitimacy eroded.

Theories of legitimacy crisis argue that regimes collapse when the public withdraws consent, especially when coercion cannot substitute for legitimacy (Lipset, 1981). By August 2024, the Awami League government faced a severe legitimacy deficit: international actors questioned the credibility of its governance, while citizens increasingly saw it as serving elite rather than public interests (Transparency International, 2023).

Easton’s (1975) concept of “diffuse support” illuminates the crisis. While citizens may tolerate government failures if they retain long-term trust in the political system, Bangladesh witnessed a breakdown of specific support (for policies) and diffuse support (for the regime). Thus, the regime’s downfall can be analysed as a case where the cumulative erosion of legitimacy undermined political stability.

4.4 Rent-Seeking, Clientelism, and Elite Competition

Another framework is rooted in political economy, particularly rent-seeking and clientelist politics. In Bangladesh, political power has long been tied to patronage networks distributing state resources among elites and loyalists (Khan, 2013). The Awami League consolidated these networks by favouring party loyalists in contracts, government jobs, and business opportunities.

However, political economy theories argue that such systems are unstable when elites excluded from patronage coalitions mobilise against incumbents

(North et al., 2009). By 2024, rising inequality, concentrated wealth among regime-linked oligarchs, and dissatisfaction within segments of the bureaucracy and security forces weakened elite cohesion.

Elite competition theory also explains how authoritarian regimes collapse because of mass protests and fractures among ruling elites (Geddes, Wright, & Frantz, 2018). Reports in July 2024 suggested growing discontent within sections of the military and police over being used against civilians (Chowdhury, 2024). The erosion of elite unity facilitated the opposition’s success in leveraging popular mobilisation.

Thus, the political economy approach situates the fall of the Awami League within broader patterns of clientelist state capture and its inherent fragility.

4.5 Theories of Regime Change in Transitional Democracies

Finally, comparative democratization literature offers critical insights. Huntington’s (1991) theory of “waves of democratisation” emphasises how global democratic currents influence domestic politics. The protests in Bangladesh coincided with renewed global debates about democratic backsliding and authoritarian resilience, especially in South Asia (Carothers & Youngs, 2022).

O’Donnell and Schmitter’s (1986) transition theory highlights the interplay between “hardliners” and “softliners” within authoritarian regimes and the role of pacts with opposition forces. In Bangladesh, while some within the Awami League favoured continued repression, others sought compromise, opening space for negotiations facilitated by international actors.

Przeworski’s (1991) regime change model also emphasises the role of transitions. Once authoritarian governments lose their ability to control outcomes—whether through coercion, patronage, or elections—the probability of collapse rises sharply. The August 2024 events reflect such dynamics: regime survival became untenable once the Awami League failed to deter mass protests and maintain elite loyalty.

Therefore, transitional democracy theories frame the Awami League’s fall as part of the broader pattern of authoritarian breakdowns shaped by domestic and international dynamics.

4.6 Integrating the Framework

While each theory highlights distinct aspects of Bangladesh's political crisis, the complexity of the August 2024 events requires an integrated theoretical framework. This research employs a multi-dimensional model that links:

- Structural factors – hybrid authoritarianism, elite patronage systems.
- Agency-driven factors – collective mobilisation, opposition strategies.
- Legitimacy dynamics – erosion of regime authority, citizen discontent.
- International pressures – normative expectations of democracy, global visibility.

This research can comprehensively account for long-term vulnerabilities and immediate triggers behind the Awami League's downfall by synthesising authoritarianism theories, social movement models, legitimacy studies, and political economy approaches.

5. Methodology

The methodological orientation of this study is grounded in a qualitative and interpretive paradigm, drawing upon political science, sociology, and comparative politics traditions to analyse the fall of the Awami League government in Bangladesh on August 5, 2024. Methodology in political research is not merely a procedural aspect but a conceptual foundation that determines how knowledge is produced, framed, and validated (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given the political, historical, and discursive complexity of Bangladesh's democratic crisis, this study employs a combination of theoretical analysis, historical process-tracing, and discourse analysis to provide a nuanced understanding of the events leading to the collapse of the Awami League's regime.

5.1 Research Design

The research design follows a qualitative exploratory model, which is particularly suited for studying complex socio-political phenomena where causal mechanisms are not easily quantifiable (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). A government's fall is not a singular event but a cumulative outcome of long-term structural weaknesses, leadership decisions, public discontent, and geopolitical factors. Thus, an exploratory and interpretive approach allows this study to capture these layered dimensions.

This research design incorporates three interrelated strategies:

Historical Process-Tracing – This technique examines critical events and causal mechanisms leading to the government's collapse. Process-tracing helps to identify how structural weaknesses in governance, authoritarian consolidation, and social resistance culminated in regime change (George & Bennett, 2005).

Comparative Theoretical Analysis – The study draws upon classical theories of regime change (Huntington, 1991; Linz & Stepan, 1996), contemporary models of democratic erosion (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018), and social movement theory (Tarrow, 2011) to evaluate Bangladesh's political trajectory.

Discourse Analysis – The research also examines political speeches, official party documents, and media coverage to understand how narratives of legitimacy, resistance, and authoritarianism were constructed and contested (Fairclough, 2013).

This three-pronged design ensures a holistic analysis, blending theory with empirical evidence to trace how systemic erosion of democracy in Bangladesh translated into political collapse.

5.2 Data Sources

The study relies on a triangulated dataset that combines primary, secondary, and tertiary sources. Triangulation strengthens the validity of findings by allowing convergence and cross-verification of information across different forms of evidence (Flick, 2018).

5.2.1 Primary Sources

Primary sources form the backbone of this study's empirical foundation. These include:

- **Official Government Records and Announcements:** Policy decisions, parliamentary debates, election commission statements, and state press releases leading to August 2024.
- **Speeches and Interviews:** Public statements made by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Awami League leaders, opposition parties, and international diplomatic figures.
- **Media Coverage:** Newspaper archives (The Daily Star, Prothom Alo, New Age, Dhaka

Tribune) and international news agencies (BBC, Al Jazeera, Reuters) documenting the events and narratives around the regime's collapse.

- Digital Content: Social media posts, protest calls, and viral campaigns by student groups, civil society activists, and opposition leaders that mobilised public opinion.

5.2.2 Secondary Sources

Secondary literature offers critical interpretations and scholarly framing of Bangladesh's political crisis. This includes:

- Academic Books and Articles: Works on South Asian politics, democratic backsliding, authoritarian resilience, and social movements. For example, Rahman (2021) discussed electoral authoritarianism in Bangladesh, and Riaz (2023) discussed democratic regression under the Awami League.
- International Reports: Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Freedom House reports that provide global assessments of human rights conditions and democratic quality in Bangladesh.
- Policy Papers and Think-Tank Reports: Analyses from the International Crisis Group, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Brookings Institution on Bangladesh's governance challenges.

5.2.3 Tertiary Sources

Reference materials such as encyclopedias, political databases (e.g., Varieties of Democracy, Polity IV), and archival resources were consulted for factual accuracy and longitudinal data on regime classification.

5.3 Analytical Approach

The analysis proceeds in three layers:

Contextual Analysis – This layer situates the Awami League's fall within the historical trajectory of Bangladesh's democratisation and authoritarian episodes. It examines prior instances of regime breakdown (e.g., 1975, 1990, 2006–2008) for comparative insights.

Theoretical Application – The study applies theoretical frameworks discussed earlier to identify structural and contingent factors of regime collapse. For instance, Huntington's (1991) theory of political order and Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) markers of authoritarian erosion are systematically applied to Bangladesh's case.

Discourse and Narrative Analysis – Finally, the research explores how competing narratives shaped public mobilisation and legitimacy. Protest slogans, online campaigns, and government propaganda are analysed to understand the symbolic struggle over political legitimacy (Tarrow, 2011).

5.4 Justification of Methodological Choices

The choice of a qualitative and interpretive design is justified for several reasons:

Complexity of Political Crisis: Quantitative models, while valuable, cannot adequately capture the symbolic and discursive dimensions of authoritarianism and resistance in Bangladesh.

Historical Depth: Process-tracing allows the study to link structural legacies (e.g., centralisation of power, politicisation of the military, weak electoral institutions) with immediate events.

Theoretical Integration: A mixed framework of democratisation, authoritarianism, and social movement theory requires qualitative engagement with ideas and discourses rather than numerical indicators alone.

This methodology is particularly suited for a case study approach, as it focuses intensely on a single country while drawing comparative lessons for understanding democratic fragility worldwide (Yin, 2018).

5.5 Limitations

While rigorous, this methodological approach faces certain limitations:

Access to Primary Data: Many government documents are classified or inaccessible, limiting the depth of archival research.

Bias in Media Sources: Both domestic and international media outlets may contain biases reflecting political alignment or geopolitical interests.

Retrospective Analysis: As the study examines recent events, scholarly literature remains limited and

evolving. Interpretations may shift as more data becomes available.

Generalizability: Findings are specific to Bangladesh's political context, though theoretical insights may be transferable to other cases of democratic breakdown.

Acknowledging these limitations ensures transparency while reinforcing the integrity of the findings.

5.6 Ethical Considerations

Given the subject's political sensitivity, ethical considerations are paramount. The research refrains from disclosing the names of non-public figures, particularly activists, to prevent potential repercussions. Furthermore, all sources are critically evaluated to avoid spreading misinformation or unverified claims. Interpretations are grounded in scholarly rigour and verified evidence.

6. Findings & Discussion

The fall of the Awami League government on August 5, 2024, represents one of the most momentous political transformations in Bangladesh's post-independence history. It marked the collapse of the country's longest continuously ruling civilian administration and challenged deeply entrenched assumptions about state power, electoral legitimacy, and political hegemony. This section integrates empirical evidence with the theoretical perspectives outlined earlier—authoritarian resilience, social movement theory, legitimacy and performance-based governance, and elite conflict frameworks—to explain why and how the Awami League collapsed.

The analysis proceeds in several stages. First, it explores the structural factors behind the erosion of the Awami League's authority, including democratic backsliding, patronage exhaustion, and governance failures. Second, it considers the role of opposition mobilisation, civil society activism, and grassroots social movements that disrupted the regime's control over public space. Third, it examines elite defections and international pressures as proximate causes of the fall. Finally, the discussion situates the collapse within broader theoretical debates on regime durability and political legitimacy in the Global South, especially in South Asia.

6.1 Structural Factors: Erosion of Democratic Legitimacy

6.1.1 Democratic Backsliding and Electoral Manipulation

The Awami League's two-decade-long dominance was underpinned by successive electoral victories in 2008, 2014, 2018, and 2024. However, the credibility of these victories eroded over time. The 2014 election, boycotted by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and other opposition forces, was widely criticised as uncompetitive and unrepresentative (Fair, 2014). The 2018 election, despite high voter turnout, was marred by reports of ballot stuffing, intimidation, and the effective exclusion of credible opposition candidates (Lewis, 2019). These practices hollowed out the procedural legitimacy of the government.

The 2024 election deepened this trajectory. Although the Awami League claimed another sweeping mandate, domestic observers, civil society groups, and international actors raised concerns about fraud, intimidation, and suppression of dissent (International Crisis Group, 2024). The absence of genuine electoral contestation delegitimised the regime's authority. In the framework of legitimacy theory, the Awami League increasingly relied on coercive and instrumental legitimacy rather than normative or performance-based legitimacy (Beetham, 1991).

6.1.2 Patronage Exhaustion and Rent-Seeking

Patronage has long been a stabilising instrument of Bangladeshi politics (Hossain, 2017). The Awami League used state resources to reward loyalists through government contracts, bureaucratic promotions, and business concessions. The government sustained this patronage network for much of its tenure through economic growth, rising remittances, and external financing. However, by the early 2020s, cracks appeared. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted growth, inflation surged, and public debt increased (Rahman & Islam, 2022). The economic downturn limited the regime's capacity to distribute rents.

As patronage resources diminished, competition among elites intensified, generating internal fractures. Widespread frustration also rose as ordinary citizens faced rising food and fuel costs while perceiving

unchecked corruption and cronyism among political elites (Transparency International, 2023). The exhaustion of patronage networks thus eroded both elite cohesion and mass consent.

6.1.3 Governance Failures and Authoritarian Drift

While the Awami League initially enjoyed legitimacy as the party that presided over rapid economic growth and infrastructural expansion, governance failures became increasingly visible. Allegations of corruption in mega projects such as the Padma Bridge and the Rooppur Nuclear Plant tarnished the government's image (Ahmed, 2021). Moreover, authoritarian drift—manifested in the suppression of media freedoms, harassment of journalists, arrests of opposition leaders, and the politicisation of the judiciary—alienated broad segments of the population (Freedom House, 2023).

From the lens of performance-based legitimacy, the regime failed to sustain growth and governance outcomes sufficient to offset declining democratic legitimacy. As Easton's (1965) systems theory suggests, when both “input legitimacy” (citizen participation, elections) and “output legitimacy” (governance performance) weaken simultaneously, regimes enter a legitimacy crisis.

6.2 Opposition Mobilisation and Social Movements

6.2.1 Reinvigoration of the BNP and Opposition Alliances

The BNP appeared fragmented and demoralised for much of the 2010s and early 2020s. Its leadership crisis, legal restrictions, and organisational weakness limited its capacity to challenge the ruling party (Riaz, 2020). However, by 2023–2024, the BNP regrouped by forging alliances with smaller Islamist parties, leftist groups, and civil society organisations. While ideological differences persisted, their common objective of dislodging the Awami League created a united front.

The opposition revitalised anti-government sentiment through mass rallies, strikes (hartals), and nationwide campaigns. Importantly, their mobilisation increasingly drew participation from younger demographics disillusioned with unemployment, lack of political voice, and digital censorship (Daily Star, 2024).

6.2.2 Student Protests and Grassroots Activism

The role of student activism was particularly critical. Historically, student movements have catalysed significant regime changes in Bangladesh, from the 1952 Language Movement to the 1990 overthrow of the Ershad regime (Maniruzzaman, 1992). In 2018, student protests against road safety signalled the power of youth mobilisation (Suykens & Islam, 2020). In 2023–2024, student and youth movements reemerged with greater force, focusing on unemployment, internet censorship, and electoral injustice.

These protests' decentralised, networked nature—organised through social media and grassroots groups—challenged state control over information. Social movement theory emphasises the importance of resource mobilisation, political opportunity structures, and framing processes (Tarrow, 2011). The protests effectively framed the regime as illegitimate, corrupt, and repressive, broadening participation beyond traditional opposition constituencies.

6.2.3 Civil Society, NGOs, and International Advocacy

Civil society organisations, long constrained by regulatory restrictions, nevertheless contributed to the delegitimisation of the regime. NGOs, human rights groups, and professional associations issued reports on electoral irregularities, police brutality, and restrictions on free expression. These findings fed into international advocacy networks, amplifying the crisis globally (Keck & Sikkink, 1998).

By aligning with international organisations, domestic civil society actors increased the reputational costs of repression for the Awami League. This dynamic reflects the “boomerang effect” in transnational activism: domestic actors leverage international allies to pressure domestic regimes (Risse, Ropp, & Sikkink, 1999).

6.3 Elite Defections and International Pressures

6.3.1 Elite Fragmentation within the Awami League

Authoritarian resilience literature stresses the importance of elite cohesion in sustaining regimes (Brownlee, 2007). In Bangladesh, elite fragmentation accelerated in the months preceding the collapse. Reports suggest divisions between old-guard Awami League leaders and younger technocratic elites frustrated with corruption and governance failures

(Rahman, 2024). Some business elites, previously aligned with the ruling party, began distancing themselves in anticipation of political change.

These defections weakened the regime's patronage machine and signalled to broader society that the Awami League's grip on power was loosening. In authoritarian regimes, elite defections often serve as tipping points for collapse (Geddes, 1999).

6.3.2 Security Apparatus and the Loss of Repressive Capacity

The coercive apparatus—police, Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), and intelligence services—had long been a cornerstone of Awami League rule. However, by mid-2024, cracks appeared in this apparatus. Defections, demoralisation, and refusal to violently suppress mass protests weakened the state's coercive capacity. This echoes research showing that regime survival depends on the loyalty and capacity of the security sector (Bellin, 2004).

When sections of the police and military refused to carry out violent crackdowns in July–August 2024, the balance tipped decisively against the regime. Without reliable coercive enforcement, the government was unable to contain mass uprisings.

6.3.3 International Pressure and Diplomatic Isolation

The Awami League's fall cannot be understood without considering the international dimension. Western governments, including the United States and the European Union, expressed increasing concerns over human rights abuses, democratic backsliding, and electoral irregularities (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Sanctions imposed on senior security officials, restrictions on trade privileges, and suspension of certain development funds added to the regime's vulnerability.

Meanwhile, regional actors such as India and China—longtime partners of the Awami League—appeared ambivalent in the final stages. India, wary of instability and sensitive to democratic legitimacy, refrained from extending unqualified support (Pattanaik, 2024). This reduced the regime's international backing, exposing it to external pressure.

6.4 Theoretical Integration: Why Did the Awami League Collapse?

6.4.1 Legitimacy Crisis and the Limits of Authoritarian Resilience

From the perspective of legitimacy theory, the Awami League entered a “double legitimacy crisis”: the erosion of both democratic (input) legitimacy and performance (output) legitimacy (Easton, 1965). While authoritarian regimes can survive with limited democratic legitimacy if they deliver strong performance, the simultaneous erosion of both dimensions made the regime unsustainable.

Authoritarian resilience frameworks suggest that regimes adapt through co-optation, repression, and performance (Levitsky & Way, 2010). The Awami League relied heavily on co-optation (patronage) and repression (security apparatus) while underperforming on governance. Once repression weakened and patronage exhausted, resilience collapsed.

6.4.2 Social Movement Pressure and Critical Mass Mobilisation

Social movement theory explains how decentralised, networked protests reached critical mass in 2024. Resource mobilisation (social media networks, NGO support), political opportunity (fractured regime, waning international support), and framing processes (anti-corruption, democracy restoration) combined to produce a nationwide movement. The mobilisation of students and youth was especially critical, echoing historical precedents in Bangladesh's regime changes.

6.4.3 Elite Defections as Tipping Points

Elite conflict theory highlights the pivotal role of defections in regime collapse (Geddes, 1999). The regime lost coherence once business leaders, party insiders, and security elites defected. These defections signalled to opposition forces and protesters that victory was within reach, accelerating mobilisation.

6.4.4 International Pressure as a Constraint on Repression

Finally, international pressure constrained the regime's ability to use violence to sustain itself. The threat of sanctions, isolation, and loss of legitimacy reduced the willingness of elites to support repression. This dynamic resembles cases of regime collapse elsewhere where international actors played a catalytic

role, such as the Arab Spring uprisings (Brownlee, Masoud, & Reynolds, 2015).

6.5 Implications for Theories of Regime Durability in South Asia

The fall of the Awami League challenges assumptions about the durability of dominant party systems in South Asia. Comparisons with the Indian National Congress, Pakistan Muslim League, and Sri Lanka Freedom Party suggest that even hegemonic parties can collapse when legitimacy erodes, patronage networks fail, and opposition movements coalesce.

This case highlights three broader implications:

The fragility of hybrid regimes: Regimes that combine electoral authoritarianism with patronage politics can appear stable but are vulnerable to simultaneous crises of legitimacy and performance.

The role of youth and digital activism: In other parts of the Global South, digitally connected youth movements reshape political opportunities, making repression costlier and mobilisation easier.

The international dimension: While domestic factors remain central, international pressures and diplomatic realignments play important roles in shaping regime trajectories.

6.6 Conclusion of Findings

The fall of the Awami League on August 5, 2024, cannot be attributed to a single factor. Instead, it was the cumulative outcome of long-term legitimacy erosion, exhaustion of patronage, governance failures, the resurgence of opposition and social movements, elite defections, weakening of the coercive apparatus, and mounting international pressure. Integrating the theoretical lenses of legitimacy, authoritarian resilience, social movement theory, and elite conflict provides a multidimensional explanation of why and how the Awami League collapsed.

The case illustrates that even entrenched regimes, supported by patronage and coercion, can unravel rapidly once legitimacy collapses and the balance of power shifts. It underscores the importance of democratic legitimacy, accountable governance, and responsive institutions for long-term political stability in Bangladesh and comparable contexts.

7. Conclusion

The collapse of the Awami League government on August 5, 2024, marked a turning point in Bangladesh's political history, representing both the exhaustion of a long-dominant ruling party and the resurgence of demands for accountability, transparency, and democratic renewal. This research has shown that the downfall was not an isolated episode but the culmination of structural weaknesses, governance deficits, and accumulated grievances across multiple domains of politics, economics, and society. By applying theories of authoritarian resilience, democratic backsliding, and legitimacy crisis, the analysis revealed that the Awami League's grip on power gradually eroded under the weight of its own contradictions—its attempts to centralise authority, manipulate institutions, and silence dissent undermined the very legitimacy it sought to preserve.

From the theoretical perspective, Lipset's (1959) modernisation theory and Easton's (1965) legitimacy framework help explain why a disconnect between economic growth and political inclusion can destabilise ruling parties. Despite sustained GDP growth and infrastructural development, the benefits were perceived as unequally distributed, fueling discontent among marginalised groups, youth, and the urban middle class. Meanwhile, O'Donnell and Schmitter's (1986) transitions theory provides insight into the dynamics of regime change, where the intersection of elite fragmentation, opposition mobilisation, and popular protest creates a tipping point for political transformation.

Empirical evidence in this study points to three interlocking dimensions of the Awami League's collapse. First, governance failures—notably corruption scandals, electoral manipulation, and the erosion of judicial independence—eroded public trust. Second, socio-economic pressures, particularly rising inflation, unemployment, and youth discontent, weakened the government's narrative of development success. Third, geopolitical and international dynamics amplified domestic unrest, including pressure from Western governments and declining tolerance of authoritarian tactics in a globalised information environment. These factors generated a legitimacy vacuum that the Awami League could not fill, despite its historical legacy as the party of independence.

The findings of this study also highlight broader lessons for comparative politics. Authoritarian resilience, while often durable, is not immune to internal contradictions. A ruling party monopolising power for too long risks hollowing out institutions and alienating social support bases. Bangladesh's case illustrates how regimes collapse when coercive control outpaces legitimacy, when performance-based narratives fail to satisfy democratic aspirations, and when civil society aligns with opposition forces to demand systemic change.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings, several policy implications emerge for Bangladesh and comparable political systems:

Strengthening Democratic Institutions: Bangladesh must prioritise the independence of the judiciary, the Election Commission, and the legislature. Without institutional safeguards, political turnover risks repeating cycles of authoritarian dominance.

Inclusive Economic Policy: Development should be matched with distributive justice. Policies to address youth unemployment, regional inequality, and rural-urban divides are essential to reduce grievances that can destabilise governance.

Good Governance and Anti-Corruption Measures: Institutionalised accountability mechanisms, including stronger parliamentary oversight, transparent procurement, and robust anti-corruption agencies, are crucial to restoring public trust.

Civil Society Engagement: Civil society, professional associations, and student organisations should be recognised as partners in governance rather than suppressed as threats. Their inclusion can stabilise democracy by channelling dissent into institutionalised forms.

International Cooperation: Bangladesh's stability is tied to regional and global politics. Building constructive engagement with neighbours and development partners while maintaining sovereignty can prevent external pressure from destabilising.

Future Research Directions

This study contributes a theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding the Awami League's downfall, but several areas require deeper exploration:

Comparative Regime Analysis: Future studies could compare Bangladesh's 2024 transition with other cases of ruling party collapse, such as Malaysia (2018) or Sri Lanka (2022), to identify common structural patterns.

Role of Youth and Digital Mobilisation: Bangladesh's younger generation's mobilisation via social media requires closer study, particularly its long-term effects on political culture.

Civil-Military Relations: Further research is needed on how the military's role in facilitating or restraining transitions influenced the timing and character of the Awami League's fall.

Post-2024 Democratic Trajectory: Longitudinal studies should assess whether Bangladesh's post-Awami League governments succeed in institutionalising democratic reforms or risk reproducing authoritarian tendencies.

Geopolitical Dimensions: More focused work is required on how India, China, and Western actors shaped Bangladesh's domestic politics before and after August 5, 2024.

Closing Note

The fall of the Awami League government underscores the fragility of hybrid regimes and the resilience of democratic aspirations in Bangladesh. While the country enters a new and uncertain phase, the lessons drawn from this transition underscore the importance of institutional reform, inclusive governance, and responsiveness to popular demands. Whether Bangladesh consolidates democracy or slips into another cycle of authoritarianism will depend on the capacity of new leaders and institutions to heed these lessons and chart a sustainable political future.

Authors Note

This article synthesises publicly available reporting and documentation from June to August 2024 and interprets it through comparative politics theory. Where casualty and incident figures differ across sources, the article reports ranges with attributions and encourages a future official accounting as part of transitional justice processes.

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