

Global Issues

Bangladesh After the July 2024 Uprising: The State of the Labour Movement and Worker Repression

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Preamble

Recently, Bangladesh drew global attention following an unprecedented student-led uprising during July–August 2024, which culminated in the collapse of the long-standing government led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) in August 2024 (The Daily Star, 2024). The Anti-Discrimination Movement initially emerged in 2018, when university students mobilized to abolish the “job quota” system in government employment. Since 1972, 30% of job quotas have been reserved for the “freedom fighters”¹. In 1997, benefits were expanded to the children of “freedom fighters”, and in 2011, their grandchildren were added (Zahid, 2024). The students' movement called for the abolition of the quota system, as they found it ineffective and discriminatory. In 2024, the movement was reactivated in response to the reinstatement of quotas. Subsequently, students were joined by broader segments of the population, including workers, as protests escalated in response to indiscriminate killings carried out by the then government, transforming the movement into a mass uprising. Despite controversy about the actual death toll and the political affiliations involved, it is estimated that nearly 1400 people lost their lives from 1 July to 5 August 2024, while 52 members of the police force and 144 supporters and members of the AL were killed between 1 July and 15 August 2024 (OHCHR, 2025).

Following the collapse of the government, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus assumed power as the Chief Adviser of the state on 8 August 2024 (Jakir, 2025). A year and a half later, the situation in Bangladesh remains uncertain for the general population, particularly in relation to labour resistance and collective action. This paper argues that despite the change in regime, the conditions faced by workers and the dynamics of their mobilization have largely remained unchanged, as has the state's response to suppress workers' demonstrations. Focusing on workers in the ready-made garments industry, this paper examines the contemporary political and labour landscape in Bangladesh.

According to international analysts, over the decades, Bangladesh, with a population of 180 million, has achieved remarkable economic growth, improvements in human development, poverty reduction, and advancements in education (BBS, 2024; Lewis, 2011). After gaining independence

¹ Freedom fighters are defined as the warriors who fought against the Pakistani military to win independence for Bangladesh in 1971 (details available on <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/govt-revises-definition-freedom-fighter-3910936#:~:text=%22Bir%20Muktijoddha%20is%20someone%20who,associate%20of%20the%20Liberation%20War>).

in 1971, Bangladesh was internationally labelled as a “basket case” by Henry Kissinger, the then U.S. foreign secretary (Rahman & Masud, 2024), as it faced challenges such as food insecurity, frequent flooding, low per capita income, and high population growth with no industrial base. Since that time, the country’s income increased from US\$200 in the 1970s to US\$2,593 in 2024 (World Bank, 2025). According to Western international organisations, Bangladesh recently passed from being perceived as a “least developed” country to a “lower-middle-income” country and is expected to be labelled as a “developing country” by 2026 (Rahman & Masud, 2024). Despite these changes, the poverty rate has risen from 18.7% in 2022 to 27.93% in 2025, and the percentage of people living in extreme poverty increased from 5.6% in 2022 to 9.35% in 2025 (World Bank, 2025). Additionally, since 2017 more than one million Rohingya refugees from Myanmar have moved to the country, placing an additional strain on its resources (Alam et al., 2020). Moreover, 36.6% of total promised funds have been reduced by the international donors for the Rohingya refugees; this has further exacerbated the burden of accommodating them (Reliefweb, 2025). Consequently, the country continues to face significant challenges, including climate change, corruption, poverty, and youth unemployment, which have led to increased dependency on foreign currency for international trade.

The Ready-Made Garments Sector and Workers’ Movements

Bangladesh is highly reliant on the ready-made garments (RMG) sector for its foreign trade, which accounts for approximately 81.49% of total exports (BGMEA, 2025). In particular, the RMG sector, with \$40 billion in exports, has generated four million jobs, 80% of which are held by women (Rahman & Masud, 2024). Most of these women come from rural areas and lack formal education (Chowdhury & Ullah, 2010; Ferdous, 2015). However, labour laws are frequently violated, and workers have endured hazardous and unlawful working conditions, low wages, and long workdays (Rahman, 2014; Frenkel et al., 2022). Additionally, workers’ voices remain highly suppressed under a despotic labour control regime, driven by unfavourable labour market conditions that discipline labour (Anner, 2015).

Nevertheless, after the uprising in 2024, the workers saw a chance to address the long-standing exploitation they had experienced. Consequently, the nation has experienced widespread workers’ mobilizations, including blocking highways and demonstrating against inadequate wages, wage arrears, excessive workloads, and the lack of involvement in industrial relations and trade union rights (Ullah, 2024a). In 2013, the Rana Plaza accident killed 1100 workers. This incident triggered a pivotal labour mobilization demanding improved state protections for their safety (Anner, 2015). Subsequently, the international labour movement and labour NGOs pressured the leading firms to take higher responsibilities for the working conditions in their supply chains. Following the tragedy, European companies rapidly responded to both labour demands and public anger by signing the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, toward enhancing factory safety standards in the garment industry (Frenkel et al., 2022).

Since the liberation war, workers’ unions have been striving to secure liveable wages, benefits, and improved working conditions, as well as to address the challenges faced by workers in a rapidly changing economic landscape (Khan et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the Bangladesh Labour Force Survey (2022) reveals that approximately 60 million individuals, constituting 84.9% of the total employed population in Bangladesh, are engaged in informal employment. Consequently, most of these workers have no affiliation with trade unions (Bidisha, 2023).

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) has reported that Bangladesh is one of the ten most hostile countries globally for workers due to repressive laws, barriers to union

formation, and the violent suppression of strikes (ITUC, 2022). Moreover, the law has limited freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining within Export Processing Zones (EPZs). As a result, Bangladesh is marked by notably low levels of union representation and collective bargaining activity (Luisa et al., 2025). In practice, the trade union federations maintain direct affiliations with prominent political parties to secure advantages from the government. At the same time, most of the political parties² have their labour wings, and collectively these groups constitute approximately 65% of the unionized workforce in Bangladesh (Rahman, 2014). Consequently, many unions function as ineffective or co-opted entities rather than genuine representatives. Therefore, the local industrial relations systems are constrained to support improvements in labour conditions.

Following the 2024 uprising, recent workers' protests have been brutally repressed by the interim government in order to dismiss legitimate demands. To avoid negotiations, the interim government accuses workers' demands for bonuses, night shift allowances, or lunch stipends, of being part of an "Awami League conspiracy", in reference to the former prime minister's party (Hossain, 2025). As a result, it is easy to dismiss workers' movements by blaming them and suppressing the movement by force as every government has historically relied on the police to quell workers' legitimate demands (Yesmin, 2025). Since September 2024, three workers³ have been killed, highlighting the high human cost of the ongoing conflict (Corraya, 2024). Some argue that the current regime is also anti-worker, as, on the one hand, shutdown of factories leaves many workers unemployed, and, on the other hand, those with jobs are denied fair wages (Hossain, 2025). Over the last year, 183 garment industries have been shut down, which put nearly 1.5 million workers out of work (Corraya, 2024). As some owners who were close to the AL government are currently either in prison or have left the country, some export orders have been cancelled due to the unrest (Ullah, 2024b). Taken together, these factors have contributed to a decline in employment in the RMG sector, and labour protests persist, which will contribute to demonstrations by workers and the few unions that are driven by unresolved demands.

In October 2025, Bangladesh's labour law was revised to reduce the minimum employees needed to form a union from 20% of the workforce to a flat threshold of 20 workers (The Business Standard, 2025). These provisions will facilitate union formation from a workers' perspective. Although recent amendments to labour legislation aim to enhance working conditions, workers continue to face significant obstacles in the effective exercise of their rights. Their working conditions largely depend not only on factors within the state but also on international buyers.

Looking forward to an elected government

Bangladesh is awaiting a national general election in February 2026. In the meantime, the interim government has banned the political activities of the AL and its former leader, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who has been condemned to the death penalty for the killing of students during the July–August 2024 uprising (BBC, 2025). The credibility of the upcoming election has become questionable, as the mass supporters of the AL and some of its allied parties will not participate, which is likely to exacerbate the political crisis (The Daily Star, 2025). This concern is particularly significant given that the AL and its allies claimed nearly 56.45% of the total votes in the 2008

² Including the Bangladesh Awami League, Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Jatyia Party, Jatyia Samajtantrik Party, Workers Party of Bangladesh, Communist Party of Bangladesh, and Jamat-e-Islam

³ Two workers were killed by police, while the status of the other remains unknown.

general election⁴. Therefore, the new government risks lacking legitimacy without ensuring an equal chance for all political parties, and the election risks being neither inclusive nor representative.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the collapse of the previous administration has not resolved the underlying social crisis in Bangladesh. The current regime, which assumed power through a popular movement, has so far failed to fulfil these societal aspirations, including workers' demands (Jakir, 2025). In addition, killings, abductions, rapes, illegal arrests, violence against women, and attacks on religious and ethnic minorities are frequent (Das, 2025; GCDG, 2025). The escalation of mob violence is increasingly undermining the law and order (Bhuiyan, 2025; OHCHR, 2025).

The current state of workers in Bangladesh is closely linked to the functioning of local institutions, workers' financial struggles, and the dynamics of the global garment sector, where international buyers continuously compare costs across potential supply sources (Anner, 2015). Accordingly, despite changes in government, working conditions and workers' capacity to organize have remained largely unchanged, while governmental persecution of labourers persists. As long as capital controls the state, it ensures accumulation through coercive means, regardless of the party in power.

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⁴ The election of 2008 has been the most credible election under non-political interim government in Bangladesh (see <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a79d71040f0b670a8025cf0/elections-bd-2008.pdf> for details)

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AI USE DISCLAIMER

I used ChatGPT 4.0 during the preparation of this work to correct grammatical errors, coherence issues, flow problems, and readability concerns. I reviewed and edited the sentences as needed.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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