

WAVE OF CONTENTION IN SHAHBAG MOVEMENT: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This paper is originated with a basic argument that movements are connected through time and space; and no movement can be analyzed in independent or isolated way. For this, it tries to explore the wave of contention in Shahbag Movement that took place in Bangladesh in 2013.

The paper begins with conceptualizing Shahbag Movement as social movement and attempts to clarify Pre-Shahbag contentious politics. It shows that soon after the independence of Bangladesh, there emerged a contentious politics over the issue of 'trial of war criminals' and with the passage of time, this contentious politics turned to be a significant social movement in the 5th February of 2013. Hence the paper comes up with a significant finding that different kinds of lasting issues and interactions among various parties are interconnected with each other and take, with the passage of time, a form of social movement which is staged mainly by three phases—expansion, transformation and contraction. In doing so, the paper mainly follows the notion of 'Wave of Contention' introduced by Ruud Koopmans in 2003 and concludes with a particular focus on analyzing who are privileged in new equilibrium entailed by the social movement of Shahbag, Bangladesh.

CONCEPTUALIZING SHAHBAG MOVEMENT AS SOCIAL MOVEMENT

David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule and Hanspeter Kriesi conceptualize social movements "as collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organization, society, culture, or world order of which they are a part." This definition indicates several specific characteristics which are undoubtedly present in Shahbag Movement as argued below.

Exploring various aspects of Shahbag Movement leads to assert that although, the initial movement was not well organized, there were networks of interaction in which protesters were expressing their collective actions through a continuous process. The movement was initiated outside of institutional channels and had a specific goal of challenging the existing order and authority in terms of "Trial of War Criminals". With this argument, it can be concluded that Shahbag Movement is a social movement.

PRE-SHAHBAG CONTENTIOUS POLITICS

Soon after the independence of Bangladesh, there emerged a contentious politics in the issue of "trial of war criminals" which sustained in whole of the period. For example, in 1992, Jahanara Imam organized the "Ghatak-Dalal Nirmul Committee" to call for the trial of war criminals. The Committee set up mock trials in Dhaka in March 1992 known as Gonoadalot (Court of the people) and 'sentenced' the persons they accused of being war criminals. But these activities including many others were deemed unlawful by the Government of Bangladesh. In that contentious politics, governments of every period politicized the issue. For example, some governments were, in reality, unwilling to try the war criminals whereas the others tried to politicize the issue in favor of their voting politics.

In this period of normal politics, the trial seeking people expressed their demands in some familiar ways having no elite support and the governments could simply cope with the situations as they knew better how to tackle. As a result, contentious politics in Pre Shahbag period could not turn into mass uprising, although it is clearly connected to the emergence of Shahbag Movement.

WAVE OF CONTENTION IN SHAHBAG MOVEMENT

The notion “wave of contention” refers to the strong increase and subsequent decrease in the level of contention. It works through three phases that include expansion, transformation and the contraction of contention. These phases do not necessarily function in a linear process and each of them can prevail in whole of the wave. However, these fundamental features of wave of contention are explained here in relation to Shahbag Movement.

Expansion of Shahbag Movement

In times of pre-Shahbag contentious politics, the absence of elite support and sufficient political opportunities and the continuous failure of arranging an effective social movement made the trial seeking people accept the existing institutional arrangement as unalterable and even natural. Protest wave in Shahbag occurred when people could gain elite support and exceeded the threshold of such boundaries leading to radical destabilization of social relations within the polity. The expansion of Shahbag Movement can, therefore, be explained based on three specific tools that include expanding political opportunities, contentious innovations and their diffusion and reactive mobilization.

Firstly, Expansion of Political Opportunities. It mainly refers to changes in resource distribution and political power disparity. In terms of Shahbag Movement, we can see that the “2008 electoral manifestation” of the present government showed a deep commitment for the trial of war criminals and after being elected; they formed ICT (International Crimes Tribunal) and started the trial procedure. Besides, in January 3, 2013, the then Home Minister declared that the trial of war criminals was their fight for existence. These activities, however, were giving a positive signal to the trial seeking people and therefore, they were searching for elite support which can be termed as “Bottom-up approach to the expansion of political opportunities”.

But although the government had an electoral commitment to try the war criminals, some of their activities created a deep suspicion that they were making entente with the criminals. For example, in January 21, 2013, the tribunal declared supreme sentence against Abul Kalam Azad. On the other hand, in February 5, 2013, the same tribunal announced life imprisonment against Abdul Qader Molla, although his crime was more punishable than Abul Kalam Azad. This created a deeper suspicion from within.

In this situation, the government lost its unified power as indicated by the speech uttered by Rashed Khan Menon and Muin Uddin Khan Badol in the 5th February session of National Parliament. As a result, the trial seeking people gained a political opportunity which facilitated the expansion of Shahbag Movement.

Secondly, contentious innovations and their diffusion. Since the actors of movement parties are well experienced to deal with the known types of protests, protesters need novel qualities so that predictable patterns of interactions can be destabilized and the authority cannot understand how to tackle the situations. This novel quality of protest comes through contentious innovations or diffusion from others. And this diffusion process has three specific characteristics that include the followings;

- Diffusions are socially embedded and they can spread by the way of communication from a source to an adopter, along established network links.

- Adopters are not passive recipients. Rather they actively choose to adopt a particular innovation based on different kinds of similarities like political system or geographic.
- Adoption depends on the perceived success of innovation.

In terms of Shahbag Movement, we can find out some novel qualities of protest. For instance, Shahbag Movement was organized through online activism which is very rare in the history of Bangladesh. This movement shows different kinds of newness in their protest like “sit-in-protest”, people’s standing at a same time all over the country, different kinds of new slogans and so on. In addition, the initial movement had no single leader who could be convinced by the government and declared that “people are the leaders” in following the “Occupy Wall-Street Movement”. All of these novel qualities of protest puzzled the government about how to tackle the situations and thereby, contributed to the expansion of contention.

Finally, Reactive Mobilization. It means mobilization in reaction. Due to mobilization of initial contenders, when the interest of any group is affected, then they seek to create reactive mobilization. Such kind of reactive mobilization can be of two kinds. One is counter-mobilization which refers to the mobilization of a different constituency and the other is competitive mobilization which refers to the mobilization of same constituency.

In terms of Shahbag, Hefajat Movement is a remarkable example of counter-mobilization. Since the very beginning of shahbag Movement, there was a rumor that protesters of Shahbag are atheist. In February 15, 2013, Rajib Hayder was killed who had posted different kinds of anti-Islam writings in his blog. In that time, protesters of Shahbag said the “janaja prayer” on rajib’s death in the place of movement and declared him to be the “first martyr of second generation” which was highly covered by media. Particularly, some anti-Shahbag medias like “Amar Desh” tried to provoke a counter mobilization through the use of people’s religious sentiment.

In this top-down approach to expansion of contention, the anti-Shahbag elites and media openly patronized the religious groups in their counter-mobilization and as a result, we saw the “6th April long march” of Hefajat-e-Islam and its subsequent blockade of the 5th May. These religious groups announced their 13 point demands in oppose to Shahbag Movement and thereby, showed a successful counter-mobilization.

Transformation of Shahbag Movement

In short, variations within the wave can be termed as transformation and these variations depend on state-society interaction or interaction between authority and challenger. It may include transformation of nature, structure, actors, allies, “change in pace” and “the pace of change” and so on. Some variations in Shahbag Movement occurred as follows;

- In terms of nature, shifts from challenger to defender of existing authority.
- In terms of actor, shifting leadership from mass people to few of the selected persons.
- In terms of demand, extending demand from the trial of war criminals to the ban of Jamat-e-Islam.
- In terms of ally, declaring all of the parties as ally except BNP-Jamat which created divisions among mass people.
- In terms of pace, declaring “sit-in protest only in Friday” instead of everyday and so many others.

However, in relative equilibrium, rational model is fairly well applicable that includes three mechanisms of strategic change. Firstly, “strategic anticipation” which refers to forward-looking rational decision making.

Secondly, “strategic adaptation” which refers to the trial-and-error character of interactions and functions through learned behavior. And the last one is “environmental selection”. It is context specific in which different instruments of selection like political system, media and so on significantly affect the movement. For example, In terms of Shahbag Movement, media played a significant role in magnifying the movement and facilitating its legitimacy. On the other hand, government also could not put sufficient repression on the protesters due to democratic political regime.

Here is a problem that due to non-recurrent character of social movement and different kinds of contingencies, the abovementioned three mechanisms cannot well function in a movement period and therefore, we need moving on to explain “path dependence”. Path dependence is a particular way in which subsequent developments depend on prior events. In terms of Shahbag Movement, there can be many examples of path dependence that include.

- Saying “janaja prayer” on Rajib’s death is a remarkable example of path dependence as it made the people think all of the protesters as atheist which is explained above.
- Initially, the original and impartial protesters did not take the leading positions and thereby, government could capture the decision making process which made the return to previous position impossible.
- The movement did not take the anti-establishment stand which created suspicion among the people.
- With the passage of time, the movement decided not to raise any question about ICT which also created suspicion among the people.
- The movement did not demand the trial of all of the war criminals including criminals of ruling party which proved the movement biased.

All of the abovementioned instances created a situation where certain ways had been closed due to certain decisions and as a result, the movement could not return to previous decisions. However, this path dependence in combination with contingency is also responsible for radical unpredictability and therefore, the transformative mechanisms in the wave of contention cannot be generalized.

Contraction of Shahbag Movement

The explanation of contraction must be based on relations rather than actors and therefore, the contraction of wave of contention can be defined as re-stabilization and re-routinization of relations among the actors through predictable and reliable patterns of interaction.

At the very beginning of Shahbag Movement, as mentioned above, the government was puzzled about how to tackle the situations. But within a short time, they took the strategy of capturing the movement and with this end; they took some strategic measures like sending leaders and Ministers to Shahbag, declaring open support, patronizing the movement and so on. Through this process, Bangladesh Students League and other organs of ruling party captured the stage, entered into the decision-making process with high levels of influence, pushed into the movement some favorable leaders like Dr. Imran H Sarker and thereby, routinized the repertoires of movement in favor of ruling party. In consequence, the movement became highly institutionalized and now the relations between government and so-called protesters are highly re-stabilized through predictable patterns of their interaction.

WHO ARE PRIVILEGED IN NEW EQUILIBRIUM?

Although Shahbag Movement seems to be successful in spreading the people's consensus on trial all over the world, refocusing the issue of Bengali identity and ensuring the supreme trial of some war criminals, it could not continue raising voice for the trial of all of the criminals irrespective of political identity. It made so many strategic mistakes and left behind so many of its potentials that could build the "expected shonar Bangla" and thereby, fulfill the cherished dreams of youth.

In consequence, the ruling party received all of its advantages. For example, they can now claim the fulfillment of their electoral manifestation while not ensuring punishment for their own criminals. The movement also facilitated the ruling party in their suppression on opposite parties, promoting their voting politics and thereby, regaining ruling power in 2014. So, with this argument, it can be asserted that the ruling party is highly privileged in this new equilibrium.

CONCLUSION

Shahbag Movement is no more. Occasionally, what we see now is routinization. Having been institutionalized, although it left behind so many of its potentials, the movement will remain ever fresh in people's heart and provide significant guidelines for any of the future movements as showed by the recent "NO VAT MOVEMENT" called by the students of private universities.

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