

# State Against the Streets

A Comparative Case Study on State Violence during the July Uprising in  
Bangladesh and the Aragalaya in Sri Lanka



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## Abstract

In recent years, a wave of protests has swept the South Asian subcontinent. These protests have been spearheaded by Generation Z, a generation that has been described as disillusioned with, and disconnected from, politics. The protests have been met with disproportionate state violence, despite generally following non-violent disciplines. Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are two such countries. This thesis compares the Bangladeshi July Uprising in 2022 and the Sri Lankan Aragalaya in 2024 on the basis of many shared similarities but a marked difference in the nature of the state violence they were met with. Through a comparative case study, guided by theories of postcolonialism, authoritarianism, and political polarisation, the thesis found that the two states share a history of colonial violence that resurfaces in different ways in the modern context. Bangladesh's high political polarisation and political (rather than economic) protest demands resulted in the July Uprising being met with more violence than the Aragalaya, as Sri Lanka experienced low to none political polarisation and had economic rather than political demands.

*Keywords: Gen Z protests, Asian spring, Aragalaya, July Uprising, State violence, State repression, Authoritarianism, Political polarisation, Postcolonialism, Youth Movements*

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# 1. Introduction

“My son screamed for help inside that police station. No one saved him. I will not rest until those who burned him can never harm another mother’s child again”. Shahina Begum—mother of one of the 1400 youth protesters killed by the Awami League government during the July Uprising in Bangladesh—told Al Jazeera (Ahmmed Sujun 2025) as Bangladesh’s former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina received a death sentence for crimes against humanity. Since 2020, South Asia has faced a wave of uprisings mainly driven by generation Z. Surveys have described the generation as “[...] disconnected from politics and disillusioned with democracy” (Chenoweth & Cebul 2026, p. 5). A point contested by the wave of uprisings in South Asia. Many of the countries experiencing the “Gen Z protests” feature weak economies, high youth unemployment, corruption and democratic backsliding (Chenoweth & Cebul 2026, p. 6 & 9). The movements follow a nonviolent discipline but frequently end up being victims or perpetrators of violence (Chenoweth & Cebul 2026, p. 6).

Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are but two of many countries that have, in recent years, experienced regime change following widespread protests that have seen great involvement by the so-called “generation Z”. The cases share many similarities with other recent uprisings in the region—among other things, the prominence of generation Z and violent state responses. There is, however, a significant difference in the use of fatal state violence. In Bangladesh, the UN estimates 1 400 deaths as a consequence of state repression of mass protests (UN News 2025), while the Aragalaya protests in Sri Lanka only led to one fatality (Razick 2025).

## 1.1 Research Question and Purpose of the Study

*What factors shaped the differing violent state responses in the July Uprising in Bangladesh (2024) and the Aragalaya in Sri Lanka (2022)?*

The protests in both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka shared several similarities—eg. similar goals, demographic makeup, wide mobilisation, and similar motivations—yet the nature of state violence they were met with differed greatly. Thus, the purpose of our study is to examine the

factors that shaped the violent state responses that protesters in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka were met with when agitating against their respective governments.

## 1.2 Background

Between 1990 and 2020, 80% of non-violent campaigns to overthrow national leaders or achieve self determination featured a large youth participation. The so-called Gen Z protests therefore follow a long-term trend where protest movements are powered by young people (Chenoweth & Cebul 2026, p. 5). Studies suggest that a nonviolent campaign is “[...] twice as likely to succeed if it has extensive youth participation, where more than 50 percent of the observed frontline participants are young people, compared with limited youth participation, where fewer than 10 percent are” (Chenoweth & Cebul 2026, p. 7). Although the movements in the short-term achieve their goals, evidence proposes that they are not durable or stable in the long run (Chenoweth & Cebul 2026, p. 10).

Bangladesh has a history of student-led demonstrations shaping its democratic and political landscape (Rana et.al 2026, p. 1). In the first half of the 20th century, a sectarian Muslim movement aimed to establish a nation for the Muslims of British India. The movement was driven by Pakistani as well as Bengali Muslims. The Bengali Muslims envisioned that their mother tongue, Bengali, would be the language of the new nation. The ruling elite determined that Urdu was more fulfilling of a national language. As a result, student movements emerged, promoting Bangladesh’s ethno-linguistic nationalism through “Ekushey”—the Language Movement—in 1952. The movement faced brutal police violence (Iqbal 2025, p. 425). In 1990, there was a student movement calling for democracy in Bangladesh. The movement resulted in the resignation of President Ershad and a milestone in the history of Bangladesh was reached as a regime was born through a citizens’ movement, not by a bullet (Ullah 2009, p. 69).

In July 2024, the Bangladesh High Court adopted a quota system favoring loyalists to the ruling Awami League party. The quota can be viewed as the catalyst to the peaceful protests in a state where deep structural grievances were embedded in Bangladesh’s political economy and governance. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, leader of the Awami League party, labeled

the youth protesters as “razakars”—a term that refers to the Bangladeshi “traitors” who fought for the Pakistani forces during the war of independence in 1971 (Campbell 2024). The Awami League party has, since its electoral win in 2008, disassembled parts of the democracy by abolishing the caretaker government system that ensured free democratic elections. The party has since shrunk civic spaces and taken part in corruption as well as nepotism. Echoing the party’s historical repression of activists and opposition, the student wing of the ruling party, the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), alongside security forces, attacked peaceful student protests in July 2024, resulting in hundreds of deaths and thousands injured (Rana et al. 2026, p. 3). The physical and discursive violence used by the state intensified public outrage rather than suppressing it. As the government announced a national curfew and internet shutdown, both the youth movement and oppositional political parties demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her cabinet, as well as justice and accountability (Ahmad 2025, p. 32). On August 5th, protesters from around the country marched to the prime minister’s residence in Dhaka. As a result, Hasina resigned and fled to India (Ahmad 2025, p. 30). In total, the July Uprising in Bangladesh led to 1 400 protest-related deaths, 13 529 protest-related injuries, and 11 702 protesters were arrested by the police between July 1st and August 15th (OHCHR 2025).

Unlike in Bangladesh, the protests that took place in Sri Lanka in the first half of 2022 were unique in the country’s history (Jayawardena 2022). The protests were notable partly for their mobilisation of citizens across ethnic and religious lines, but also because they were headed by young professionals and activists (Hasan et al. 2026, p. 3). Hasan et al. (2026, p. 2) locate the recent large-scale protests in South Asia in the context of the region’s long history of student-led political movements, where the Aragalaya protests of 2022 can be seen in the context of a long history of mobilisation and activism among Sri Lankan university students (Dulanjana 2026, p. 309-311). However, while previous youth-dominated movements in Sri Lanka have focused on students’ issues, the Aragalaya protests sprung from the “worst economic crisis” in the country’s post-independence history (Amnesty International 2022, p. 4). Prior to the outbreak of the protests, Sri Lankans were grappling with soaring inflation (up to 70%) and power cuts lasting as long as 13 hours, as well as shortages of medicine, food, and fuel (ibid.).

Prompted by steadily worsening conditions, the first large protest took place on March 31st 2022, outside the residence of former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa (Amnesty International 2022, p. 9). Despite their peaceful nature, protesters were met with tear gas and water cannons, which led to an escalation of violence and, eventually, the arrest of more than 50 persons (ibid.). April 19th saw the deadliest day of the protests, with the police opening fire on a group of protesters, injuring 14 and killing one (ibid.). A few weeks later, on May 9th, pro-government groups attacked peaceful protesters with sticks as law enforcement officers stood by (Amnesty International 2022, p. 11). The protests peaked on July 9th, with nearly one million people joining the protests bypassing barricades and barriers to occupy the President's official residence (Jayawardena 2022). Law enforcement officers attempted to disperse the protesters by beating and firing at them, as well as using water cannons and tear gas. Later that day, journalists were assaulted by a special unit of the police on live broadcast (Amnesty International 2022, p. 15). Another significant crackdown came on July 22nd—after Rajapaksa's resignation and the accession of the new President, Ranil Wickremesinghe—when the police and armed forces launched attacks on the protest site “GotaGoGama” and “on peaceful protesters occupying one room of the Presidential Secretariat” (Amnesty International 2022, p. 17).

The protesters achieved their goal of removing Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who had come to represent the corruption—as well as a range of other social and economic issues—that had long plagued Sri Lanka (Hasan et al. 2026, p. 3). Although Rajapaksa was succeeded by his political ally Ranil Wickremesinghe, Wickremesinghe was eventually replaced via democratic election and succeeded by Anura Kumara Dissanayake of the National People's Power coalition (Timberman 2025, p. 1).

### 1.3 Scope of the Study

The paper will limit the analysis of the July Uprising in Bangladesh from June 5th—when the student protests began—to August 5th, 2024, when Prime minister Sheikh Hasina resigned and fled the country as a consequence of the July Uprising (OHCHR 2025). Although violence occurred after Hasina's resignation, these cases will not be included in the scope of the study due to its focus on state violence during youth protests and not the period following

the symbolic achievement of the protesters' objectives, i.e. regime change. In the case of the Aragalaya protests, the paper will limit the analysis from March 31st—when peaceful protests on a larger scale began—to July 22nd, 2022. Although sitting President Gotabaya Rajapaksa fled the country on July 9th and resigned on the 14th, one of the most violent crackdowns occurred on the 22nd after Ranil Wickremesinghe was sworn in as President, as anti-government protests continued. Accordingly, most timelines over the protests end on July 22nd (Amnesty International 2022, p. 9-18).

The scope of the study will be limited to violence against the protesters including violence performed by military, police, security forces and state backed groups like the BCL in Bangladesh. Violence performed by, or among, protesters will be excluded due to the purpose of the study (see 1.1 Research Question and Purpose of the Study).

## 1.4 Relevant Concepts

### 1.4.1 State Violence

State violence is a central strategy in making the state and its identity (Stanley 2025, p. 4-5). As Weber puts it, states claim: “[...] the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force” (Weber 1946/1970, p. 77). Central to the use of state violence is the threat “[...] of the Other—of those categorised as threatening, or those deemed to be lacking in morality, ability or all kinds of other subjective attributes” (Stanley 2025, p. 29). By re-embedding otherness, the state reasserts counter-identities where state violence shapes and controls categories of victimhood and sets out who can be recognised as a victim or which populations are in need of protection from “the Other” (Stanley 2025, p. 34-35). State violence also serves a performative function through “[...] an embedded commitment to violence, and to centre dominant political interests, economic benefits or administrative needs, state institutions reinvent and re-empower themselves through violence” (Stanley 2025, p. 39).

Paul Butler (2022, p. 24) deploys a conceptualisation of state violence that encapsulates both direct and structural violence, writing that violence can be understood as “a process or ongoing social condition embedded in our everyday lives”. It is necessary to utilise a broad

conceptualisation when studying state violence since both structural and “overt” violence cause suffering and harm (Butler 2022, p. 25). Joe Sim (2016) writes that state violence operates within the discursive confines of state-produced social categories. By portraying victims of state violence as “dangerous, unpredictable” deviants, a “culture of impunity and immunity” can be constructed around state servants (Sim 2016). Sim writes that state servants like police officers who engage in overt violence are also portrayed as abnormal individuals who have deviated from otherwise harmless institutions (ibid.). Violence against state servants—like police officers—is often exaggerated, while the violence they themselves wield is downplayed and sanitised (ibid.).

The paper will include state repression as well as direct, structural and cultural violence within the concept of state violence. According to Galtung & Fischer (2013, p. 36 & 37) violence and insults in all three forms affect the four basic human needs: survival, wellness, freedom and identity.

#### 1.4.1.1 State Repression

State repression is a subcategory to state violence. State repression includes the threat and actual use of physical sanctions within the territorial jurisdiction of a state against an individual or organisation. The use of threats and physical sanctions is supposed to induce deterrence of activities and beliefs that can be seen as threatening or challenging to the government, its practices and institutions. State repression does not concern deterrence of crimes like theft and criminal violence; rather, it deals with violations of freedom of speech and freedom of association and belief (Davenport 2007, p. 2).

#### 1.4.1.2 Direct Violence

Insults against survival characterised as direct violence can, according to Galtung and Fischer (2013, p. 36), be killing, maiming, siege, and sanctions. Direct violence against wellness can be illness and misery, direct violence against freedom can be repression, detention and expulsion, whilst direct violence against a person’s identity can be alienation, de-socialisation and second class citizenship. According to Stanley (2025, p. 95), direct violence is performed by states against those who contest or corporate harms. Some of this direct violence can be

publicly condemned but many acts of direct violence by the state are given social license that diffuse responsibility, normalises indifferences and give violence decency (ibid).

#### 1.4.1.3 Structural Violence

Structural violence is seen as a violent structure where exploitation is a centrepiece, meaning that the “top dogs” get much more out of the structure than the “underdogs”. Here, insults against survival include marginalised people dying from starvation or avoidable diseases. Insults on wellness can be seen as being alive in a permanent, unwanted state of misery, including malnutrition and illness (Galtung & Fischer 2013, p. 36 & 37). Structural violence against freedom can be fragmentation and marginalisation while structural violence against identity can be penetration and segmentation (Galtung & Fischer 2013, p. 36).

#### 1.4.1.4 Cultural Violence

Cultural violence are aspects of culture such as religion, language, ideology, art, and empirical and formal science that can be used to justify and legitimise direct and structural violence (Galtung & Fischer 2013, p. 41). However, entire cultures can scarcely be classified as violent. Culture violence makes direct and structural violence look and feel correct by changing “wrong” moral acts to acceptable or right (Galtung & Fischer 2013, p. 42).

### 1.4.2 Youth Movement

Youth movements are collective, organised attempts by young people with a joint goal to bring about or resist societal change (Braungart 2026, p. 16668). The paper will define young people as belonging to generation Z (Gen Z), which consists of people born between 1997 and 2012 (Beresford Research 2026). A defining characteristic of youth movements is that they are carried out largely by young people. These movements may be initiated spontaneously by young people but can also be sponsored by adults to supplement the activities of larger social and political movements. Youth movements are seen to be driven by young people’s “[...] idealism, energy, impetuosity, and desire for independence [...]” (Braungart 2026, p. 16668). An important basis for youth mobilisation are shared environments at, for example, universities (Flesher Fominaya n.d).

Both the Aragalaya protests in Sri Lanka (2022) and the July Uprising in Bangladesh (2024) are viewed as youth movements in this paper since they are generally perceived by our main sources to be spearheaded by youth.

### 1.4.3. Protester

The thesis will define a protester as someone who actively took part in the protests one or more times. As the police and security forces also attacked both bystanders and journalists that were present at the protests, these are hard to differentiate from data and empirical material on the protests. Due to this, the thesis will include both active protesters as well as bystanders and journalists that were exposed to violence to define a protester.

### 1.4.4 Hybrid Regime

Within the studied period, neither Bangladesh nor Sri Lanka fit neatly within the picture of either a democracy or an autocracy. Instead, we contend that they possess some attributes of a democracy and some of autocracy. Robertsson (2011, p. 18) named these regimes “hybrid regimes”. Hybrid regimes allow protests, but go to considerable lengths to control, manipulate, and channel protests in a way that is not consistent with democratic principles (Robertsson 2011, p. 22).

## 2. Literature Review

The following section comprises an overview of the existing literature on youth movements and state repression, as these are the fields of research that we seek to contribute to. The overview summarises the background of the field along with recent developments.

A brief review of the literature on youth movements shows that small-N case studies are a common feature in the field, often combined with methods that bring the researcher closer to protesters’ individual experiences (e.g. Gukurume 2022; Lam-Knott 2017; Shrestha & Paudel

2025, etc.). In our study, we will be continuing in this tradition by focusing on two cases of youth movements.

Studies have been made on the motivations driving the global Gen Z movement. Chenoweth & Cebul (2026) find that there are a multitude of factors that motivate young people to protest. Many of the countries that experience Gen Z-protests feature “[...] weak economies, high youth unemployment, and swelling youth populations governed by an aged cohort of political elites who are far older than the average citizen” (Chenoweth & Cebul 2026, p. 6). What seems to be the main driving motive, however, is corruption—a motive that derived from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and inspired others to protest in the region (Chenoweth & Cebul 2026, p. 6-7).

Drawing on earlier studies, Chenoweth & Cebul (2026, p. 7) find a strong association between youth participation in “[...] political protest and the success of maximalist non-violent campaigns”. Scholars argue that the success derives from young people being committed activists, creative with protest tactics, and better at building broad coalitions in socio-cultural divides (Chenoweth & Cebul 2026, p. 8). The success of youth movements makes them especially threatening to autocratic regimes and their security forces. Youth movements are therefore positively associated with more intense violent repression by state and security forces although the movements often follow a non-violent discipline (ibid.). Even though the youth movements initially follow a non-violent discipline, empirical material shows that violent state repression can provoke the movements to become violent (Chenoweth & Cebul 2026, p. 9).

Social media’s role in Bangladesh Gen-Z protests is studied by Islam et al. (2025). The authors found that the uprising was deeply rooted in digital culture, with social media platforms playing important roles in raising awareness, mobilising, acquiring support, communication, informing, shaping public opinion, and contributing to the decomposition of the ruling party’s political and moral legitimacy (Islam et.al., 2025, p. 8).

The study of state repression centres on “why and how political authorities use coercive power domestically amid potential and existing challenges and challengers” (Davenport 2007, p. 1-2), with researchers focusing on “repressive actions directed at individuals and

groups based on their current or potential participation in noninstitutional efforts for social, cultural, or political change” (Earl 2011, p. 262). Both the actor practising repression and the mode of repression are conceptualised with differing degrees of narrowness by different academics—with the former varying from the state to including non-state actors, and the latter ranging from actions that “increase the cost of protest” to those that violate specific rights (ibid.). Since the emergence of the field in the 1970s, researchers have aimed to explain variations in the severity of or the willingness to practice repression, as well as strategies to dampen its effects (Earl & Braithwaite 2022, p. 229). Key findings in the field have been that authorities consistently respond to “behavioural threats” with some kind of repressive action (but that their reasoning is difficult to discern), and that the results of repressive action on social movements is highly inconsistent; the latter is also known as the dissent-repression nexus (Davenport 2007, p. 8-9).

In recent years, there has been a turn toward studies of both digital repression and online social mobilisation, as political and social activity increasingly takes place on online platforms and through social media (Earl et al. 2022). An example of such a study is Kreutz & Makrogianni (2024), which found that (digital) state repression could function as a motivator for transnational collaboration and the formation of a transnational identity that is mediated through social media. In a similar vein, Gukurume (2022) studies how activists in youth-led movements organise non-violent resistance on online platforms in the face of state repression and violence.

Lance B. Kurke (1992) explores how people are repressed and how they can make restitution. The article explains that repression is an organisational phenomenon (Kurke 1992, p. 235), examining how large scale organisations (such as governments) become oligarchies where a few officials have near monopolistic power over the masses they are supposed to serve (Kurke 1992, p. 236). Building on previous research, Kurke (ibid.) argues that when a threat to power arises, the more powerful leader can subdue a threat with greater impunity. The people making the oligarchy “[...] subvert the goals of the organization and substitute the goal of the oligarchy’s survival. For the oligarchy to survive, repression may be necessary”. The article concludes that when leaders and oligarchies feel fundamentally threatened they will respond to that threat. In many historic cases (e.g. Hong Kong and Soviet Georgia), leaders have fired against unarmed, non-violent protesters to get rid of that threat. Consequently

thousands will flee the country, but millions will stay and no longer oppose a threat (Kurke 1992, p. 246).

### 3. Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical framework constitutes a foundation in our analysis by embodying theoretical guidelines in answering the research question. The theory on postcolonialism is employed to understand the two cases' historical and present experience of violence. Throughout the analysis we will utilise the theory on authoritarianism to find structural explanations for the regime's responses to the protests. By comparing the two protest movements' demands through game theory we seek to find possible explanatory causes to the different levels of violence and fatalities. Lastly, by examining the cases through our theoretical and empirical framework on political polarisation we aim to observe how different levels of polarisation can form the use of violence.

#### 3.1 Postcolonialism

Galtung argues that violence is built on unequal and unrepresentative social structures like colonialism. These social structures cause situations where human beings are below the realisation of their potential (Demmer 2016, p. 59). Mohammed Ayoob explains that postcolonial states are expected to replicate relatively stable, centralised modern states in a few decades—a process that took so-called developed states centuries and long, fatal wars. The rapid and pressured modern state-making is seen as the source of most contemporary violent conflicts (Demmer 2016, p. 66).

Like the rest of South Asia, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have a shared history of having been colonised by the British Empire—although Sri Lanka gained independence earlier than Bangladesh, and was under the rule of the Portuguese and then the Dutch before the British assumed control (Arasaratnam & Peiris 2026). Studying Maoist rebel groups in India (another former British colony), Swati Parashar connects the state violence that was used and institutionalised in India by the British Empire to the violent repression practiced by the modern Indian state (Parashar 2019). Parashar finds that “the reciprocal violence between the

state and its subjects” that can be found in today’s India is one of many legacies that have remained after the colonial period (Parashar 2019, p. 338). She argues that the nation-state as we know it engages in a “hostile policing of marginalised subjects”, engendering political violence and revolt that it then answers with equal or greater violence (ibid.). The decision to take violent means to achieve one’s ends is motivated by a lack of trust among marginalised populations in the state’s governance model, which in turn stems from the systemic disempowerment of the same populations (Parashar 2019, p. 344). While the Indian state has many tools in its arsenal, violence is an oft-used method to bring conflict-stricken areas back under state control—a method that is clearly rooted in the disproportionate, repressive violence utilised by the British Empire to quell insurgencies during the colonial period (Parashar 2019, p. 348).

Similarly, Whittaker (2015) writes that continuity between colonial and postcolonial methods of “population control” are more than colonial hangovers (Whittaker 2015, p. 643). Systemic use of “collective punishment and state violence” may have been introduced under British colonial rule, but it was later expanded and institutionalised by postcolonial governments, often used against populations that are perceived to be hostile to the state (ibid.). Additionally, much of the administration remained unchanged after independence was achieved in Kenya (Whittaker’s object of study), which meant that British officers remained in power alongside British systems of governance, aggravating any possible departure from the oppressive systems that had existed under the colonial administration (Whittaker 2015, p. 647-648). These systems have remained in place well after the period immediately following independence, illustrating their entrenchment in the postcolonial state (Whittaker 2015, p. 649-651). Like Parashar (2019), Whittaker (2015) finds that state violence engenders further violence from non-state actors, rather than establishing lasting security (Whittaker 2015, p. 652).

Although both Whittaker and Parashar study cases that differ from our own, we find that their conclusions regarding the continuity between colonial and postcolonial states—especially with regards to those that were colonised by the British Empire—are applicable to our study of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Persaud and Kumarakulasingam (2019) associate this continuity of violence with Aníbal Quijano’s concept of the coloniality of power, writing that the violent exercise of power served to embed frameworks that allowed for the continued

practice of violent repression (Persaud & Kumarakulasingam 2019, p. 200). In relation to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, our main points of reference for this violence are the 1971 Bangladeshi war of liberation and the decades-long Sri Lankan civil war, as well as the violence that occurred during the colonial period itself. Although the violence of the Sri Lankan civil war took place outside of the bounds of colonial rule, following Parshar, it can reasonably be rooted in the violence of colonial rule. As a war of liberation of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) from Pakistan, the violence of the war in 1971 can be said to be a colonial phenomenon (Siddik et al. 2026, p. 1).

### 3.2 Authoritarianism

We define both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka as hybrid regimes, meaning that we believe that they possess some attributes of a democracy and some of an autocracy. On the basis of the autocratic characteristics of the regimes we find it important to highlight authoritarianism to find a pattern to the use of violence.

Authoritarianism comprises a continuum of political competition-closure where state repression, militarism, religiosity, and nationalism is present. Although no autocratic regime is identical, they share an opportunity structure where the state manages or tries to manage political actors, such as protesters, through legal or repressive responses when they feel that their power is threatened by non-state actors (Torres-Van Antwerp 2022, p. 24).

Mitchell, Inata & Higashijima (2025) present a game theory model to study if different types of protest movements (under dictatorship) influence outcomes of either accommodation or repression. The model explains that movements which are more economic tend to be accommodated while demands that are more political tend to be repressed. The model also explains that protesters' demands vary "[...] according to their incomes: individuals with lower incomes join purely economic protests, those with middling incomes join protests that mix political and economic demands, and individuals with higher incomes join political protests." (Mitchell et al., 2025, p. 285). According to the theory, dictators seek to maintain their security in office, therefore they are more willing to make economic settlements rather than political concessions to promote their regime stability (Mitchell et al., 2025, p. 295).

The theory explains, among others, the two cases of democratisation student protests in South Korea and China in the mid-late 20th century. In South Korea, a repressed student movement reorganised with labour workers to gain widespread support and mobilisation with both economic and political demands and succeeded in 1987 (Mitchell et.al., 2025, p. 297). The student protests in China 1989 only demanded greater political rights for themselves and strategically sought to exclude other sectors of society to appear more moderate to the regime. The students' approach of excluding labor meant that the demography of the protesters was narrow while their demands were inadmissible to the regime and aligned with the model, therefore ended promptly with the regime's repression (ibid.). According to the game theory: "Repression occurs only when the cost of repression is not minuscule." (Mitchell et al. 2025, p. 290).

Since 2011, researchers have coined the term "digital authoritarianism" to describe the use of different digital technologies to repress, surveil and manipulate populations (Roberts & Oosterom 2025, p. 861). Within the concept of digital authoritarianism, digital repression is present and "[...] refers to the use of new technologies – primarily the internet, social media, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) – to repress citizens and maintain political control" (ibid.). Regimes practice digital authoritarianism through online censorship, digital surveillance, digital disinformation, and repressive laws. Online censorship entails digital practices of online internet filtering, internet shutdowns and blocking of websites, keywords and bandwidth throttling (Roberts & Oosterom 2025, p. 875). Digital surveillance is used to monitor all citizens or persons of interests such as activists, journalists and oppositional politicians. Digital disinformation refers to intentional falsehood with a political purpose to, for instance, control public debates. Repressive laws and regulations can be used to legislate both digital surveillance and censorship by considering content and social digital interactions as "against national security" and "the undermining of moral values" (Roberts & Oosterom 2025, p. 876). Although digital authoritarianism is becoming increasingly prevalent—and is therefore generally applicable to research on protest movements—it will not be a central focus of this study.

### 3.3 Political Polarisation

Polarisation is defined by Lutiko et al. (2022, p. 8) as a prominent idea of a difference within a society that amplifies an us-and-them mentality. Building on this definition, political polarisation can be defined to which extent society is divided into hostile political camps where political differences undermine social relationships and deter interaction across ideological lines (Our World in Data 2026). Further, McCoy et al. (2018, p. 22) explain that divided political identities become social identities in deeply polarised societies. Political polarisation can be beneficial to democracies as it can provide voting heuristics or help voters choose among candidates, mobilising supporters, strengthening political parties, and providing programmatic choices (McCoy et al. 2018, p. 18). Severe political polarisation, however, can threaten democratic norms and governance (McCoy et al. 2018, p. 34-35), undermine social cohesion and political stability, and lead to increased intergroup violence or hostilities (McCoy et al. 2018, p. 18-19). Accordingly, rapid polarisation can be exploited through state-driven polarisation—mainly by populist leaders—to gain political power and in extreme cases, seek authoritarian rule. In response, citizens can organise social movements in resistance (Lutiko et al. 2022, p. 8). According to Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, Miall (2016, p. 12-13) polarisation often precedes violence as conflict situations escalate.

## 4. Research Design

### 4.1 Method

Our study will constitute a small-N comparative case study (Halperin & Heath 2017, p. 217). A small-N comparison—as opposed to a single-N case study or large-N quantitative study—allows for a detailed analysis and comparison of two or more cases while still providing the opportunity for broader generalisations, combining the advantages of both single and large-N studies (Halperin & Heath 2017, p. 218). However, the limited number of cases introduces the potential for selection biases, which necessitates careful examination of the case selection process (ibid.).

## 4.2 Case Selection

Our thesis will compare the cases of the Gen-Z uprisings in Sri Lanka in 2022 and Bangladesh in 2024. To avoid introducing selection bias, the cases were selected using the *Most Similar Systems Design* (MSSD). According to Halperin & Heath (2020, p. 239), MSSD is based on selecting cases that share many vital characteristics but differ in one significant aspect. The cases diverge from each other in some way that can explain the difference in outcome. Our selected cases of Sri Lanka and Bangladesh share many similarities that impact the nature and probability of political uprisings but differ greatly in the level of deadly violence. Both the July Uprising and the Aragalaya protests were driven by economic grievances, history, political dissatisfaction due to democratic backsliding, as well as severe repression against the protesters during the uprising (see 1.1 Background). Additionally, both protest movements can be regarded as successful in the sense that some kind of regime change was achieved in both Sri Lanka and Bangladesh—with the former seeing the removal of the sitting President, and the latter the replacement of the entire government with an interim government. Although researchers have found multiple similarities on the chosen cases, our research puzzle is based on why they greatly differ in violent state responses, where the July Uprising led to 1400 cases of protest related deaths (OHCHR 2025) whilst the Aragalaya protests only led to one case of fatal violence (Amnesty International 2022, p. 9).

## 4.3 Data

This study will use both qualitative and quantitative data to answer the research question. Qualitative data like academic literature, interviews, newspaper articles, or other accounts from the protests will form the basis of analysis. To acquire a more nuanced view in the analysis we will use quantitative data from reports from organisations like OHCHR (2025) and Amnesty International (2022) to fill statistical gaps that need to be filled in the analysis. Potential causes of state violence—like political polarisation—in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh will be analysed using primary quantitative data from V-Dem in the form of an index of political polarisation. Thus, we will be collecting qualitative and quantitative data independently and analysing the data in relation to each other (Halperin & Heath 2020, p. 20). The benefit of using both quantitative and qualitative data is that phenomena that can and

cannot be quantifiably measured, can be compared and contrasted in the same study, leading to more holistic results (ibid.).

#### 4.4 Operationalisation

To find factors that explain the differences in state responses to the July Uprising in Bangladesh and the Aragalaya protest, we will use our data to systematically calibrate conditions and outcomes to analyse patterns. Through Table 1. with the categories: *legacies of (colonial) violence*, *protest demands* and *political polarisation*, we outline the conditions that we found to have shaped the degree of state violence. The table structures the empirical analysis and ensures a consistent theoretical basis. The categories were selected by guidance through the theories on postcolonialism, authoritarianism and political polarisation. Our study uses a positivist approach. The theories have different ontological points of departure but are utilised to get a more nuanced picture on the explanatory factors. In the analysis, we use the conclusions within the given game theory, which are that economic demands are more often met with accommodation and political demands are more often met with repression.

Analysis Outline		
	<b>Bangladesh: July Uprising (2024)</b>	<b>Sri Lanka: Aragalaya (2022)</b>
<b>Legacies of (Colonial) Violence</b>	History of communal violence and state repression	History of communal violence, state repression, and inter-ethnic collaboration
<b>Protest Demands</b>	Political with economic aspects	Economic with political aspects
<b>Political Polarisation</b>	Score: 3.21 Political polarisation to noticeable extent.	Score: -0.61 Political polarisation is almost non-existent.

Table 1. Analysis Outline with the three main explanatory factors.

## 5. Analysis and Empirical Material

The analysis, guided by our theoretical framework, presents the three main factors that shaped the violent state responses to the July Uprising and the Aragalaya protests. This section is based on the following explanatory factors: *legacies of (colonial) violence*, *protest demands* and *political polarisation*. In the analysis we compare the two cases through our data and theoretical framework.

### 5.1 Legacies of (Colonial) Violence

The violence with which the state responded during Bangladesh's July Uprising in 2024 can be seen both as a consequence and as a continuation of the state violence that has featured throughout Bangladeshi history. Siddik et al. (2026) write that the state response to the protests is a historically rooted phenomenon, with laws such as the colonial era 1861 Police Act still being in place (Siddik et al. 2026, p. 2). Although laws have been passed after Bangladesh gained independence in 1971 to mitigate abuse and improve accountability, violent crackdowns have remained the rule rather than the exception, with protest policing becoming increasingly militarised (ibid.). The disproportionately violent state response is linked to the discursive securitisation of the protests, which allowed for a lowered threshold for greater violence and faster escalation (Siddik et al. 2026, p. 4).

These patterns have resulted in a normalisation of the securitisation of dissent, with lethal outcomes becoming the norm of protest policing (Siddik et al. 2026, p. 4). At length, this results in the erosion of trust in democratic institutions and further inculcates authoritarian measures in already illiberal regimes (Siddik et al. 2026, p. 6). "Similar organisational features" in protest policing have been identified in neighbouring countries like India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, suggesting the existence of norm diffusion in the region, despite differing social contexts and political and legal frameworks. Following Parashar (2019), the violence of the July Uprising can be traced back to oppressive policing of dissent since the colonial era, with continuous entrenchment of these norms through Bangladeshi history. Despite the success of the July Uprising in deposing Sheikh Hasina, the state response forms another link in a centuries-old chain that will continue to grow unless effective reforms are

made (Siddik et al. 2026, p. 2). Although the protests successfully mobilised a broader segment of the population beyond the students who started it (ibid.), the entrenchment of lethal protest policing and the history of intra-communal violence limited the space for a more peaceful response, following Parashar (2019).

Another legacy of colonial rule, aside from institutionalised state violence, is the repeated occurrence of violence between and within different ethnic and religious groups in Bangladesh (Ahmed 2005, p. 1040). Inter- and intra-communal violence has been a cornerstone of South Asian politics and life throughout the region's history—through the colonial period, the partition of Punjab in 1947, and the partition of East and West Pakistan in 1971 (ibid.). Accordingly, civil society has become highly polarised along ethnic and religious lines in the subcontinent (Ahmed 2005, p. 1040). Ahmed (2005, p. 1047) contends that anything that is “national” by nature invites violence and alienation—similarly, Parashar & Schulz (2021, p. 872) write that postcolonial and decolonial encounters are violent by virtue of colonialism being a violent project, and that violent imaginaries and actions are continually reproduced throughout the history of postcolonial states.

In contrast, the Aragalaya and the corresponding state response can be seen as a result of a long history of inter-ethnic mobilisation in the name of universal issues and in spite of attempts to splinter the movement along ethnic lines. Similar to the Bangladeshi case, the violence of the state response can be traced back to the gradual erosion of human rights and the strengthening of state repression prior to and during the Sri Lankan civil war (Deane 2016, p. 974-5). The civil war can, in turn, be seen as the result of “divide and rule” policies that were implemented along ethnic lines during the British colonial period—policies that resulted in tension and polarised relationships between majority and minority ethnic communities in Sri Lanka (Gunasekara & Pannilage 2020, p. 74). These policies have persisted beyond independence from colonial rule in 1948, which serves as proof of their deep roots in the country's political establishment as well as social and cultural life (ibid.).

The fight for independence in Sri Lanka is an example of inter-ethnic mobilisation motivated by the perceived presence of a common enemy (Gunasekara & Pannilage 2016, p. 77). Although this unity eventually gave way to the sectarian tension that led to the civil war (ibid.), it was revived again during the Aragalaya protests. General workers strikes—which

have been a powerful tool in the hands of the people—have had a similarly unifying power (Perera 2024, p. 12). Despite mobilising people across religious and ethnic groups, communal tensions were still present at the site of the “GotaGoGama” encampment that had become a physical epicentre of the protest movement (Hettiarachchi & Hemachandra 2023, p. 82-83). The Aragalaya also represented a return to the non-violent protest that was popularised in Sri Lanka by the communist Sama Samaja party (Perera 2024, p. 17). The violent state response—despite the Aragalaya initially being, and largely remaining, peaceful—can be understood as a result of the glorification of state violence and military power by the Rajapaksa regime during the civil war (ibid.). Thus, the violence that was embedded in state structures during the civil war and colonial period resurfaced in the state’s protest policing, as detailed by Persaud & Kumarakulasingam (2019).

Attempts were made by ruling politicians to discredit and delegitimise protesters in the Aragalaya movement by labelling them as deviants and enemies of the state (Kodikara 2022, p. 32; Amnesty International 2022, p. 28). State usage of “enemy discourses”—which are wielded to create space to answer dissent with violent repression—against the Aragalaya protesters was reminiscent of the discursive construction of the so-called “Tamil terrorist”. This construct was used against Sri Lankan Tamils that agitated for equal rights prior to and during the civil war (Kodikara 2022, p. 32-33).

Thus, although the state intentionally used polarising language in an attempt to reignite deeply embedded ethnic tensions and occasionally resorted to using violence to quell the protests, we contend that a strong legacy of inter-ethnic mobilisation ensured that the protests in Sri Lanka remained largely peaceful.

## 5.2 Protest Demands

Even though the July Uprising and the Aragalaya protest had similar demands and both led to power shifts, we note a difference in the protesters’ demands. The July Uprising in Bangladesh 2024 was sparked when the Bangladesh Supreme Court reaffirmed a quota system for government jobs. The system reserves 50% of the jobs for underrepresented groups like women and minorities—the unpopular part is the quota that reserves 30% of the

governmental jobs for the children and grandchildren of those “[...] who took part in the 1971 Liberation War with Pakistan, which led to the creation of independent Bangladesh” (House of Commons Library 2025, p. 13). When the quota system was introduced, the Bangladeshi population already faced a struggling economy with corruption and large youth unemployment (ibid.). The economic grievances can be seen to have fueled the protests but according to the International Crisis Group (Prakash 2025), the main frustration with the government’s growing authoritarianism were that the Awami League Party was able to secure a fourth electoral win in an election perceived as “stage-managed” (Prakash 2025).

The Aragalaya protests sparked as a result of Sri Lanka’s worst economic and financial crisis in their 75 years of independence. As prices of basic commodities spiked and living standards declined, popular anger grew against the government as they were accused of economic mismanagement. The protest gained momentum and protesters demanded an investigation into President Rajapaksa’s family to locate large-scale corruption and political crimes, as well as for President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his family to resign (Keenan 2022). According to data from Tudor Silva & Ramasamy (2024, p. 11), the two main drivers of the Aragalaya protests according to respondents were economic and related to “corruption of rulers” and “economic hardships of people”. The later drivers were political and related to, *inter alia*: “poor government policies”, “family rule”, “lack of democracy” and “authoritarianism” (see table 2.).

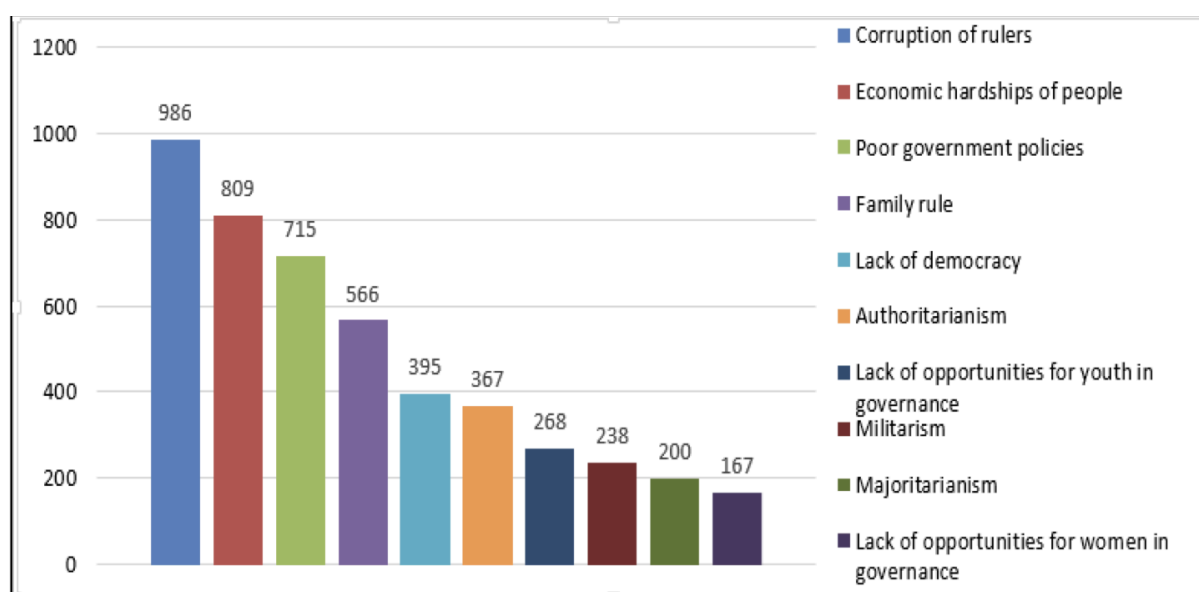


Table 2. Graph from Tudor Silva & Ramasamy (2024) showing: Drivers of the Aragalaya.

According to Mitchell, Inata & Higashijima's (2025) game theory model regarding protests leading to authoritarian accommodation or repression, movements that have economic demands tend to be accommodated while political protests are prone to be repressed. The July Uprising had a distinct political demand with economic aspects where the main goal of the uprising was first to change the quota system, and after severe repression, to force the resignation of Prime Minister Hasina (Ahmad 2025, p. 32). In the case of the Aragalaya protests, however, the demands were mainly economically driven with political aspects with the main goal to end the economic crisis which included making the regime take responsibility for the crisis and resign (Keenaan 2022; Tudor Silva & Ramasamy 2024). Accordingly, we observe a correlation between the demands and the corresponding state responses.

The July Uprising was met with violent state repression on the 15th day of the uprisings (with notable state repression between 15th July–5th August). The repression included fatal violence, internet shutdowns (Ahmad 2025, p. 32), denial of healthcare for injured protesters, arbitrary arrests, as well as sexual and gendered violence (OHCHR 2025 p. 13-14). In a private phone call Hasina issued an open order to use lethal weapons and “[...] shoot wherever they find [protesters]” (Al Jazeera 2025). The Aragalaya protests were largely met peacefully until March 31st, 2022 (almost two months after the peaceful protests began), when the state used water cannons, teargas, and arrests to disperse the protests (Amnesty International 2022, p. 9). Later on, the state repressed protesters with direct violence through arrests and torture while in police detention, as well as surveillance of protesters' social media accounts (Amnesty International 2022, p. 9-19 & 36). While the July Uprising had political demands from the start, the Aragalaya protests started off as economically driven and eventually refined political demands. The state violence in the July Uprising began earlier than in the Aragalaya protests—meaning that the Bangladeshi regime supposedly felt that their power was in danger due to the distinct political demands and therefore fatally repressed the protesters early on. Since the regime in Sri Lanka presumably did not perceive the protesters' economic demands as threatening, they did not react with repression until the protesters' demands threatened their power.

### 5.3 Political Polarisation

Quantitative data on political polarisation from Our World in Data (2026) by V-Dem estimates “[...] the extent to which society is divided into hostile political camps, where political differences undermine social relationships and discourage interaction across ideological lines” (Our World in Data 2026). The data is ordinal converted to interval where the following linear diagram illustrates that Bangladesh had a score of 3.21 when the uprising commenced in 2024. Derived from the score 3 on the scale, Bangladesh experienced political polarisation “[...] to noticeable extent. Supporters of opposing political camps are more likely to interact in a hostile than friendly manner” (Our World in Data 2026). Sri Lanka, however, had a score of -0.61 in 2022 which indicates that their levels of political polarisation were almost non-existent and that “[...] Supporters of opposing political camps generally interact in a friendly manner” (ibid.).

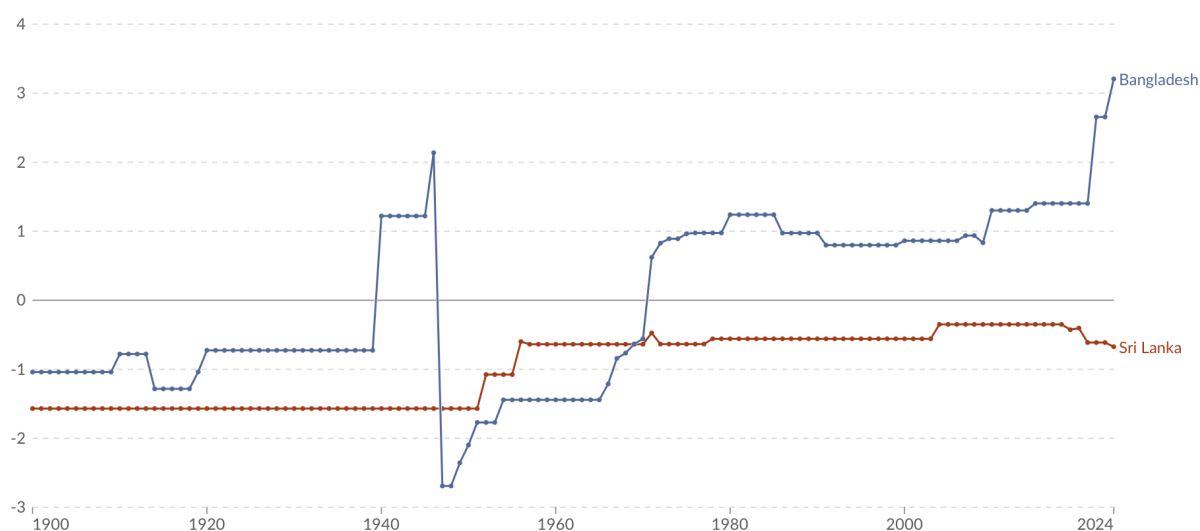


Table 3. Graph from Our World in Data (2026) of political polarisation in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka between 1900 and 2024.

According to the theory on political polarisation, state-driven polarisation can be utilised by populist leaders to gain political power and seek authoritarian rule (Lutiko et al. 2022, p. 8). In Bangladesh, the political polarisation is perceived to have been partly state-driven, as the Awami League party created great fractions between the country’s political parties and in society (Borthakur 2025). During the July Uprising the country became more polarised when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina labeled the youth protesters as “Razakars”—a highly charged term that refers to the Bangladeshi “traitors” who fought for the Pakistani forces during the

war of independence in 1971 (Campbell 2024). Table 4 demonstrates how fatalities rose after Hasina’s controversial statement about the protesters. The statement can therefore notably have exaggerated the political polarisation leading to increased intergroup violence and fatalities. McCoy et al. (2018, p. 18-19) describe how severe political polarisation can undermine social cohesion and lead to increased intergroup violence or hostilities. The rhetoric during the protests was highly partisan, where the Awami League party accused the opposition of supporting the student-led movement. The Bangladesh National Party (BNP) was mainly blamed for the violence and many of those who were arrested were BNP leaders (Pandya 2025). The protestors, however, blame police and the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL)—the Awami League’s student wing—for inciting violence. Data from ACLED (ibid.) show that the BCL was involved in 15% of all political violent events in the last five years in Bangladesh.

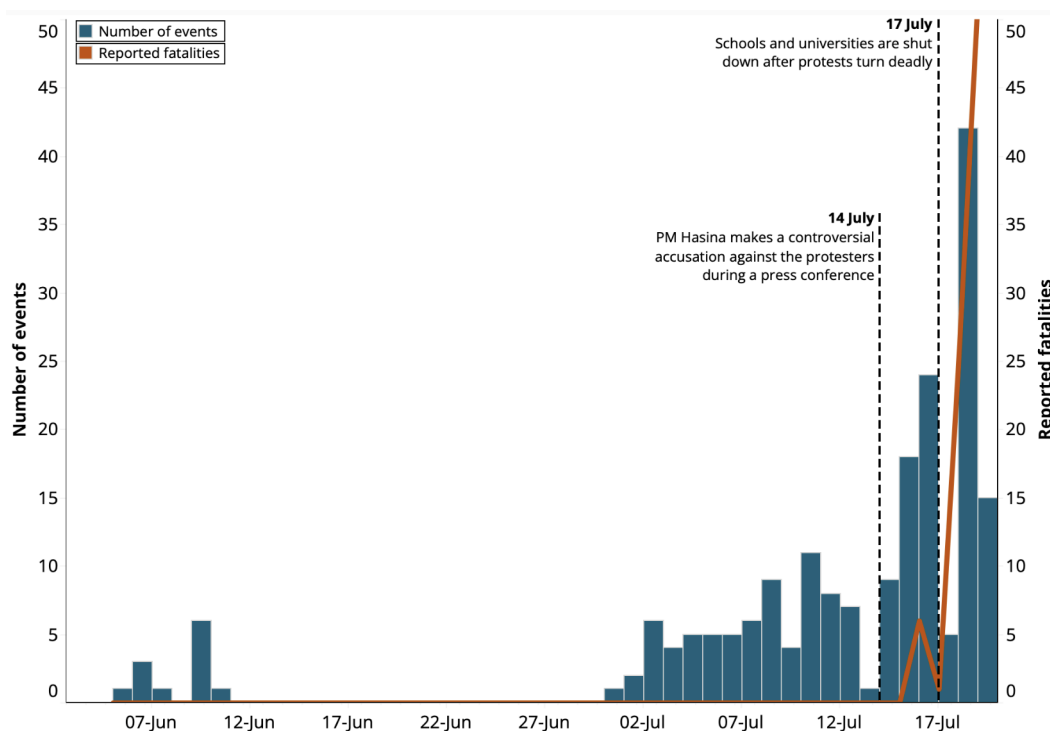


Table 4. Graph from ACLED (Pandya 2025) showing daily quota related demonstrations in Bangladesh and reported fatalities between 1 June- 19 July 2024.

At the time of the Aragalaya protests in 2022 there was little to none political polarisation in Sri Lanka (Our World in Data 2026) meaning that political identities do not necessarily create social identities based on ideological lines (McCoy et al. 2018, p. 22). In societies where

there is none to little political polarisation, supporters of opposing political camps generally interact in a friendly manner (Our World in Data 2026). Low political polarisation can, however, pose a threat to democracy. According to an interview with Hans Kundnani (Henckes 2021), Europe suffers from low polarisation, something that can favor technocracy and be a more prominent threat to democracy than polarisation.

## 6. Discussion

In this section we will discuss the results of the analysis and how the different factors shape one another, but also examine potential deficiencies with the utilised data, empirical material, and theories.

Through our analysis we found legacies of (colonial) violence in both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. In Bangladeshi society, the colonial heritage is present in the quota system and discourse surrounding the protests. Throughout the protests, the state's discourse and cultural violence builds on framing the protesters as "razakars", referring to the Bangladeshi "traitors" who fought for the Pakistani forces during the war of independence in 1971. Additionally, oppressive colonial-era legislation and structures have remained in place, despite some reform taking place. As the July Uprising erupted, the Bangladeshi regime was quick to repress and employ direct, structural and cultural violence. Following the game theory, the regime supposedly felt endangered by the distinct political demands and therefore repressed the protesters early. However, the quick and violent state response can also draw on Bangladesh's history of violence against protesters where violent crackdowns have remained the rule rather than the exception.

Our study shows that the original economic demands in the Aragalaya played an important part in why the protests were not confronted with considerable violence until the protesters began to have political demands. The utilisation of rational oriented game theories are argued to simplify relationships between actors and disregard social, cultural and historical contexts but also overlook asymmetrical power relations. Through our analysis however, we capture these contexts by applying the following analytical categories: legacies of (colonial) violence, protest demands, political polarisation.

Our analysis and empirical material have shown that a main source of political tension in Sri Lanka—both historically and in modern times, in terms of the colonial period and the civil war, respectively—has been ethnic and religious tension between the island’s different ethnic groups. Additionally, the use of state violence has often been inextricable from ethnic tensions. The Aragalaya protests were driven primarily by economic demands, with additional political dimensions. The overall violence of the protests may have been kept to a minimum because the issues that the protests revolved around were not of a sectarian character, which prevented the violent legacies of the civil war and colonial period from being fully reignited. Consequently, both violence between protesters and state violence were less severe than they were in Bangladesh. Something that could be seen as a large threat against the state is the fact that the different ethnic groups in Sri Lanka unified in the protests despite the Sri Lankan state trying to introduce more ethnic polarisation. Although the state tried to introduce ethnic polarisation, political polarisation in the country was none to little during the chosen period. The low political polarisation could be used by the government and pose a threat to democracy by securing the regime’s power.

However, ethnic tension is far from eliminated in Sri Lankan society—as was evidenced by its presence at the GotaGoGama encampment—which means that the protester’s demands could have taken on an ethnic dimension if the society was sufficiently polarised. That this dimension did not manifest in the protest could speak either to lessening ethnic tension, or to a strong legacy of inter-ethnic collaboration. The organisers and participants of GotaGoGama also made conscious efforts to make the movement inclusive and intersectional (Perera 2024; Hettiarachchi & Hemachandra 2023).

Another factor that may have contributed to keeping the intensity of state violence low during the Aragalaya protests is the presence of sympathetic members of the security forces (Perera 2024, p. 16). The economic nature of the protesters’ demands meant that individual members of the security forces supported the movement because they, too, wanted respite from the severe economic crisis; at multiple instances, police officers or members of the armed forces were seen supporting or participating in the protests (*ibid.*). It may also be that the specific focus of the demands on the removal of the ruling party—rather than being directed at the establishment and government collaborators—meant that state security forces were not forced into siding with the state by being lumped in with them by protesters. Demands that were of a

more polarising nature—or if the protests had taken place in a more politically polarised environment—may have resulted in less sympathy to the movement among people who were not directly affiliated with it, like security personnel.

A common factor between the two cases of authoritarianism is their digital repression through direct violence by surveilling protesters' social media accounts. Social media has a crucial role in organising non-violent resistance against state violence and repression. The digital repression follows our notion of the state feeling threatened by the two movements. By striking against the protesters' social media accounts, both states gained control over a crucial organising platform within the movements.

We found that our theoretical framework was well suited to the chosen cases and empirical material. Used individually, the theories would have provided one-sided and incomplete explanations of the causes of the differing state responses in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, as they illustrate separate aspects of their background. Taken together, the theories facilitate a more holistic understanding of the factors that could have shaped the manner in which the state responded in both cases. Additionally, although the theories illustrated different structural causes to our research question, they did so in complementary ways to each other.

A consequence of using theories that shine light on broader structural explanations is that the impact of the actors or groups that participate in these movements is neglected. For example, taking a narrower view by focusing on the “youth movement” aspect of the July Uprising and the Aragalaya would have led to a different—but no less valid—conclusion regarding the outcome of the protests. While there are factors and explanations that fall outside the remit of the theories that we have used, our theoretical framework enables generalisations of our results to similar cases of youth-led protest movements facing violent crackdowns in formerly colonised states.

## 7. Conclusion

To understand the differing factors that shaped the violent state responses to the July Uprising and Aragalaya we have applied theories of postcolonialism, authoritarianism, and political polarisation to gain a better comprehension of why the July Uprising became more violent than the Aragalaya. An important aspect of our research area is the fact that the protests were youth movements. Youth movements are positively associated with intense violent repression and are especially threatening to autocratic regimes because of their high success rate.

Regarding the case of Bangladesh, the fact that the July Uprising was a youth movement with political demands, combined with the hybrid regime's closeness to violent state repression, along with high political polarisation as well as legacies of colonial violence, enabled the regime to answer the existential threat with great repression and (fatal) violence. In the Sri Lankan case, the regime observed a youth movement demanding economic change along with accountability. Although we believe the regime may have felt threatened by the movement, economic change and accountability do not necessarily pose a direct threat to a regime's power. However, when the movement began to advocate for political demands, we consider that the regime felt more threatened and therefore became more violent—though less violent than the Bangladeshi case. Therefore, we conclude that the main differences in the two cases' violent state responses were the legacies of state violence, different demands and levels of political polarisation.

The colonial legacy of violence in Sri Lanka is more closely tied to the country's history of ethno-religious tension and conflict, whereas state violence in Bangladesh has featured in a wider variety of situations and contexts. Thus, violent repression was closer at hand for the Bangladeshi government than the Sri Lankan. Additionally, by continuing a legacy of violent state repression—though to different extents—the space for democratic participation and civil society remains narrow in both Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

By using a small-N comparative case study approach, our study constitutes a continuation of the tradition of studying youth-led protest movements, particularly those in former colonies. By studying two relatively recent—and therefore underresearched—cases, using a unique theoretical framework and research design, we are making a novel contribution to the studies

of youth movements and state repression. Our conclusions regarding the contributing factors to the Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan violent state responses can contribute to a deeper, more holistic understanding of similar movements in the rest of South and Southeast Asia as these cases continue to materialise. The existence of norm diffusion in the region implies that the outcomes of the July Uprising—both for the state and for the protesters—will be disseminated throughout the region both within and beyond the realm of academia. Furthermore, it would be interesting to delve deeper in the impact that the securitising discourse had on the protests' both violent and powershifting outcomes. It would also be intriguing to examine the cases on a micro-sociological level through sequential analysis, observing the microdynamics of ritual interaction between the protesters and security forces to capture how these dynamics could have impacted the violent outcomes.

In the end, state repression and violence comes from a place of fear, where leaders, regimes and security forces act upon what they believe will reduce that threat. In both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, the regimes have a history of violence, making the decision to respond with repression and violence closer at hand. We believe that the use of repression and violence comes from a place of fear, violent history, and heightened political polarisation, where the demands of the July Uprising threatened the status quo while the Aragalaya's initial demands did not. As Kurke (1992) puts it:

Yes, firing unarmed, non-violent protesters is atrocious, but so are nearly every government's action on occasion. [...] Yes, thousands flee, but millions stay.

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