

PERSPECTIVE

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The violent escalation of nonviolent movements: religious leadership and the micro-foundations of identity supremacy in Myanmar and Bangladesh

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Abstract

What drives a nonviolent movement to adopt violent strategies? The paper examines this question through a Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) of the Saffron Revolution in Myanmar and the movement led by Hefazat-e-Islam (HI) in Bangladesh. Utilizing a similar system design, it explores how actors, including monks and lay people in Myanmar and religious leaders in Bangladesh, shaped agency and strategic choices within otherwise comparable movements. Theoretically, the study emphasizes micro-foundational dynamics, highlighting individual agency, emotional motivations, and ultranationalist ideologies as key factors driving the transition from nonviolent to violent action. By focusing on religious mobilization, it demonstrates how religious identity and cultural anxieties propelled activists and leaders toward violence, even in the absence of severe state repression. The findings also show that ultranationalist narratives and the prioritization of religious identity over other affiliations were instrumental in fostering violence in both cases. In addition, shifting the movement's target also contributed to its transition from nonviolent to violent action by emphasizing the supremacy of their religious identity. By unpacking these processes, the paper contributes to the literature on social movements and nonviolence, offering a nuanced understanding of how micro-level mechanisms such as identity, preferences, and agency interact with broader socio-political contexts to produce strategic shifts. This analysis advances scholarly debates by specifying the conditions under which nonviolent resistance can transform into violent mobilization and by highlighting the central role of religious actors in shaping these trajectories.

Keywords Nonviolent, Violent, Religion, Hefazat-e-Islam, Saffron revolution

1 Introduction

How does a nonviolent movement evolve into a violent one, and what prompts activists within the movement to shift from nonviolent to violent strategies? Scholars commonly agree that nonviolent movements may evolve into violent ones when the state intensifies its utilization of violent repression against unarmed adversaries. This escalation modifies



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the perceived advantages and disadvantages of nonviolent resistance [1, 2]. This view-point suggests that the shift from nonviolent to violent dissent may occur when non-violent movements face state repression and violence, prompting dissidents to alter their tactics. However, in previous studies, the focus has primarily been on analyzing the macro foundations of transformation rather than examining the micro-level foundations. This raises the question: Does individual agency play a role in the transition from nonviolent to violent strategies? In the context of collective action, micro-level foundations serve as crucial driving forces. Individual agency, along with the roles of specific actors such as leaders, potential defectors, and decision-makers, propel social movements forward [3]. This indicates that the decisions made by individual participants in any collective action significantly influence the movement's dynamics and outcomes. In this context, this study seeks to explore answers from the Saffron Revolution in Myanmar and HI in Bangladesh.

In Myanmar in 2007, amid a severe economic downturn, monks and ordinary citizens-initiated protests that began modestly but grew substantially as more individuals gathered the courage to join the marches. The demonstrations swelled to approximately 60,000 to 100,000 participants, spanning around twenty-five locations across the nation [4]. Despite initial repression from state authorities, the movement retained its nonviolent nature and momentum. However, in 2012, when monks and lay people took to the streets again, the movement lost its nonviolent character [5]. During this period, the target of the movement's actions shifted from the government to the Rohingya, and this change in the movement's direction represents another factor contributing to its shift from nonviolent to violent strategies. Conversely, HI in Bangladesh initially functioned as a fundamentalist Islamic pressure group but turned violent after 2013. When the organization presented its demands, encapsulated in 13 points of Islamic principles, many were surprised by its sudden prominence, which triggered street protests [6] and led it to evolve into a more violent group. This paper seeks to understand why these two revolutions transitioned into a violent one, particularly when government repression did not serve as the primary catalyst. In this context, the study uses QCA to test theory-driven hypotheses within a most-similar systems design. Focusing on religious leaders and activists, it examines how similar religious backgrounds, goals, and intimidation strategies diverged into different pathways from nonviolent to violent action. Data are drawn primarily from International Crisis Group reports and supplemented by academic studies, media sources, and observations of ultranationalist leaders to analyze the interaction between leadership preferences, agency, and violent transformation. Empirically, the findings show that activists' and followers' personal preferences and self-identities are central to shifts from nonviolent to violent tactics. In both cases, ultranationalist ideologies emphasizing religious supremacy and fears of cultural survival act as powerful catalysts for violence, often exerting greater influence than state repression. In addition, particularly in the Saffron Revolution, the shift of the movement's target from the government to the Rohingya people was another factor driving the transition from nonviolent to violent action, as this process emphasized the supremacy of their religious identity over others.

By examining this aspect, this paper enriches the existing literature of individual agency, aligning with the nonviolent and violent approaches of social movements. While previous research predominantly focuses on the macro-level foundations of nonviolent

approaches, this study introduces a new perspective by exploring the micro-foundations of both nonviolent and violent approaches. This will open a new avenue of thinking in this literature. This paper follows a structured approach. Initially, it situates the discussion within the broader literature on agency, and nonviolent and violent approaches to social movement. Subsequently, it introduces a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between agency and the transformation nonviolent to violent movements. The paper then outlines the research design and presents empirical evidence drawn from the Saffron Revolution in Myanmar alongside the HI movement in Bangladesh. Finally, the analysis of the results is discussed, and the hypothesis is tested.

2 Literature review

This literature review highlights two main areas of focus. Firstly, it delves into analyses and evaluations of individual agency within social movements. It emphasizes the functioning of agency as a micro foundation in social movements and explores how this agency triggers the initiation and development of social movements. Secondly, the review shifts focus to understanding the process by which nonviolent movements transition into violent ones. It seeks to uncover the motivations behind such transformations and examines the mechanisms through which this transition occurs within the context of social movements.

Agency in social movements operates through the intentional actions and choices of individuals within the broader context of social structures and opportunities for contention. Theorists such as McAdam [7], Tilly [8], Tarrow [9], Goffman [10], and Jasper [11] have provided insights into how individuals mobilize for social change, navigate within social networks, manage emotions, and collectively pursue shared goals. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly assert the pivotal role of agency in social movements and collective action, emphasizing the significance of individual choice in shaping their dynamics. However, they caution against reductionist views of human goals, which may limit agency. They advocate for a nuanced understanding of agency, closely tied to the lived experiences of those involved in social movements, stressing the importance of grappling with its complexities for a more effective comprehension of movement dynamics. While Jasper [12] argues that agency involves the strategic choices made by protestors, organizers, and other players in fields of strategic contestation. This includes decisions related to organization, resource mobilization, alliances, and the extension of the movement. Players in social movements are seen as audiences for words and actions, and their strategic actions are interpreted culturally and psychologically, aiming to produce effects on different audiences.

Individuals participate in movements under various conditions. While Tilly [8], Alain Touraine [13, 14] and Olson [15] focus on macro-level factors, Jasper [16] and Popkin [17] argue for micro foundations, highlighting individuals' roles and interactions in shaping collective movements. Jasper contends that participation arises when individuals perceive opportunities for change, are driven by personal desires and goals, feel a sense of collective identity and purpose, and are influenced by cultural and emotional factors. This decision, Jasper asserts, is complex and shaped by individual, social, and contextual factors. Conversely, Popkin [17] emphasizes the rational self-interest of individual peasants in participating in revolutions. He identifies four conditions: rational cost-benefit analysis, sufficient selective incentives, contingent contributions from others, and moral

compulsion. Popkin's analysis suggests that individuals weigh the potential benefits of revolution against the status quo's losses, influenced by selective incentives and by political leaders' manipulation of collective goods to garner support for revolutionary causes.

In strategic decision-making, emotions drive social movements. Emotions permeate all stages of strategic action, including initial engagement, goal formulation, the dynamics of social networks, decision-making processes, acceptance of sacrifices, and eventual outcomes [18, 19]. Goffman's dramaturgical perspective suggests that individuals manage their emotions to convey impressions to others, especially in face-to-face interactions. Emotions, according to Goffman, are a part of the "front stage" performance where individuals strategically display or suppress emotions to conform to social norms and expectations. This can be seen in how individuals within social movements strategically express emotions such as anger or solidarity to convey commitment to the cause or to rally support from others. Jasper emphasizes that emotions are integral to the mobilization process, shaping individuals' motivations, commitments, and actions within social movements. He argues that emotions such as anger, fear, or hope can motivate individuals to join or sustain their involvement in social movements. Additionally, emotions can serve as a form of collective identity, binding individuals together through shared emotional experiences and solidarity. Emotions not only serve to energize participants but also to frame their experiences and interpretations of events [19]. For example, expressions of outrage or indignation may be used to highlight perceived injustices or grievances, while displays of joy or celebration can reinforce feelings of solidarity and accomplishment within the movement.

The transition from nonviolent resistance to violence is a subject of debate within scholarly literature. Some studies concentrate on state-based repression, while others explore additional contributing factors. In this section, the study will examine the effectiveness of nonviolence, reasons for its failure, and the catalysts that prompt a shift towards violent approaches. Does nonviolence work? Theorists such as Bunce and Wolchik [20], Chenoweth and Stephan [21], Schedler [22], and Trejo [23] seek to answer this question. Chenoweth and Stephan [21] argue that civil resistance, such as peaceful protests and nonviolent campaigns, can effectively topple dictators, expel foreign occupations, and promote territorial succession. They suggest that nonviolent campaigns are more successful because they increase the costs of repression for incumbents and encourage military factions to defect from the dictator. Additionally, they propose that nonviolence is more likely to lead to stable democracy than civil war. However, Bunce and Wolchik [20] contend that the effectiveness of nonviolent campaigns may be influenced by the choices made by autocrats. They suggest that it is the regime's response that determines whether protests remain peaceful or turn violent. Schedler [22] shares a similar perspective, arguing that nonviolence can lead to the liberalization of autocracies and the removal of tyrants. Contrary to these views, Trejo [23] raises doubts about the effectiveness of nonviolent campaigns in toppling dictators. He argues that assuming the opposition decides how to end a dictatorship is misleading because autocrats make choices that determine whether protests remain peaceful or become violent. Ultimately, Trejo asserts that it is the behavior of regimes that influences whether opposition movements choose peaceful protest or armed struggle.

However, the transition from nonviolence to violence within social movements is a multifaceted process. One potential reason is the use of violent repression by the state

against unarmed opponents, which may escalate the situation and prompt nonviolent activists to change tactics [1, 2, 24]. This shift in tactics can occur when activists and protesters perceive that nonviolent resistance is no longer effective in achieving their goals. Furthermore, external factors such as state sponsorship of violent groups or the lack of international support for nonviolent campaigns can also contribute to the transformation of nonviolent movements into violent ones. Ultimately, the decision to resort to violence often stems from feelings of frustration, desperation, and a belief that peaceful means are no longer viable. Concessions from the state may lead to the emergence of violent factions within a movement, as they may divide the movement into moderates and hardliners, incentivizing hardliners to adopt violent methods to distinguish themselves. This suggests that the authority's policy towards movement activists and efforts to divide them may contribute to the transition from nonviolence to violence. Additionally, the failure of nonviolent tactics to achieve their goals may result in frustration and a shift towards more confrontational and violent methods [1]. Internal divisions within the nonviolent movement or the emergence of radical factions can also contribute to the escalation of nonviolent dissent to violence [24]. However, these studies predominantly focus on the macro level, leaving the role of individual agency less explored.

In turning to nonviolent social movement to violent one, individual agency could work as a driving force, because Agency is the ability of individuals and groups to make strategic choices, negotiate, and pursue specific goals within a given cultural and institutional context. Individual agency may arise the self-identity feeling, while this Self-identity can be a catalyst for violence [25, 26]. This occurs when identity is manipulated to foster divisions and conflicts among different groups. While identity divisions, such as religious or cultural disparities, can be exploited to incite violence, there are alternative affiliations and identities that promote unity and defy isolationist demands [26]. For instance, individuals may identify with multiple identities, whether rooted in race, religion, nationality, or other factors, significantly influences individuals' perceptions of themselves and others. Strong identification with a particular group can evoke feelings of loyalty and belonging, leading to a desire to protect and defend it. However, this intense sense of identity may also foster an "us versus them" mindset, where individuals perceive outsiders as threats or adversaries [25]. This mentality can foster violence, as individuals may resort to force or aggression to safeguard their identity group from perceived threats. Additionally, when individuals feel their identity is marginalized or under attack, violence may be employed to assert power and reclaim dignity [25]. Moreover, political and social leaders can exploit and manipulate identity to fuel conflict and violence. By highlighting differences and fostering a sense of "otherness" between identity groups, leaders can stoke fear and hostility, escalating intergroup violence and conflict.

In this context, the assumption is that nonviolent activists, whether motivated by principled nonviolence or strategic considerations, may resort to violence when triggered through their self-identity (ultranationalist choices). However, existing nonviolent theories primarily concentrate on macro-level analyses, emphasizing state repression and government structures as factors that suppress nonviolent activist and subsequently lead to violent one. Yet, these theories often overlook the micro-foundations of nonviolent activism, neglecting to delve into the individual motivations and choices within the movement, which could lead to violent.

This study seeks to address this gap by focusing on the micro-foundations of nonviolent activism, which trigger them to violent activism. Specifically, it aims to shed light on the individual choices and behaviors within movements. To explore this further, the study examines two cases: The Saffron Revolution in Myanmar and the HI movement in Bangladesh. By investigating these cases, the study aims to understand how individual identities, motivations, and decisions contribute to the dynamics of nonviolent movements. By examining the micro-level factors influencing activists' actions, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the complexities underlying nonviolent activism and its potential evolution into violence.

3 Drivers of nonviolent to violent movement

In the realm of collective action, the micro foundation serves as a driving force, where individual agency and the roles of individual agents such as leaders, potential defectors, and decision-makers propel social movements [3]. This suggests that within any collective action, the decisions made by individual participants significantly influence the dynamics and outcomes of the movement. In this process social movement participants are continually faced with choices, which unveil cultural meanings, moral sentiments, emotions, and modes of reasoning within communities and individuals [27, 28]. In addition, in the decision-making process, individuals are influenced by emotions, affectual relationships, and collective identities, all of which contribute to the dynamics of social movements. These individuals operate within various organizational or association networks, where their choices and actions are shaped by conflicting behavioral pressures [29]. Emotions play a pivotal role in social movements, influencing both the processes by which individuals become involved in these movements and the ongoing activities within them. They are integral to the formation and sustenance of social movements, as well as to the recruitment and retention of members. Various emotions experienced by individuals, such as anger, fear, outrage, love, and solidarity, can drive them to join or initiate protest movements. Often, these emotions arise in response to external stimuli, such as moral injustices or shocking events, and are transient in nature. Furthermore, underlying positive and negative sentiments, such as loyalty to certain groups or individuals, and fear of repercussions, also shape these emotional responses [18].

On the other hand, scholars widely concur that nonviolent movements can transition to violence when the state escalates its use of violent repression against unarmed opponents. This escalation alters the perceived costs and benefits of nonviolent resistance [1, 2]. Moderate repression of nonviolent activities may encourage mobilization, while a display of willingness by the state to employ extreme violence against protestors can lead activists to believe that nonviolent resistance is futile. When significant levels of violence against civilians occur, nonviolent resistance becomes exceedingly challenging, as the expected costs of employing nonviolent methods become too high for many individuals to bear. This often results in a shift towards violent methods of contention. This transition may occur when nonviolent resistance movements perceive that their peaceful methods are no longer effective in achieving their goals, or when they face extreme violence from the regime, compelling them to defend themselves [2].

However, it can't deny the role of state repression in triggering the shift from nonviolence to violence within movements. Nonetheless, it is not always the sole factor. Nonviolent activists may also be influenced by personal agency, particularly from leaders

and activist's emotions. However, these emotions often trigger self-identity in social movements such as nationality, religion, ethnicity, and gender, which can intersect and potentially lead to conflict or violence when one identity is prioritized over others. An individual's emotion plays a crucial role in this framework as an indicator of how individuals perceive and prioritize their identities across contexts [25]. The paper anticipates that state repression may indeed contribute to the shift from nonviolence to violence within movements, but this is not always the case. Sometimes, nonviolent activists may resort to violence when triggered by individual agency, ultra-nationalist identity supremacy over others, or fear of being excluded from others' actions, regardless of whether they adhere to principled nonviolence or strategic nonviolent activism. This perspective leads to the following hypothesis.

H₁: When actors within a social movement foreground their religious or ultranationalist identity over others, then the movement is more likely to shift from nonviolent to violent strategies.

4 Research design

This paper employs a QCA method, wherein a hypothesis is formulated based on existing theories and subsequently tested through empirical analysis of selected case studies from the Saffron Revolution in Myanmar and HI in Bangladesh. Specifically, a qualitative comparative approach is utilized, focusing on the roles of monks and laypeople in the Saffron Revolution and extremist leaders in HI Bangladesh. This study uses the method of difference (the most similar system design), meaning the selected cases share similar characteristics but differ on the study variable. This approach facilitates the identification of the primary causes of the transition from nonviolent to violent approaches, as well as the factors influencing agency. Both cases share similarities in their transformations. In both organizations, leaders have similar religious backgrounds and nearly identical objectives regarding implementation. Additionally, both seek to enforce religious rules in their respective states, with similar approaches of intimidation. For the Saffron revolution, data were collected primarily from the International Crisis Group's Conflict Watch series report, which relies on field studies engaging directly with all parties to the conflict. Reports from 2006 to 2008 and 2010 to 2015 were closely examined. In addition, to verify the information, several diverse sources, including published and unpublished research papers, newspapers, and online articles, were employed, with a focus on the revolution itself and the ultra-nationalist Ma Ba Tha leaders. Initially, the emphasis was on the Saffron Revolution, but later data collection extended to include monk activists, particularly focusing on events after 2012. Conversely, the study of HI in Bangladesh began by examining organizational characteristics, approaches, and instances of intimidation starting in 2013 and continuing into the aftermath of the 2015 long march to Dhaka from local areas. In this case, International Crisis Group reports were also examined from 2010 to 2015. Additionally, observations were made on the activities and sermons of ultranationalist leaders based on organizational characteristics. As a whole, the collection and analysis of data on multiple independent variables allow for a thorough examination of the hypotheses under consideration, resulting in a better understanding of the complex interplay between activists' and leaders' personal preferences, the nonviolent-to-violent transformation they pursue, and the ultranationalist character. Consequently, as this study relies exclusively on secondary data and does not involve

human participants, animal subjects, clinical interventions, or identifiable personal data, it was exempt from Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. This exemption aligns with standard academic and ethical guidelines for secondary data research.

5 Empirical study

In this section, the discussion will examine the Saffron Revolution in Myanmar and HI in Bangladesh. Each case is divided into two distinct phases: the nonviolent episode and the violent episode. The first phase focuses on the formation of the movement and its nonviolent approaches, as well as the response of the respective governments to the movement. The second phase is characterized by the transformation from nonviolence to violence, exploring the underlying causes, the role of leaders in this transformation, and the strategies employed by leaders to influence the general populace.

6 Saffron revolution

6.1 First phase

Monks play a central role in Buddhism, holding esteemed positions within Burmese society as part of the Sangha. Myanmar is home to over 500,000 Buddhist monks, and the country features numerous monasteries, particularly abundant in low-lying areas, which historically held considerable moral authority and served as educational centers for the populace [30]. Buddha's philosophy emphasizes nonviolence, a principle that prohibits causing harm to any living being [31]. Monks are considered the primary bearers of this philosophy and have long incorporated it into their political activism. From ancient times to the modern era, including the independence movement, Buddhist monks have drawn upon nonviolence as a guiding principle. This commitment is evident in various significant events in Myanmar's history, such as the anti-colonial movement, the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, and the 2007 Saffron Revolution [32]. In translating Buddha's philosophy of nonviolence into political action, monks in Myanmar have employed several key strategies. First, they advocate for peaceful resistance through nonviolent protests, marches, and acts of civil disobedience. Second, they promote dialogue and reconciliation by acting as mediators between conflicting parties, following Buddha's teachings on compassion and understanding. These efforts aim to resolve conflict and foster harmony within communities and among various ethnic and religious groups. Third, many Buddhist monks actively participate in social welfare and community development programs. Inspired by Buddha's emphasis on compassion and service to others, they operate schools, orphanages, hospitals, and other humanitarian initiatives to alleviate suffering and promote societal well-being. Fourth, monks in Myanmar engage in political education and public awareness efforts, emphasizing the importance of civic participation, human rights, and democratic principles. They use religious sermons, teachings, and literature to promote ethical leadership and responsible citizenship [33]. Fifth, monks frequently invoke Buddha's teachings on moral integrity and accountability to speak out against injustice, corruption, and the abuse of power. They call for transparency, justice, and adherence to ethical standards in governance. Finally, monks have employed symbolic acts of protest—such as hunger strikes, prayer gatherings, and public rallies—to peacefully express dissent and draw attention to political issues [34]. These actions are rooted in the Buddhist principles of nonviolence, mindfulness, and moral courage.

So, this raises an important question: how are the monks connected to economic grievances, and what led them to engage in the nonviolent Saffron Revolution? Monks and laypeople in Myanmar are connected in two fundamental ways—spiritually and materially. In this context, we focus on the material connection, which played a key role in triggering their rebellion against military rule. First, a Burmese monk, also known as a *bhikkhu* or mendicant, engages in the daily routine of collecting alms food. This age-old rite, observed by the ordained Sangha, which consists of monks and nuns from many Theravadin nations, is deeply steeped in tradition. The daily alms-round, which dates to the Buddha's time, is still a valued ritual in the Buddhist community, serving several reasons. It allows laity Buddhists to earn merit, cultivate charity, and provide vital material support to the Sangha. At daybreak, the monks begin their alms-round, making a peaceful journey through local villages or towns with their alms-bowls in hand to collect food for the day ahead. When they return to the monastery, they congregate to share the offerings and eat together, which is an important part of their daily ritual. For many monks, this communal meal is their sole source of food, typically ending before mid-day to adhere to traditional traditions and beliefs [35]. Furthermore, most monasteries, whether organized or not, rely largely on donations from laypeople. The generosity of lay benefactors provides the majority of the food, shelter, and clothes required for the monastery's operation and the monks' survival. Without this crucial support, it would be difficult to keep the monastery running and the monks surviving [36]. Laypeople donate as a way of spiritual benefits. So, both monks and lay people are connected mutually. As the state administration decided to withdraw the subsidies from oil prices, with in several days' price of oil rose dramatically. As most of the lay people lived under the poverty line and higher oil costs imposed an additional strain on an already impoverished Burmese population. Such challenges would also be transmitted to the Sangha, who relied on food gifts from lay Buddhists for sustenance [30]. It had almost stopped the supply of the food and clothing chain from the lay people, because lay people were facing challenges to meet up with their own food let alone donation. The increased financial hardship caused by rising oil prices imposed an additional burden on Burma's already economically disadvantaged population. This economic pressure may have had a considerable impact on laity Buddhists' capacity to perform their traditional function of sustaining the Sangha, or monastic community. As a result, the monks and nuns' struggles in sustaining themselves and their monastic life would have been exacerbated. In reaction to these growing frustrations and sufferings, the monks got increasingly angry, eventually mobilizing and taking to the streets to protest the economic injustices they faced.

When these economic grievances were reached at extreme level monks were got to the street in Myanmar in 2007. Economic grievances triggered series of events that would bring monks to a forefront of the revolutionary event, which is commonly known as "Saffron Revolution." The saffron-colored robes, synonymous with Buddhist monks, were worn by those leading the demonstrations. At first, the monk-led protest started off modestly, but as individuals gained more courage, they opted to join the marches, leading to a significant increase in size. The number of demonstrators swelled to approximately 60,000 to 100,000, spanning around twenty-five locations across the nation [4]. The protests garnered support from celebrities, Buddhist nuns, and additional students, while the previously prohibited All Burma Buddhist Monks Union emerged in solidarity. In just a few days, the monk-led demonstrations evolved into the second most substantial

nonviolent resistance movement against the military government. With tremendous popular backing, the monks had bravely and definitively resisted the regime; their organizational capacity is a force the military dread [37]. Though the military authority suppressed the revolution, but monks were passionate about the nonviolent principles and applied nonviolent strategy. First, civil disobedience was one of the nonviolent strategies by the revolutionaries. In two ways monks non cooperated with the military. Monks declared to boycott to perform religious rituals in favor of the military. Senior military personnel regularly perform their rituals under monk's guidance, which is socially and spiritually acceptable towards military and others lay people. When the anti-military revolution started, the monks declared a religious boycott by refusing to perform religious rituals and ceremonies in favor of military dictator [38]. Which was very insulting for the military and mass people accepted this approach as a way of disobedience. Along with religious boycott the monks also declared not to take any donation from military personnel. The monks' symbolic action during the demonstration, in which they offered their upturned bowls, represented their rejection of donations from the military dictatorship, sending a powerful message [5]. Monks usually accept offerings, or 'alms,' from both the military and laypeople. However, throughout the demonstration, they refused to take military funding, which had a huge impact on the government [4]. Furthermore, when the monks flipped their alms bowls upside down as a symbolic act of protest, it carried the weight of excommunication, indicating their profound opposition to the regime's policies. Second, the monks marched through Myanmar's major cities reciting Metta (loving-kindness) chants, spreading unconditional compassion to the world, intending to alleviate the suffering of their fellow citizens and encourage a change of heart among Myanmar's military officials. The monks' unique contribution is to create a sacred place during everyday life. Unlike civilian rallies that are subject to the government's worldly responses, the monks turned public areas into sanctuaries. Chanting, which was formerly limited to monastery or pagoda grounds, was now brought into the public domain to demonstrate the city's dedication to the Buddha's teachings [5]. Third, Peaceful rallies and stay over with oppressed was another technique of the safe-front revolution. On September 22nd, approximately two thousand monks demonstrated through Yangon and ten thousand through Mandalay, with other demonstrations taking place in five townships throughout Myanmar. In the capital, marchers shouted "Myitta Thote" (the Buddha's words on loving-kindness) as they passed through a street block in front of Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. Despite being under house arrest, Suu Kyi arrived momentarily at her residence's gate to receive Buddhist monks' blessings [4]. This type of movement strategy symbolizes the non-cooperation with the existing rule because Suu Kyi was under house arrest and meeting with her by the monks represents that monks were behaving disobeying the state law. Fourth, initially the movement was against the economic deprivation, but Growing protests forced the government to tighten security by deploying troops to quell demonstrations, enforcing curfews, and prohibiting mass gatherings. Security personnel used brutality, resulting in numerous arrests, including monks who were tortured and denied sufficient medical care. The military's heavy-handed tactics made the movement counterproductive [4]. A month later, on October 26th, groups of general people dressed in yellow gathered to Rangoon's Shwedagon temple for prayers, carrying candles and flowers. Monks also renewed protests in Pakokku, with approximately 200 taking part in a march by the end of October.

Primarily they were demanding the decrease of fuel prices and release of prisoners but after the military crackdown they demanded the democratic rule and withdraw of military rule. In the new phase of the movement general peoples were actively participated willingly and another repertoire they added which was the inception of the 'stop sign', shown as a raised palm within a circle, is a powerful symbol of resistance to military government and an appeal for democracy. This simple yet powerful graphic, suggestive of a welcoming wave or the Buddha's hand, depicts the "stop campaign" that advocates peaceful resistance to the regime. The sign has been widely circulated, appearing on leaflets given around Mandalay's streets at night and spray-painted on walls alongside red splashes symbolizing the authorities' bloodshed [39]. This symbol represents a nonviolent message that calls for an end to torture, violence, and injustice. As more people notice these marks, the message of resistance grows stronger and spreads faster.

Though the monks applied nonviolent techniques, but the authority took several military crackdown and internal pressures within the protest movement. The government responded to the protests with severe repression, sending troops to subdue them, instituting curfews, and prohibiting mass gatherings [37]. Security forces used brutality against protestors, arresting hundreds of people, including several monks who were at the vanguard of the demonstrations. Despite the crackdown, the protest movement continued to survive for a while, with regular protests and acts of resistance. However, internal differences and the military's overwhelming power eventually slowed the protests. The government's strong methods, which included arrests, assault, and intimidation, effectively quelled the protest movement. Additionally, the lack of significant international backing and action hampered the protesters' capacity to fulfill their objectives [4].

In this phase Monks, nuns, laborers, mothers accompanied by their children, members of the National League of Democracy (NLD), and outlawed opposition factions peacefully marched for several days, advocating for national reconciliation and the release of Suu Kyi along with other political detainees. As the Saffron Revolution gained momentum, military personnel and riot police joined forces with the USDA and the Swan Arr Shin to suppress the nonviolent movement. Despite attempts by protesters to regroup after each assault, the imprisonment of movement leaders and the confinement of most monks weakened their resistance, ultimately succumbing to the regime's systematic and persistent oppression. Consequently, the Saffron Revolution concluded with military control remaining unshaken. Though the revolution failed but it had not left its rhythm of nonviolence, while state repressed them.

6.2 Second phase

The second face is characterized by political violence, which initially began as unarmed resistance but gradually escalated—promoted and propagated by campaigners, particularly extremist leaders—during the Rohingya crisis. This violence, which often targeted the Rohingya people, eventually took the form of armed violence in some instances.

The Saffron Revolution of 2007 initially called for reconciliation and peace in Myanmar. However, the situation gradually shifted as extremist Buddhist monks began orchestrating hostility against the Rohingya Muslim community [40]. While the monks were originally opposed to the military and the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), the dynamics changed over time. Eventually, the monks, the USDP, and the military formed a nefarious alliance [40]. This alliance created a mutually beneficial

arrangement in which all parties gained through collaboration, negotiation, or collective involvement. However, we argue that this alliance marked a critical turning point—signaling the shift of the monkhood from a tradition of nonviolence to one increasingly associated with violent extremism. In this phase, monks—particularly ultranationalist ones—actively supported and justified military persecution. From a broader perspective, the Sangha, including the monks, assumed the role of civil society in a context where formal civil society was largely absent. Through their close ties with state actors, these extremist monks expanded their political influence and mobilized large segments of society through religious institutions and charismatic authority. Comparable dynamics were evident in Myanmar, where organizations such as Ma Ba Tha and the 969 Movement emerged as organized platforms for promoting exclusionary nationalist ideologies and facilitating mass mobilization. Hardline Buddhist monks and organizations such as Ma Ba Tha spearheaded campaigns targeting the Rohingya Muslim community under the banner of protecting “race and religion.” Through religious networks and public advocacy, these actors promoted narratives depicting Islam as a demographic and cultural threat, thereby contributing to the mobilization of anti-Muslim sentiment among segments of the Buddhist majority. Anti-Rohingya narratives promoted by Buddhist nationalist movements relied heavily on dehumanizing representations and demographic anxieties. As one communal relations analyst interviewed by Al Jazeera observed, many people feared that “very soon Rakhine state will be full of Muslim Rohingyas and the Buddhists will be swallowed,” framing Muslims as an existential threat to Buddhism and the nation [41]. Ma Ba Tha leaders frequently included military figures in their propaganda. Influential monks like Sitagu Sayadaw, who had credibility among military personnel, played a key role in spreading anti-Rohingya narratives to justify military actions against the group. Sitagu Sayadaw (Ashin Nyanissara), aged 88, was once known for his participation in the 1988 pro-democracy movement but later aligned himself with the military, similar to other Ma Ba Tha monks. Despite his past exile in the U.S. and global recognition—including meetings with Barack Obama and Pope Francis—he returned to Myanmar during the democratic transition as a monastic academic [42]. Though he once spoke of Buddhist nonviolence in interfaith forums, his stance shifted after 2012, particularly regarding interfaith marriage laws. While his English sermons abroad promote peace, his Burmese sermons often depict Islam as violent and frame Rohingya Muslims as foreign to Myanmar [43]. A notable example of his military alignment occurred on October 30, 2017, when he preached to troops in Karen State. There, he framed the Rohingya crisis as a defense of race and religion, citing Dutthagamani’s conquest of a Tamil ruler in ancient Sri Lanka. He declared the bond between monks and the military “inseparable” and assured the military of monastic support, even stating that those killed in battle were “not fully human” [43]. Sitagu’s influence made the military receptive to his sermons, which fueled hatred by framing violence as religious devotion. On the one hand, another influential figure known for promoting hatred and religious extremism is Ashin Wirathu. He is the leading figure behind the ultra-nationalist 969 Movement, founded in 2001, which claims to promote and protect Buddhism but has primarily spread anti-Muslim rhetoric. Time magazine described Wirathu as “the face of Buddhist terror” [44], and he has embraced the nickname “the Burmese Bin Laden” [45]. The 969 Movement’s objectives were initially ambiguous, but after Wirathu’s release in January 2012 and the surge in activism that followed, both the monks and their supporters began

adopting increasingly violent tactics. Liberal Buddhists who attempted to support or even shop at Rohingya-owned stores were often intimidated, ostracized, or worn down by pressure from extremist followers of the movement. In its second phase, the 969 Movement—under Wirathu’s leadership—became more openly anti-Rohingya. Wirathu used false information, rumors, and inflammatory rhetoric to incite hatred. In one interview, he accused Muslims of “breeding rapidly,” “stealing and raping our women,” and declared, “We must keep Myanmar Buddhist.” [44]. He likened Rohingya Muslims to “mad dogs” and described them as “crude and savage” [45, 46], portraying them as a threat to Buddhism and Burmese society. Wirathu fueled fear among Buddhists by claiming that Islam threatened Myanmar’s Buddhist identity. He cited examples like Indonesia, once Hindu-Buddhist but now Muslim-majority, and the Philippines’ struggle with Islamic militants, warning Myanmar could be next [47]. Initially using DVDs, he later turned to platforms like YouTube and Facebook to spread hate speech and rumors. Facebook eventually removed his page for inciting violence [48]. Supported by the military, Wirathu became more extreme. At a rally in Yangon, amid international scrutiny of Myanmar’s treatment of the Rohingya, he declared, “The day the International Criminal Court and the R2P come to our country... U Wirathu will pick up a gun,” receiving loud public support [41].

The propagation by these monks has had two major effects. First, their hate-filled rhetoric and propaganda have directly influenced the lay population, many of whom either actively participate in violence or passively support the military’s policy. In 2012, thousands of monks and laypeople once again flooded the streets—this time in support of the military’s agenda—due to a growing alliance between ultranationalist leaders and the military. Unlike previous protests, they were now chanting in favor of the military, and there were calls to marginalize those seeking revenge [49]. In this episode Ma Ba Tha and leaders played the role and their ultra nationalist view and hatred became the rhythm of the movement. The leaders of this organization were the vanguard of the saffron revolution. The organization’s roots can be linked to the 969 movement, which gained prominence in 2011 [50]. The attraction of Ma Ba Tha extended beyond its beliefs and actions; it offered its members and followers a sense of community and purpose. The belief that Buddhism is under threat from Islam, along with economic concerns and a perceived absence of tangible benefits from reforms, fueled the resonance of nationalist discourses [51]. Ordinary citizens and laypeople became influenced by this propaganda, actively engaging in violence and supporting state-led oppression of the Rohingya. These agitators encouraged attackers to target not only Rohingya Muslims but also other Muslim communities, such as the Kaman—an officially recognized ethnic group [51]. This mobilization was driven through sermons delivered in monasteries and speeches at public events, primarily spreading hostility via false information and rumors. Many Buddhists, whether knowingly or not, absorbed this narrative of hatred against the Rohingya, fostering both widespread animosity and fear. As a result, monks and the ultra-nationalist group Ma Ba Tha gained significant influence within the Buddhist population, reinforcing the military’s dominance [40]. In pursuit of its political aims, the military carried out brutal campaigns marked by killings, forced displacement, and the mass exodus of Rohingya from Myanmar.

Second, one of the darkest consequences of Myanmar’s political transition has been the rise in religious intolerance. Since mid-2012—when communal violence between

Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims erupted in Arakan State, resulting in over 200 deaths and the displacement of around 140,000 people, mostly Muslims—extreme Buddhist nationalism has steadily grown [52]. These tensions have spread beyond the “anti-Bengali” rhetoric used by the government to delegitimize the Rohingya, who were excluded from the 2014 national census and labeled as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Monks have even been accused of inciting mass violence, such as in Meiktila, a central Burmese town where Buddhist mobs attacked Muslim neighborhoods. At least 44 people were killed there, including 20 students and several teachers at an Islamic school [52]. The surge in anti-Muslim riots notably intensified after the 2012 by-elections, which marked a landslide victory for Aung San Suu Kyi’s NLD. These recurring riots reveal not only deep-seated religious prejudice but also suggest strategic political manipulation and political violence.

7 Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh

7.1 First phase

HI, an Arabic term meaning “Protectorate of Islam,” gradually brought its movements and activities to the forefront of the political stage, raising concerns among both the government and liberal segments of society. Initially, HI emerged as a reactionary religious interest group characterized by nonviolent activities—a focus of our analysis in the first phase. However, over time, it lost that nonviolent momentum and shifted away from its original approach. HI was established in January 2010 in Chittagong under the leadership of the *ulama*¹ from *Qawmi* Madrasas (QM). Its formation was triggered by growing discontent over the government’s alleged anti-Islamic policies and the perceived promotion of secular values and principles [53]. HI functions as an umbrella organization, bringing together a broad coalition of *ulama* from both political and non-political platforms. United under this platform, these religious leaders mobilized in response to what they viewed as the ruling government’s questionable policies and increasingly secularized, anti-Islamic stance [54]. HI portrays itself as a non-political organization, its leaders have consistently pushed for political and legal reforms. They have openly criticized the secular legal system and called for a revolution to establish an Islamic state in Bangladesh governed by Sharia law [6, 53]. While HI is not officially registered as a political party, its leadership has remained deeply involved in political discourse and activism. Although HI’s leadership consists of individuals from varied political and non-political backgrounds, they are predominantly united by a common ideological adherence to Islamic conservatism. More specifically, most of these *ulama* of HI have been educated through the QM system, which has deep historical ties to—and is considered a derivative of—the renowned Darul Uloom Deoband Madrasa in India [55]. HI ideologically promotes a strict and often radical interpretation of Sunni Islam, explicitly rejecting Western cultural norms and values. Central to its agenda is the enforcement of Islamic law, including punishment for blasphemy, as outlined in its 13-point charter. HI also opposes secular education, cultural celebrations such as Pohela Boishakh (Bengali New year), and the public participation of women. Through its extensive QM network, the organization advances Islamic nationalism and seeks to establish cultural hegemony. The primary drivers of the HI movement are teachers and students affiliated with over

¹The term *Ulama* refers to the educated class within the Islamic community, specifically scholars who specialize in various aspects of Islamic knowledge and are often regarded as authoritative interpreters and guardians of Sharia law.

25,000 madrasas (Islamic religious schools) across Bangladesh. These institutions play a pivotal role in uniting and mobilizing support for HI. Among them, there are 13,902 QMs, enrolling more than 1.4 million students—approximately 30% of the total population in state-regulated secondary education [54, 56].

At the heart of this vast network is the Hathazari Madrasa, which functions as the de facto headquarters of HI. The organization's leadership also originates from this influential institution. The Hathazari Madrasa, with its substantial student body and high religious prestige, serves as a critical recruitment base for HI [57]. Its prominence within the QM network gives the organization extensive leverage, enabling it to draw support from tens of thousands of similar institutions across the country [58]. Beyond its educational dominance, HI also derives considerable power from its involvement in social and welfare initiatives. Like other Islamist movements globally, such as Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), HI's conservative religious agenda is bolstered by charitable efforts conducted through its madrasa network. These efforts involve offering shelter to orphans, organizing religious services for the poor, and extending financial support to underprivileged families [58]. According to a 2009 report by The National Bureau of Asian Research, the expanding involvement of the ulama in community welfare through religious NGOs has deepened their ties with local communities and enhanced their engagement with government authorities. Their visible presence in public affairs has opened new avenues for sharing their socio-religious and cultural perspectives with a wider audience [59].

Several influential leaders serve as the vanguard of the HI movement, while imams who graduated from institutions like Hathazari Madrasa often act as grassroots campaigners. These organizations employ teachers across affiliated QMs, where students are systematically mobilized to participate in street protests and mass demonstrations, as previously noted. This institutional structure grants teacher's substantial authority over their students, enabling them to direct collective political action [60]. As a result, when HI leadership calls for mobilization, students can be rapidly organized and deployed with the coordination and intensity of a disciplined force. It is estimated that a single QM has the capacity to bring thousands into the streets, reinforced by the far-reaching social networks maintained by madrasa leaders who wield significant influence within their communities. Despite having a vast support base and a strong organizational network, HI initially adopted a conventional nonviolent approach, advocating for the implementation of Shariah-based laws. Between 2009 and 2013, HI employed a variety of nonviolent strategies to advance its demands. This approach aligns with the foundational Islamic principle that rejects violence and upholds peace and justice. The Quran emphasizes non-aggression and imposes strict limits on the use of force, permitting it only in cases of self-defense or under clearly defined just conditions. Even in such cases, Islamic teachings prohibit excessive force, retaliation beyond limits, and any harm to civilians or non-combatants [61]. Initially, HI operated in accordance with Islamic principles and adopted a range of nonviolent strategies to advance its ideological agenda while distancing itself from militant activity. These strategies included legal action, mass mobilization, public rallies, and rhetorical framing, all aimed at pressuring the government to address their concerns. HI leaders first attempted to influence national policy through legal appeals and formal petitions, particularly in opposition to the 2009 Women Development Policy and proposed secular reforms to Islamic education [59, 62]. HI mobilized its extensive network of QMs to organize large-scale protests, most prominently

the Dhaka long march on April 6, 2013, during which it presented a 13-point list of demands. These included the enactment of blasphemy laws, a ban on so-called “anti-Islamic” practices, and safeguarding Islamic educational institutions [58]. This was followed by the mass sit-in at Motijheel on May 5, 2013, which was initially presented as a peaceful demonstration, although it ultimately escalated into violent clashes with law enforcement authorities [63]. During this period, HI consistently portrayed itself as a moral and religious movement rather than a political organization, regularly issuing sermons, public statements, and religious discourses that framed its activities as spiritual obligations rather than political dissent [59, 63]. Furthermore, HI actively engaged in welfare initiatives to strengthen its social credibility and broaden its grassroots support base [62, 64]. The organization also published formal fatwas rejecting the use of violence in the name of Islam and condemning isolated acts of killing as sources of social disorder [65]. These actions reflect an early commitment to nonviolent advocacy and resistance, even in response to what they perceived as threats to their religious and ethical values. Collectively, these strategies helped HI position itself as a guardian of Islamic principles through symbolic, institutional, and community-driven nonviolence, despite operating in a politically charged environment. This raises an important question: How did HI transition from nonviolent activism to violent confrontation? What factors contributed to this shift, and did individual actors play a role in this transformation? The following section explores these questions in detail.

7.2 Second phase

This stage is characterized by violent extremism. Like the Ma Ba Tha in Myanmar, HI also uses ultra-religious views to tackle government policy as well as to infatuate followers and mass supporters. HI influences its followers through traditional sermons, social media outreach, Da’wa activities, and its networks of QMs and *Manhazis*, leveraging the authority of its leaders to mobilize and motivate supporters toward its extremist agenda. HI leaders influence their mass supporters primarily through religious sermons, including *Waz Mahfils*² and *Fatwas*.³ Among these, *Waz* plays a particularly intensive role. When HI leaders embed political messages and hidden agendas within their religious preaching, followers—whether consciously or unconsciously—tend to accept these appeals as legitimate, making them more susceptible to participating in violent acts. For example, speeches delivered at Hefazat-e-Islam gatherings framed sculptures of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as incompatible with Islamic principles and called for their removal. One speech stated that “If any idol of Bangabandhu is constructed anywhere, it will be demolished if we can afford it” [66]. Shortly thereafter, a sculpture under construction in Kushtia was vandalized. Media reports indicated that those arrested in

²In Bangladesh, *Waz Mahfils* serve as public platforms for delivering Islamic teachings and interpretations, where scholars from both *Qawmi* and *Aliya* madrasahs engage in shaping and guiding the Islamist public sphere. Although some critics question the philosophical depth of these gatherings, *Waz Mahfils* have become prominent sources of religious instruction and are closely tied to everyday religious practices. Recently, these events have sparked significant debate—particularly concerning the sermons delivered by certain HI leaders and influential ulema. Their emotionally charged rhetoric has led to growing concerns that *Waz Mahfils* are fostering radical mindsets among the youth, overshadowing more nuanced Islamic discourse.

³*Fatwa* is an Arabic term that holds a respected place in Islamic jurisprudence and the *Holy Qur’an*. It denotes the rulings or guidance provided by a *Mufti* (Islamic legal scholar) based on Islamic legal sources in response to particular situations or issues. The foundations of a *fatwa* include the *Qur’an*, *Sunnah*, *Ijma*, and *Qiyas*, and only qualified *Muftis* are authorized to issue them. However, in the context of Bangladesh, fatwas often face challenges due to misinterpretation and misuse. There are also instances where certain ideological groups, particularly Islam-based political parties and movements, manipulate fatwas to serve their own political agendas.

connection with the incident claimed during initial interrogation that they had been influenced by statements made at such gatherings [67]. This sequence of events highlights the role of religious rhetoric and symbolic issues in facilitating collective mobilization. Experts argue that such sermons violate Islamic principles and instead serve to mislead followers under the guise of religious duty [66]. Second, Islamic modernism is scarcely reflected in HI's ideology, which largely adheres to medieval interpretations. However, a significant form of modernization is evident in their strategic use of modern technology—particularly social media—to disseminate traditional beliefs and mobilize supporters. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have transformed from basic means of communication into central hubs for social interaction and activism [68]. While HI's demonstrations remain street-based to showcase their strength, their ideological messaging, organizational strategies, and propaganda efforts are increasingly driven by social media. Since the inception of HI's social media presence, the group's activities and leaders' speeches have been widely circulated on its official Facebook page. From organizing the anti-Modi campaign to demanding the release of detained leaders, the page has mobilized supporters for rallies, protests, and even sabotage. With over a million followers, posts quickly gain millions of likes and shares, often sparking polarized comments—many aggressively targeting opponents. Additionally, hundreds of anonymous videos, particularly on YouTube, feature HI leaders expressing sentiments that are often more violent than religious, though not universally so [66]. Third, *Da'wa*,⁴ commonly understood as a call to Islam encouraging non-Muslims to convert [69], is also a Quranic term referring to God's invitation to believe in true religion. In Bangladesh, Tablighi Jamaat is the most influential *da'wa* movement [70] and has supported HI's demands in the past [71]. Although different in approach, HI also engages in *da'wa*; one form involves publicizing conversions, such as a 2021 Facebook post celebrating a Brahmin family embracing Islam under HI's leadership [72]. Another form involves mass mobilization through *da'wa*-style outreach—leaflets, posters, and social media—urging Muslims to join HI's public programs and support its broader agenda. Fourth, as discussed in the previous section, QM serves as the foundational support base for HI, providing both manpower and ideological strength. When mobilized by Islamist leaders, QM students are often ready to take to the streets with a militant spirit. A typical QM can potentially gather thousands, supported by the extensive social networks of its leaders. This capacity enables HI to rapidly organize protests, making it a significant force in Bangladesh's street and power politics. Fifth, in religious politics and extremism, those

⁴*Da'wa* means "invitation" or "call" and generally refers to inviting others to Islam. It is rooted in the Quranic tradition and is often seen as both a spiritual and social mission. While groups like *Tablighi Jamaat* focus on spiritual outreach, HI engages in *da'wa* for both religious and strategic purposes. HI promotes two types of *da'wa*: one involves publicizing religious conversions to inspire followers and expand their support base; the other focuses on mobilizing people before events by distributing leaflets, using posters, and posting on social media. This dual approach helps HI spread its message and gather mass support for its agenda.

advocating for a caliphate through jihad are known as the *Manhazi*.⁵ Although HI presents itself as a nonviolent organization, authorities have reported links between HI and the *Manhazi* group [66]. Social media posts attributed to individuals associated with the *Manhazi* network criticized HI's relatively passive stance on the sculpture controversy and advocated a more confrontational approach. Media reports further noted that some of these individuals had previously faced allegations related to promoting jihadist ideas and maintained connections with religious institutions in Chittagong [73]. These developments suggest the presence of ideological currents seeking to encourage more radical forms of activism within or around the broader movement. Security forces also linked HI's violent protests during Modi's visit (March 26–27, 2021) to extremist "guidance" from within, claiming that Afghan returnees, including former *Huji* members, are part of HI's *Manhazi* faction aiming to establish a jihadist state. The then authorities described the *Manhazi* wing within QM as the ideological driver behind HI's most militant actions [73]. Among all HI-affiliated groups, *Manhazi* is seen as the most extreme. While HI also uses other methods—like talk shows, activist meetings, and weekly *Halkaye Jikir*—to grow its support base, these are less impactful than its radical mobilization strategies.

As we mentioned earlier that HI's followers, primarily comprising low-income, uneducated individuals from rural areas, have historically been overlooked by the educated middle class. HI capitalized on this opportunity, bringing these marginalized groups to the forefront and fostering stronger allegiance among them [65]. With millions of followers, HI's influence extends through its control of numerous Quranic schools in Bangladesh. It has successfully united various political groups and organizations that had previously operated independently. Specifically, the protests in Dhaka were largely led by teachers and students from QM, under HI's influence [54]. These students, heavily influenced by their religious teachings, readily heed the directives of their leaders, mobilizing as a unified force when necessary. The leaders and teachers of these Madrasahs cultivate a "cultural hegemony," shaping the beliefs of their followers and prompting them to take to the streets to protect Islam from perceived threats, regardless of justification [74]. In addition, HI's leaders employ propaganda against foreign cultural influences, condemning practices such as the celebration of the Bengali New Year and advocating for strict gender roles and modesty for women. They even go so far as to attribute responsibility for incidents of rape or sexual misconduct to "certain kinds" of women, claiming that their behavior or perceived indecency invites or justifies such violence [75]. Additionally, this organization to instigate hatred against the other religious believers and even

⁵ *Manhazi* refers to those involved in religious politics and extremism who openly call for jihad with the aim of establishing a so-called caliphate. While some groups may claim to be nonviolent, *Manhazi* elements are known for promoting militant ideologies and pushing organizations towards extremism. Leadership figures within these groups often criticize more passive approaches to religious or political issues, advocating instead for direct and active militant engagement. *Manhazi* factions tend to have connections with extremist returnees and former militants, which strengthens their radical agenda. They use moments of social or political tension to incite violence and demonstrations, often framing these actions as guidance for their extremist supporters. Within broader religious organizations, the *Manhazi* faction represents the most militant wing, nurturing extremist views and aiming to transform political landscapes through force. In addition to direct militant activities, *Manhazi* groups also engage in softer methods to build support, such as participation in religious gatherings, talk shows, and community meetings. However, these are generally less influential compared to their more aggressive and violent tactics.

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one point of its 13 points demands (“foreign conspiracy to separate the Chittagong Hill Tracts from Bangladesh and make it is Christian state”) also indicates that instigation. Thus, the common mass and the followers without any justification took this propagation as the non-Islamic one and they took to the street for the protection of Islam [76]. Indeed, the followers consciously or unconsciously believed the propagations and took to the streets to show their muscle strength, and the results were obvious that religiously motivated extremists became embroiled in deadly political violence in Bangladesh.

Initially, this organization surfaced as a religious fundamentalist pressure group, and the state did not suppress them; rather, state authorities facilitated them in certain sensitive matters. However, when the organization put forth its demands, encapsulated in 13 points of Islamic principles, many were astonished by its sudden prominence, triggering street protests [6], and thus it has outgrown as a more repressive group. HI initially maintained a nonviolent stance, but this began to change in 2013 as leaders grew frustrated with government policies they viewed as anti-Islamic. They felt alienated by secular education reforms, the prosecution of Jamaat-e-Islami leaders, and a perceived push toward Westernization and atheism. These grievances, fueled by inflammatory leadership rhetoric, led HI to adopt increasingly confrontational and sometimes violent tactics. Basically, HI enforced blockades at Dhaka’s entry points and organized a mass mobilization toward the city center, resulting in widespread disruption. Violent street clashes erupted between HI supporters, law enforcement agencies, and rival political activists. Protesters were seen throwing bricks and setting fires during the confrontations [77]. Reports of vandalism and arson emerged, including attacks on bookstores near the Baitul Mukarram National Mosque, where Qurans and other religious texts were allegedly burned—although HI denied any responsibility [78, 79]. Additionally, protesters physically assaulted academics, journalists, and secular activists [80]. Due to inflammatory and anti-minority rhetoric voiced by its leadership, HI has played a role in stoking communal tensions to serve its political objectives. For instances, On March 17, 2021, following a Facebook post critical of HI leader Mamunul Haque, several hundred HI supporters attacked the Hindu village of Nagaon in Sunamganj’s Shalla Upazila. At least 75 homes were looted or damaged, idols desecrated, and valuables stolen. The violence came just days after an HI rally where Haque criticized celebrations of Bangabandhu’s birth centenary and Narendra Modi’s planned visit. Although the boy who posted the criticism was handed over to police, the attack followed soon after—highlighting how HI incites unrest to assert its influence [81]. Again, HI Though claiming to be apolitical, HI routinely exploits religious sentiments to pursue political objectives through confrontational tactics. In 2020, it staged a massive anti-France protest in Dhaka, demanding the severance of diplomatic ties over President Macron’s defense of cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad—demonstrating HI’s ability to mobilize violence over global issues [82]. Similarly, during Bangladesh’s golden jubilee in 2021, HI launched violent anti-Modi protests, accusing the Indian Prime Minister of anti-Muslim policies. The clashes with security forces in Dhaka, Chattogram, and Brahmanbaria left at least ten dead and saw attacks on cultural institutions, including the Allauddin Music Academy. HI’s nationwide hartal, paired with incendiary speeches from its leaders, underscored its strategy of using mass mobilization, religious outrage, and street violence to pressure the state and challenge secular governance [83–86]. Besides, the way this group conducts its protests is highly questionable and unconventional, often involving strikes, riots, attacks on

minority religious communities, and acts of sabotage. Although the organization claims these actions are within their rights, their methods do not align with constitutional principles, and their demands appear largely unconstitutional. Sociologists and anthropologists have critically examined this contradiction, with recent scholarly work frequently portraying traditionalist Islamic groups like HI as posing a threat to, and contributing to a crisis in, Bangladesh's national identity [54]. Moreover, HI mobilized the masses and their student supporters to the streets, utilizing these tactics to foment animosity against their adversaries and cultivate extremist factions willing to undertake any action in support of HI's agenda. This ultimately led to political violence in secular Bangladesh fueled by religious extremism.

8 Conclusion

Existing literature indicates that nonviolent movements may turn violent when the state increases its use of violent repression against unarmed opponents. This escalation alters the perceived risks and rewards associated with nonviolent resistance. However, much of this literature overlooks the micro-foundations of the movement. This piece delves into the micro-foundations, drawing on empirical studies from Myanmar's Saffron Revolution and HI in Bangladesh. These studies suggest that individual agency serves as a significant driver of social movements. The actions of movement activists and leaders play a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of the social movement.

In existing literature, theorists often highlight the state's perspective in explaining the transition of movements from nonviolent to violent approaches. However, this study shifts its focus to individuals' preferences. While this study does not deny that state repression can indeed provoke a shift from nonviolence to violence, it suggests that this is not a universal phenomenon and that other factors should be reconsidered.

In the case of the Saffron Revolution in Myanmar, the authorities responded to nonviolent resistance with several military crackdowns and internal pressures within the protest movement. The government employed harsh measures, including sending troops to quell protests, imposing curfews, and banning mass gatherings. Security forces resorted to brutality, resulting in the arrest of hundreds of individuals, including numerous monks who played prominent roles in the demonstrations. Despite the crackdown, the protest movement persisted for a period, with regular nonviolent protests and acts of resistance. The situation in Bangladesh with HI is somewhat different. While the government responded with leniency to the nonviolent movement, it did not heed their demands for implementation.

Existing literature suggests that repressive responses to nonviolent resistance often lead to its transformation into violent resistance. However, empirical evidence indicates that in both cases, ultranationalist views held by leaders and activists trigger the shift from nonviolent to violent resistance. In Myanmar, the ultranationalist organizational stance and leaders' propagation against other religious beliefs incite violence. Specifically, the fear of the Buddhist religion disappearing among believers and followers due to Rohingya Muslims serves as a catalyst for violence. Moreover, in the Saffron Revolution, shifting the movement's focus from the government to the Rohingya further propelled its transition from nonviolent to violent action by reinforcing the supremacy of their religious identity.

Similarly, in the case of HI in Bangladesh, the trend is similar. Activists and leaders demand the imposition of Sharia law in the Muslim-dominated country and the removal of foreign cultures by state authorities. Here, religious supremacy acts as a driving force, but HI leaders propagate against other religions and the government, warning that anti-Islamic regulations imposed by the government would secularize the country. Consequently, followers and activists, whether consciously or unconsciously, believe this propaganda and take to the streets as defenders of Islam in a violent manner.

Therefore, the findings indicate that individual preferences and self-identity play a crucial role in transitioning activists and followers from nonviolent to violent strategies within the revolution. Ultranationalist ideologies, promoting the dominance of one religion over others, shifting the movement's target and instilling fear of cultural extinction, emerge as significant drivers of violent movements in these contexts, often outweighing the impact of state repression.

Author contributions

Md. Al-Amin conceptualized the research idea, designed the study framework, conducted the secondary data and performed the analysis. He also wrote the initial draft of the manuscript and coordinated revisions. Md. Abdul Baten Chowdhury contributed to review and edited the manuscript for intellectual content ensuring clarity, coherence, and adherence to journal guidelines. Sushmita Roy contributed to the literature review, assisted in writing the manuscript. She also played a key role in refining the arguments and strengthening the theoretical framework and supervised. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript before submission.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from public, commercial, or not-for-profit funding agencies.

Data availability

The qualitative materials supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements but may be provided by the corresponding author upon reasonable request and with appropriate ethical considerations.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study relied exclusively on secondary data and did not involve human participants, animal subjects, clinical interventions, or the use of identifiable personal data. Therefore, ethical approval was not required from an IRB in accordance with local legislation and institutional requirements. As the study did not involve direct interaction with human participants, informed consent was not applicable. This exemption aligns with standard academic and ethical guidelines for research based on publicly available and secondary sources. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Consent for publication

All authors have given their consent for publication of this manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Received: 24 March 2025 / Accepted: 8 July 2026

Published online: 15 July 2026

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