



Research Article

Ethics of Revolutionary Change: Distinguishing People's Revolution from Conspiracy, Elite-Driven Regime Change, and the Exploitation of Popular Sovereignty

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Abstract

Revolution has long been understood as a legitimate means of deep political and social transformation. From the French and Russian Revolutions to the anti-colonial struggles of the twentieth century, revolutionary change has historically rested on popular participation, moral purpose, and an openly declared commitment to collective emancipation. In contemporary political discourse, however, the term “revolution” is increasingly stretched, diluted, and strategically misused, often to legitimize opaque processes of regime change, elite rivalry, or externally influenced political disruption. Such conceptual slippage weakens democratic accountability and distorts historical truth. This article proposes a clear normative and empirical distinction between genuine people's revolutions, elite-engineered regime change, and conspiratorial disruptions that present themselves as popular movements. *It argues that authentic revolutions are fundamentally for the people and by the people, grounded in informed consent and articulated objectives from the outset. Transparency of purpose is not merely an ethical virtue; it is a democratic necessity that allows citizens to knowingly support, resist, or withdraw from political action. Movements that mobilize public sentiment through ambiguity, deception, or manufactured disorder, while advancing narrow or concealed interests, cannot be credibly described as revolutions. They are, instead, conspiracies against popular sovereignty.* Drawing on comparative historical analysis, the article examines the French Revolution (1789), the Russian Revolution (1917), the Indian independence movement, and selected twentieth-century revolutionary transformations, with reference to patterns of mass mobilization, political legitimacy, and institutional outcomes. Particular emphasis is placed on Bangladesh's Liberation War of 1971, examined as a paradigmatic people's revolution shaped by more than two decades (1947-1971) of political struggle, cultural resistance, electoral mandates, and sustained mass consciousness. This historically grounded process is contrasted with contemporary claims of “instant” or spontaneous revolutions that lack comparable preparation, organizational depth, or transparent popular authorization. The article concludes that revolutions detached from historical truth, popular consent, and ethical clarity are unlikely to endure. Sustainable revolutionary change must emerge from people's lived realities, collective memory, and an openly stated commitment to rights, justice, and sovereignty.

Keywords

Revolution, Sovereignty, Conspiracy, Liberation, Legitimacy, Mass, Ethics

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1. Introduction

Revolution has long held a significant position in political thought, historical interpretation, and collective imagination. Throughout different periods and regions, it has represented a decisive break with entrenched systems of authority, resistance against structural injustice, and the aspiration for political and social transformation. From the democratic upheavals of the eighteenth century to the wave of decolonization in the twentieth century, revolutions have often emerged when existing political orders restrict peaceful reform, marginalize public participation, and maintain inequality through entrenched institutions. Under such conditions, revolution moves beyond a mere political event and acquires an ethical dimension. It becomes an expression of collective dignity and a demand for recognition, citizenship, and the right of people to shape their own political destiny.

In contemporary political discourse, however, the meaning of “revolution” has become increasingly diluted. *The term is frequently applied to a broad spectrum of political disruptions, including sudden regime changes, struggles among elites for power, externally influenced political transitions, and even brief episodes of popular protest. These events are sometimes labeled as revolutions regardless of their origins, intentions, or long-term consequences.* Movements that lack widespread public legitimacy, coherent ideological direction, institutional planning, or moral restraint are often retrospectively described as revolutions for political or strategic reasons. Such expansive usage weakens the conceptual clarity of the term and blurs the important distinction between genuine popular uprisings aimed at emancipation and political shifts driven primarily by elites.

The implications of this ambiguity extend beyond academic debate. When political disturbances are inaccurately described as revolutions, they may inadvertently legitimize unconstitutional transfers of power, normalize coercive forms of politics, and weaken democratic standards. Mischaracterization also distorts historical understanding, limiting a society’s capacity to critically reflect on its political experiences and draw lessons from earlier struggles. In a global context marked by democratic erosion, intense polarization, and the manipulation of information, conceptual precision in political language becomes especially important.

This article contends that not every episode of political upheaval deserves to be called a revolution. Restoring conceptual clarity is necessary to safeguard historical accuracy and democratic accountability. A revolution should not be defined simply by the collapse or replacement of a government. Instead, it must be evaluated through deeper questions: who initiates the transformation, whose interests it serves, how power is exercised during the process, and whether the outcome ultimately expands or restricts popular sovereignty. Only by applying such criteria can the concept of revolution retain its analytical significance and moral weight in contemporary political analysis.

2. Theoretical Framework

This article is anchored in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws from classical political philosophy, comparative historical sociology, political economy, and social movement theory. By integrating Popular Sovereignty Theory, Revolutionary Legitimacy Theory, Collective Action Theory, and Gramscian notions of hegemony and counter-hegemony, the framework offers a nuanced lens through which to distinguish between revolution, regime change, and conspiracy. These distinctions are critical for understanding contemporary political upheavals, particularly in contexts where mass mobilization, elite intervention, and external influence intersect. Historical patterns further enrich this framework: studies of early modern Europe indicate that structural pressures, such as demographic growth, economic strain, and governance weaknesses, frequently precipitated popular uprisings [17], providing a comparative backdrop for contemporary analysis.

2.1. Popular Sovereignty Theory

The normative foundation of the framework lies in Popular Sovereignty Theory, most prominently articulated by John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government* (1689/1988) posits that political authority derives from the consent of the governed and that governments exist primarily to protect natural rights: life, liberty, and property. When a government systematically violates these rights, it forfeits its legitimacy, thereby justifying resistance or even rebellion [33].

Rousseau extends this argument by emphasizing the general will as the ultimate source of political legitimacy. In *The Social Contract* (1762/1997), he argues that sovereignty is inalienable and indivisible, residing permanently in the collective body politic rather than in rulers or institutions. From this perspective, popular uprisings are not inherently destabilizing or unlawful; rather, they may represent an effort to reclaim sovereignty when state institutions no longer reflect the general will [48].

Within this framework, a genuine revolution is understood as an expression of popular sovereignty: mass-based, participatory, and oriented toward restoring or redefining the social contract. Conversely, political changes that occur without broad popular consent, or that merely replace ruling elites without addressing structural injustices, cannot be normatively justified under popular sovereignty theory.

2.2. Revolutionary Legitimacy Theory

Revolutionary Legitimacy Theory draws on the works of Hannah Arendt and Theda Skocpol. Arendt, in *On Revolution* (1963), distinguishes revolution from rebellion or coup d’état by emphasizing its foundational character. For Arendt, revolutions are not merely episodes of violence or power seizure;

they are moments of constitutive politics, aimed at establishing new forms of freedom and durable political institutions.

Arendt also underscores that secretive manipulation, coercion, or elite-driven conspiracies, even if successful in toppling regimes, lack the moral and political legitimacy associated with true revolutions [4].

Skocpol, adopting a structural and comparative approach, defines social revolutions as rapid, fundamental transformations of state and class structures, accompanied by mass-based revolts from below [52]. Arendt and Skocpol provide criteria for revolutionary legitimacy: depth of transformation, mass participation, and institutional reconfiguration. These criteria help distinguish authentic revolutions from elite-driven regime transitions or externally engineered political disruptions.

2.3. Collective Action Theory

Collective Action Theory, particularly the work of Charles Tilly, conceptualizes collective action as a function of interests, organization, mobilization, and political opportunity structures (From Mobilization to Revolution, 1978). Tilly's theory suggests that revolutions require not only grievances but also organizational capacity and sustained mobilization across social groups. Transparent leadership, identifiable claims, and collective ownership of the movement are hallmarks of legitimate revolutionary action [58].

By contrast, conspiracies often exploit collective action dynamics without genuinely representing popular interests. They may instrumentalize protests, manipulate grievances, or provoke disorder to create pretexts for power consolidation. Such actions lack the participatory depth and accountability that characterize authentic mass movements.

2.4. Gramscian Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony

In Prison Notebooks (1929–1935), Gramsci argues that domination in modern societies is sustained not merely through coercion but through consent, achieved via cultural, ideological, and institutional leadership [18]. Revolutions, from a Gramscian perspective, represent moments of counter-hegemony, where subaltern groups challenge dominant narratives and construct alternative moral and intellectual leadership.

This lens is particularly useful in distinguishing revolution from regime change. Regime change may occur within the same hegemonic order, reproducing existing power relations despite changes in leadership. Conspiracies, by contrast, operate within hegemonic shadows. They manipulate ideological confusion, spread disinformation, or exploit crises to reinforce or reconfigure elite dominance without empowering the masses. Rather than producing counter-hegemonic consciousness, conspiracies often deepen alienation and depoliticization.

2.5. Conceptual Distinctions

Building on these theoretical foundations, the article introduces a critical conceptual triad:

2.5.1. Revolution

A revolution is defined as a mass-based, transparent, and rights-oriented process of transformation. It is rooted in popular sovereignty, legitimized through collective action, and aimed at structural political, social, and ideological change. Revolutions seek to reconstruct the social contract and establish new hegemonic orders grounded in justice and inclusion.

2.5.2. Regime Change

Regime change refers to the replacement of political leadership or governing institutions without substantive transformation of underlying power relations. While regime change may occur through elections, coups, or negotiated transitions, it does not necessarily reflect popular sovereignty nor produce counter-hegemonic restructuring.

2.5.3. Conspiracy

Conspiracy denotes covert, elite-driven manipulation of disorder or dissent to achieve narrow, vested interests. Unlike revolutions, conspiracies lack mass ownership, transparency, and normative legitimacy. They instrumentalize popular grievances rather than resolve them, often reinforcing existing hegemonies under new guises.

2.6. Analytical Implications

This integrated theoretical framework allows for a more rigorous assessment of political upheavals, avoiding simplistic binaries of “revolution versus stability.” By foregrounding legitimacy, participation, structure, and ideology, it provides criteria to evaluate whether political change represents democratic transformation, elite substitution, or manipulative conspiracy.

3. Literature Review

The concept of revolution, its moral justification, social foundations, and political outcomes has occupied thinkers from classical antiquity to the present. While contemporary scholarship offers sophisticated empirical and structural analyses, many of its core concerns: justice, freedom, legitimacy, and popular participation, can be traced back to classical philosophy.

3.1. Classical Foundations: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle

The earliest philosophical reflections on political order and transformation emerge in the works of Socrates (470–399

BCE), Plato (427-347 BCE), and Aristotle (384-322 BCE). Although Socrates himself did not develop a theory of revolution, his insistence on moral reasoning, justice, and the examined life laid the ethical groundwork for later political thought [6].

In Plato's *Republic*, political change is portrayed as cyclical degeneration, from aristocracy to tyranny, caused by moral decay and imbalance between reason and desire [17]. Revolution, in this sense, is not celebrated but understood as a symptom of ethical failure within the polity.

Aristotle offers a more systematic and empirically grounded analysis in *Politics*, where he explicitly examines the causes of revolutions (*stasis*) [5]. He identifies inequality, injustice, and exclusion from political participation as primary drivers of revolutionary upheaval [59]. Notably, Aristotle emphasizes that stability depends not merely on institutional design but on broad participation and the perception of fairness, an insight that resonates strongly with modern democratic theory. His work marks an early recognition that revolutions are social processes rooted in collective grievances rather than isolated elite actions.

3.2. Medieval and Early Modern Thought: Legitimacy and Resistance

During the medieval period, political thought was largely constrained by theological frameworks. Augustine (354-430 BCE) viewed political disorder as a consequence of human sin, while Aquinas cautiously justified resistance to tyranny if it served the common good [3].

The early modern period marked a decisive shift. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), in *Leviathan*, prioritizes security over liberty, arguing that rebellion against sovereign authority inevitably leads to chaos [21]. His pessimistic view contrasts sharply with later thinkers but remains influential in contemporary debates about state collapse and post-revolutionary instability.

John Locke (1632-1704), by contrast, provides a normative justification for revolution. In his *Second Treatise of Government*, Locke argues that when rulers violate natural rights and breach the social contract, the people not only have the right but the duty to resist [33]. Locke's emphasis on consent, legitimacy, and popular sovereignty directly informs modern democratic and revolutionary theory, particularly in framing revolution as a restorative rather than destructive act.

3.3. Enlightenment and Revolutionary Thought

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) further radicalizes the concept of popular sovereignty. In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau asserts that legitimate authority arises only from the general will of the people [42]. While he does not explicitly promote revolution, his critique of inequality and artificial social hierarchies provides a powerful ideological foundation for mass-based revolutionary movements.

The American and French Revolutions transformed these philosophical ideas into political reality. Thinkers such as Thomas Paine framed revolution as a moral imperative against tyranny, emphasizing popular participation and civic virtue. These historical experiences reinforced the notion that revolutions driven by collective action and clear ideological commitments were more likely to produce enduring political transformation.

3.4. Marxist and Structural Approaches

The nineteenth century witnessed a fundamental reorientation in the study of revolutions with the emergence of Marxist theory. Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) conceptualized revolution as an inevitable outcome of class struggle rooted in material conditions [34, 35]. Unlike earlier normative approaches, Marxist theory emphasizes structural contradictions within economic systems rather than moral or legal legitimacy. Marx's analysis powerfully explains systemic pressures leading to revolution. Subsequent scholars attempted to refine this approach by integrating state structures and international contexts.

3.5. Twentieth Century Social Science: From Structure to Agency

Theda Skocpol's seminal work *States and Social Revolutions* (1979) represents a high point of structural analysis. Skocpol argues that revolutions result from state breakdown under international and domestic pressures rather than from revolutionary ideology alone. However, she later acknowledged that her early work underplayed the role of popular agency and political leadership.

Hannah Arendt offers a contrasting perspective rooted in political philosophy. In *On Revolution* (1963), Arendt distinguishes between revolutions aimed at liberation and those aimed at freedom. She argues that successful revolutions institutionalize public participation and political liberty rather than merely transferring power from one elite to another. Arendt's emphasis on civic engagement and legitimacy bridges classical normative concerns with modern political realities.

Charles Tilly further advances the field by focusing on collective action and political contention. In *Social Movements, 1768-2004*, Tilly conceptualizes revolutions as sustained interactions between challengers and authorities, emphasizing organization, legitimacy, and repertoires of contention [60]. His work highlights that revolutions are not spontaneous eruptions but prolonged social processes requiring coordination and mass involvement.

3.6. Contemporary Empirical Literature

Recent scholarship increasingly combines normative insights with empirical methods. Chenoweth and Stephan's

(2011) influential study demonstrates that nonviolent movements with broad participation are significantly more likely to achieve durable democratic outcomes than violent or elite-driven revolutions [24]. Their findings challenge long-standing assumptions about the necessity of violence and underscore the importance of inclusivity and legitimacy [8, 10].

Other contemporary scholars focus on post-revolutionary outcomes, noting that revolutions lacking institutional preparation and social consensus often result in authoritarian relapse or state failure [30, 31].

3.7. Critical Synthesis

Across historical periods, a recurring theme emerges: revolutions succeed not merely through the overthrow of regimes but through the construction of legitimate political orders grounded in popular participation. Classical philosophers emphasized justice and inclusion; Enlightenment thinkers highlighted consent and sovereignty; Marxists foregrounded structural inequality; and contemporary scholars integrate these insights through empirical analysis.

The literature reveals a growing consensus that elite-driven power transfers rarely produce lasting freedom. Instead, revolutions anchored in mass participation, moral legitimacy, and institutional development are more likely to yield stable democratic outcomes.

4. Revolution as a People-Centered Process

Revolution, when understood through a normative democratic lens, is not merely a mechanism of regime change but a deeply people-centered process rooted in collective agency, moral legitimacy, and informed participation. A revolution that sidelines the people, obscures its objectives, or instrumentalizes mass suffering for elite gain fundamentally contradicts the ethos of popular sovereignty. Political history and empirical research consistently demonstrate that revolutions succeed, both normatively and institutionally, only when they are transparent, participatory, inclusive, and accountable to the people in whose name they are undertaken.

This section conceptualizes revolution as a deliberative and participatory process, rather than a conspiratorial or elite-driven rupture. It argues that transparency of purpose, informed consent, mass participation, ethical leadership, and post-revolutionary accountability are not optional ideals but structural prerequisites for sustainable political transformation.

4.1. Transparency and Informed Consent

Transparency of objectives constitutes the moral and political foundation of a people-centered revolution. Citizens must be able to clearly understand why they are mobilizing, against whom, and toward what alternative political order. Without such clarity, participation becomes coerced, manipulated, or

accidental rather than consciously chosen.

Historically, successful and legitimate revolutions have articulated their aims in explicit and accessible terms. The American Declaration of Independence (1776) is emblematic in this regard: it did not merely announce separation from British rule but carefully enumerated grievances and articulated universal principles of equality and natural rights (e.g., grievances and universal principles noted in historical scholarship). Similarly, Bangladesh's Six-Point Movement (1966), led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, presented a clear, programmatic roadmap for political and economic autonomy within Pakistan, widely communicated to the populace and mobilizing mass support across class lines [45].

By contrast, many failed or degenerative revolutions exhibit opacity of intent. The Arab Spring produced varied outcomes: Tunisia, which initially articulated concrete economic and political demands, achieved relatively more stable transitions, whereas Libya and Syria saw revolutions fragment into civil wars under competing elitist agendas and unclear programs (general pattern in conflict studies). Empirical research on nonviolent and violent campaigns finds that clear objectives and broad legitimacy are correlated with more durable democratic outcomes [7, 8].

4.2. Mass Participation and Moral Agency

Revolutions are collective moral acts rather than episodic outbursts of violence. They derive legitimacy not from the seizure of power but from the active and conscious participation of citizens as moral agents. Participation transforms individuals from subjects of history into authors of political change.

Chenoweth and Stephan's landmark research shows that nonviolent movements, those that engage a critical mass of citizens, are more likely to succeed than violent insurgencies; in their dataset, campaigns involving sustained participation were significantly more effective in achieving political change [7, 8]. They also coined the so-called "3.5% rule," noting that movements with at least 3.5% of the population actively engaged tended to succeed, highlighting the strategic value of broad participation [7, 8].

Inclusive participation by diverse social groups embeds the revolution socially rather than factionally. The 1986 People Power Revolution in the Philippines, with massive nonviolence, delegitimized authoritarian rule and constrained elite capture precisely because of its widespread, cross-class participation.

4.3. Leadership, Representation, and Accountability

Although revolutions are driven by the masses, leadership remains a necessary component. The critical distinction lies between representative leadership and vanguardist domination. People-centered revolutions require leaders who articu-

late collective aspirations rather than impose ideological blueprints detached from popular will.

Historical experience suggests revolutions fail when leadership becomes unaccountable to the base. South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle, led by the African National Congress in genuine alliance with trade unions and civic groups, facilitated an inclusive and negotiated transition away from authoritarian rule.

Empirical studies suggest that when revolutionary leadership becomes insulated from popular scrutiny, corruption can increase, and democratic consolidation stalls, a pattern observed in many post-Arab Spring cases (findings in conflict transition studies broadly echo this, such as organizational analyses of post-conflict governance).

4.4. Inclusivity, Social Justice, and Intersectional Participation

A genuinely people-centered revolution must be inclusive in both participation and outcomes. Exclusion of women, minorities, rural populations, or marginalized economic groups weakens moral legitimacy and long-term stability.

Research on peace processes finds that meaningful participation by women increases the probability that peace agreements and political transitions will endure over the long term (United Nations member states data show that peace agreements involving women are more likely to last at least 15 years). Similar arguments apply for broader social inclusion across ethnic and regional divides.

4.5. Non-Violence, Ethical Constraints, and Civil Resistance

While violence has historically accompanied many revolutions, empirical research increasingly underscores the strategic and ethical advantages of nonviolent resistance. Nonviolent campaigns lower participation costs and enable broader societal involvement, including women, the elderly, and economically vulnerable groups [8].

From an ethical perspective, restraint reinforces the moral high ground of revolutionary movements, preserving the distinction between resistance and terror. Practically, it reduces the likelihood of fragmentation and foreign intervention, which have plagued multi-factional violent uprisings.

4.6. Post-Revolutionary Institutionalization and Popular Oversight

The people-centered nature of a revolution must extend beyond regime change into the post-revolutionary phase. Failure to institutionalize popular oversight often leads to counter-revolution, authoritarian consolidation, or chronic instability [30-32].

Successful cases demonstrate the importance of early constitutional clarity, independent electoral commissions, transi-

tional justice mechanisms, and decentralized governance. Empirical data from comparative democracy research show that inclusive constitutional processes increase the likelihood of democratic consolidation within a decade (general findings from democratic transition literature).

A revolution that deceives its people, instrumentalizes chaos, or substitutes elite ambition for collective aspiration ceases to be a revolution in the normative sense; it becomes merely a transfer of power, often at immense human cost.

5. Historical Comparisons

Historical revolutions provide invaluable empirical material for evaluating the conditions under which mass political upheaval advances popular sovereignty, and the circumstances under which it degenerates into elite domination or authoritarian consolidation. A comparative reading of the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, India's independence movement, and Bangladesh Liberation Movement and War reveals a decisive pattern: revolutions that articulate clear objectives, cultivate popular political consciousness, and maintain accountability to the masses are far more likely to produce durable political legitimacy than those driven by opaque strategies or vanguardist elites.

5.1. The French Revolution (1789): Transparency, Ideology, and Mass Political Awakening

The French Revolution remains the archetypal modern revolution precisely because of its explicit articulation of political objectives. Rooted in prolonged fiscal crisis, regressive taxation, and aristocratic privilege, the revolution was intellectually incubated by Enlightenment thinkers whose ideas circulated widely in public forums [11, 20, 36]. Crucially, its demands: *liberté égalité fraternité* were not covert slogans but publicly debated ideals disseminated through pamphlets, salons, newspapers, and revolutionary assemblies [49].

Despite its descent into the Reign of Terror, the French Revolution never abandoned the language of popular sovereignty. Even Jacobin excesses were justified, however problematically, as temporary measures to defend the "general will" [29]. Importantly, the revolution's excesses were publicly visible and contested, not hidden actions of a closed elite; participation was premised on awareness, not manipulation.

Despite its contradictions, the French Revolution exemplifies a movement where mass endorsement followed transparent articulation of goals, reinforcing the normative legitimacy of revolutionary action [14, 15].

5.2. The Russian Revolution (1917): From Mass Mobilization to Elite Capture

The February Revolution of 1917 in Russia was undeniably

mass-driven. Triggered by food shortages, war fatigue, and autocratic repression, it resulted in the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II and the collapse of centuries-old Romanov rule [12]. Workers' councils (soviets), soldiers' committees, and spontaneous strikes reflected a genuine bottom-up upheaval [46].

The October Revolution marked a decisive transformation in Russian political life, promising "peace, land, and bread" amid war, economic collapse, and institutional paralysis [12, 51]. Under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin, the new regime withdrew from World War I through the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, initiated land redistribution, and attempted to construct a socialist state grounded in workers' and peasants' councils (soviets) [41, 54]. While the early Soviet government pursued ambitious programs of social restructuring and mass mobilization, the consolidation of authority intensified during and after the Civil War, particularly through the expansion of party control and coercive institutions [12, 13, 56]. Following Lenin's death in 1924, power struggles within the party culminated in increasing centralization under Joseph Stalin, marking a shift from revolutionary pluralism toward a more rigid and hierarchical political order [19, 51].

5.3. India's Independence Movement: Transparency, Moral Authority, and Political Education

India's independence movement offers a sustained example of mass-based, transparent, and normatively grounded political struggle in modern history. Spanning over six decades, it evolved through multiple phases, from early constitutional agitation to mass civil disobedience, yet consistently foregrounded public participation and moral legitimacy [7].

The movement explicitly rejected secrecy and violence. Strategies such as satyagraha, non-cooperation, and the Salt March were not only symbolic acts of defiance but pedagogical tools designed to politicize the masses [16, 40]. Gandhi insisted that participation must be voluntary and informed; coercion, even in the service of liberation, was considered morally illegitimate [19].

The Indian National Congress functioned as a broad-based platform rather than a conspiratorial elite. Political objectives: self-rule (swaraj), civil liberties, and social reform, were debated openly in annual sessions, newspapers, and village meetings. Importantly, the movement invested heavily in political education, fostering what Amartya Sen later described as India's "argumentative tradition" [50].

5.4. Comparative Implications

Across these cases, a clear pattern emerges. Revolutions that succeed in advancing popular sovereignty share three characteristics: transparent objectives, sustained mass participation, and accountability to public deliberation. Where these

conditions are absent, as in elite-driven or ideologically monopolized revolutions, initial liberation often gives way to new forms of domination [52]. Historical comparison thus reinforces a central normative claim: revolution is not merely an act of overthrow but a process of collective self-definition. When people are misled, mobilized through deception, or excluded from decision-making, the revolutionary claim collapses into moral contradiction. True revolution, by contrast, requires that citizens know what they are fighting for and retain the right to refuse.

6. Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971: A People's Revolution

The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 was not just an armed conflict but a people's democratic revolution: a struggle of unparalleled moral force, rooted in identity, language, and existential freedom [2]. The War was the culmination of nearly a quarter-century of political evolution, burgeoning national consciousness, and organized resistance in East Pakistan. This conflict did not erupt out of spontaneous outrage; it was the product of decades of systemic political discrimination, cultural repression, and economic exploitation [23]. Far from being a sudden rupture, the path to independence was marked by successive movements that progressively unified the Bengali population behind the demand for autonomy, and when peaceful democratic channels were blocked, towards full sovereignty. Taken together, these developments satisfy the historical and political criteria of a genuine revolution: deep structural grievance, mass mobilization, and the overthrow of a prior political order [47].

6.1. Roots in Identity: The Bengali Language Movement (1952)

The ideological genesis of the liberation movement lay in the assertion of Bengali linguistic and cultural identity. After the 1947 partition of British India, Pakistan was created as a bifurcated state with two wings, West Pakistan and East Pakistan, separated by more than 1,000 miles and with markedly different linguistic, cultural, and economic profiles [23]. Despite Bengali speakers constituting a demographic majority, the central government in West Pakistan sought to impose Urdu as the sole state language.

In February 1952, students and activists in Dhaka protested this imposition; police opened fire, killing several demonstrators [44]. These events, now commemorated as International Mother Language Day, marked the first large-scale assertion of Bengali national consciousness in post-partition Pakistan. As Alam argues, the Language Movement was not merely a protest over linguistic policy but "an ontological defense of collective selfhood," in which language became the moral boundary of political belonging [2]. The Language Movement

crystallized the idea that Bengali identity could not be subsumed under homogenizing Pakistani nationalism [25].

For many Bengalis, language was not merely a medium of communication but the symbolic core of cultural heritage and political belonging. Its defense became the first mass movement transcending class and regional divides in East Pakistan, laying the groundwork for later political mobilizations [2, 44, 53].

6.2. First Electoral Vindication: United Front Victory (1954)

The 1954 United Front election in East Pakistan marked the first major electoral articulation of Bengali autonomy. A coalition of Bengali-centered parties, including the Awami League, decisively defeated the ruling Muslim League [23]. This victory represented not simply political turnover but what Alam (2026) describes as “the democratic institutionalization of linguistic consciousness.”

Though short-lived due to federal intervention, the United Front victory demonstrated enduring popular support for provincial self-governance and deepened distrust of West Pakistani elites [53].

6.3. Charter of Autonomy: Six-Point Movement (1966)

In 1966, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman articulated the Six-Point Program, demanding extensive provincial autonomy [38]. These demands addressed structural grievances, political marginalization, economic exploitation, and resource extraction [47].

Alam interprets the Six Points as a “constitutional codification of accumulated historical grievances,” transforming diffuse resentment into a structured and programmatic political doctrine [2]. The movement rapidly gained cross-class support, effectively becoming the manifesto of Bengali aspirations. Repression, including the Agartala Conspiracy Case, only intensified popular mobilization [23].

6.4. Mass Uprising (1969): Collapse of Military Dictatorship

The 1969 mass uprising broadened resistance against centralized authoritarian rule [47]. Demonstrations cut across occupational and social lines, forcing President Ayub Khan’s resignation and the imposition of martial law under Yahya Khan [53].

According to Alam (2026), the uprising marked the “transition from reformist autonomy to existential self-determination,” signaling that Bengali political consciousness had surpassed incremental negotiation and entered a phase of collective moral resolve.

6.5. Electoral Mandate (1970): Democratic Mandate Denied

The December 1970 elections gave the Awami League 167 of 169 East Pakistani seats, securing a parliamentary majority. Constitutionally, this entitled the party to form the federal government. However, power transfer was resisted by West Pakistani elites, including Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and the National Assembly session was postponed [47].

Alam (2026) characterizes this refusal as “the final rupture between procedural democracy and substantive sovereignty,” arguing that the denial of electoral legitimacy transformed autonomy into a struggle for full independence. For many East Pakistanis, constitutional avenues were effectively closed [2, 53].

6.6. From Political Crisis to Armed Struggle (1971)

With the denial of the democratic mandate and growing repression, tensions reached a breaking point. On March 7, 1971, Mujibur Rahman delivered a historic speech in Dhaka, signaling that his people would resist subordination and asserting that “the struggle this time is for freedom and independence” [38]. When Yahya Khan launched Operation Searchlight on March 25, deploying the Pakistan military to suppress dissent, widespread atrocities ensued. Targeting students, intellectuals, minority communities, and unarmed civilians, this crackdown sparked a full-scale armed resistance [47].

Bengali military, border guard, and police defectors, civilians, and volunteers formed the Mukti Bahini guerrilla forces. The war that followed was both a liberation struggle and a profound social upheaval. By December 16, 1971, Pakistani forces in East Pakistan surrendered, and Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign state [23]. This transition from political crisis to armed resistance exemplified not only tactical escalation, but also the moral force of a mass revolution [2].

7. Revolution vs. Conspiracy: Clarifying the Boundaries of Political Change

The distinction between genuine revolutionary change and conspiratorial manipulation is more than a semantic exercise; it is fundamental to understanding how societies transform, stagnate, or regress. Whereas revolutions are popularly conceived as collective uprisings toward broadly articulated normative aims, conspiracies dwell in the shadows, driven by narrow factions operating without transparency or genuine consent [52]. Revolutions, in their ideal form, are collective endeavors aimed at systemic correction and affirmation of popular sovereignty [4, 52]. Conspiracies, by contrast are clandestine exercises of power designed to consolidate advantage for a select few [28].

7.1. Foundations of Transparent Political Transformation

At the heart of meaningful political transformation lies the principle of transparency: the articulation of goals, processes, and institutional reforms that enable genuine democratic participation. Political change, whether through revolutionary upheaval or systematic reform, cannot be divorced from the norms of accountability, legitimacy, and collective deliberation. As Zahurul Alam observes in his analysis of electoral governance, transparent, participatory, and fair electoral systems are fundamental to democratic legitimacy and public confidence; without clarity in institutional roles, particularly that of the electoral commission, citizens' ability to participate meaningfully in governance is undermined, creating conditions that can fuel neither authentic revolution nor sustainable reform [2].

Effective governance reform also demands an ethical commitment to institutional neutrality and inclusiveness. In contexts where political actors seek power without broad consensus or where procedural fairness is compromised, the result is often not vibrant political agency but stasis or regression. As scholars in governance stress, institutional reform and capacity building, especially in civil society, public administration, and oversight bodies, are necessary to move beyond manipulative or opaque political practices toward participatory and rights-based frameworks of change [1, 57]. In his reform-oriented commentary, Zahurul Alam emphasised that governance must be grounded in institutional credibility and balanced participation, warning that without substantive capacity building and normative commitment, structural reform remains only aspirational [1]. A 2010 *Daily Star* essay on regulatory and administrative reform likewise argued that governance reforms, whether in infrastructure regulation, public service performance, or accountability mechanisms, require proper evaluation of institutional prerequisites and transparent procedural frameworks to be effective [57].

Thus, transparent political transformation requires more than declared objectives: it requires a structural commitment to inclusion, procedural fairness, and ethical accountability that distinguishes legitimate collective agency from subterfuge or manipulation. Without such commitments, reform initiatives risk becoming rhetorical rather than practical, weakened by inconsistent implementation and political capture. These foundations help frame the subsequent analysis of revolution, conspiracy, ethics, and institutional legacies in the following subsections.

7.2. Transparency and Collective Aspiration

Revolutions exemplify collective assertion against perceived injustice. Huntington (1968) defines revolutions as “rapid, fundamental, and violent domestic change in the dominant values and myths of a society, in its political institutions, social structure, leadership, and government activities.”

Transparency is central: clear objectives, such as abolishing feudal hierarchies, redressing inequality, or dismantling autocracy, enable public deliberation, mobilization, and ethical evaluation.

Participation in genuine revolutions is voluntary and mass-based, distinguishing them from elite-driven conspiracies. The Russian Revolution of 1917 illustrates this dynamic, with workers, peasants, and soldiers engaging alongside Bolshevik leadership [13, 22]. Citizen involvement in governance initiatives, through inclusive mechanisms and participatory platforms, enhances legitimacy and collective agency, mirroring the role of popular support in historical revolutions [1].

7.3. Conspiracy: Opaque Agendas and Manipulated Participation

Conspiracies thrive on secrecy and manipulation. They are planned by a limited group to achieve ends often contrary to public interests, undermining democratic agency [55]. Unlike revolutions, conspiratorial action obscures objectives to avoid detection, accountability, and counter-mobilization.

Historical examples include the Watergate scandal [27] and twentieth-century coups orchestrated by narrow elites [8, 9]. Participation in conspiracies is often coerced or misinformed, highlighting the instrumental nature of engagement rather than genuine collective deliberation. As Alam (2026) argues in the context of governance, opaque institutional practices erode public trust and compromise the ethical foundation necessary for democratic participation.

7.4. Ethics: Rights-Based vs. Power-Centric

Revolutionary ethics typically appeal to rights-based claims, legitimized through moral discourse around emancipation from tyranny, exploitation, or colonial domination [4]. In contrast, *conspiratorial ethics* are power-centric, prioritizing elite advantage over justice or collective welfare [37]. Even movements with emancipatory rhetoric can devolve into oligarchic control absent accountability.

Alam emphasizes that governance reforms must integrate ethical frameworks prioritizing transparency, citizen rights, and procedural fairness to prevent power concentration and institutional decay [1]. Such normative grounding ensures that political transformation maintains legitimacy beyond mere strategic advantage.

7.5. Legacy: Institutional Reform vs. Instability

The outcomes of political action diverge sharply. Revolutions can catalyze structural transformation, such as the U.S. Revolution (1775–1783) creating representative institutions or the Iranian Revolution (1979) reshaping social and state structures [13].

Conspiracies, however, often yield instability or repression.

The 1973 Chilean coup, with covert backing, dismantled democratic structures, resulting in authoritarian consolidation and societal fragmentation [26]. Alam highlights that institutional reforms grounded in transparency, accountability, and public participation are crucial for mitigating instability and ensuring sustainable governance [2].

7.6. Counter-Revolutionary Ambiguity

Counter-revolutionary ambiguity involves movements that co-opt revolutionary rhetoric to pursue self-interested agendas. Such hybrid phenomena exploit crises and fear, manipulating participation while weakening democratic institutions [39].

Analyzing these movements requires assessing transparency, participation, ethics, and institutional legacy. Alam (2004) underscores that governance systems must resist manipulation by embedding accountability, independent oversight, and citizen empowerment to safeguard against both conspiratorial and pseudo-revolutionary threats.

8. Conclusion

The distinction between revolution and conspiracy is not merely semantic; it carries profound implications for the interpretation of political transformation, the assessment of legitimacy, and the safeguarding of democratic principles. Revolutions, in their ideal form, are collective endeavors aimed at systemic correction, the affirmation of popular sovereignty, and the reordering of social and political hierarchies in line with the will of the people. Conspiracies, by contrast, are clandestine exercises of power, often executed by narrow coalitions, designed to obscure objectives, manipulate perception, and consolidate advantage for a select few. The analytical clarity of this distinction is essential because the manner in which change is pursued, its transparency, inclusivity, ethical orientation, and long-term legacy, determines whether it contributes to genuine societal emancipation or entrenches cycles of exploitation and instability.

Transparency is the cornerstone of legitimate political mobilization. A revolutionary movement that clearly communicates its goals, mechanisms, and anticipated consequences empowers citizens to make informed choices about participation. This openness fosters trust between the leadership and the populace, creating a moral and practical framework within which collective action can occur. In contrast, conspiratorial undertakings deliberately exploit informational asymmetries, cultivating ambiguity to advance sectional interests while suppressing dissent. Historical examples illustrate this dynamic vividly. The French Revolution of 1789, despite its eventual descent into terror, initially galvanized broad-based support through clear articulation of grievances, particularly around taxation and representation. Conversely, the coup attempts in Weimar Germany during the early 1920s, orchestrated by secretive factions, destabilized democratic institutions without

offering a legitimate platform for public engagement, highlighting the perils of opacity in political maneuvering.

Participation is the second critical dimension distinguishing revolutionary legitimacy from subversive opportunism. Democratic change thrives on the involvement of diverse social actors, from grassroots communities to professional organizations and civic institutions. Broad participation ensures that the resulting political architecture reflects multiple perspectives, mitigating the risk of elite capture and fostering sustainable governance. Revolutionary theory, from the classical insights of Rousseau and Locke to the structural analyses of Theda Skocpol, underscores the necessity of mass engagement in creating durable social contracts. Conspiracies, by contrast, prioritize control over inclusion. They marginalize, intimidate, or co-opt potential participants, converting the political arena into a closed circuit that privileges the ambitions of a few over the welfare of many. In contemporary contexts, the manipulation of electoral processes, the clandestine funding of lobbying campaigns, or the covert orchestration of political unrest exemplify how conspiratorial practices can masquerade as reform while subverting the collective interest.

Ethical considerations further delineate the boundary between emancipatory revolution and corrosive conspiracy. Political change is never morally neutral; the means employed shape both the legitimacy of the outcome and the social fabric it leaves behind. Ethical revolutions, even when disruptive, maintain respect for human dignity, minimize unnecessary harm, and seek justice as both process and outcome. Arendt's reflections on revolutionary morality stress that the pursuit of power without a normative compass transforms liberation into oppression, replacing one hierarchy with another under the guise of change. Conspiracies, however, operate with a fundamentally instrumental logic: human actors and public institutions are treated as means to strategic ends. The ethical deficit inherent in such operations erodes trust, perpetuates cynicism, and generates long-term societal fragmentation. This observation is crucial in evaluating contemporary political movements, where the line between strategic ambiguity and deliberate manipulation is often blurred.

The legacy of political action constitutes the final and perhaps most enduring measure of its nature. Revolutions that succeed in establishing accountable, participatory governance contribute to institutional resilience and civic empowerment. Their historical imprint is marked not solely by the upheaval they generate but by the stable pathways they open for subsequent generations. The American Revolution, for instance, while initially violent and exclusionary in certain respects, ultimately laid the groundwork for enduring constitutional democracy, underpinned by mechanisms for accountability and civic engagement. By contrast, conspiracies leave legacies characterized by mistrust, institutional fragility, and recurrent cycles of instability. The moral and practical quality of political transformation is inseparable from the intentionality, inclusivity, and transparency with which it is pursued.

From a policy and analytical perspective, distinguishing between revolution and conspiracy is not only a matter of historical or academic interest; it has tangible consequences for governance, conflict resolution, and international engagement. Policymakers and scholars must recognize that movements exploiting chaos and ambiguity for sectional advantage, whether through populist demagoguery, covert funding networks, or disinformation campaigns, cannot be treated as genuine agents of reform. They are, in essence, counter-revolutionary forces, undermining both internal cohesion and external credibility. Conversely, movements grounded in clear objectives, participatory processes, ethical conduct, and long-term societal vision constitute opportunities for constructive transformation. The capacity to differentiate between these trajectories informs both domestic policy, in terms of supporting institutional resilience and civic agency, and international practice, in terms of diplomatic recognition, aid allocation, and conflict mediation.

Ultimately, the conceptual boundaries between revolution and conspiracy highlight a fundamental truth about political life: the legitimacy of change is inseparable from the process by which it is achieved. Power without principle, or action without transparency, is corrosive; principle without action is inert. The synthesis of ethical rigor, broad participation, and clear strategic vision is what allows revolutions to become emancipatory rather than destructive, generative rather than divisive. Conversely, the exploitation of ambiguity, fear, or structural asymmetry for narrow advantage subverts the collective agency of the polity, producing outcomes antithetical to democratic development and societal welfare.

In conclusion, a disciplined engagement with the principles of transparency, participation, ethics, and legacy provides the most reliable framework for evaluating political change. It allows scholars, policymakers, and citizens alike to distinguish between genuine emancipatory movements and covert, opportunistic operations that masquerade as reform. In a global political landscape increasingly marked by information asymmetry, populist mobilization, and strategic ambiguity, the ability to maintain this analytical clarity is not merely academic; it is foundational to the protection of democratic norms, the promotion of accountability, and the cultivation of social trust. Movements that obscure their intentions, manipulate popular perception, or instrumentalize chaos for sectional gain represent threats to the integrity of political life. Conversely, movements that foreground transparency, prioritize inclusive participation, adhere to ethical imperatives, and consider the long-term implications of their actions exemplify the emancipatory potential of collective political endeavor. The stakes are high: the survival of democratic institutions, the legitimacy of governance, and the agency of citizens themselves hinge upon the capacity to recognize and support movements that align with these enduring principles, while resisting those that seek to undermine them.

9. Findings: Scholarly Discussion

The findings of this study underscore several critical dimensions of revolutions, emphasizing both theoretical and empirical insights. First, the observation that revolutions require long-term consciousness-building highlights the temporal and socio-cultural prerequisites for meaningful political transformation. Historical and contemporary evidence suggests that revolutions are rarely spontaneous phenomena; rather, they emerge from sustained collective awareness of structural injustices and the articulation of shared grievances. Gramsci (1971) posits that the creation of a counter-hegemonic consciousness is a gradual process, whereby subaltern groups develop the intellectual and moral frameworks necessary to challenge entrenched power structures. In this regard, short-term mobilizations, while potentially disruptive, often fail to generate durable institutional change because they lack a foundation of widespread social understanding and legitimacy [52].

Second, transparency emerges as a sine qua non for revolutionary legitimacy. Transparency, defined as openness in objectives, processes, and intentions, facilitates informed consent among the populace, enabling citizens to actively participate in shaping the trajectory of political transformation. Arndt (1963) and Tilly (2004) stress that revolutions perceived as opaque or manipulative often face legitimacy deficits, resulting in fractured post-revolutionary states. Transparency not only ensures ethical adherence to democratic principles but also mitigates the risk of co-optation by vested interests, thereby preserving the revolutionary ethos as genuinely popular rather than elite-driven.

The case of Bangladesh in 1971 exemplifies a classical people's revolution, wherein broad-based participation, clarity of purpose, and sustained mobilization coalesced to achieve both national liberation and foundational democratic principles. Unlike coups or elite-led interventions, the Bangladesh Liberation War demonstrates how inclusive participation and clear moral imperatives can consolidate revolutionary legitimacy and produce enduring societal change [43]. Empirical studies of revolutions, including Skocpol (1979), confirm that movements with extensive grassroots involvement tend to establish more resilient institutional frameworks, compared with revolutions dominated by narrow factions or opaque agendas.

Conversely, instant or opaque upheavals often lack substantive revolutionary quality. Events such as sudden military coups or elite-engineered insurrections may produce immediate political disruption, yet they frequently fail to address structural grievances or generate broad-based political empowerment. Without the scaffolding of long-term consciousness-building and transparent processes, such movements risk being ephemeral, resulting in cycles of instability rather than meaningful transformation.

Finally, the findings highlight the *pernicious effect of historical denial on democratic sustainability*. Revisionism or suppression of revolutionary narratives undermines collective

memory, erodes legitimacy, and weakens the moral and institutional foundations of democratic governance. Empirical evidence from post-revolutionary societies indicates that nations that fail to acknowledge or commemorate transformative struggles often experience recurring political fragility and diminished civic engagement [4, 52]. Recognizing historical truths, therefore, is not merely symbolic; it is central to embedding accountability, sustaining democratic norms, and nurturing a politically conscious citizenry.

In sum, these findings collectively emphasize that successful revolutions are long-term, participatory, transparent, and historically cognizant endeavors. They illuminate the intricate interplay between collective consciousness, legitimacy, and institutional sustainability, providing both theoretical and practical insights for the study of political transformation.

10. Recommendations

Drawing upon the preceding theoretical and empirical analyses, a set of strategic recommendations emerges to guide both policymakers and scholars in understanding and managing revolutionary processes. The overarching principle underpinning these recommendations is the preservation of revolutionary integrity as a mechanism for genuine popular empowerment rather than elite capture or instrumentalized chaos.

10.1. Establish Rigorous Criteria for Evaluating Revolutionary Legitimacy

Revolutions should be assessed not merely by the scale of upheaval but by the alignment of their objectives with the collective will of the people. Criteria must include transparency of aims, inclusiveness of participation, respect for fundamental human rights, and measurable commitments to institutional reform. Such frameworks can mitigate the risk of opportunistic power grabs masquerading as popular movements, ensuring that revolutionary legitimacy is grounded in ethical and democratic norms rather than transient force or rhetoric. Historical analysis indicates that revolutions with clear, widely communicated agendas are significantly more likely to produce sustainable democratic outcomes.

10.2. Safeguard Historical Narratives from Instrumentalization

The interpretation of revolutionary history is often contested, with competing political actors attempting to exploit historical memory to legitimize contemporary agendas. Establishing independent, academically rigorous mechanisms for documenting and preserving historical accounts is essential. Archival integrity, peer-reviewed historiography, and public access to source material can protect revolutionary narratives from distortion while providing citizens with the tools to critically evaluate past movements. This fosters a political culture

that values evidence-based discourse over partisan mythmaking, reducing the likelihood of manipulative narratives influencing contemporary policy.

10.3. Prioritize Civic Education and Participatory Democratic Institutions

The long-term success of any revolutionary process is contingent upon an informed and engaged citizenry. Educational curricula should emphasize not only the historical context and causes of revolutions but also the normative principles of civic responsibility, constitutional literacy, and democratic deliberation. Simultaneously, institutional reforms must expand mechanisms for citizen participation, including local governance structures, consultative bodies, and transparent policy-making processes. Collective action theory underscores that sustained civic engagement is a critical determinant of both revolutionary efficacy and post-revolutionary stability.

10.4. Reject the Romanticization of Chaos as a Political Tool

While popular narratives often valorize the spectacle of disorder, the glorification of disruption without a clear ethical or political purpose undermines both legitimacy and social cohesion. Policymakers, scholars, and media actors must promote frameworks that emphasize orderly transition, accountability, and constructive dissent. Revolutionary movements must be evaluated on their capacity to transform structural injustice without resorting to gratuitous violence or destabilization. Empirical studies reveal that movements prioritizing transparency, ethical leadership, and collective deliberation are more successful in securing durable institutional and social gains than those that embrace chaos for its own sake.

10.5. Integrate Multi-disciplinary Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms

Finally, a comprehensive approach requires systematic monitoring of revolutionary dynamics through interdisciplinary methods combining political science, sociology, and data analytics. Metrics should assess legitimacy, participation, institutional resilience, and human rights adherence. Such evidence-based evaluation not only informs policy responses but also strengthens the public's confidence in the revolutionary process, ensuring that movements remain accountable to the people they purport to serve.

Collectively, these recommendations advocate a paradigm in which revolutions are consciously structured, ethically grounded, and oriented toward enduring democratic empowerment rather than episodic disruption or partisan advantage. By emphasizing transparency, civic participation, historical fidelity, and principled leadership, societies can transform revolutionary potential into tangible, long-term political and social dividends.

11. Reflections on Claims of the “July Incident” as Revolution: Analytical and Political Perspectives

The events colloquially referred to as the “July Incident” in Bangladesh have been the subject of intense public debate and media scrutiny, with some actors labeling them as a popular revolution. However, a closer analytical examination demonstrates that such characterizations are deeply flawed both in historical context and political substance. Unlike the Liberation War of 1971, which was rooted in longstanding structural inequities, systemic political suppression, and a legitimate struggle for national self-determination, the July Incident lacks comparable historical grounding, coherent objectives, or mass consensus, rendering claims of it as a “people’s revolution” analytically unsustainable.

A fundamental criterion for any political upheaval to be considered revolutionary is transparency of objectives. Classic scholarship on revolutions emphasizes that revolutions succeed not merely through acts of mass unrest, but through clarity of purpose, moral legitimacy, and alignment with popular grievances [Arendt, 1963; Skocpol, 1979; Tilly, 2004]. In the case of the July Incident, the initial framing of the movement deliberately conflated a narrow grievance with a broader political agenda. The movement began under the pretext of contesting university quota policies, a policy issue adjudicated by the courts, with institutional procedures available for redress. By targeting students’ and intellectuals’ immediate grievances, the initiators were able to generate initial sympathy and mobilization.

However, this tactical inception was deceptive. The issue of quotas, while socially sensitive, was never a systemic failure that threatened governance or national sovereignty. Rather than advancing constructive dialogue, the movement’s orchestrators escalated the protests in stages designed to maximize disruption and delegitimize the government. When the government responded positively to initial demands, instead of de-escalating, the movement strategically reframed its objectives, shifting the rhetoric toward generalized narratives of inequality, discrimination, and systemic injustice. This reframing sought to manufacture broader societal support for what was, in essence, a politically motivated agenda rather than a genuine popular uprising.

The subsequent escalation underscores the distinction between legitimate protest and insurrectionist activity. Following the initial phase, the movement transitioned into acts of deliberate violence targeting public institutions and law enforcement agencies. Reports indicate systematic attacks on police and civilian infrastructure, arson at industrial sites, and looting of government property. These actions, orchestrated in a concerted and premeditated manner, bear the hallmarks of a terrorist-style campaign rather than a spontaneous revolutionary uprising. The objective appears to have been less about addressing societal grievances and more about undermining

the legitimacy of an elected government, specifically, the Hasina administration, through coercive and destabilizing tactics.

From an analytical perspective, this pattern reveals a conspiratorial approach to political change. Genuine revolutions, as defined in political theory, rely on the alignment of popular consciousness with systemic injustices that cannot be addressed through established legal and political processes. In contrast, the July Incident demonstrates the use of a socially acceptable grievance as a veneer for political subversion. By exploiting student networks and societal sensitivities surrounding quota policies, the initiators manufactured a perception of mass legitimacy. This manipulation of public perception is consistent with what Gramsci (1971) describes as counter-hegemonic strategy: the orchestration of moral and ideological consent to facilitate structural disruption. In this context, the counter-hegemonic mobilization was not aimed at broad societal emancipation, but at toppling an established government, a fundamental divergence from the emancipatory ethos of genuine revolutionary movements.

The consequences of this movement were not merely symbolic but profoundly violent and destructive. Empirical evidence, including police reports and post-event investigations, reveals a level of organized destruction, including targeted killings of law enforcement personnel and civilians, widespread property damage, and disruption of industrial production. These actions are incompatible with the principles of popular sovereignty and collective action theory, which emphasize sustained mass participation with clear ethical and political objectives. Instead, the tactics employed align more closely with insurgent or terrorist operations, wherein destabilization is a strategic end in itself, rather than a means toward socially legitimized reform.

Importantly, the mischaracterization of these events as a revolution has broader political and social implications. Labeling the July Incident as a “people’s revolution” risks normalizing violent attempts to undermine democratic governance. By framing a deliberate and violent campaign against an elected government as an organic expression of popular will, political actors may encourage imitation, erode institutional trust, and distort historical memory. Comparative analysis of revolutions in global contexts suggests that only movements grounded in authentic societal grievances, transparent objectives, and inclusive participation result in lasting political and economic transformation. Short-term unrest, manipulated for conspiratorial objectives, rarely achieves legitimacy and often exacerbates social divisions.

The question of legitimacy is further complicated by the post-event revelation of the human and material costs. Contrary to narratives that have circulated in some media and social channels, subsequent investigations have clarified the circumstances surrounding the casualties. Evidence now indicates that many of the deaths attributed to state repression were, in fact, outcomes of the orchestrated violence initiated by the movement itself. This truth is crucial, as the perception

of martyrdom or repression often serves as a central legitimizing myth in revolutionary discourse. The unveiling of these facts not only challenges the claim to moral high ground but also exposes the dissonance between rhetoric and reality in the portrayal of the July Incident.

From an economic perspective, the disruption caused by the July Incident also undermines claims of mass-based, progressive revolt. The deliberate targeting of industrial sites, public infrastructure, and commercial activity inflicted measurable economic costs, ranging from loss of production to heightened investor uncertainty. Empirical studies in post-conflict and post-unrest economies consistently show that violence and uncertainty reduce investment, increase unemployment, and disproportionately affect marginalized populations, outcomes antithetical to the purported egalitarian and pro-people ethos of a revolution. Thus, the economic consequences further contradict the narrative of a socially constructive uprising.

The events of the July Incident, when analyzed through the lens of political theory and empirical evidence, therefore highlight a critical distinction between organized, conspiratorial efforts to overthrow government and genuine popular revolutions. While both may involve mass mobilization and public visibility, their objectives, ethical grounding, and consequences diverge sharply. The July Incident exemplifies how an issue-specific grievance, in this case, quota policy, can be manipulated to generate wider societal participation, only to pivot toward violent subversion once initial legitimacy is achieved. This pattern underscores the importance of transparent objectives, historical grounding, and ethical legitimacy in distinguishing true revolutions from orchestrated unrest.

In conclusion, the claims equating the July Incident to a “people’s revolution” are analytically and politically misleading. Unlike the historical precedent of 1971, this movement lacked both the moral and historical justification, relied on conspiratorial escalation rather than authentic societal grievances, and resulted in orchestrated violence against civilians, law enforcement, and economic infrastructure. The transparent objectives necessary for popular legitimacy were absent; mass consent was manipulated rather than earned; and the ethical grounding typical of revolutionary movements was conspicuously missing. Recognizing these distinctions is essential for maintaining an accurate historical record, safeguarding democratic institutions, and ensuring that popular grievances are addressed through legitimate and constructive channels rather than violent subversion. In short, the July Incident represents a case study in the manipulation of social movements for political ends, rather than a legitimate assertion of the people’s sovereignty.

Abbreviations

AL	Awami League
ANC	African National Congress
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
CAT	Collective Action Theory

GH	Gramscian Hegemony
GH-CH	Gramscian Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony
JM	July Incident Movement
PST	Popular Sovereignty Theory
RLT	Revolutionary Legitimacy Theory
RR	Russian Revolution (1917)
SPM 1966	Six-Point Movement (1966)
UF 1954	United Front Election (1954)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WC	Workers’ Councils (Soviets)

Author Contributions

Zahurul Alam: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Funding Acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project Administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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