



Political Instability and Youth Mobilization in South Asia

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Executive Summary

Between 2022 and 2025, three South Asian nations, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, experienced the overthrow of their governments. Led largely by young people, these uprisings were a direct result of systematic corruption, socioeconomic disparity, and the deliberate exclusion of young people from positions of power. Through a comparative analysis of these three cases, this paper examines why and how young people mobilized, as well as whether or not their movements violated or upheld democratic norms. It finds that youth-led mobilization, while at times bypassing electoral channels, mostly functioned as a corrective force against authoritarian consolidation and revitalized demands for democratic reform across South Asia.



***“GAP World Stage: Gen Z Uprising
and Democratic Change in Nepal”***

*Guest Speaker: Rudabeh Shahid
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I. Introduction and Background

South Asia, home to nearly two billion people (WPR n.d.), entered the 21st century as one of the most politically tumultuous regions in the world. Characterized by recurring institutional breakdowns and weak governance systems, the region encompasses some of Asia's most fragile states. The extent of this instability has been so severe that, within a span of just four years, three of its nations, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, have witnessed the overthrow of their governments in a violent and somewhat similar process. In September 2025, the Nepali government was overthrown by a large-scale, youth-led anti-corruption movement, which significantly shifted the political trajectory for modern Nepal. Similarly, a year earlier, in 2024, the country's southeastern neighbor, Bangladesh, witnessed a similar political upheaval led primarily by students against discrimination,

resulting in the overthrow of its then-ruling government and the end of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's long-standing autocratic rule (1996-2001 and 2009-2022). Earlier still, in 2022, Sri Lanka's Rajapaksa dynasty, ruling the government for nearly two decades (2005-2022), was ousted by massive public protests due to severe economic crises and consolidation of power in the hands of a single family (Komireddi, 2025). Although the immediate causes of these political upheavals vary on the surface, the underlying factors are corruption and socio-economic inequality (Shahid 2025). Enabled by the actions of self-serving ruling elites who used state mechanisms to consolidate power, manipulate elections, and suppress opposition; corruption and socio-economic inequality have been the ultimate catalysts for the surge of recent uprisings in these nations. Specifically, with courts and law enforcement agencies hijacked by political elites, governmental institutions responsible for addressing the needs and demands of the many came to primarily serve the interests of the few. In all three cases – Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and

Nepal – their respective governments not only failed to fulfill their basic responsibilities as public institutions but also reinforced inequality and societal fragmentation. The 2022 economic crisis in Sri Lanka and labor protests, especially among younger workers in Bangladesh are prime examples of public outrage in response to such government failures (HRW 2025)(Bhattacharya 2024)). All in all, it is reasonable to conclude that it was ultimately the consolidation of power in the hands of a few political elites in these nations that facilitated corruption, exacerbated socio-economic disparities, generated discontent among the public, and made state institutions vulnerable to opposition and collapse.

Finally, one of the most significant consequences of these systematic failures is their disproportionate impact on the younger populations of these nations. South Asia is home to the largest youth population in the world, with nearly half of its population under the age of 24 (Raiser 2023). Thus, in the face of recurring crises, this segment of the population has also remained the most impacted. With over one

million young people set to enter the labor force in South Asia every month until 2030, rising levels of unemployment, limited access to governmental services, and a surge in poverty have become the primary factors for youth to mobilize against their respective governments. In fact, as will be discussed in the next section, the role of youth in driving political action and demanding institutional reform has been paramount across South Asia over the past few years. They have used digital platforms to organize mobilization, stood at the forefront of protests, and maintained a powerful voice in shaping post-crisis political developments. Therefore, in what follows, this paper will examine the role of youth in challenging political institutions for their mass corruption and inability to address socio-economic disparities. It will also explore the ways in which they organized their movements and briefly assess whether these movements remained within the boundaries of democratic practice. Finally, it concludes with concrete policy recommendations and asserts that, in the long run, these movements helped

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prevent the rise and institutionalization of authoritarianism.	employed (Statista 2026). These numbers clearly show how unlike political elites, who massively benefit from patronage networks, corruption, and access to state resources, the younger and less privileged segments of South Asia’s population have largely remained excluded from political and economic spaces. Therefore, one of the major causes of youth mobilizations and uprisings in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal is the inability of their governments to provide secure jobs and establish an economic system that ensures the financial stability of their younger populations.	(BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC), are known for prioritizing loyalists and dynastic connections over new or independent voices (IPU 2024). Similarly, in Bangladesh, the rivalry between the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), two of its most dominant political parties, has left little to no space for youth-led reform.	and global climate activism, these platforms have enabled youth, not only in South Asia but across the globe, to read, watch, and learn about one another’s past and present and draw inspiration from each other’s experiences. In fact, being aware of the struggles of others has fostered global conversations around topics such as justice, freedom, and equality, ultimately connecting this generation more strongly than ever before. Therefore, this generation is more aware and willing to challenge entrenched power structures, demand transparency, and confront corruption than previous age groups, as seen in the cases of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.
II. Why The Youth Mobilized <i>Economic Frustration</i> Economic marginalization has been one of the most prominent causes of youth mobilization across South Asia, particularly in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. Each year, millions of young South Asians attempt to enter the labor market, with most failing to secure a job. Even among those who hold university degrees, employment has become a constant struggle, with many forced into either informal labor or jobs that do not correspond to their education or skills. According to International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates, the labor force unemployment rate for people aged 14–24 remains extremely high across South Asia, reaching 25.23% in Sri Lanka, 20.4% in Nepal, and 15.7% in Bangladesh, all higher than the world average of 13.8%. In fact, even as of 2024, around 40% of Bangladeshi youth are neither in education nor	<i>Political exclusion and Elite Dominance</i> While youth make up the majority of the population in South Asia, they are largely absent from decision-making spaces. As a matter of fact, the average age of parliamentarians in most South Asian countries is estimated to be above 50 (IPU 2026), and many political parties are largely dominated by family dynasties and small elite networks (Das 2023). For instance, both major political parties in India, Bharatiya Janata Party	Thus, it is due to such exclusion and the monopolization of power by small elite networks that many young people in South Asia no longer see traditional politics as a space where real change can happen. Instead, they are forming new networks outside of party politics, such as student organizations, advocacy groups, and grassroots movements to challenge the status quo. <i>A Connected Generation</i> Today’s young South Asians have grown up in a world shaped by technology, where social media platforms, in particular, have made the spread of information faster than ever. From the Arab Spring to Hong Kong’s pro-democracy protests	III. How The Youth Mobilized <i>Digital Spaces as Political Arenas</i> Social media has been one of the main spaces for young South Asians to organize and express their views. Platforms such as X (formerly known as Twitter), Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have consistently been used over the past few years to share information, expose corruption, and demand justice. In Bangladesh, the

student-led road safety protests began when videos of a bus accident went viral (BBC 2018). Students used Facebook Live to demand accountability and quickly mobilized thousands across Dhaka. In Sri Lanka, the 2022 “Gota Go Home” movement used Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp to expose corruption and economic mismanagement, uniting people across class and religion and ultimately forcing the president to resign (Arulthas 2022). In Nepal, the “Enough is Enough” campaign that started in 2020 with online posts about government inaction during COVID-19 also evolved into nationwide protests demanding transparency and reform (Heaton 2020). These movements show how online spaces have become critical arenas for political participation across South Asia, particularly in contexts where formal dissent was not encouraged.

Technology and A New Political Identity

Digital communication has created a new political identity among young South Asians. Today,

many see themselves not just as voters but as active participants, influencers, and watchdogs. Using various social media platforms and methods, they have turned art and humor into creative tools for protest. As a matter of fact, during the Sri Lankan protests, drone footage of peaceful crowds became a global symbol of resistance, and in both Nepal and Bangladesh's uprisings, the sharing of images and videos played a major role in bringing people together. Through technology, South Asia's youth have built their own platforms for change. Their activism demonstrates that democracy is no longer confined to parliaments or political parties; it is happening online, in communities, and in everyday conversations.

Online Activism and Street Protests

Online activism in South Asia has often led to street protests, making it possible to mobilize thousands of people within days. Through the use of hashtags, group chats, and viral videos, people have come together to challenge existing

systems and demand reform. In fact, most youth movements built on the foundations of online activism have been decentralized, with no clear leaders or party control, which has helped protect activists from government pressure and allowed anyone interested in the movement to participate. Using this approach, youth organizers have also employed crowdfunding to support logistical needs such as signs, transportation, and legal aid. Governments have often responded to these efforts with arrests, surveillance, or internet shutdowns, frequently generating greater public sympathy and international attention.

IV. Democracy or Authoritarianism?

The three mass protest movements in South Asia (2022-2025) resulted in the overthrow of elected leaders in government. In all three countries (Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal), it is evident that the protest movements were not a coup as they were decentralized civilian protests (Sharma 2025). Yet, it is crucial to ask: if these coun-

tries had established electoral systems, were these mass protest movements antithetical to the core values of democracy, such as accepting election results?

In the case of Bangladesh, some could categorise the July Revolution (2024) as “anti-democratic”. The protest movements bypassed established electoral channels by resorting to empowering unelected leaders, such as those from Students Against Discrimination (CNN 2024). They succeeded in removing an elected government (that took office in January 2024) through mass pressure. On the surface, it appears that the protestors ignored democratic channels. However, the democratic backsliding of Sheikh Hasina’s government (2009-2024) engaged in creating the conditions for mistrust in the democratic system, marked by extremely low vertical accountability (Luhrmann 2020). For example, the Awami League engaged in election rigging and the crackdown of the opposition, including 10,000 arrests in the lead-up to the 2024 Bangladeshi General Election (HRW 2023). The July Revolution was essential in redirecting Ban-

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gladesh’s politics to a free and fair democracy that it had lacked for over a decade. The movement has and is likely to continue strengthening democracy, given its ousting of parties that engaged in unfair democratic practices (Reuters 2025). Moreover, there appears to be a strong commitment by the interim government leader, M.Yunus, to address protestors’ demands for democratic constitutional reforms, including free and fair elections (AA News 2025). Although protestors violated procedural democratic norms (e.g. bypassing elections), they advanced substantive democratic shortcomings, such as in the July Charter (e.g. ending corruption and committing to prevent the rise of another authoritarian government) (Siddique 2025). Similar to Bangladesh’s protest movements, the anti-democratic elements of Aragalaya in Sri Lanka are evident from protestors storming the president’s house (Davies 2022). The resignation of Gotabaya Rajapaksha after threats to his property and life, rather than through elections or impeachment, is evidence	of protestors placing little value on electoral channels to express dissatisfaction with the government. Unlike Bangladesh’s rigged electoral system, Sri Lanka’s is freer and fairer (EIU 2026). With direct, regular presidential elections, the vertical accountability of Sri Lanka can be judged as moderate-high. However, Aragalaya was characterised as being loosely organised and cross-ethnic (Senaratne 2023). The lack of leadership and direction of protestors to decide a leader following the resignation of Rajapaksha shows this was not a calculated attempt to be anti-democratic, but rather mass frustration at the government’s failures to sustain the economy. With the socio-economic context of the protests being taken into account, Sri Lanka’s political future can be evaluated at Huntington’s fourth wave of democratisation, and it appears that Sri Lanka is headed towards democratisation over authoritarianism (Singh, Bawa, et al. 2024). Key evidence of a democratic shift is seen in the passing of the 21st Amendment that reduced presidential powers, regular elections including in July 2022 and September 2024, and the rejection	of authoritarian governance in the 2024 election (DeVotta 2025). The 2025 Nepalese Gen Z protests were arguably the most democratic of the three countries. Although taking a similar form to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka in the way that the leading members of government were ousted, Nepal’s movement prioritized democratic principles. For example, the loosely organised Gen Z protests featured democratic characteristics, such as the interim Prime Minister Sushila Karki being elected through a Discord server of over 160,000 members (Ray 2025). This signifies the underlying democratic ambitions of the mass protest movement, including the youth’s preference for democratic decision-making. Moreover, the contrast from pro-monarchy sentiment from the pro-monarchy movement in March 2025 shows that the Nepalese protests in September shifted the country further away from authoritarianist tendencies (Pandey 2025).	V. Policy Recommendations
			<i>Bangladesh</i> Strengthen the role of international observers in elections: post-revolutionary judiciary in Bangladesh has shown overreach, such as issuing a death sentence for the former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and banning the previous ruling party, the Awami League (Mukharji, Arunday, et al. 2025). Bangladesh must avoid setting a dangerous precedent where certain parties are suspended, as this could lead to the validation of anti-democratic principles, such as expelling political opponents. Establishing stronger enforcement of international observers is crucial given the Awami League downplayed the criticisms of international observers in the 2018 and 2024 elections (Congress.gov 2025).
			<i>Sri Lanka</i> The 21st Amendment should be built upon by restructuring the central role of the president: limit the presidential function to ceremonial duties, transfer the power to appoint and dismiss the Prime Minister and cabinet to the parlia-

amentary majority and elected MPs. Given that the Aragalaya protestors strongly opposed a presidential system that enabled authoritarianism by Rajapaksha, Sri Lanka should transition into strengthening its parliament while weakening the powers of the president to a ceremonial role.

Nepal

Given that Nepal has had multiple governments without the completion of a full term, constitutional articles should be amended to require votes of no confidence to feature a replacement for the Prime Minister. Digital freedom is crucial as it triggered the Gen-Z protests. A Digital Rights Act that requires transparent criteria to ban digital platforms must be created, with an independent, informed review before enacting limitations on digital platforms. Moreover, policymakers should avoid blanket nationwide bans on digital services. Economic reform is essential given the overreliance on remittances in the Nepalese economy. Nepal must diversify its economy to prevent brain drain and unemployment by subsidising textile exporters and deve-

loping its digital services sector.

VI. Conclusion

South protest movements in South Asia are a combination of economic mismanagement, corruption, and authoritarian tendencies of elected officials. Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal face a turning point in the democratization of their political systems and the integration of Gen-Zs' demands in the political and economic outlook of these nations. The three countries appear to be increasing their vertical and horizontal accountability in the electoral process. In order to strengthen long-term democratic outlooks, policymakers should prioritize transparency and accountability in economic policy, independent and fair judicial systems that oversee corruption and elections, and set guardrails for government authority in digital affairs.

