

YOUTH QUAKES OR DEMOCRATIC TREMORS? A CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON NEPAL'S GEN Z PROTESTS

*Bijetri Pathak**

ABSTRACT

The 2024 to 2025 Nepalese protests by the youth that has been widely described as a Gen Z uprising have been celebrated as a democratic awakening in a disillusioned polity. But a deeper questioning introduces the transformational possibility and uncomfortable limitations. This article places assertion on the protests and puts them into perspective with the topic of youth mobilisation and protest politics in Nepal and South Asia. It asserts that Gen Z activism is a sign that the new generation is going to break with elite-led party politics, but it is also fragmented, digitally short-lived, and easy to be appropriated. The anti-institutional spirit of the movement, as energising as it is on the other hand is also risky in the sense that it can cause individuals to grow cynical of democracy rather than to bring positive change to it. The article throws into focus the paradox of mobilised generation of the digital generation demanding accountability of the institutions they no longer trust and ponders on the implications of the same to the Nepal's frail work of democracy and the region in general.

Keywords: Nepal, Gen Z, protest politics, anti-institutional, South Asia

INTRODUCTION

The media has reported the youth led protest movement that took place in 2024 to 2025 in Kathmandu and other cities in Nepal as the great breakthrough of the youth in the country. It has continued to cover the probable improvised, innovative, and digitally savvy young protesters who went to the streets in response to corruption, unemployment, and stagnation by the old political elites of Nepal. But the ironic outcome of such protests is concealed behind such positive coverage. What appears to be a premature democratic awakening without any form of guidance, turns out to be a protest of contradictions that might have the delicate Nepal democratic politics on its toes. Therefore, the demonstrations are not only the disappointment of a generation that lost faith in political parties but also the display of how impulsive such youth movements are in situations- neither the institutions nor the government can be trusted anymore. The protests of Gen Z are treated in this article as two sided: on the one hand they demonstrate that the system of democracy in Nepal is utterly inefficient, on the other it is impulsive and anti-institutional, therefore, they also provoke the question of sustainability, coherence and responsibility of a democratic system. Institutional weakness in Nepal and precarity in the politics of youth have also characterised the protests, rather than being a clear sign of democratic deepening.

UNPACKING THE PROTESTS

The youth movements have long been the major players when it comes to the moments of democratic transitions. Huntington (1991) argued that democratic waves are often also driven by youth bulges, and Inglehart and Norris (2016) identified generation-based changes in political values toward autonomy and equality as the main factors behind political change.

* Bijetri Pathak (bijetri2014@gmail.com) is an Assistant Professor at the Centre for Distance and Online Education, Sikkim Manipal University.

What scholars of South Asia point to however is the paradoxes of youth mobilisation. Harriss (2010) warns that youth can drive democratization as well as authoritarian populism, and that each generation has its own repertoires of protest which suit it well (Tilly, 2006). The Gen Z of Nepal, however, appears to have developed their own repertoire, combining memes, livestreams and decentralised networks with the ancient methods of protesting on the streets. However, according to Tarrow (2011), since movements without an organisation continuity tend to fizzle away. In this respect, the Gen Z in Nepal have to face structural contradiction, i.e., they demand institutional responsibility of the institutions which they do not trust, but without institutional basis, they can lead to short-term activism.

The situation is more explicable by the history of Nepal youth activism. In the years 1960 to 1990, student unions were very instrumental in fighting the Panchayat regime (Hachhethu, 2002). The youth were at the centre of the 1990 Jana Andolan which restored multiparty democracy. Maoist rebellion in 1996 to 2006 once again caught youth in focus but in a manner that turned violent and scarring (Lawoti and Pahari, 2009). The generational power of youth activism was also stressed with the help of the People's Movement (Jana Andolan II) of 2006 which eliminated the monarchy. But in the course of such experiences, the potential of young people was finally co-opted or betrayed by the party mechanisms. The Gen Z protesters of the present day bring with them an extra sensitivity to this history of disillusionment and this explains their hostility towards party patronage and their insistence on leaderless, decentralised actions. This repudiation of leadership and institutions creates an extra dilemma, however, namely that without organisational continuity, the mobilisation-disillusionment cycle may be renewed.

The protests were triggered by the familiar complaints and evolved in unprecedented and unexpected fashions. Youth unemployment is high, inflation remains high, and the government is relying on migration, which has given rise to widespread discontent (Adhikari, 2022). Corruption scandals, in particular, the so-called phony Bhutanese refugee hoax, in which the bureaucrats allegedly sent Nepalis abroad on fictitious refugee claims, acted as hotspots (The Kathmandu Post, 2024). But what has helped these grievances to converge and stream towards mass protest was the ability of young Nepalis to translate anger into online culture. Instagram reels, hashtags and Tik Tok clips turned personal disillusionment into the outcry of the crowd. The people protested riots alongside the police, mocked leaders with memes and thought up virally transmissible slogans that struck a chord in the diaspora. This was how the protests were, more of being seen than heard. They fulfilled both those functions to encourage a digitally networked generation, and they also threatened to reduce the protest to spectacle, the trade of online performance against long-term political mobilisation.

Gen Z Nepal political culture is radically different compared to the older generation. They condemn the power of the ruling elite, and view political parties as gerontocracies. This horizontal and leaderless system of the organisation is portrayed as democratic but in the real sense, it complicates staying in a collective action and negotiating with the state. Their ingenuity-gatherings of humour, irony and satire are novel yet possess a possibility of transforming truly grave matters into trifles. Their transnational consciousness (organised in the context of mentioning the Sri Lanka Aragalaya or the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement) is a marker of transnational learning yet in actual fact, it masks constraints of institutions in Nepal. Most notably, the protests indicate a paradox: a generation of individuals who are highly determined to hold to account a state that they mostly do not trust, a state that they feel is not in a position to bring about true change. The reaction of the Nepali state has proven to be no less than vacillating. The many police crackdowns have reminded many of the old authoritarian traditions, and protesters have been mocked by the elites as immature or restless (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Nevertheless, the other parties have acted under a low profile to hijack the movement which has seen them propose that they can use the youthful energy to serve political

interests. The other paradox is that the same system that the youths are revolting against is probably going to swallow them and dilute their revolutionary reasons. Such co-optation can only be compounded, unless the state brings about actual reforms, in creating jobs, quality education, and fighting corruption, in place of tackling the root causes.

On a further examination of the protests, there are even more contradictions. Firstly, there is the irony of holding the untrustworthy institutions to account. The protests can make the governments listen, but when the institutions themselves are discredited as unbelievable, the threat of incessant stalemate looms. Second, the movement has weaknesses in its organisation, which is coupled with online militancy. There can also be a protest movement that flourishes under the algorithm and dies under the algorithm. Third, the demonstrations are more urban and middle-class than the rest. The rural young people, who tend to keep Nepal alive due to remittances, are underrepresented, and that is where the problem of inclusiveness lies. Fourth, caste, gender and regional cleavages are built with Gen Z camouflages. The at-risk groups continue to be vulnerable to marginalisation even in movements that claim to represent a generation. Nepal Gen Z protests are linked to the wider South Asian youth unrest. In a parallel with the Aragalaya of Sri Lanka, the comparison is also appropriate: both the mobilisations were against corruption and economic meltdowns but could not establish the feasible alternatives. Similar protests in India against anti-CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) have also manifested a similar trend in youth ingenuity but have been silenced without compromise in favour of reform.

This Nepalese example is part of a greater trend, youth movements have the potential to topple elites but it may not necessarily have mechanisms to institutionalise change. The upheavals on the international scene debilitate donor discourses that Nepal is a democratic success. They are receptive to the involvement of youth, but they are not paying such an intensive attention to the structural causes of youth disillusionment in their developmental programmes. The demonstrations give out a message of instability to direct neighbours India and China of a country of strategic importance in such a way that they are left ponder how they are going to go about democratic change which is youth driven. Lastly, the aspect of Gen Z protest in Nepal occurring is an indicator that democratisation process was partial. It not only demonstrates how the young generation can distort the complacency of the elite but also suggests how a democracy regime becomes lifeless once the institutions have been disillusioned. The pretence that there is no such thing as any kind of institutional politics being denied without providing an alternative will in no way help to revive democracy but instead the movement will go along with cynicism. It risks the peril of being eclipsed by spectacle because it puts the digital repertoires instead of the long-term organisation at the forefront. It is a threat to the marginalisation of majority who are rural as it broadcasts virtually almost outside the city. and in the process of organising itself around the banner of generational solidarity it risks blurring still more basic inequalities. Such contradictions do not rule out the significance of the protests, though they sound out a one-sided interpretation, according to which, it is a trouble-free manifestation of the process of intensifying democracy.

CONCLUSION

The protests in Nepal in 2024 to 2025 of Gen Z is interesting not only due to the incredible scale of the protest as well as its creativity but also to the reveals of contradiction within youth politics in frail democracies. They are not just a rupture of party politics of elites but also the expression of institutional decay. In as much as they show the constraints of digital ephemera, they also show the mobilisation force of the digital culture. They expose the manner in which young people are able to occupy political space but at the same time will run the risk of stirring up cynicism in case institutions retain. The pessimist view of the protests leaves the optimist

in the conditional mood: the democratic effectiveness of such mobilisations does not lie in what temporary effect it has but in whether it will lead to a perennial institutional change. In the case of Nepal, the question is whether the demonstrations of the Gen Z would become the beginning of the rebirth or just another stage of the downward spiral of disillusionment. In the case of South Asia, in general, the lesson given to the youth will always be that the rules can be overthrown out by the young generation and that democracies can only be strengthened by the institution.

REFERENCES

- Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(5), 739–768. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661>
- Hachhethu, K. (2002). *Party building in Nepal: Organization, leadership and people*. Mandala Book Point.
- Human Rights Watch. (2025, September 8). Nepal: Police fire on ‘Gen Z’ protest. *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/09/09/nepal-police-fire-on-gen-z-protest>
- Huntington, S. P. (1991). *The third wave: Democratization in the late twentieth century*. University of Oklahoma Press.
- Lawoti, M., & Pahari, A. K. (Eds.). (2009). *The Maoist insurgency in Nepal: Revolution in the twenty-first century*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203875436>
- Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2019). *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108595841>
- Seddon, D., Adhikari, J., & Gurung, G. (2002). Foreign labor migration and the remittance economy of Nepal. *Critical Asian Studies*, 34(1), 19–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/146727102760166581>
- Tarrow, S. (2011). *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- The Kathmandu Post. (2024, April 25). Supreme Court rejects plea for release of fake refugee scam arrestees. *The Kathmandu Post*. <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2024/04/25/supreme-court-rejects-plea-for-release-of-fake-refugee-scam-arrestees>
- Tilly, C. (2006). *Regimes and repertoires*. University of Chicago Press.
- World Bank. (2023). *Nepal development update, October 2023: Restoring export competitiveness*. World Bank. <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/40442>