



Flow of History, “Gen Z” and Populism

Chaitanya Mishra

Central Department of Sociology, Tribhuvan University, Nepal

Article Info

Received: May 22, 2026

Revised received: June 15, 2026

Accepted: June 27, 2026

Available online: June 30, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/djsa.v20i1.94692>

Abstract

This article aims to examine the birth and rise of “Generation Z” (henceforth Gen Z) in recent world history and in Nepal, and explore what this rise may imply for national political systems in Nepal and elsewhere. This paper argues that distinctive and “named” generations, such as Gen Z, are products *not* of biological (*jaivik*) reproduction, as we evoke when we speak of generations (*vansa, pusta*, etc.) of parents and those of their children and grandchildren. The distinctiveness of such generations is rooted in distinctive *social* (i.e., economic, political, cultural) and *historical* periods they were born into, and in distinctive social and historical currents they themselves advance. In particular, Gen Zs are products of a very *rapid flow of history*. It is this flow that leads to the regime of named generations in the first place. In addition, it argues that Gen Z and similar generations are not the same the world over; rather, it is necessary to identify distinct sets of Gen Zs within specific regions and countries, i.e., within *specific social and historical contexts*. The world today is one single historical *whole* inasmuch as it is intricately integrated across all major dimensions of production and exchange. Yet the world is highly *differentiated, uneven, and unequal*, and it is becoming more so. As such, even as the nature and dynamics of the world today provide an overall framework for analysis, the *specificity of the local and the present* must be valorized. It is further argued that the rapid shift in social-historical generations is likely to lead to a *move away* from the older framework of a durable, ideologically-based, cadre-based, “principled” and ordered political party formation to a formation that is much more populist and, therefore, geared to a shorter time frame, principal-leader-based, less long-run and ideologically and programmatically flexible. Populist politics in peripheral countries such as Nepal today is also *more “manipulable”* at the hands of powerful forces inside and outside the country and, increasingly during the last two decades, along the *liminal* (mainly cyber-borderland) spaces inhabited mostly by young and Gen Z cyber-denizens of specific but anonymous hues and interests. Finally, in the context of news reports on initiatives to amend the existing constitution, a brief conclusion identifies three key provisions that ought to be honored for a better future.

Keywords: Gen Z, Nepal, September 8 and 9

Introduction

The events of September 8 and 9, 2025, will be remembered in Nepal for a long time to come. September 8 was a day of protests organized by several online Gen Z groups (which I use here somewhat more generally to refer to groups of youth) on a short stretch of a main street in Kathmandu. The organizers expected a fairly small gathering. The plan, it seems, was to come armed with placards, march for about 600-700

meters on a thoroughfare to the point of a police barricade, speak out against the just-instituted restrictions against a host of popular social media platforms and widespread corruption in the government, and then march back to the point the procession started out from. Clearly, it was planned as a potent yet tame affair. It would surely have merited some print and visual media coverage and maybe a couple of editorials. It would also have met with much approval both from onlookers and journalists. In addition, it could have encouraged the



organizers and others to continue and perhaps enlarge and broaden protests in the days to come.

It turned out to be far more. The protest was widely heard, but it was drowned out by what followed. The protest swelled into a large and unruly crowd that some estimated at 5,000 when the procession reached the police barricade, and possibly peaked at 20,000 later in the vicinity of the national parliament campus. When the rather soft police barricade was broken and, apparently, rather violent protests began to pour forth from several other directions that the organizers had not expected or called for, all hell began to break loose. The small contingent of police at the barricade was overwhelmed. Part of the swelled crowd scaled the wall of the nearby parliament campus. Some of them then began to tear down and burn sections of the parliament buildings there. The police, who had lost control, began to fire upon those scaling the walls of the campus. Then it was, for hours and late into the night, a macabre dance of batons, teargas, rubber bullets, live ammunition, scores of dead bodies and many more injuries. There was grievous pain and sorrow all around, even as there were calls for revenge.

The next day was worse. There was widespread – almost Nepal-wide, arson of government and commercial buildings and private homes. Several people were burned alive and there were many more gunshot deaths and injuries. The deathly dance finally began to subside at the close of September 9.

Inevitably, the event had consequential political ramifications. The House of Representatives was disbanded. The prime minister decided not to honor the best political-moral traditions of South Asia and Nepal of resigning following a substantial-scale loss of life due to lapses in security. On the other hand, and in another huge lapse of statecraft, he was apparently told by the chief of the army that security would be enforced only after the prime minister's resignation, which he then issued. Not a single fire truck went out to control the spread of arson, including at the federal secretariat, the Supreme Court, and a host of supermarkets and private homes, and many other facilities outside the Kathmandu Valley. In addition, the report of the commission instituted to investigate the September 8-9 events focuses only on the September 8 violence and remains conspicuously silent on the September 9 violence and arson.

Quickly, a new non-party interim government was sworn in with the mandate to conduct a general election within six months. The March 4, 2026, elections routed out many of the established political parties. A relatively new political party that projected the highly charismatic Kathmandu mayor as the next prime minister has just returned with a massive majority. On the other hand, much uncertainty lies ahead.

Methodology

This paper is principally framed within a world-historical reading of Nepal during the last five decades. The inroads made by world capitalism, a high level of economic and security dependency, and democratic political transitions that have nonetheless failed to grapple successfully with the onslaught that world-scale and Indian capitalism generate

loom large in this reading. It focuses on and brings together data on these large-scale processes that have shaped a massive de-ruralization and the large-scale fallowing of farms, which were the principal source of livelihood during much of the period and now generate one-fourth of the gross domestic product and “employs” more than one-half of all labor. It also focuses on large-scale movements to urban locations and international labor destinations, rapid shifts in belongings among households, kin groups, and the community, an emphasis on individualization of life processes, and a reorganization of the imagination of personal life and the future.

The much more concrete empirical information used in this paper has been collected and gleaned from high-quality data sets such as the decennial censuses of Nepal, the Nepal Living Standard Measurement Survey, and the five-yearly Nepal Demographic Health Survey. Some information has also been derived from literature, newspaper reports, and, in rare instances, from social media. I interpret such information from a social science perspective, which regards the nature and flow of social relations, which congeal into social institutions, as the principal key that must be wielded to unlock contemporary riddles of human existence.

Findings

What is Gen Z after all? The new notion of generation connoted by Gen Z and similarly named generations *stands apart* from the better-known notion of biological or reproductive generations, such as that of a set of parents and their children and grandchildren, as well as of the chronologically young and the chronologically aged. A biological generation generally renews itself, depending upon the age at reproduction, between a 20-30-year period, although, in some instances, it can begin to renew itself as soon as a 15-year period and, among a growing number of groups who now marry and reproduce rather late, in 30 or more years.

A generation, however, is not only a biological-reproductive category, but also a *social and historical* category. Gen Z and similar generations are born from the womb of history. The periodization and successive renewal of generations is principally shaped by how *rapidly* a society is changing, i.e., from the relative rapidity of the flow of history. A meandering, slow historical flow of society, such as that in a subsistence-dominant smallholder agrarian regime, for example, minimizes economic, political, and ideological differences among biological generations. Thus, smallholders, who subsist away from relatively fewer large production and market centers, experience minimal inter-generational social-historical gaps across several biological-reproductive generations. This applies in particular to smallholders in places of large-scale conflicts and wars, and are mired in a network of caste, ethnic, gender, faith-related, and localized and regionalized identities and networks. On the other hand, a commercialized, industrialized, globalized, and digitized society, i.e., a competitive capitalist society today, experiences intergenerational socio-historical change within short periods

of time. Not only parents and children but also siblings 5-10 years apart can belong to different generations, both objectively, i.e. in terms of the nature of opportunities and constraints in life, and subjectively, i.e. in terms of their respective preferences, imaginations, hopes, and fears. Thus, despite the overwhelming tendency to biologize most life-related processes, the nature and flow of human life are extensively and deeply socially embedded. In fact, most, if not all, human biological categories are *also* social categories. There is *no* free-standing and exclusive human biological domain whatsoever.

Let us examine two examples. Consider, first, birth and death, events that are invariably regarded as exclusively biological. In Nepal 50 years ago, the average number of children born per woman was 6; it fell to 4.6 in 1996 and to 2.1 in 2022 (National Statistics Office, 2025b). In 2024, it was 1.9 (Worldometer, 2026). (It may thus be quipped that should the fertility rate in Nepal remain constant or go further down, the expressions “*sainla*”, “*kainla*” - the third and the fourth son, respectively - together with their female avatars, may well hurtle toward oblivion in everyday usage and the dictionary may soon go on to regard such expressions as arcane altogether!) Similarly, the child mortality rate 75 years ago in Nepal was 300-400 out of every 1,000 births; in 2025, it was 23. There is, on the other hand, no evidence that women in Nepal have experienced a sharp biological or genetic shift within the last 50 years to account for a two-thirds reduction in fertility. Nor is there any evidence that children in Nepal today are born with “stronger” genetic and biological makeup or step out of the womb with far greater immunity to malnutrition, disease, etc., than 75 years ago. These large-scale changes in birth and death rates over last 50 years are, thus, driven not by biology or genes but by social change, i.e. a lower poverty rate (from 42.8 percent in 1996 to 25.2 percent in 2011 and 20.3 percent in 2023 (National Statistics Office, 2024a) which has further decreased in 17.4 percent in 2025 (*Trading Economics*) – not the least due to the remittance transferred from within and outside of the country. (The proportion of all households receiving remittance, in turn, rapidly increased from 23.4 percent in 1996 to 76.8 percent in 2022/23 (National Statistics Office, 2024a. Urbanization, more educated and higher-earning mothers and fathers, the innovation of the institution of female child health volunteers, and the mass utilization of oral rehydration therapy (*jivan jal*), a relatively public-health-responsive policy, have led to a reduction in birth and death rates. It is also driven by the rise in many educational and training facilities for nurses, doctors, public health workers, health posts and hospitals, the rise of a democratic state that is responsive to popular demands – not the least because of the hunger for votes during elections, an advancement in general as well as health-related information and practice among members of households and communities. All in all, ostensibly exclusively biological events are very much socially shaped.

That ostensibly purely biological categories are simultaneously social categories can perhaps be more easily

illustrated by means of another example: “teenage”. Teenage is widely but wrongly accepted as a descriptor of a specific chronological age and as a biological category that transcends space and time – that teenage is both a universal and timeless human condition. This, however, is far from the case. All societies surely have 13-19-year-olds (therefore, “-teens”) in their midst. But when children start working on their own farm or as laborers for others, begin taking household responsibilities by early-to-late childhood, remain within very close control of parents and other relatives, marry when they are in their late childhood or by 16 or so – and give birth to their children soon after, begin to support parental families when they are 13-15 years of age, there is no teenage to speak of. In such societies and times, there is no substantial interlude between childhood and adulthood, and teenage is absent. The notion of teenage, thus, is far more a social than a genetic, hormonal, biological, or demographic category.

Humanity now lives in a period when the course of world – and national, familial, personal and other – history is *whizzing* by – which is also another way of saying that each of us is successively hurtling away from our own avatar just a few years ago. We are becoming ever new economic, political, and cultural beings at a faster rate than before. The last decade was far less a reenactment of the one before than one that is rapidly whirling in new waters. The old sense of stability has rapidly denuded. So has the old contour of the relations between the old and the young, father and son, mother and daughter and brothers and sisters. Siblinghood is no longer a guarantee of growing up in a single self-same generation. Because change is so rapid, new generations take shape ever more quickly. A generation that now seeks solace in the familiar is one that will grow old early on. Now, older persons either learn from the younger ones or become socially old much before they become biologically aged.

In addition, given the evolutionary lens through which history is now overwhelmingly viewed – under which a more developed capitalism is interpreted both to be a culmination of a long-haul historical process as well as the hoped-for future, a biologically older generation in a developed capitalist society could be considered as being younger than a young generation in a less-developed capitalist society. That is, the former may be considered as showing a mirror of the future to the latter. On the other hand, the young in any society today can claim to possess a better grasp of the future than the biologically older generation. Thus, while the road toward a new biological generation used to start from the older cohort, the road toward a new social generation in many ways starts out from the *younger* toward the older cohort.

To elucidate the point further, let us try to draw a contrast between a farming father and his son or a farming mother and her daughter, both sets of which live in a highly stable society, operate together a farm handed down by forebears, do not enjoy an opportunity to go to school, have not travelled or migrated far from their place of birth, rely exclusively on farming as their source of livelihood, and possess similar imaginations, hopes and fears. What we have here is *two* biological generations, but

the two inhabit a *single* social generation. They live in a society that is *relatively* changeless, timeless and “generations-less”. There will be no Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z there.

At another level, generational change rapidly takes hold when the nature of social relations between the members of a household, kin groups and the wider community undergoes transition. Witness the often-weakening bond of social relations of a long-run migrant with parents and certainly the wider kin groups and the wider community of birth. This process has been taking hold in Nepal for 2-3 generations; in parts of the world, it began 2-3 generations before that. Notice also that parents no longer have the ability to control the younger generation for a host of reasons. The younger generation operates much more knowingly in a changing world and society, perhaps takes up a new occupation, is more educated, lives in a different place, perhaps earns more, has perhaps married a person from a dissimilar background, etc., compared to the older generation. As noted, even siblings can now belong to separate social generations. Indeed, a pair of twins can belong to different generations if they live in highly dissimilar places that also change at different rates.

Historically, during the last 500 years, it was the rapidity of worldwide economic, political, cultural, and technological change that was ushered in by capitalism, Europe-led 18th-19th century industrial revolution, large-scale and smaller resistance movements, e.g. the American, French, Soviet and Chinese revolutions as well as a large number of worldwide but also much more localized movements and revolutions, colonization and decolonization, democratization, etc. Even within the limited span of the last 50 years, it is difficult to think of any social entity such as the family, a locality, a community, classes, genders, and state that has not undergone substantial and ceaseless shifts. The world that the younger generation, Gen Z in particular, inhabits is a very different world from the one the older generation does. This difference functions as a *wedge* that keeps both existential conditions and future outlooks of the older and the younger generations *distinctive and apart*.

The perception of both personal and collective time has been squeezed much shorter. Gen Z prizes the short and medium term, and, compared to the older generation, has a much lower level of patience for longer time frames. If the older generation was wedded to Braudel (2009) very long-term “sage time” and long-term “structural time,” the young seem much more wedded to his short-term “event time” and 1-2 decade-long or medium-term “conjunctural time”. From the perspective of the older generations, we now live in a time warp. The young regard both the longer run history and the longer run future with unease and disdain.

Carving up generations I

The criteria used to define and carve up distinctive social generations across cultures, countries and authors are far from uniform. Under one set of criteria for carving and defining that is developed in the US, the category of “Boomers” (those born between 1946 and 1964) has been associated with a high birth rate and post-World War II prosperity. “Generation

X” (1965-1980), in turn, is associated with rapid economic and social change. “Millennials” or “Gen Y” (1981-1996) is associated with an initial phase of changes linked to the rise of information technology. “Gen Z” (1997-2012), in turn, is associated with the middle phase of the digital revolution. Finally, “Gen Alpha” (2010/12-2023) has been associated with growing up with advanced and integrated digital and AI technologies. The nature of the society that the “Gen Beta” (2024-) will grow up in and the attributes its members will acquire, of course, remains far less identified. The climate crisis, the oncoming steamroller of AI, a possibly major realignment of global economic and political power that may well involve either a military or a Cold War-like conflict, perhaps one or more epidemics, nevertheless, are certain to create even wider and deeper ruptures among future social generations in the medium-term future.

The preceding categorization of social generations, however, is *parochial*, i.e., one that specifically caters to the US experience. The definitional criteria utilized are narrow, i.e., the level of advancement in digital development and, in some instances, economic growth. The criteria fail to catch even the major historical motifs of the US experience. The definitions wrongly imply that economic growth and social change in the US were associated only with Gen Boomers and Gen X. On the other hand, the definitions fail to associate rapid shifts in social generations to work-related and other migration, income and wealth differences, and the increasing social isolation of households and individuals. Nor has the categorization of generations been linked to the rise of individualization and loneliness, both of which are widely known to have rapidly increased within the US during the last three decades.

All of these, at another level, are linked to the concentration of global capital/globalization and the expansive cycle of reinvestment and profit. These structures have clearly driven an extensive and sharp wedge among successive generations there during the last seven post-WW II decades. The categorization also remains delinked from extensive de-politicization there during the last five decades. In fact, the progressively higher level of social separation of the individual from parents, siblings, and extended kinship groups, as well as the community, loss of secure employment and income, and the entry into an increasingly highly unequal and precarious informal and gig economy, has also been driving generations apart there. So has the divide between the residents of large cities on the one and rural areas and small towns on the other. In addition, there remains a huge economic and cultural divide between the college educated and the rest.

To the extent that the US experience diverges from those in other cultures, a valid categorization of distinctive social generations in the latter would necessarily *diverge* from that for the US. All Gen Zs are not the same and all Gen Zs do not mimic the US Gen Z. One is, therefore, required to *reimagine* both the nature and ordering of generational shifts in specific non-US (and non-European) locations. Even as all of us inhabit within the world-capitalist economy and there is nothing that is not global, the global or the world-scale is not

a homogeneous whole. It, instead, comprises many disparate and fractured locals, a multitude of entities such as states and countries, economies, cultures, classes, ideology-holders, and age-sex groups. In addition, both the nature and flow of social change remain uneven across the world. As such, the US experience in defining and carving up social generations must be taken as only one of many such experiences.

Carving up generations II

A categorization of the phenomenon and dynamics of social generations - the Gen Z in particular, in societies and countries other than the US, therefore, should begin but *not* end with the manner in which it is categorized in the US. Following a historical and global - and US-located review, such categorization should, in the first instance, move on to identify the nature, extent, speed and causes of ruptures in social relations among parents and children and young and old, as well as, in these fast-changing times, among siblings, in a society of interest. It should then go on to locate similar ruptures in the household, kinship network, community, class, gender, regions, and countries.

Because such ruptures in life are rooted in the nature of the economy, the structure of employment income and wealth, polity, and faith in a society, a close analysis of the macro structures and processes is called for. Shifts in control over resources, farmland, education, employment, wealth and income, and social security across generations are also some key drivers of distinctiveness among generations. Further, and in a globalized world, such structures themselves often flow from the nature and dynamics of the world-capitalist - including regional and national, economy.

Access to and the ability to manipulate information technology - the smartphone above all, that connects not only the nearest ones as the "dull phone" did but "the whole world," as it ceaselessly conveys news and spices up fake information as well as novel imagination, aspiration, hope, fear, etc., has recently become perhaps the prime instigator of the generational shift. The intense significance of social media, including the "dark web," in cementing and creating social fracture, fragmentation, individualization and isolation is germane to quickening the social-generational divide. For a "keyboard warrior" and the warrior's eager audience, both a narrow unity and an expansive fragmentation are just one keystroke away. Thus, even as social media is a great facilitator of individual freedom that, as it were, enables each to create one's own world, a world that is nearly completely private, liberating and possibly socially questionable, in fact there is *nothing* that is completely private nor can there be individual freedom *without* social implications and individual responsibility. Such a world, therefore, is also a self-willed prison which houses the self and, sometimes, friends who cocoon themselves away from the larger society, narrow their gaze, otherize the rest - with a host of ill consequences for one's inner self.

Echo chamber outputs, often produced in popular or fairly secretive social media platforms, possess a dubious agentic outcome. Surely, as in organizing a "flash mob" together,

social media can play an effective agentic role. Often, however, such output cannot cultivate coherent and sustained agency. It almost certainly cannot cultivate or implement a coherent and longer-term political, economic, and governance strategy. What it can effectively and relentlessly cultivate is populism, which cannot but keep changing its color.

Echo chambers rapidly promote *centrifugal* forces, and the chances for hairsplitting multiply. Fracturing is also furthered by established forces who may seek to respond by erecting "Gen Z" fronts of their own or by promising individual Gen-Z leaders low-to-middling roles within the established political formations. Most importantly, however, an echo chamber culture is highly likely to leave a large body of potential Gen Z youth politically excluded.

From the social science perspective, it is important to recognize that technologies do not arise *sui generis*. The innovation and spread of the cell phone and, by extension, each and every technology, is an *outcome* of a specific kind of society undergoing and pushing a specific dynamic. Undoubtedly, new technologies do change the nature and dynamics of social relations. On the other hand, it is as important to comprehend a technology cycle by reversing the causal arrow and to visualize a particular technology as arising from a particular social foundation. As far as the cell phone - and each of the modern-day technology - goes, it is easy enough to visualize it as an outcome of a large scale and highly organized economy where the re-investment cycle is well-oiled and markets largely unfettered. The capitalist economy, globalization - where states played very important roles nonetheless - and the *limited liability company* are some of the key political-economic conditions that have led to the rise of the cell phone (It should be noted that many regard the limited liability company, which immensely lowers the risks of borrowing for the investor and which, thus, privileges the investor over the worker, consumer as well as the tax-paying citizen, as the most important of *all* modern inventions.) In addition, it is obvious that not only markets but also highly organized states can drive a similar investment cycle, as seen in the examples of the old Soviet Union and modern-day China. In addition, nationally and internationally spread-out centers of production, loose-foot capital, migratory and individualized polity and culture, have contributed to the rise of modern communication technologies.

It has been noted, on the other hand, that a quick and widespread contagion of rumor is not solely attributable to social media. Madhoosudanan (2025), for example, reports, basing herself on a study led by French Economist Antoine Parent, which, in turn, relies upon French historian Georges Lefebvre's 1932 account in his *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France*, that rumor, fear, panic and violence spread very rapidly during the French Revolution. Needless to say, there were no cell phones, not even a dull phone, and no social media more than 235 years ago. And to cite a much more recent and local example, despite the absence of cell phones or social media during the 1990 political movement in Nepal, rumors spread rapidly across Nepal within a couple of days. A similar story unfolded during the 2006-07

political movement, when social media was nonexistent, and cell phones were limited to a few hands. The lesson perhaps is that rumor, fear, panic, and violence often acquire wings during periods of intense political and economic turmoil. Such turmoil erodes the legitimacy of that which exists and makes tantalizing hints of what better alternatives could come to exist. It is a different matter that most such hints die young, some others that are hinted at do not come to pass, and many others that are not hinted at come to hold.

Acquisition of Agency

Agentification, i.e. with-intent and self-reflective initiative taken by an individual to reaffirm or change one's life, social relations and institutions, arises principally from rapid social generational change that, in turn, is correlated with large-scale *structural-historical* change. A change in social order, by definition, delegitimizes the old ways of doing and thinking and pushes individuals to rethink and to adopt newer practices. Newer practices, in turn, further delegitimize older practices. A younger generation is much more likely to grasp the new order than the older one. Given that we are today in the throes of large-scale change, agentification – primarily of the youth, has taken *wings*. Such change also pushes against the existing streams of economic, political, and cultural benefits accrued to those in the old order, which is a space where the young and Gen Z are in the minority. Social change, i.e. a *new* economic, political and cultural order, generates *new streams of opportunities and aspirations* for the young. The young, much more than the old, are likely to take the initiative to grasp such opportunities, i.e., to agentify themselves.

Agentification of the youth is generally *weak* in places where the old are much too well- resourced and too powerful, whether due to custom, laws, or a specific course of history that favors the leadership of older persons (who are mostly men). Stem families with impartible inheritance systems, monarchies, and postcolonial and post-revolutionary societies have tended to be governed by men who do not wish to relinquish power. Within large and landed households, older males, for example, during a period of relative historical stillness, are much more likely to keep their progenies tied up with them right up to their adulthood – and, in fact, through their old lives, thus disabling them from agentifying themselves. (As someone said, a rule of love can sometimes be as stifling as physical punishment is painful.) On the other hand, opportunities created by non-monopoly capitalism or any other rapidly rising economies have provided a major impetus to agentification over much of the last 500 years. Globalization, entrepreneurship, labor and labor migration have immeasurably expanded the objective material basis for agentification. These regimes have also fired the imagination regarding what is potentially attainable, creating both the glass ceiling and its perforation. So have democracy, citizenship, and weakening and *dismantling* of old gender, caste, ethnic, linguistic, faith-related and other orders and identities. Inclusion, access to information and knowledge, migration, urbanization, occupational diversification, increasing equity and equality

have also had a singular role in encouraging agentification.

On the other hand, in globally peripheral areas like Nepal – or, for that matter, in many small towns and rural areas in the richer countries, some of the young aspire what is almost ungraspable. The personal, familial and political costs of ungraspable expectations can, of course, become intolerable. The ache produced by an impenetrable glass ceiling is more painful than a ceiling that was opaque to begin with. (Much of the glitz and glamor visible in social media, in turn, often purveys a fake perforation of the glass ceiling rendering the ungraspable ostensibly “reachable”.) Conversely, a condition of economic involution, a strong “tradition,” political control – whether exercised by parents, political parties, governments, faiths, or global institutions, on the other hand, stifles agentification, except as an outcome of a rare act of high rebellion.

Shift to Shorter Social Generations

A shift from biological to social generation carries powerful implications. As we are all aware, social - including demographic, economic, political, social, psychological, and cultural – change has remained rapid for some time and looks to be on the point of another long inflection. This sequence may very well be broken after a few decades; the flow of social change over the last 200 years has alternated like a river that becomes a torrent for a few decades and then meanders and snails for the next few years. For now, though, it appears nearly certain that there will be more rapid change over the next couple of decades than at present. A torrent-like inflection will inevitably be coupled with a host of economic, political, military and cultural changes, contradictions and overt conflicts. All of these, in turn, will generate large-scale and intense social-generational fractures and give birth to newer generations in shorter spans than at present.

Novel and large-scale torrents of change are likely to cough up, at least over the next few decades, a new generation every 1-1.5 decades. One, on-the-cusp AI explosion will likely generate a host of implications: a massive explosion of information and knowledge, as well as fake news and visuals, all of which could be utilized beneficially but could also possess large-scale potential for serious political, economic, and psychological change and harm. Progress on the AI and robotics front will likely lead to large-scale unemployment, particularly in low-skilled and repetitive work as well as low-level clerical and digital work.

Two, the global climate crisis will likely cause *serious* harm to livelihoods, loss of resources, famine, and de-population in many regions and localities. Under climate crisis, established ways of living, thriving and belonging will likely be repeatedly upended. Social and political instability, conflict, and migration may become more routine, and also create a large marginalized peoples.

Three, epidemics and pandemics show signs of becoming more frequent, potentially leading to large-scale death, disability, loss of livelihood, and sudden and serious loss of belonging and isolation. Frequent epidemics and pandemics,

should they occur, will generate cycles of all-around instability.

Four, the dynamics of the capitalist global economy show signs of an increasing geo-political shift. Post-World War II rule-based economic governance seems to be increasingly selectively observed, creating a high level of instability across regimes of investment, employment, production, trade, and consumption. The rise of China in particular, the ongoing mid-level trade war, a rapid weakening of multilateralism, and a salient level of “de-coupling” and de-globalization may eventually lead to a wide-scale political-military realignment across the world. Right-wing, ethnicist, racist, nationalist, and walled-in politics may well come to rule in much of the world during this turmoil.

And five, in a progressive continuation of what is already taking place, increasing de-ruralization, under which not only do people move to urban areas but the rural itself becomes a shadow of the urban in terms of cultural leadership, political power and values and norms, will proceed ahead unabated – endangering, among others, the livelihood and accustomed ways of life of a large body of peoples, communities and citizens. As can be experienced in Nepal now, even a “small” war – in fact a war that the US government has not even declared as such – in Iran (and, to an extent, in parts of West Asia), has had a powerful negative outcome for labor migration, remittance, import of petroleum products and various other commodities, and inflation in Nepal. All of these will intensify both the creation of distinctive generations as well as intergenerational conflict.

It may be that only one or a couple of the identified major “events” will take hold during the next 5-10 years. Such event(s), nonetheless, will saliently alter the existing organization of social relationships and create new societies as well as new men and women. As an explanatory note, all social change creates new individuals; a social change that fails to do so is a contradiction in terms. All age-based – including intergenerational, relations will transform under any of the five transitions identified. Such transition will break apart and redefine the bonds among and between generations and may well lead to further individualization and isolation.

While it requires a study far more comprehensive than this, someone should examine if the expanse and rate of social (i.e. economic, political and cultural) change that people in Nepal and similar other peripheral countries have been going through during the last three decades are not wider and faster than people in Europe, USA, and other core countries are currently experiencing. My own hunch tells me that for the broad population as a whole – and not specific sections of it, the last three decades of life in the peripheral areas, change has been more extensive and rapid than in the core and semi-peripheral regions of the world. The change taking place during the last three decades in Nepal, I think, may rival those that took place in north-western Europe during 1850-1900, although the domains and directions of change may be quite different in the two instances. In particular, the north-western Europe during that period was transforming into the core zone of the world while the changes in Nepal are now being driven mostly by

peripheralization

Gen Z in Nepal

This brings us to the Gen Z phenomenon in Nepal. The Gen Z (or, more generally, the youth group) in Nepal, as elsewhere, is not a singular entity but a multitude. That Gen Z groups diverge from one another, of course, also implies that the descriptions that follow will not fit all subgroups equally well. It should also be noted that the Gen Z that publicly crystallized on September 8-9 does not represent all Gen Zs groups or individuals in Nepal. It is likely that the September 8-9 Gen Zs would be the first to acknowledge it. It is also likely that the Gen Z garb worn by the highly consequential political initiative of September 8 and 9 was intended, *in part*, for its popular appeal. Finally, it is also likely that the violence that shook Nepal on September 8 and 9 was, *in part*, a false flag operation carried out under the popular Gen Z banner.

A clear implication of all this is that even as the old parties and the ruling government dug their own grave – as generally happens when existing political frameworks crumble, who “pushed the body inside the pit” is not as clear as it is often made out to be. As elsewhere, as the dig widens, a host of agents, who may not even be aware of one another, begin to step in to fill the pit in, and the air may never really clear up on who pushed the “body” down. A key organizer of the initial short march on the morning of September 8 has repeatedly said that the initiative was hijacked following the initial hours and rendered violent by intruders. Some other news reports (e.g. Pageni et al. (2026), indicate the possibility that forces other than Gen Z were engaged in violence and arson. Gen Z, thus, may well have served as both actors *and* as a smokescreen for what went on during those two days. (Shrestha, 2026, in her *BBC* report, succinctly presents the agency-dimension of Gen Z while stopping short of all other agents.) In this specific sense, even as it will be shown and argued in much of the rest of this paper, the youth in Nepal, as in most other places are increasingly placed in objectively difficult circumstances and imbibe different values and imaginations, agency for what happened on September 8 and 9 cannot be *solely* placed upon them.

The birth and rise of Gen Z in Nepal, nonetheless, is real and consequential. In line with the argument made in the preceding section on the world-historical rise of Gen Z, this section attempts to analyze the rise of Gen Z in Nepal.

Changes in and Household Demography

Within the last 3-4 decades, life in Nepal has been buffeted by tumultuous changes. Modes of generation of livelihood as also of exchange of commodity, service/labor and finance, rural and urban living and aspiring, claims of citizenship and social services from the government and the level of incorporation in the world-scale division of labor have undergone a fundamental shift. In what follows, I will attempt to describe some of the transformations and what they imply for the young in particular.

Five decades ago, agriculture was the dominant sector of Nepal’s economy. In 1970, the share of agriculture in

GDP was 67 percent, and those of industry, manufacturing, and services were 12 percent, 2 percent, and 21 percent, respectively (Sharma, 1986). Almost 90 percent of labor was engaged in agriculture, which also contributed more than 70 percent of the total export earnings. In contrast, in 2024/25, the share of GDP from agriculture, industry, and services was 25 percent, 13 percent, and 62 percent, respectively (preliminary estimation by Nepal Rastra Bank, 2024/25). It is remarkable now both that the scale of remittance is as high as that of agriculture and that the service sector is much larger than the agricultural sector (

Like in many other countries, there has been a large-scale shift in the demographics. The total fertility rate plummeted from 6.2 in 1976 to less than two in 2024. The mortality rate, including the child mortality rate, has sharply come down. There is now a decided demographic bulge in the age group 15-24, the classic Gen Z social category. The size of the household came down from more than six in much of the 1980s to 5.7, 4.8 and 4.4 in 1995, 2011, and 2023 (National Statistics Office, 2025a; National Statistics Office, 2025b; National Statistics Office, 2025b; National Statistics Office, 2024a; National Statistics Office, 2024b), respectively. Approximately 79 percent and 72 percent of the population have now become literate in the urban municipalities and rural municipalities (National Statistics Office, 2024b), respectively. Again, these shifts have strongly reshaped the nature of the household and the regime of production as well as the availability and preference of occupation.

Migration from the Hills/Mountains to the Plains or the Madhesh region began in the 1950s and picked up rapidly since the 1960s. The proportion of the population in Tarai/Madhesh, which was only 38 percent of the total population in 1971 jumped to 54 percent in 2021 while the proportion of the population in the Mountains fell from 10 percent in 1971 to 6 percent in 2021, and that in the Hills fell from 52 percent in 1971 to 40 percent in 2021 (National Statistics Office, 2024b). Migration to towns and cities, in turn, picked up in the 1980s. Similarly, even as international labor migration from the Hills/Mountains region has had a long history going back to the 1800s, the new and much-expanded regime of international labor migration from across the country picked up in the latter half of the 1990s. Urban and international migration has now become a flood. While the precise rate of urbanization remains uncertain, not the least because the administrative fiat led to the sudden ballooning of the “urban population” from 22 percent to 67 percent (National Statistics Office, 2024b), other information, nonetheless, tell us that rural-to-urban migration in remains rapid in Nepal and is perhaps one of the fastest in Asia. Even as the Mountains and Hills continue to have a large rural population, the Madhesh/Tarai region is overwhelmingly urban (NSO, 2024a).

These processes, among others, have led to a denudation of the Hills/Mountains production regimes and made the regions true backwaters of the urban areas, the Plains/Madhesh region and locations of international labor migration. (This does not, by any means, imply that the Plains/Madhesh region is not a

location free of outmigration; a large segment of the youth in the region migrate to urban areas in Nepal and to well-tread locations of international labor migration.) The “age effect” of this shift is also fairly clear: It is the younger ones who leave their native places and migrate to towns, cities, and to other countries. The large-scale movement to urban locations in Nepal – mostly to large metropolitan cities, mid-sized cities and towns, most of which are located along the East-West Highway, in this context, appears to be most economically as well as politically pregnant. These are also spaces from which a plural and “hybrid” culture flows to more far-flung rural regions of the country.

To summarize, the physical movement within the country is very large in scale, and it has seen an inflection in the last 2-3 decades. Transformation toward urban life, values and aspirations has become intense all over the rural areas. All of this implies that new modes of acquiring information, enhancing education and health, generating livelihood, diversifying occupation(s), and, in general, gaining entry into capitalist relations and public services has been a key feature of the last few decades. Physical migration to Tarai/Madhesh and to towns and cities, thus, serves not only to demonstrate a large scale and intensifying demographic but also economic, political and cultural shift. Further, and as will be argued later, the rural and the agricultural, in terms of values and aspirations, have become nearly completely hollowed out and hegemonized by the urban and the international. You may well be living in a rural municipality but the rural is largely unable to colonize your values and aspirations. You are not thriving in those spaces. You are, in particular if you are young, merely waiting for your turn to move out.

Another side to the labor regime is the paucity of jobs in the urban areas of the country as well as low paying and intermittent nature of most urban jobs. Because of a high rate of supply of migrants and the consequent labor surplus in the urban areas, combined with the low profitability of most small-business establishments, e.g. restaurants, private schools, transportation, etc., the wages of urban workers is extremely low, even as the cost of living is much higher than in villages. As such, the young who are now in urban locations are in and out of jobs and almost always looking to move out to better locations and jobs.

Further, international labor rapidly picked up during the last three decades. Nearly all international labor migrants are between the ages of 18-44, with one-half between 25-34 years of age. Remittance, as noted, now accounts for approximately 25 percent of national GDP, which is as much as that derived from agriculture. Perhaps more importantly, as much as three-fourths of all households now rely on remittances for, on average, one-third of the total household income (Giri, 2025). One implication is that the young, for quite some years to come, will not be looking back to return to agriculture, homes and communities they grew up in or even kin groups and parents. They will insistently look for opportunities in urban areas, service jobs, and migrate to international locations for a job.

The massive reduction in fertility rate and the secular

reduction in the size of the household, the unraveling of the village community, large-scale internal and international migration, the “lure” of the Plains/Madhesh and the urban have reduced the absolute size of population in as many as 33 Hills and Mountains districts (NSO, 2024a). There is also some evidence that de-population in places may be linked to the climate crisis which has, among others, reduced rainfall and rendered it irregular. Over the last three decades, these processes have led to an unprecedented and potentially enormously economically, politically and culturally impactful fallowing of farms, reportedly to the scale of 44 percent in the up-hills, 23 percent in the mid-hills and 33 percent in the lower plains (Paudel et al. 2014). Reduction in the size of the household by way of low fertility rate and migration has also meant that a significant proportion of households cannot operate the farm anymore. The old regime of rural production, rural community, as well as rural households and their members, has unraveled.

The fact that the production of livelihood is largely de-localized to urban and international centers carries immense economic, political and cultural consequences. Disinvestment has long become the norm in the rural areas. Productivity, wages and profits have dried up. For most households, subsistence has become impossible. Because of increasing de-localized production and exchange as well as investment, employment and income, households in the local community have become increasingly attached to urban and international centers rather than to other households and the community. Under this onslaught, even non-material exchange regimes with other households in the community have increasingly frayed out. A community, after all, is kept alive by longstanding local networks of production and exchange of commodities and services and, based on these, a variety of community festivals, and rituals.

City and Non-city

The old definition of a city remains mostly fixated on physical attributes, e.g., size of population in a delimited locality, availability of schools and health posts, ratio of crown cover and built-up area, and proportion of non-primary production (see Bhattarai, Adhikari and Gautam, 2023). The process of de-ruralization of the world, including Nepal, is proceeding so rapidly, however, that physical attributes can no longer be regarded as the only or prime markers of rural-urban distinction. Nor is the old categorical notion of the rural and the urban is no longer valid. Even as the rural and the urban were long regarded as mutually interconnected, the old definition in terms of contrasting physical attributes continued to insist that the two were distinctive and separate. Within the old definition, rural-urban connections were almost exclusively tied to the flow of labor on the one hand and commodities on the other. This definition, however, fails to capture the implications of massive and cyclical internal and international migration as well as the “migration” of “rural” values and aspirations toward the urban and the international. The rural resident is increasingly becoming transient there because the

resident’s imagination, aspiration for oneself and present and future members of the family are only weakly, if at all, tied to where he or she resides.

While economic valorization of the urban was always clear, the sheer cultural valorization of commodities, services, values and aspiration – “things” metropolitan and international in particular, was not part of the old definition either. Now, large-city culture – ways of doing, thinking, imagining, etc., flows into the rural not only relatively seamlessly but also with a hegemonic embrace. The rural, in turn, often struggles through the intrusion of urban culture but mostly internalizes it with some local adaptation. It is high time now, therefore, to discard the old notion of the rural and urban that relies on physicality and exclusivity and, instead, develop a definition that is relational as well as cultural and political. The urban area is not only the economic center and the location that provides employment and income but also exerts political and cultural power over the rural. The definition must also center stage the cyclic migration of ostensibly “rural” residents. In addition, it must take due note of the massive reach of the urban, national and international media as well as the social media in defining the rural and the urban. The changes that the Gen Z and the young in Nepal are going through – as also the recent Gen Z – are impossible to be accounted for without comprehending the large-scale and intense cultural valorization of the urban and the international across the spread out “rural” areas.

Shift in Belonging

An overarching theme of the last few decades, thus, is one of incessant movement of peoples and cultures, change and diversification in sources of livelihood and, inevitably, shifts from close or primary belonging – with household members, family and kin networks, neighbors and close workers – to a looser or secondary belonging with whoever one is staying with and with an often expansive yet shallow circle of friends and coworkers. The relations are also often transient. In other words, the new life is a move away from “age-old” society to one that is much less intimate, relatively anonymous and individualized – and, in these specific senses, individually “free”. Living within a rather transient network of social relations possesses a rootless quality that hovers between belonging, un-belonging and not-belonging. More or less fixed and long-term relations are often difficult to build in a society that is on the move – from one place to another, one job to another, one imagination to another, one hope to another, and so on. Maintaining relations with relatives, including parents who are unaccustomed to a world that is forever *becoming* in economic, political and cultural terms and who thus, cannot fully comprehend or adjust to their son’s or daughter’s predicament, is difficult. The new life is also a move toward a much more differentiated and much more unequal society. All in all, for most, this is a move that gives life a floating quality that corrodes rootedness. For some, it also corrodes individual autonomy inasmuch as one is buffeted by forces that one does not comprehend let alone control.

Further, it is a move that does not allow a large proportion

of the young, in particular, to get rooted into a job, a locality, an income level, and so on. Instead, it requires a floating status and identity for much of their youth. For them, it constitutes a shift toward a state of precarity and the identity of a floating semi-proletariat (“semi-proletariat” insofar as many of them, for now at least, continue to entertain the notion that they could go back to “their village” if it came to the worst). Both political activism and flammable violence can flow from this de-anchored and floating belonging. Should the trend continue, the next generation of young people will likely stop identifying with their old village. Should the trend – particularly the trend of underemployment and unemployment – continue, more of them will also be pushed to the extreme margins, and some will grow ever more disaffected and angry.

For a large section, on the other hand, the current period is also helpful in that it relaxes bonds of subjugation. Among such groups are most women, Dalits and agricultural and other menial workers in rural areas – mainly in the Plains/Madhesh region. While this has certainly given some individuals in such groups an autonomous citizenship, many others do not yet possess the set of capabilities required in order to function competently in the new society.

The denudation of the rural community and the weakening of the agricultural regime has also meant a rapid erosion of belonging to the *local community*. Joint management and utilization of local public resources and exchange of labor and other resources for private production were the fuel that hummed the life of a community. But when non-local sources of livelihood (such as urban or international jobs and remittance) become significant or paramount, private productive resources dwindle (such as by means of fallowing a cultivated farm or due to a trend toward lower productivity) or, for various reasons, there is not much material and non-material exchange to be had, a community hollows out. This hollowing out can be starkly observed all over today in fallowed-out land, vacant and derelict buildings nearly-covered by overgrown bushes, marauding “holy” monkeys and other wild animals damaging crops and terrorizing farmers, and centuries-old terraces flattened out into steep slopes. It can also be observed in an old, bent and nearly-disabled widow or widower passing out his or her days alone. It would appear that either a large-scale and long-term reorientation in public management or an urban calamity, e.g. massive unemployment – part of it created by international conflict, epidemic, large-scale and sustained violence could possibly create conditions for a substantial section of the young to rejoin older men and women back on the farm and recreate new production regimes and a thriving household and community.

Youth Power

All of the preceding has culminated in a massive rise in the relative power of the young. The rural regions, much of which is now hollowed and fallowed, and which the young are forsaking and which is now home mostly to older persons, are sites that have lost much economic, political and cultural power. (In a reenactment of the cities in the core

regions of the world, entrepreneurs in Kathmandu and along the highways are just beginning to beckon nostalgic recent city-dwellers to caricatures of things rural, e.g. wood-fired restaurants, home-made or mother-cooked food; ethnic and “antique” ornaments; faith-related gatherings; preparation and publication of lineage records. Indeed, such reenactments are also becoming widespread in the Nepali diaspora across the world.)

In contrast, much of the non-primary “modern” sector and a large proportion of the urban and service sector is much more welcoming to the young. There is a much greater chance, certainly compared to that in rural locations, of finding work and earning in the cities. Even if urban work is both intermittent and pays low, it also allows many an opportunity to network and sift through copious information for a better job, possibly in another country. There is also a slim chance there that an urban income may enable one to remit back home a portion of the earnings.

On the political side, catching the urban political ethos today has consistently translated into catching the national political ethos tomorrow. That the urban and the young embody and emit power becomes clearer when one looks at the sequence of electoral and other political events in the country. One just has to look at how the votes of the urban young for a party *translates* into the fortune of that party in the rural areas during the next electoral cycle. This has been a lesson Nepal has learned right since 1990. Indeed, the first flush of urban hegemony could be pushed back right to the late 1940s and 1950s when the Nepali diaspora youth living in cities in North India, who also participated in the anticolonial and Indian independence movement there, eventually came over to lead a democratic initiative in Nepal.

On the flip side, cities, towns, and international locations of labor migration, where the youth from Nepal live and work together in fairly large groups, carry on intense interaction among themselves back home in Nepal, are sites of power. Such sites, in addition, are valorized as harbingers of the future. The city allows an imagination that is far less available to those living in the “backwaters”. It is where, very often, easier access to better and higher education and better healthcare is available. The city also provides much wider facilities to the young to become conversant with the evolving “ways of the world” and to share such ways from a position of power.

The young worker who goes across the seas to work remits not only cash but also know-how and information to those back home. The migrant worker is physically away but very much with his or her household, community and country, and there is an intense and ongoing exchange over the ways things are changing. The physically absent migrant is nonetheless an active member of an evolving local and national history. The migrant – whether internal and international – is an active re-shaper of the citizenship and politics of people and society back home. In this, as much as in provisioning remittance, there has been a reversal in the political position of the old and the young – that includes the Gen Z. The young are in the driver’s seat here even as the relatively aged remain the custodians of

an established “culture,” some of which is rapidly becoming archaic.

Cell Phone and Social Media

The cell phone, various web platforms and social media are perhaps the most important instruments of belonging in times of incessant movement. The cell phone not only facilitates communication with the family and friends back home but also among the migrants themselves. Perhaps, as importantly, it connects migrants and others – and builds belonging – with a much wider world. It facilitates one to transcend physical borders in highly salient and personalized ways.

In addition, social media is utilized for echo-chambering among those within the in-group, who then narrow themselves further by progressively shouting off the rest. This process further strengthens the bonds within the in-group. There have been reports in the media of how the urban and international diaspora – in addition, perhaps inevitably, with a few local and other provocateurs – participated in the *Discord*-platform conversations that apparently functioned as one of the precursors to the events of September 8-9, 2025. (It has also been reported that the *Discord* conversations included 356 references to “Molotov cocktail” (*EKantipur*, 2026). More generally, however, in the manner that diplomats lost much autonomy with the invention of the telegraph, the invention of the cell phone allows the worldly-wise young to erode the autonomy and influence those back home, including parents, siblings, wives, husbands, relatives, friends, etc.

The Gen Z in Nepal, as most elsewhere, are, to a salient extent, creatures of the cell phone and social media, which is both a useful tool as well as weapon that can not only harm others but can destroy one’s own soul. It has both the best and the worst housed within it: It can connect people, places, information, and knowledge to great uses; but it also connects and gives strength to the worst instincts. It can help uphold upright citizenship and help regenerate it where it goes astray. At the same time, it can degrade citizens into a mob and into a network for arsonists. Both had plenty of evidence in Kathmandu and across Nepal on those two days of September 2025.

The civil society groups who gathered online to organize protests against government corruption and restrictions on social media were, in effect, calling out for a rehabilitation of upright citizenship and responsible governance. They were organizing protests against a massive overreach of political parties and the government and against large scale impunity, particularly in relation to corruption by party leaders and civil servants. Yet, in just a few hours, and in part through the use of social media, a crowd bent on fomenting violence overwhelmed both the police force and the civil society. Disciplined citizens in the organizing civil society groups called for a retreat but, in the heated atmosphere, it was much too late.

Although social media has deservedly been hailed by many as a democratizing force, it can severely corrode upright citizenship. Anonymity is fundamentally inimical to the exercise of citizenship. That one can fake one’s identity, and

one need not own one’s public statement, teaches nothing but irresponsible speech. That is not freedom of speech but a caricature of freedom of speech. Of course, there are times and places, such as in a faith-based, military, and highly authoritarian regimes, where anonymity may provide refuge. Otherwise, anonymity encourages one to backstab the rest from behind a thick and opaque wall, and is completely undemocratic.

Echo-chambering is the other dark domain of social media. As noted previously, it keeps swooping in on an ever-narrow point of view and disregards perspectives honed by a much larger body of citizens, whom it otherizes. Echo-chambering, thus, leads to a secretive and clique-based declaration rather than a democratically arrived-at decision. Fake postings abound: One report has noted that at least one-third of all postings of the September 8-9, 2025, events were fake. The ills of social media, together with its promise, were in full display in these events.

Disaffection and Resentment with Political Parties and Government

At a more immediate level, the Gen Z phenomenon and events are outcomes of a severe popular resentment against the heavy presence of the political party structure as well as against successive governments that were widely seen as non-performing, corrupt, and shrouded in impunity. The political parties consistently forced themselves upon citizens and citizen groups and raised party fronts across most domains of civil life and, in doing so, corroded citizenship. (In Nepal, “citizenship” – *nagaraikata* – is often utilized to refer to the legal document of citizenship. The usage here, however, is different in that it emphasizes the civil, political and social dimensions of citizenship. In order to aid clarity, I here translate citizenship as *nagarikatwa* that calls attention both to duties of citizenship as well as to upright citizenship that insists on questioning holders of political power.) The party fronts work as organizational pillars of the parties, and leaders of such fronts function in the shadow as influence-peddlers, middlemen and agents who increasingly seek a mediatory role between the citizen and the government. Mediation, of course, diminishes citizenship. It also often comes with a fee. In addition, front workers become contractors, traders, etc., and cut the line for government contracts as well as other forms of access. In addition, fronts often unionize and, supported by the party, exert illegitimate control over government or civil society programs. Members of the front are often fed off public resources, and those who have not eaten a slice of the cake consider themselves to be standing in a queue.

Such fronts now span nearly all domains of public, civil, professional and even business life. Thus, there are fronts erected by almost all old parties among farmers, squatters, civil service workers, laborers, students, teachers, school boards, physicians, veterinarians, engineers, scientists, professors, street sweepers, tailors, barbers, rural health workers and mothers’ groups, community forestry groups, non-resident

Nepali associations across a large number of countries, *ad infinitum*. Periodic elections across all these institutions are fought along party lines. From these pillars, the parties raise cadres in the hundreds of thousands, compete to enroll ever more members and gloat over the size of their membership. They also gloat over how many supporters they could “bring out” into the streets if it came to it.

As noted, many of these members fan out as influence-peddling and rent-seeking middlemen across almost “well-resourced” sectors. Most of the remaining members wait their turn to peddle influence and seek out rent. In addition, party functionaries are at the forefront of lines for government jobs, control over public land – sometimes effected via the perennial “landless and squatter commission(s)” that each government invariably institutes immediately after it comes to power. All government appointments, including in the courts of law – the Supreme Court as well as all statutory anti-corruption agencies included, bear distinct imprints of political parties. It has become almost impossible to imagine a professionalized and non-party based or non-party-tinged public space.

The political system had overreached way beyond its domain. Performance was seriously compromised across most domains because political parties sapped the agency and autonomy of citizens. As elsewhere within such a system, sycophants rode over lay workers and citizens. Corruption was rife. While personal corruption was widespread, corruption for party purposes, most of all to enlarge the elections war chest, was possibly larger in scale. And, inevitably, charges of large-scale corruption against party and government leaders, in public perception and/or in courts of law, were widespread. The level of public trust had rapidly eroded. Impunity regarding corruption was reported by newspapers to be widespread. Indeed, impunity was possibly the leading cause of erosion of public trust.

The widespread disaffection among the young – and many of the older ones – as seen through the elections, owed much to the emasculation of citizenship at the altar of the political parties and the government. As Robert Michels (1961/1911) showed a long time ago, democratic political parties often graduate into oligarchy. It would appear that the oligarchy of top party leaders and successive governments had grown impervious to criticism from citizens. Indeed, top party leaders were growing impervious to some of their own senior leaders, who often decried the absence of democracy within the parties.

The disaffection of citizens also owed much to the way the legislature and the judiciary functioned. A large number of legislators – from whom citizens expect a high level of integrity – were unserious in their job. Frequently, the required quorum for committee and parliamentary meetings was missed due to the absence of the required number of members. Many legislators marked themselves present but immediately left campus for the day without participating in committees or parliament. The committees were very often rubber stamps for the party and government positions. And at one time, when the secretarial staff finalized a fake set of recommendations that nullified an actual decision of a parliamentary committee, the

parliament failed to punish the culprits. It was widely agreed that the legislature utterly failed to carry the public trust it was bestowed by citizens.

The judiciary, in turn, has long been regarded as a bastion not of prompt or well-reasoned justice but as a key site of corruption. In addition, the fact that appointment of judges to the courts, including the Supreme Court, is made by a committee of politicians has eroded its popular legitimacy. All in all, key institutions of the government had lost much ground in public trust over the last several years. Indiscipline and rot were becoming wider and deeper in the highest echelons of the political system and the government.

Now, all of the preceding does not imply that older generations and old-party political leaders and governments did everything wrong and that was why they bit the dust. That was certainly not the case. It is not my intention here to “set the record straight” and let things fall where they may. My intent here is merely to identify what led to the birth and rise of Gen Z and, to the extent that Gen Z made its presence felt during the September 8-9, 2025, events, try to explain why that was the case. On the other hand, the old parties did bite the dust because of corruption, impunity and a roomful of machinations performed to engorge and ostensibly strengthen the parties. The size of the cadre and the spread out and intensely hierarchized nature of the party were considered the *sine qua non* for winning elections and, as in many other ostensibly democratic states, elections became nearly all of what politics was for. Everything else was secondary. However, as will be argued in the next section, the party system that relied upon – more correctly, that pretended to rely upon – grand old ideological narratives, the size of the party cadre and a deeply hierarchized party organization may itself have been for some time under dark and thick clouds.

It is unlikely, once again, that the old parties will resist bulking up. Given the political culture of equating a large, spread out and hierarchized party and its further pillarization, it is more than likely that the new parties, including the one which has seen a spectacular rise, will rapidly seek to bulk up, spread out, hierarchize and colonize civil space. Recreating that culture, however, will merely recycle history. Becoming and remaining strong is quite different from growing obese.

History, Gen Z and Populism

The results of the recently concluded general elections in Nepal, in which a reputedly populist party RSP, with the imprint of a massively charismatic new entrant there, Mr Balendra Shah (popularly known as Balen), who is also slated to be the next prime minister, won nearly two-thirds of the parliamentary seats, provides us with an opportune moment to examine the connections between the flow of history, Gen Z and populist politics. Because the rise of populism today is not a specifically Nepali but a global phenomenon, this examination may also lead us to a theoretically salient *insight*.

The Magna Carta, the US independence movement and, perhaps more so, the French Revolution gave us rather sturdy frames to regulate national politics. The next round of framing

politics came by way of the Soviet (and, later, the Chinese) revolutions, after which the world split apart and gave rise to two distinctive, doctrinaire, and mutually exclusive modes of doing politics and governing. (For quite a few decades, the anti-colonial independence movements in various countries strongly framed a nationalist political narrative and political organization.) The two often-inimical camps, in turn, gave rise *distinctive grand political narratives* of history, economy and politics – and to distinctive political parties based on those narratives. Each grand narrative, for the faithful, spanned almost all of history and all of the world. Based on ostensibly “self-evident” truths- which the faithful sanctified as “-isms,” the narratives gave full and detailed prescriptions on how to organize people and govern. Political parties in each of the two streams were expected to abide by the doctrines, as declared in the narratives, for the long term. Of course, there were “deviations” from time to time. Some “deviations” were mainstreamed while many others were banned and the “deviants” punished.

The Cold War came and went away. With the apparent victory of the bourgeois-dom and the vanquishing of the USSR and other communist states in Eastern Europe, the end of history was finally proclaimed. Only that the proclamation, as Francis Fukuyama himself now (2022) agrees, was not only premature but invalid; indeed, in his new book, *Liberalism and Its Discontents*, he believes that classical liberalism is now threatened by runaway capitalism and a heavy emphasis on identity. On the other hand, the Old Left is very much on the defensive. As early as the 1990s, UK Labor’s Tony Blair and US Democrat’s Bill Clinton’s sided with neoliberalism. Most of Nepal’s own communist parties continue to wear the party feather but they now do so ever so squeamishly. The Maoist Party, for example, recently unceremoniously took off the “Maoist” moniker and the UML (Unified Maoist-Leninist), which bravely declared support for multi-party politics three decades ago, may now put up some shade in front of its moniker. More importantly, and as critics have often giddily pointed out, the communist moniker is a throwback to the past of Moscow and Beijing rather than the past, present, or future of Nepal. As they have also pointed out, in life and governance in Nepal, all political brands feel the same.

Now, it is not only that Old Moscow and Old Beijing are no more. The protagonist of the other long-run capitalist-liberal political frame, the US, is pulling back fast as well. Old rules of world trade, etc., have decidedly taken a backseat there. And, it seems, the US cannot carry a grand narrative that valorizes the long run anymore either. The only narrative that it will henceforth uphold and sustain, it seems, is one of American strength. Thus, the long-run historical narrative itself appears to be on the *deathbed*. Maybe it will resurrect once more someday but maybe it will not. As has been said, in the long run, we are all dead in any case.

What does that leave the world and national politics, including in Nepal, with? When the world is speeding and in turmoil, which is most likely related to a widening and shifting of the world-capitalist core, it is *difficult to remain*

wedded to the old metanarrative of the long run, which was birthed by the narratives of capitalism and liberalism on the one hand and communism and socialism on the other to begin with. (Much less credible, I think, is the thesis that the turmoil is related to a purported late-stage capitalism.) It seems this is where populism comes in. Where the long run political frames have become seriously questioned or on the deathbed and where neither capitalism, liberalism, communism or old-style socialism cannot be regarded as a panacea, what you have is the short term, the midterm and a host of *makeshift isms*. If the grand old parties across the world, in a way like the ones that lost the recent general elections in Nepal, were institutional outcomes of a relatively stable world order and a long-run metanarrative, a world and a country that is speeding, unstable and in perpetual turmoil is hard-pressed to valorize the “old-guard, ideologically-steeped political parties and the long run.

On the other hand, in an unstable world where grand old parties that are founded upon grand old narratives lose their resonance, short-termism (and, at most, mid-termism) rules. This is even more the case when history (or social change) is flowing in a torrent and it remains unknown when the rains will stop. *Uncertainty and rapid shifts breed populism*. Notions of long arcs of history may or may not be right but one *must* to pass through shorter and lower arcs.

Now, if the young and Gen Z can smell the rapidly changing global and local politics much more sharply than the older generations, that would not be something unexpected. If they can see that history is whizzing by, they would certainly be more concerned than the rest and try to grasp the future more firmly and more immediately – rather than waiting for it to slow down. They would certainly not be wedded to the old political-historical narratives and the grand old political parties and older citizens. In the meantime, short termism and mid termism – and thus populism, the young seem to reason, is a more *practical* alternative because no one knows the long term future. They apparently reason that to the extent that one could take an informed guess of specific facets of a longer run future, such facets could be accommodated within a midterm political and policy frame.

In addition, many more of the young than the old are aware that they have to think in terms of the mode of Nepal-*in-the-world* rather than Nepal-*and-the-world*. The young possess a thicker, sharper and personal sense of both the airtight as well as a somewhat perforated glass ceiling for assessing their potential futures in Nepal and across the world. While it is far less certain that the young comprehend the problems of Nepal as a *state* within the interstate world system well enough, it is likelier that they will analyze it with much fresher eyes. The shorter term and shorn-of-metanarratives populist political frame popular among the young and Gen Z is, thus, *both* a response to the failure of the grand old parties as much as it is an outcome of the evolving uncertainties of the highly choppy and uncertain political-economic waters.

If the preceding analysis has some validity, it is time to *question*, and perhaps put to rest, the criticism commonly

leveled against the old leaders of “old” parties in Nepal. It is *not* mainly, as almost all critics have charged, that the leaders have become old or that the same set of aged leaders have been playing the game of musical chairs of power among themselves for far too long. It is rather that the *parties themselves* have become old and are often unable to politically grasp the nature of, and wade into, a rapidly changing world. The grand old narratives and monikers just do not resonate anymore either with the citizens or with the world. The large-sized, cadre-based, multi-pillared, intricately hierarchized, old-narratives laced, insular, hermetically sealed, and public-resource fed parties with lifetime membership may have seen their *end* for *this* period of history. Or, at the very least, in this phase of history, they have to *compete* on equal terms with rather “upstart” political parties and “newfangled” ideas that the old guard used to dismiss out of hand. The old guard, of course, had also dismissed, despite enough foretaste, that a charismatic, unbound-to-the-old-metanarrative, relatively nimble, and nearly party-less and cadre-less leadership could emerge from the relative shadows. The political ground that the old parties occupied shook quite a bit when the initial Gen Z groups hit the street. But the obese parties fell down with a thud because they could not support their own weight in this period of history. The elections showed that even party members had deserted the old parties during the elections. When the time came, the party “emperors” were seen to be naked.

On the other hand, it is not a given that the new young leaders will be capable of navigating across the political waters and prove worthy of the public trust they have been bestowed with. The Nepal-in-the-world vision - that refuses to visualize Nepal and the world as two exclusive entities - that the young imbibe, is crucial to leading Nepal to a better place. Yet, it is of utmost importance to recognize that we live in an *increasingly high-risk* world and to take steps to minimize such risks. The world is indeed a singular entity, but it is also the case that the oneness of the world hides its unevenness, inequality, racism, and otherness, all of which are now on the upswing. In this context, *states* continue to remain crucial agents of citizen autonomy and well-being.

There are a number of strategies and programs that help Nepal to de-risk. Revitalizing agriculture and the local community must come at the top of the priority list of de-risking. Agriculture puts food on the table, gives work and income to a majority of citizens and workers – women, Dalits and senior citizens in particular. It also lifts the poorest up. In addition, agriculture today is important not the least because AI and robotics, pandemics, wars, worldwide or regional economic depression, or blockades, can push a large number of migrant workers back home. The deployment of AI and robotics is expected, even at the initial stage, to negatively impact manual work and low-grade clerical labor, which are jobs most migrants from Nepal fill. When a large section of labor migrants returns due to the unleashing of any or several of these dangers, they will have to be accommodated in the rural communities and within a much more productive agriculture.

Legal, institutional and technological strategies to un-fallow the recently fallowed out farms must be given key emphasis in such de-risking.

Conclusion: From Present to Future

The old parties have lost much public trust, and it will be some time, if ever, that they regain the old glory. Yet, it is important to be thankful to the old parties and leaders –and, above all, the citizens and parents of people the young people today – for the gains they made during *their* life, and to build further on such gains. Grace is a winning formula, including in politics.

A set of three hard-won gains that must be honored by the Balen-RSP combine comes immediately to mind. The first is a republican democracy. Note that, in the parlance that is common today, a king is the ultimate nepo-baby. Plus, monarchy is the defeat of citizenship. The status of the head of state of Nepal must be open to all Nepali children and adults; it must not be bestowed as an inheritance. Monarchy and democracy are fundamentally antithetical, a contradiction in terms. The modern world came into being in part by taking leave of monarchy.

More broadly, of course, it is important to build a political, economic, and cultural order where no birthright or birth privilege exists. It is also important to shun a public culture that leads to the emergence of “Ba,” “Dai/Daju,” “Didi/Dijju,” “Bhauju,” “Babu,” “Cheli” and, more recently, of “Aama” and “Hajurama”. All of these detract from the practice of citizenship. So does the culture of “hajur,” “madam,” “pra.da,” “jarsaab” “mananiya,” and “sammananiya.”

The second is secularism. Politics and public life must not be left to the magic, wizards, witches, demons, and gods. The political, public and civil world is one of constitution, laws and citizenship; it is not a world of faith. A polity and a government cannot – and must not - of course, restrict citizens, in their private lives, from imagining, hoping, daydreaming, and worshipping. Ideally, the state, because it is a political and not a religious space, should maintain a complete separation from religion, *a la* France. A softer version is one in which the political state tolerates a status of *sarwadharmasambhava* (that all faiths are legitimate and equal). This is, for example, the model of old India. (The new BJP/RSS-India, of course, is a demo-theocracy.) Even when *sarwadharmasambhava* is the principle, it must become a feature of private, not public life. In addition, Nepal must remain secular is not only because, as it is often said, but there are also multiple faith groups in the country; it is primarily so because the public space is a political space, not that of a *Hindu* temple or *dharma*sabha, a *masjid* or a church. Nepal must rely on politics – and, thus, upon the constitution, laws, policies and government and citizen agency – and not on divine will, faith, and astrology in order to ensure both a better life for its people and the integrity of the country.

It is not for nothing that Toni Hagen (1971, p. 75) labeled Nepal an ethnic turntable of Asia. He actually wrote about something much broader than what we now understand by the term “ethnicity”. He spoke of a state of syncretism

where ethnic, religious, linguistic, regional and, indeed, the cultural comingle in Nepal. Perhaps keeping with the times he wrote in, he spoke of racial and other categories and their physical attributes, e.g. “slanted eyes,” etc., including in Nepal, that are now seriously suspect. Yet, he knew well what he was talking about. Nepal has historically been at the crossroads of civilizations, the Indian and the Sinic/Tibetan - and all the re-combinations thereof, in addition to Bengali, Oudhi, Tibetan, Persian, and Arab. All of these have added to our plural, syncretic and relatively cosmopolitan heritage. It is secularism that valorizes all of these best qualities. To de-secularize is to surrender some of the best human qualities that are thriving or lie dormant in Nepal’s culture. The next prime minister, Balen, has already given a huge gift to the nation by healing the fracture between the Madhesh and Pahad and, by implication, perforating and delegitimizing all sectarian identities and belongings at least for some years to come. (Of course, the history of Nepal and elsewhere tells us that identity struggles mutate, last long and rise and fall in cycles of a definite nature.) Balen’s electoral win, of course, was also a recognition that all Nepalis were seriously struggling against narrow and sectarian identity markers and against those who were making an enterprise out of it – regardless of whether they were doing so for political power, wages, profit, or a pseudo-intellectual glow.

Regardless of what Balen accomplishes or fails to accomplish during his tenure, this huge gain must not be squandered but pushed further to delegitimize other sectarian identities and ideologies, e.g. *Purohitvad* of all varieties and *Bahunvad* above all, as well as *Khasvad*, *Purusvad*, *Jativad*, *Adivasivad*, *Hinduvad*, *Muslimvad*, *Buddhavad*, and *Christianvad*. The valorization of “purity” is massively misplaced: Hybridity, mutt-hood and syncretism have very probably been the dominant features of Nepal’s social history. The future, of course, becomes far safer with pluralism and syncretism. It is also hoped, in this vein, that the Gen Z will rebel against the growing tendency among young political leaders, including Balen, to make a public show of putting *tika* on the top of their foreheads. One could surely, as an overwhelming proportion of Hindus do, wear a *tika* at home and during private festivals. But a *political* leader ought to refrain from becoming a *bhakta* or a *sadhu* while carrying out a public responsibility.

The third is social democracy. To the extent that the underlying principles and practices remain similar, this particular mode of governance can go by any name, e.g., democratic socialism, market socialism, or socialism. In fact, it can be practiced as a convention without any name being attached to it. This mode of governance remains enshrined in the constitution today. In fact, it is right there in the book in black and white in at least five different chapters and articles. To great regret, however, and despite successive left-of-center parliaments and, in fact, despite the absence of any vocal opposition from any party at any time, this principle has remained nearly unimplemented. I do not wish here to go into why that has been the case. But there certainly is a

line of thought, even among Left leaders, that production must precede distribution and that distribution “eats up” investment. I would not begrudge a businessman for such an assertion. But for an elected politician to assert or trust this line of thought is completely unwarranted. What is “distribution” after all, except an investment in citizens and their children, i.e., for the next round of “Gen Z” to become better graduates, workers, producers, earners, keepers of families, taxpayers, and citizens? It is an investment in citizens and their children, i.e., in the future.

As it is, Nepal now lives within a world-capitalist order, and it can thrive, in this *particular period of world history*, only by becoming a better player in this order - seven decades of Soma Sharma-like reveries aside. Hunger and severe poverty, extremely low-quality public education and public health, farms that consistently make a loss, etc., must not be allowed to oppress families and their children and grievously hurt their future. Further, only a part of the investment required for a social-democratic re-alignment is financial; the rest is political, cultural, legal, managerial, and so on. In essence, because a democratic state is a collective enterprise owned and run by all citizens – regardless of all other attributes, all of them must be enabled to function at the highest level possible. The practice of social democracy can transform all present and future citizens of the country who are the stakeholders of this enterprise.

Declarations

Ethical approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Availability of data and materials

Data are available.

Funding

No funding

Use of AI

AI was not used for the preparation and writing this manuscript. I confirm that this paper’s content was entirely human-generated.

References

- Braudel, F. (2009). History and the social sciences: The longue durée [First published in French in 1958]. *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 32(2), 171–203.
- Madhoosudanan, J. (2025). At the dawn of the French Revolution, rumors spread like a disease. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2514589122>

- National Statistics Office. (2024a). *Nepal living standard survey IV 2022/23: Statistical report* (Report). National Statistics Office, Government of Nepal. Kathmandu.
- National Statistics Office. (2024b). *Population composition of Nepal* (National Population and Housing Census 2021 Thematic Report). National Statistics Office, Government of Nepal. Kathmandu.
- National Statistics Office. (2025a). *Ageing situation in Nepal* (National Population and Housing Census 2021 Thematic Report). National Statistics Office, Government of Nepal. Kathmandu.
- National Statistics Office. (2025b). *Fertility in Nepal* (National Population and Housing Census 2021 Thematic Report). National Statistics Office, Government of Nepal. Kathmandu.
- Pangeni, R., Darji, A., & Ahmed, S. (2026). Bhadra 23 ra 24 ko ghatanama Sudan, Balen ra Raswapa connection. *Himal Khabar*. <https://www.himalkhabar.com>
- Sharma, S. (1986). Nepal's economy: Growth and development. *Asian Survey*, 26(8), 897–908. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2644139>
- Shrestha, S. (2026, February 26). *Shot like enemies: 2082 Bhadau 23 ra 24 ma khas k k bhayo?* BBC. Retrieved June 22, 2026, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zCn40LpNVQ>
- Worldometer. (2026, March 26). *Nepal demographics: Population of Nepal*. Retrieved March 26, 2026, from <https://www.worldometers.info/demographics/nepal-demographics/>

About the Author

Chaitanya Mishra  is a professor at the Central Department of Sociology, Tribhuvan University. His publications provide a critical lens on Nepal's socio-political evolution and continue to guide scholars, policymakers, and students in understanding the country's complex transformations.

Email: mishrachaitanya@gmail.com

This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/). © Chaitanya Mishra