

Hidden Politics behind the Gen-Z Movement (2025, September) in Nepal

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Abstract

The September 2025 large-scale youth uprising in Nepal is often referred to as the "Gen-Z protests." The uprising began when the government shut down most social media sites, but it soon expanded beyond its original purpose to reflect broader complaints that had been simmering among younger people. Widespread corruption in political institutions, the public display of privilege enjoyed by wealthy families, now known as "nepo kids," high rates of youth unemployment, and government restrictions on online freedoms that had become linked to generations and upward mobility were among the many issues that caused public outrage. These criticisms, though well-known and powerfully framed, were only the beginning of a more complex political endeavor. Below them was a system of clandestine politics that shaped the direction and outcome of the movement. These included conflicts over control of cyber narratives and information systems; institutional weaknesses that permitted temporary constitutional or legal wrangling; pressures from Nepal's geopolitical context; and calculated actions by political elites to delegitimize, scapegoat, or co-opt opposition. Since caste, class, gender, and geography all had an impact on who joined and whose concerns were given priority, the unequal patterns of participation within the movement itself were equally significant. This article examines these hidden political dynamics and situates them within a larger comparative framework of youth mobilizations in South Asia to ascertain whether the Gen-Z protests will persist as intermittent disruptions or evolve into more lasting and transformative forms of democratic participation.

Keywords: *Digital activism, geopolitical influence, hidden politics, youth mobilization*

Introduction

Youth mobilization has been a recurrent subject in South Asian politics in the 2020s, addressing both shifting sites of contention and systemic grievances. Often referred to as the "Gen-Z movement," the September 2025 riots in Nepal were among the bloodiest youth upheavals in recent history. The immediate cause was the government's decision to ban 26 social

media platforms, which was widely viewed as a blatant assault on online freedom of speech and livelihoods although being supposedly justified as a regulatory measure (Time, 2025).

The prohibition represented greater generational exclusion from political policymaking in addition to limiting young people's communication and creative outlets. Within days, large-scale demonstrations swept through city squares, accompanied by reports of numerous arrests, injuries, and fatalities (The Guardian, 2025).

The protests couldn't be explained by a dispute over internet restriction. Commentators noted that the protests were sparked by deeper structural grievances, such as high rates of youth unemployment, a stagnant economy, general perceptions of corruption, and the visibility of elite privilege by so-called "nepo kids" who displayed their wealth and political connections (Al Jazeera, 2025). The complaints represented a deeper, more widespread disenchantment with basic governance failures rather than just generational dissatisfaction. However, interpreting the protests as a youth-only campaign against internet censorship or corruption runs the risk of underestimating the deeper political processes at play (Phys.org, 2025). These deep politics, which included disinformation operations, institutional weakness, state repression, elite co-optation strategies, and global geopolitical demands, tended to influence the revolution's course and possible conclusion.

Problem Statement

Although the Gen-Z uprising's scope and ferocity have garnered international attention, there hasn't been much careful analysis of its underlying dynamics. The majority of contemporary narratives emphasized its salience—social media restriction, large-scale protests, and intergenerational complaints—while omitting the lesser-known political forces that shaped its course. The issue is twofold: first, youth mobilization in Nepal is usually viewed as episodic, appearing during crises but disappearing without having any institutional influence; second, the elite politics and power dynamics that underpin these mobilizations are rarely thoroughly studied. Without exploring these hidden politics, criticisms of the Gen-Z movement run the risk of reducing it to a passing fad rather than a possible area for systemic change. The gap between the apparent concerns and the underlying, covert processes of power that both restrict and facilitate young political mobilization in Nepal is the nexus problem that the article is interested in.

Objectives of the Study

This study has three main research objectives.

- To identify and examine the apparent sparks that sparked the Gen-Z demonstrations and inspired large numbers of young people in Nepal.
- To reveal the covert political dynamics that influenced the movement's trajectory beyond its stated goals, such as elite politics, institutional realignments, disinformation, co-optation, and global geopolitical influences.
- 3. To put the Nepali example in a comparative framework and learn from youth movements in South Asia and around the world in order to pinpoint ways to turn sporadic protest into sustained democratic engagement.

Review of Literature

Research on youth rebellions in the Global South has become more pressing in the twenty-first century as a result of demographic shifts, technological advancements, and governance difficulties that have sparked waves of activism. In order to understand the emergence of youth protest movements, scholars have identified three interconnected spaces: technologically enabled repertoires of dispute, structural grievances, and political opportunity structures that are conditioned by institutional vulnerability and elite weakness (Phys.org, 2025).

The oldest explanation for youth upheaval is probably structural issues. Collective action has frequently been sparked by economic uncertainty, ongoing unemployment, and growing inequality throughout South Asia and abroad. Instead of a demographic dividend, researchers have referred to Nepal's situation as a "demographic frustration" because the country's youth bulge has overtaken the growth of jobs (World Bank, 2023). The most similar structural dynamics were those that drove the 2022 protests in Sri Lanka, where high inflation and shortages of essentials inspired young people from all socioeconomic backgrounds (Al Jazeera, 2022). Anger at unemployment and being excluded from decision-making were major motivators for Bangladeshi students' 2024 demonstrations against the authoritarian government (The Diplomat, 2024). Based on a comparative study, mobilization is facilitated by organizational infrastructure and cultural framing, and structural grievances by themselves are insufficient to explain it.

A key component of modern youth revolutions is the internet, which is changing how complaints are expressed, solidarity is formed, and collective identities are created. According to Tufekci (2017), these actions are referred to as "networked protests," wherein digital infrastructures facilitate swift coordination at the expense of organizational depth. The government of Nepal banned 26 social media sites in September 2025, which was not only an instigating episode but also a sign of disregard for generational identity. The prohibition was perceived as both an exclusion of the generation and a form of persecution by Gen-Z, whose political and cultural presence is inextricably linked to online space.

Similar dynamics are revealed by comparative scholarship: in Sri Lanka (2022), *GoHomeGota* mobilized outrage into public action; in Hong Kong (2019), encrypted messaging apps and memes created a common repertoire of protest strategies (Reuters, 2022). Thus, digital media is a contentious area of state authority as well as a mobilizing infrastructure whether teenage demands and online activism can be turned into continuing political clashes depends on political opportunity structures such as elite divisions, the fragility of the party system, and institutional vulnerability. According to McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001), social movements are more likely to succeed when the ruling elites are split up internally or when institutional crises open up new avenues for opponents.

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These same issues characterized Nepal's politics in 2025: corruption scandals, dwindling major party legitimacy, and repeated collapses of coalition administrations meant to bring stability. From virtual resistance to massive street protests, they gave young mobilization a fertile basis. Comparative examples are presented to illustrate this point: in Sri Lanka, party-hopping during the crisis cleared the way for protestors to seek regime change; in Bangladesh, the weakness of the opposition party paradoxically allowed young activists to become more visible as an independent force.

However, few reports highlight what can be called the "hidden politics" of young revolutions, even while a large portion of the literature focuses on grievances, online networks, and political possibility. Among these are asymmetrical inclusions and exclusions by caste, class, gender, and area; disinformation; transnational geopolitics; and high-stratum tactics of scapegoating and co-optation. Studies on the Arab Spring (Bayat, 2017) and Hong Kong (Veg, 2020) indicate that these less obvious, more covert dynamics that lie behind surface issues must be taken into account when attempting to explain why protests were successful. According to first accounts of the 2025 protests in Nepal, elites are working to depoliticize young people who are being influenced by outside forces while also creating opportunities for prominent leaders to be incorporated into traditional party apparatuses. The necessity of a multi-layered analytical framework that takes into account both the obvious and obscure facets of mobilization is highlighted by these developments.

Methodology

The qualitative, interpretive methodology used in this study is suitable for exposing the Gen-Z movement's latent as well as visible characteristics. The majority of the analysis is based on secondary sources, including news reports, critical opinion articles, and local studies that provide detailed assessments of the events and their broader political contexts. Thematic examination of discursive framing elements such as slogans, narratives, and online campaigns demonstrates how the concerns were presented and contested. The Nepali example is also positioned among similar youth revolutions in South Asia using comparative analysis to find parallels and differences. The approach is exploratory and prioritizes mapping dynamics over theory testing. By combining information from multiple sources, the study seeks to provide both descriptive accuracy and interpretive depth. Although the lack of fieldwork or primary interviews restricts the ability to see insider perspectives, the technique provides a strong foundation for understanding the basic political processes of the uprisings. The model establishes the foundation for further studies that will develop the analysis using empirical field data.

Framework for Analysis

The Gen-Z movement in Nepal is examined in this article using a three-layered analytical approach:

Complaints: At the surface level, movements focus on certain issues, including stopping corruption, protecting online liberties, or generating jobs. These complaints give many people the moral and political impetus they need to succeed. Deeper resentments regarding institutional corruption, elite privilege, and unemployment were sparked in Nepal by the social media ban. Grievances must be integrated into mobilization infrastructures; they are necessary but insufficient on their own.

Organizing Facilities: The technological and organizational infrastructures that facilitate group activity are referred to as the second order. These infrastructures for Nepal's Gen-Z comprised international solidarity movements, student unions, informal urban youth groups, and online networks (before they were banned). The density of digital connections and the vulnerability of traditional organizational gatekeepers were both reflected in the mobilization rate. However, networked mobilization produces breadth rather than depth, as comparative scholarship indicates—movements can grow rapidly but have difficulty institutionalizing. This was true during the protests in Nepal, where a large number of people participated but the leadership groups were erratic and divisive.

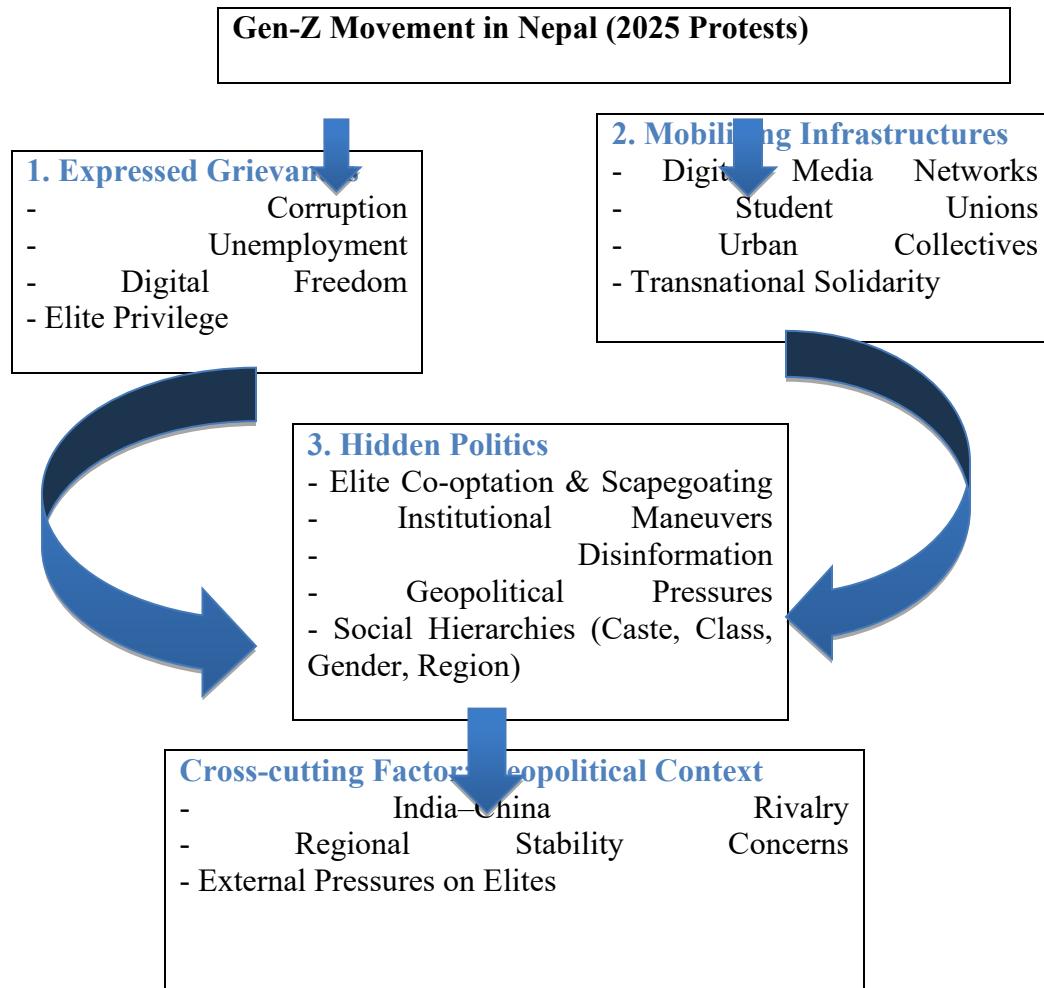
Covert Politics: The field of hidden politics is the third and primary subject of this research. These entail high-level strategies—like enlisting protest leaders, making symbolic compromises, or using scapegoating rhetoric to undermine protests. They also cover institutional strategies such as disbanding parliament, imposing emergency powers, or using legal measures to disband mobilization. Importantly, covert politics also exist in the geopolitical arena: Nepal's location between China and India creates external factors that affect the choices made by the elite and the outcomes of protests. Due to their shared desire for stability, Nepali elites were unable to fully support or repress the young movement due to the unstated preferences of each neighbor. Lastly, internal social hierarchies are a component of hidden politics. Youth activism in Nepal, which is not a monolith, is mediated by caste, class, gender, and regional divisions that influence representation and involvement.

Contribution: By integrating all three levels, this method provides a more comprehensive analysis than either one that only concentrates on evident problems or digital mobilization. Framed grievances explain why people protested, mobilizing infrastructures explain how they organized and spread, and hidden politics explains the movement's pathways, boundaries, and effects. The paradigm in Figure 1 also facilitates comparisons: Nepal demonstrates how elite influence and geopolitics shape outcomes, whereas Bangladesh and Sri Lanka demonstrate how Gen-Z mobilization overthrows regimes.

Research Techniques

Instead of using primary field research, the study predominantly uses secondary sources and takes a qualitative and interpretative approach. Three complimentary approaches are used in the study to address the Gen-Z protests in Nepal. In order to recreate the chronology of events, identify the main complaints, and examine the government's response, think-tank reports and news accounts are first content-analyzed. In order to trace how demonstrators articulated problems around corruption, digital liberty, and generational identity, as well as how these ideas traveled across networks, thematic analysis of online communications, including hash tags, slogans, and viral internet campaigns, is carried out. Third, a comparative regional analysis places the Nepalese experience in the context of other youth revolutions in South Asia, such as those in Bangladesh (2024) and Sri Lanka (2022), highlighting both local contexts—such as Nepal's geopolitical priorities—and common trends, such as first-digit mobilization and anti-corruption discourse. The research investigates the politics concealed in the protests, such as elite co-optation, institutional strategies, and the involvement of outside players, using this synthesis of the available data. This approach can offer a scholarly, interpretive view of the movement, linking observed events to a more comprehensive theoretical and geopolitical perspective, even when no preliminary fieldwork is carried out.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework of Gen-Z Movement in Nepal



Note: The conceptual framework illustrates the three-layer analysis of the Gen-Z Movement in Nepal (2025). With geopolitics as a cross-cutting issue that affects the underlying layer, it symbolizes expressed frustrations, mobilizing infrastructures, and underlying politics.

Findings and Discussion

Hidden Politics and Visible Drivers

Both overt and covert political forces propelled the Gen-Z demonstrations in Nepal in 2025. Online restriction was one of the more obvious causes, and the government's ban on 26 social media platforms served as an immediate spur for mobilization (Al Jazeera, 2025). Another factor was economic instability, which infuriated young people due to significant youth unemployment and restricted prospects (Phys.org, 2025). As social media discussions about "nepo kids" revealed deeper systemic corruption and unequal access to resources, elite

entitlement sentiment intensified grievances and sparked widespread public indignation (Time, 2025).

As disinformation tactics and online hash tag wars shaped public opinion and attempted to undermine student movement, information politics also played a decisive role (Phys.org, 2025). In order to incorporate mobilization into preexisting power dynamics, mainstream political parties tried to either reframe demands in exchange for concessions or co-opt protest leadership (Time, 2025). Beneath these public grievances, the movement was steered by a vibrant array of clandestine political forces. Since governments imposed social media bans as a regulatory measure and simultaneously portrayed protesters as being led by foreign elements, elite scapegoating and signaling were seen as necessary in order to demand coercive action (The Guardian, 2025). The use of caretaker appointments, constitutional short cuts, and abrupt bureaucratic interventions to control the crisis and avoid implementing practical reform were all examples of institutional maneuvering that exacerbated elite survival efforts (Financial Times, 2025).

The movement's potential was also limited by geopolitical factors, as elites were urged by Nepal's location between China and India to put peace and order ahead of radical change (Phys.org, 2025). In conclusion, social exclusions structured participation and representation: rural and marginalized representatives were mostly absent, while urban, caste-preferred youth commanded center stage and media attention (Al Jazeera, 2025). These overt and covert dynamics collectively show the multifaceted complexity of Gen-Z demonstrations and how the extent and boundaries of youth mobilization are shaped by the intersection of structural grievances with elite maneuvering, institutional frameworks, and geopolitical restrictions.

Comparative lessons, policy responses, and strategic outcomes

The Gen-Z demonstrations in Nepal demonstrated the advantages and disadvantages of youth-focused mobilization, among other strategic results. Co-optation, in which major political parties incorporated the vigor of youth movements into their agendas by taking on conspicuous leadership roles or partially endorsing parts of the demands, was one of the most noticeable outcomes (Time, 2025). Stricter cyber regulations and tougher security crackdowns were implemented in the interim as a form of repression, demonstrating the state's determination to regain control over public and digital areas (The Guardian, 2025). A revolutionary divide between the youth and the political class is still possible, but it is unlikely to occur until structural rural-urban divisions and social exclusions are addressed. This suggests that profound inequality limits the capacity for transformation (Phys.org, 2025).

Numerous policy proposals have been put forth to address these problems. Youth voices can be firmly ingrained in the decision-making process by establishing youth councils with representative participation. Enhancing anti-nepotism through more transparent laws might lessen complaints of elite favoritism, and regulating digital governance to find a balance between regulation and fundamental rights can suffocate seeds of future unrest. Long-term political awareness and involvement can be increased by supporting autonomous youth organizations and offering civic education. Lastly, for accountability and legitimacy within the state apparatus, it is critical to conduct unbiased investigations into violent protest-related incidents (Al Jazeera, 2025).

The contrasting experience of South Asia highlights how contingent young mobilization is. As shown in Bangladesh (2024) and Sri Lanka (2022), digital-first mobilizations have the

potential to overthrow governments rapidly, but they rarely result in long-lasting transformation unless they are supported by institutional frameworks that channel demands into long-term policy change (Phys.org, 2025). This lesson is reinforced by Nepal's experience: although the Gen-Z movement was successful in mobilizing widespread political participation and making their claims heard, its long-term effects hinge on policymakers' capacity to pursue inclusive, accountable, and structural change that addresses the underlying as well as the immediate causes of youth grievances.

Unique Features of Nepal in the Gen-Z Movement

The Gen-Z of 2025, a mix of national structural, cultural, and geopolitical factors influenced the demonstrations in Nepal. Nepal's uprising took place against a backdrop of low party credibility, unbroken coalition cabinets, and protracted political instability after several decades of post-monarchy transition, in contrast to the majority of earlier South Asian youth uprisings. Because conventional institutions had the authority or integrity to put an end to protests, this produced a political climate in which young activism could quickly spiral out of control.

Elite privilege salience and the "nepo kids" frame, which has become a meme framing mechanism, are two further distinctive features of Nepalis. In Nepal, the growing intergenerational prominence of privileged classes in business and politics sparked outrage, linking personal resentment to more widespread institutional unfairness. In other countries, youth protests are more likely to concentrate on issues like economic instability or corruption (Time, 2025).

Third, Nepal is unique due to its geopolitical location. Because Nepal is sandwiched between China and India, its elites are constantly scrutinized by the outside world, and both countries strongly favor stability. The parameters of youth-led change were determined by this particular triadic demand, which also limited state replies and encouraged quick institutional responses (such caretaker designations) (Phys.org, 2025). Fourth, how the intersection of caste, regional, and urban-rural divisions affected visibility and involvement.

While rural and marginalized youth were underrepresented, urban, educated, and caste-privileged youth from throughout the country dominated protest narratives and media coverage. A recurring feature of Nepali social structures, this unequal representation influences the mobilization process as well as the outcomes of policy (Al Jazeera, 2025). Last but not least, Nepal's revolution demonstrated digital-cultural hybridity: physical protests were extremely localized, organized through unofficial networks, student organizations, and local community associations, even while online mobilization, viral memes, and hashtags were at the forefront. The distinctive adaptation of Nepali youth to limited institutional support and dispersed physical landscape is the combination of digital-first strategies and collaborative action on the ground.

Prolonged political unpredictability, elite prominence, geopolitical tensions, deeply ingrained social stratification, and hybridized digital-offline protest are all Nepali quirks that set the 2025 Gen-Z movement apart from similar regional movements and influence its scope and strategic impact.

Conclusion

The 2025 Gen-Z movement in Nepal demonstrated how long-standing systemic governance shortcomings and elite networks have restricted the political influence and participation of young people. Soft underlying political issues shaped its trajectory in addition to overt manifestations of discontent, such as internet restrictions, economic marginalization, and perceptions of elite privilege. Among these was the selective appropriation of protest leaders, intentional placement, targeted disinformation efforts against specific groups, elite scapegoating, and outside pressures brought on by Nepal's geopolitical location between China and India. Together, these elements restrict the range of reform alternatives and control the level and ferocity of mobilization. Whether it ignites a moment of revolutionary democratic change or fades away as another cyclical episode of protest, its long-term significance will depend on how youth activism, institutional response, and the capacity of internal and external forces to establish inclusive, accountable, and sustainable political change interact.

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