



## REFLECTIONS FROM UPRISING: THE ROLE OF YOUTH AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN POLITICAL MOVEMENTS IN NEPAL AND INDONESIA

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### ABSTRACT

While youth-led digital activism is increasingly visible across the globe, scholarly understanding of how these dynamics shape political outcomes in South and Southeast Asia remains limited. Addressing this gap, this study investigates how Generation Z in Nepal and Indonesia employs social media to mobilize political action and influence institutional change. Specifically, the research compares the mechanisms through which online platforms facilitate coordination, amplify grievances, and construct collective identity among young activists in both countries. Using a qualitative comparative approach that integrates media content analysis with secondary data from reports and news archives, the study analyzes two key cases: the 2025 social-media-ban protests in Nepal and the digitally driven mass demonstrations in Indonesia. The findings show that digital activism not only accelerates the transition from online engagement to offline mobilization but also generates cross-border ripple effects, where successful youth movements inspire similar actions in neighboring states. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of youth political agency in the digital era and offers insights into the evolving patterns of civic engagement shaped by social media.

### INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, South and Southeast Asia have witnessed a rise in youth-driven political engagement, fueled by rapid digitalization, expanding internet access, and growing public dissatisfaction with governance. Across the region, young citizens are emerging as influential political actors who use social media not only to express grievances but also to coordinate collective action and challenge entrenched power structures. Despite this growing trend, scholarly analysis of how digital-native generations mobilize politically—and how such mobilization translates into tangible political outcomes—remains limited.

Within this broader regional context, Nepal and Indonesia offer two compelling and contrasting cases for comparison. Both countries have large and politically active youth populations, high rates of social media use, and histories of political volatility shaped by public protest. Yet, they differ in political system, governance challenges, and digital regulatory frameworks, making them ideal for examining how similar forms of youth digital activism

manifest under different national conditions. By analyzing youth-led movements in these two settings, this study seeks to illuminate broader patterns of political participation in the digital era and contribute to a deeper understanding of regional democratic dynamics.

Across both cases young people used digital platforms not merely to express opinion but to organize, coordinate, and amplify grievances tied to corruption, nepotism, unemployment, and widening inequality; in Nepal a 2025 government ban on 26 social media platforms sparked mass Gen Z-led protests that contributed to Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli's resignation, while in Indonesia online campaigns over corruption and economic injustice translated into large street demonstrations in 2025. Building on existing scholarship on digital activism and youth political participation, this study addresses several gaps that remain insufficiently explored. First, although prior research has examined how social media facilitates mobilization, fewer studies analyze the specific mechanisms through which digital platforms transform online engagement into sustained offline political action



within South and Southeast Asian contexts. Second, the distinctive political behavior of Generation Z—characterized by their native fluency with digital technologies, their distrust of traditional institutions, and their preference for decentralized forms of activism—has not been systematically compared across countries experiencing democratic strain. Third, earlier works often focus on single-country cases, leaving limited understanding of how youth-led digital movements may generate cross-border influences or shared regional patterns

By comparing Nepal and Indonesia, this research responds to these limitations and offers a more nuanced explanation of how Gen Z uses social media to coordinate protests, construct collective identities, and exert political pressure. In doing so, the study clarifies the theoretical and empirical contributions it makes to the broader literature on digital-age political participation, this study asks how social media facilitates mobilization and collective identity among young citizens, what socioeconomic and political conditions make such mobilization possible, and how successful youth movements in one country may inspire similar actions elsewhere. The paper's novelty lies in its focused, comparative look at Generation Z in two different political contexts and in its use of the domino theory as an analytical lens to trace cross-border diffusion of protest tactics, symbols, and narratives. According to Arafat and Fahmida (2025a), digital tools can enhance transparency and accountability in governance when citizens are empowered to participate actively through accessible mobile platforms. This theoretical perspective aligns with the way youth in Nepal and Indonesia have used social media as a medium of political accountability. Using a qualitative, comparative case-study approach based on news reports, official statistics, and scholarly analyses, the study tracks key events, platform usage, and protest dynamics to identify mechanisms of digital mobilization and their short-term political consequences. The findings illuminate both the power and limits of digitally mediated youth activism and point to broader regional implications for governance and civic engagement.

## METHODOLOGY

Research means a systematic finding and study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new results (Arafat, 2024). This study employs a qualitative

research approach based entirely on secondary data. Data This study draws on a curated set of secondary data comprising news reports, government documents, national and international statistical publications, and peer-reviewed academic articles. Data were collected from materials published between 2018 and 2025, a period that captures both the rise of Generation Z political activism and the major protest episodes examined in Nepal and Indonesia.

To ensure rigor and transparency, several inclusion criteria were applied:

1. sources had to directly address youth political participation, digital activism, or protest events in either Nepal or Indonesia;
2. news reports were limited to reputable national and international media outlets with established editorial standards;
3. documents were required to be publicly verifiable and published in English or the respective national languages (Nepali or Indonesian);
4. academic articles included only peer-reviewed publications or working papers from recognized research institutions.

Sources were excluded if they were opinion pieces, lacked clear authorship, or could not be cross-verified with at least one additional independent source. The final dataset consists of approximately 85 sources, including 40 news articles, 15 government and institutional documents, 10 statistical reports, and 20 academic publications. This structured selection process enhances the replicability of the study and ensures that the analysis draws from credible and relevant evidence, and published research on social media and youth activism. The study focuses on two case countries, Nepal and Indonesia, to examine how youth and digital platforms influence political movements. Key events, such as the 2025 social media ban in Nepal and online-driven protests in Indonesia, were analysed to understand the mechanisms of mobilization, coordination, and collective identity formation. The research also explores the regional implications of these movements through the lens of the domino theory, observing patterns across South Asia. Data were evaluated critically to identify trends, causative factors, and outcomes of youth-led digital activism, with particular attention to the role of Generation Z. By comparing the two cases, the study highlights similarities and differences in the ways social media shapes political



engagement and influence, providing insights into both immediate and broader political consequences.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Nepal: Youth, Social Media, and Political Uprising

September 2025, the Himalayan nation Nepal witnessed an unprecedented political movement that ultimately led to the downfall of the ruling Oli administration. The general public's anger over years of corruption, nepotism, unemployment, and administrative inefficiency boiled over into a youth-led anti-government uprising. Nepal descended into political crisis after the government imposed a sweeping social media ban in an apparent attempt to silence dissent.

The move, against a backdrop of economic stagnation and widespread youth disillusionment, ignited mass protests across Kathmandu and other Nepalese cities, led largely by Generation Z demonstrators (Teekah, 2025). According to Koirala (2025), social media played a significant role in mobilizing and shaping the Gen Z protests in Nepal. On September 8, police clashed with protesters. On September 9, protesters set fire to the parliament building and other government offices, leading to the resignation of Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli. This signalled a turning point in Nepal's 17-year history of miserable democratic politics. The incident began on September 4, 2025, Nepal's government suspended 26 social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), China's WeChat, Russia's VK, and Japan's LINE (Teekah, 2025; Dutta, 2025). Earlier, on August 28, the Nepal government issued a directive giving domestic and foreign online and social media platforms seven days to register with the Ministry of Communication and Information.

If they did not respond to the registration after seven days, the government took the step of banning social media. Although the Oli administration stated that this measure was taken to protect national sovereignty, prevent misinformation, and implement digital registration protocols. The government wanted to impose its own controls on social media platforms. The ban drew comparisons to China's strategy of restricting online platforms to curb dissent. China, however, blocks Western sites while offering domestic alternatives (such as WeChat, RedNote, and Douyin). Nepal offered no substitutes, creating the perception of a government effort to isolate its youth from global communication (Teekah, 2025). In Nepal, young people account for approximately 20.8 percent of the

total population of the country (age group 16-25 years) while 40.68 percent of the population lies in the age group 16-40 (UNFPA, 2022).

Surveys conducted in January 2025 Nepal Population stood in 29.6 million, while 16.5 million individuals using the Internet in Nepal at the beginning of 2025, which is 55.8 percent of total population. At the beginning of 2025, about 14.3 million people were active on social media, representing 48.1 percent of the population, a similar number on the popular social media platform "Facebook". Another social media platform, Instagram, had 3.90 million users, representing 13.2 percent of the population. X (formerly Twitter) saw a relatively low level of activity, with 390 thousand, representing 1.3 percent of the population (DataReportal, 2025, March 3). Nepalese were also active on other social media platforms.

The younger generation, especially GEN-Z, viewed the ban on social media as a direct violation of their primary means of digital communication and civic engagement. This generation considered social media platforms as a means of expressing their digital communication and freedom of speech on a par with other fundamental rights. Although the social media ban sparked the protests, these developments reflect longstanding frustration over corruption, economic hardship, and youth alienation from the entrenched political elite (Choudhury, Dawar, & Cheema, 2025). Nepal's persistent failure to create sufficient large-scale employment opportunities has resulted in youth unemployment exceeding 20 percent, forcing a significant portion of young people to migrate overseas for work.

In turn, the national economy has become heavily dependent on remittance inflows, which reached approximately US\$14 billion in 2023-24, accounting for more than one-third of the country's GDP (Joshi & Briefies, 2025). Approximately one-third of Nepal's population resides and works abroad, making remittances a crucial component of household income. Currently, over 76 percent of households depend on these financial inflows, a substantial increase from 23 percent in 1995-96 (Choudhury, Dawar, & Cheema, 2025). The ban disrupted communications for nearly two million Nepalese working abroad who rely on these apps to connect with families and also threatened the country's tourism sector (The Times of India, 2025). The ban on social media cut off communication between these large expatriates and destroyed businesses that were based on online platforms. Unemployment, rampant corruption, nepotism, and administrative inefficiency have led to the collapse of Nepal's economy. Nepal was ranked 107th out of 180



countries in the 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index, highlighting ongoing challenges related to governance and corruption (Transparency International, 2024).

According to Xinhua (2025), the World Bank has projected that Nepal's poverty rate will decline to 5.6 percent in 2025 under the \$3.65/day threshold. The economic inequality between the rich and the poor has become glaring, failing to improve the living standards of ordinary Nepalese. What began as a digital rights movement rapidly escalated into nationwide unrest, with demonstrators many students and young professionals demanding not only the restoration of online freedoms but also government accountability, an end to corruption, and a rejection of political nepotism, as symbolized by the viral "Nepo Kids" campaign (The Indian Express, 2025, September 11; CNN, 2025, September 10). The "Nepo Kid" campaign on social media featured images and videos of the elite lifestyles of politicians' children—foreign dresses, expensive cars, and holiday villas. Users trended on social media with hashtags like #Nepokid, #NepoBabies, and #PoliticiansNepoBabyNepal. The government imposed a ban on 26 social media platforms in an attempt to stop the ongoing campaign, but the ban was later lifted in the face of protests. A significant number of users are migrating to Viber and TikTok, as these are currently the only major social media platforms that have complied with the registration requirements (The New York Times, 2025, September 7).

The strategic role of social media in the organization of protests was multifaceted. Platforms such as Discord and TikTok were utilized for real-time coordination, while Facebook and Instagram served as repositories for multimedia content that galvanized domestic and international audiences. Social media acted as both a mirror and a megaphone, reflecting popular discontent while simultaneously amplifying calls for accountability and reform. While the social media ban served as the immediate trigger for the protests, the underlying causes of public discontent run much deeper than digital policy disagreements (People's Reflections, 2025). On 8 September 2025, the long-simmering public anger erupted into rebellion, mainly involving teenagers and young adults. The Kathmandu Post's visual documentation highlighted how demonstrators, some visibly in school uniforms, used social media to organize before the ban, with the "Hami Nepal" group playing a leading role in mobilization (The Kathmandu Post, 2025). The demonstrators proudly adopted the title "Zen-Z Protest" outside of traditional party political movements, general people spontaneously joined the protesters in the Maitighar Mandala of the

capital Kathmandu, Pokhara and others big cities. Notably, the widespread use of symbolic motifs such as the one piece flag, emblematic of rebellion and solidarity—enhanced collective identity and moral cohesion within the movement (Shrestha, 2025).

Police responded with tear gas, rubber bullets, and in some instances, live ammunition. At least 19 protesters were killed, and many more were injured in Kathmandu and other cities (Reuters, 2025, September 8; TIME, 2025, September 9). Protesters breached the perimeter of the federal parliament building, and as tensions escalated, a curfew was imposed across parts of the capital (Al Jazeera, 2025, September 9). By the second day, the situation had deteriorated further. Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli resigned amid the escalating violence, and the government's authority appeared to collapse (Al Jazeera, 2025, September 9; The New York Times, 2025, September 10). In the political vacuum, the army shouldered the responsibility of the innocent. On September 12, former Chief Justice Sushila Karki took over as interim Prime Minister in support of the protesters, and institutional measures were hampered. The movement signalled a new form outside the previously established political structure of the movement. Although Nepal's former king Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev had issued a press release supporting the protests and condoling the deaths, the royal family had already taken to the streets in March this year to demand the restoration of the monarchy. The presence of young people outside the established political movement set this protest apart from previous protests in Nepal. This generational uprising was not just against the social media ban policy but also an expression of pent-up anger over corruption, nepotism, unemployment, and economic hardship. The young generation's ability to assert themselves on the streets despite the government's curfew has demonstrated their organizational power. Social media has emerged as a defining actor, enabling decentralized coordination by reducing reliance on traditional hierarchical political organizations and bypassing conventional mechanisms of state surveillance and repression.

### Indonesia: Digital Activism and Civic Engagement

Indonesia has historically witnessed the centrality of youth in moments of political transformation. The student movements of the late 1990s played a decisive role in the downfall of President Suharto, ushering in the Reformasi era. Since then, young people have remained an important, if at times fragmented, voice in civic life. In recent years, a combination of persistent corruption, democratic





backsliding, economic hardship, and unpopular legislation has reignited youth activism. Unlike the earlier movements dominated by university campuses and physical assemblies, the twenty-first century protests are increasingly shaped by the strategic use of social media platforms. Amid Indonesia's evolving democratic landscape, digital activism has become a defining arena for youth-driven civic engagement (Nugroho, 2025). With over 167 million people active on social media, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have evolved far beyond simple tools for communication (DataReportal, 2023). They now function as a "new public space," where young Indonesians articulate dissent on issues ranging from anti-corruption to environmental justice (Earl et al., 2022).

Two decades after the Reformasi Era, assessments point to a decline in democratic quality, with civil liberties increasingly constrained (Masduki & Wendratama, 2025). Merlyna Lim (2025) famously observed that Indonesia's social media activism produced "many clicks but little sticks," highlighting the challenge of sustaining long-term movements. Nevertheless, Indonesian youth increasingly leverage digital tools not only for performative support but also to coordinate concrete actions such as street protests, fundraising, and policy advocacy (Wahyuningroem et al., 2024). The #ReformasiDikorupsi student protests in 2019 and #TolakOmnibusLaw labor protests in 2020 exemplify this trend: viral hashtags and online outrage evolved into mass offline demonstrations that pressured lawmakers (Wahyuningroem et al., 2024). Social networks have also enhanced civic engagement by enabling youth to participate in awareness campaigns, organise seminars, protest social issues, and form broad social connections (Ida et al., 2025). On 25 August 2025, Indonesia witnessed a major wave of protests linked to broader civil unrest. The immediate trigger was a proposed hike in housing subsidies for members of parliament, nearly ten times the minimum wage in Jakarta. Reports that lawmakers received a \$3,000 monthly allowance sparked outrage among a population struggling with the soaring cost of living (Aggarwal et al., 2025). Protesters demanded the reversal of subsidy schemes, penalties for insensitive lawmakers, and the passage of the Confiscation of Assets Act for corrupt officials (Naufal, 2025). The demonstrations, initially peaceful, escalated following the death of a 21-year-old delivery driver in Jakarta when footage showed an elite paramilitary police unit running over protesters with an armoured vehicle (Livingstone, 2025). By that time, at least seven people had died, hundreds were injured, and several public buildings had been damaged (Livingstone,

2025). The protests also targeted "corrupt elites" and policies favouring conglomerates and the military, reflecting broader dissatisfaction with the growing role of the military in civilian life under President Prabowo's government (Aggarwal et al., 2025).

From Indonesia to Nepal, youth and social media have been pivotal in mobilising Gen Z—those born between 1997 and 2012—to challenge corruption, unemployment, and inequitable governance. In Indonesia, youth unemployment reached 14% in 2024, contributing to economic frustration and political engagement (Aggarwal et al., 2025). President Prabowo Subianto responded by rolling back certain government perks and dismissing five ministers, including those of finance and security. Despite official crackdowns on vandalism and violence, social media amplified incidents, further mobilising youth (Aggarwal et al., 2025).

Indonesia's experience illustrates the dual potential and limits of digital youth activism. Social media has empowered young citizens to shape narratives, coordinate action, and challenge state policies, yet structural reforms remain partial. The protests demonstrate that while digital platforms amplify voice and visibility, sustainable change requires bridging online engagement with long-term institutional reform.

### Comparative Analysis: Nepal and Indonesia

The cases of Nepal and Indonesia illustrate both the similarities and distinctions in how youth and social media shape political movements. In both countries, Generation Z has emerged as a decisive force, leveraging digital platforms to organize protests, amplify grievances, and assert political agency outside traditional party structures. Social media enables decentralized coordination, rapid information dissemination, and the cultivation of collective identity, allowing young citizens to challenge entrenched elites and demand accountability. Several shared factors underpin these movements. High youth unemployment and economic frustration drive engagement, as young citizens seek alternatives to political systems that fail to meet their needs. Corruption and governance deficits further exacerbate discontent, making social media a critical tool for public mobilization.

As Arafat and Fahmida (2025b) argue, entrenched political anomalies, corruption, and the misuse of power often trigger public frustration and civic unrest—conditions mirrored in Nepal's and Indonesia's recent youth uprisings. Both Nepal and Indonesia demonstrate how online campaigns—through viral hashtags, multimedia content, and messaging apps—can translate into mass



offline demonstrations, bridging the gap between digital activism and street-level protest. However, the two cases also highlight important distinctions. In Nepal, the social media ban acted as an immediate trigger for widespread protests, resulting in a swift political turnover with the resignation of Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli.

In contrast, Indonesia's digital activism reflects a longer-term engagement pattern, where online mobilization generates awareness and coordinates actions, but structural reforms remain incremental and partial. This contrast underscores the variable impact of digital activism depending on political context, state response, and existing institutional frameworks. Moreover, the symbolic and performative aspects of social media differ between the two contexts. In Nepal, campaigns like #Nepokid exposed elite privilege and mobilized youth through a shared sense of injustice, while in Indonesia, hashtags such as #ReformasiDikorupsi served both as tools of organization and instruments of public accountability.

In both cases, social media reinforces collective identity, encourages participatory engagement, and provides alternative channels for political expression outside traditional hierarchies. Overall, the comparative analysis demonstrates that while youth and social media are potent forces in contemporary political mobilization, their effectiveness is shaped by structural conditions, state responses, and the broader sociopolitical environment. Both cases highlight the transformative potential of digital platforms in amplifying youth voices, yet they also reveal the limits of online activism in achieving lasting institutional change without complementary offline strategies.

### Regional Implications: Uprising Following Domino Theory

Arafat et al. (2025) emphasise that the integrity of national institutions is sustained not only by legal frameworks but also by citizens' moral participation and multifaceted engagement—an idea reflected in the activism of Gen Z across South Asia. The youth-led uprisings in Nepal and Indonesia show how connected and digitally active young people can influence politics beyond their own countries. The rapid protests in Nepal after the social media ban and the sustained online activism in Indonesia highlight that social media allows youth to organize quickly, share ideas, and inspire others to act. This pattern reflects the domino theory in South Asian politics, where political events in one country can trigger similar movements in neighboring nations.

Recent examples include Sri Lanka in 2022, Bangladesh in 2024, Indonesia in 2025, and Nepal in 2025, where youth protests spread after seeing successful actions elsewhere. Social media accelerates this process by sharing strategies, symbols, and messages that cross borders, making it easier for young people to learn from other movements and replicate them. These events show that youth no longer depend solely on traditional political parties to demand change but can create their own networks to pressure governments. When digital activism combines with widespread frustration over corruption, unemployment, and inequality, it can lead to real political results such as resignations, policy changes, or even the fall of governments. The domino effect suggests that once one youth-led movement succeeds, it motivates similar uprisings in other countries, creating a regional chain reaction that challenges entrenched power structures. This shift highlights the growing power of Generation Z in South Asia, showing that social media and youth activism together are becoming a decisive force in shaping political outcomes across the region.

### Barriers of Digital Activism and Youth Engagement

Digital activism and youth engagement face several real barriers that limit how far online movements can go. Government actions like bans, registration rules, surveillance, and internet shutdowns can cut off communication and stop organisers from reaching supporters quickly, as seen when Nepal suspended many platforms and when authorities in both countries used restrictions and force to control protests. Not everyone has the same internet access or digital skills: rural areas, poorer households, and some women have weaker access, so online campaigns often reflect urban, better-off voices rather than the whole population. Misinformation, rumours, and hostile content can spread fast and damage trust, forcing movements to spend time correcting falsehoods instead of organising.

Platform algorithms and opaque moderation rules can also hide or reduce the visibility of protest content, while reliance on a few popular apps makes movements vulnerable when those apps are restricted or comply with government demands. Online momentum can be fast but short-lived unless it is linked to sustained offline organisation and clear leadership; without this, viral outrage may not translate into lasting policy change. Activists also face personal risks: doxxing, harassment, arrest, and physical violence can intimidate participants and reduce public willingness to join. Finally, elite co-optation and media framing can divert attention from the



movement's goals or reduce public pressure for reform. Taken together, these barriers mean that while social media is a powerful tool for youth mobilization, its effects are uneven and often need to be supported by broader strategies—community organising, legal protections, and inclusive outreach—to produce durable political change.

## CONCLUSIONS

The uprisings in Nepal and Indonesia show that young people today can play a powerful role in politics by using social media to organize, communicate, and demand change. Generation Z is no longer limited to traditional political channels and can act independently to challenge corruption, inequality, and government mismanagement. Social media makes it possible to coordinate protests, share information, and create a sense of unity among participants, while also inspiring others beyond national borders. The domino theory is clear in these cases because movements in one country encourage similar actions in neighboring nations, creating a chain reaction across South Asia. From Sri Lanka to Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Nepal, youth-led movements show how one successful protest can spark others, demonstrating that digital activism is not just about expressing opinions online but about achieving real political results. These events highlight that governments must respond to the concerns of young citizens and address structural problems, or risk facing coordinated protests with far-reaching consequences. Overall, the Nepalese and Indonesian uprisings illustrate a new era of civic engagement where youth and social media together can reshape politics and influence change across the region; however, there are still some challenges.

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