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NEPAL'S GEN Z: THE NEW WAVE OF YOUTH POLITICS IN GEOPOLITICAL CROSSCURRENTS

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Nepal recently witnessed an unprecedented political transformation following the massive youth-led protests of September 8 and 9. What began as an online discussion among young Nepalis about the lavish lifestyles of politicians and their children — popularly labelled as #NepoBabies — evolved into a nationwide movement that shook the political establishment. This digital awakening, driven primarily by the members of Generation Z, underscored their frustrations with corruption, poor governance and the continued power of the same political elites who have ruled from within the three major political parties of Nepal.

September uprising

The movement gained momentum when the government imposed a blanket ban on 26 social media platforms nationwide, citing national security concerns. With mainstream platforms inaccessible, disgruntled young Nepalis shifted to discord, led by a group named “Youth Against Corruption.” The movement soon saw signs of solidarity from Nepali civil society organizations, media, intellectuals and even celebrities, uniting diverse groups under a banner of anti-corruption and political reform.

The protests that began on Sept. 8 saw an unexpectedly large turnout across major cities in Nepal. What appeared to be a spontaneous outburst was, in reality, an accumulation of years of public frustration with an entrenched political class. Thousands of young protesters filled the streets of Kathmandu and other cities. Security forces responded with live ammunition, even firing above the waist, resulting in the death of over 20 people, including schoolchildren. This incident further intensified public outrage, and by the

following day, the protests had transformed into widespread chaos. Mobs attacked public infrastructure and set fire to government buildings, media houses and the residences of senior political leaders. Iconic state institutions including the Parliament, judiciary, and executive offices were targeted, reflecting the depths of public anger.

Geopolitics of discontent

The political upheaval experienced in Nepal in 2025 was reminiscent of the large-scale, youth-driven regime change movements elsewhere in South Asia, such as the mass protests in Sri Lanka in 2022 and the students' uprising in Bangladesh in 2024. The scale and speed of the protests in Nepal raised questions about external influences and the media speculated about foreign involvement, pointing to influential actors in the region like India and the United States. Organizations with connections to Western networks were suspected of inciting the protests. For instance, the Hami Nepali, which is led by Sudan Gurung, was targeted for reported support from the Barbara Foundation. The nomination of Sanduk Ruit, chairperson of the Barbara Foundation, as a potential prime minister only intensified suspicions.

Critics also accused other external actors of playing an indirect role. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a right-wing organization based in India with connections around the world, allegedly provided support to Durga Prasain — a vocal advocate for the restoration of the Hindu monarchy in Nepal. Others linked the uprising to growing dissatisfaction within Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli's Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) and his pro-China stance, particularly after he signed the Belt and Road Initiative Cooperation Framework in December 2024, and participated in China's military parade this August alongside Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un.

While the extent of foreign involvement in Nepal's Gen Z protests remains unclear, what is undeniable is that years of internal political decay had created fertile ground for mass discontent. Deep-seated corruption, nepotism and a pervasive culture of impunity had long shielded Nepal's political elites from accountability, eroding public trust in state institutions. Unemployed and disillusioned youth frustrated by inequality, lack of opportunity and political stagnation found unity and purpose through digital platforms. Although external actors may have influenced certain narratives or dynamics, the movement itself was overwhelmingly a homegrown uprising — a spontaneous generational revolt against systemic corruption, elite capture and the betrayal of democratic ideals.

Challenges ahead for Nepal and South Asia

The challenges ahead for Nepal and for South Asia remain formidable. Nepal's Gen Z movement has already transformed political discourse, exposed deep-seated corruption, revived civic engagement and introduced digital activism as a legitimate form of political mobilization. The challenge now is to channel this energy toward institutional reform and constructive political participation. Over a month after the formation of a new government,

the cabinet remains incomplete, reflecting internal divisions and competing agendas among youth factions. If these groups fail to form a united front during elections, they risk fragmentation and may inadvertently allow traditional parties to regain control.

The immediate task for Nepal's interim government is to restore law and order, conduct free and fair elections, and rebuild public trust in state institutions. The government has initiated anti-corruption measures and revived pending corruption charges against prominent politicians. However, the entrenched political elites are likely to portray these actions as politically motivated and could boycott the elections, undermining the democratic process. Furthermore, widespread looting of weapons from police stations and multiple jailbreaks during the protests have left the security apparatus weakened and demoralised.

The Gen Z-led uprisings in Nepal send a powerful warning to South Asian leaders: No government, however strong, is immune to popular revolt. Even administrations with two-thirds majorities can face mass uprisings if they fail to deliver on the aspirations of their citizens. The new generation will no longer tolerate corruption, nepotism, inequality or a lack of employment opportunities. Equipped with global awareness and digital connectivity, they can learn from experiences around the world, unite with like-minded peers and mobilize for change. For governments, the lesson is clear: listen to the people, respect youth voices, and prioritize transparency and accountability. Ignoring digital mobilization and generational demands carries steep political costs, while responsive governance can channel youth energy into constructive reform. South Asia's long-term stability increasingly depends on bridging the gap between institutional accountability and the expectations of a politically aware, digitally empowered generation.

The opinions articulated above represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network or any of its members.

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