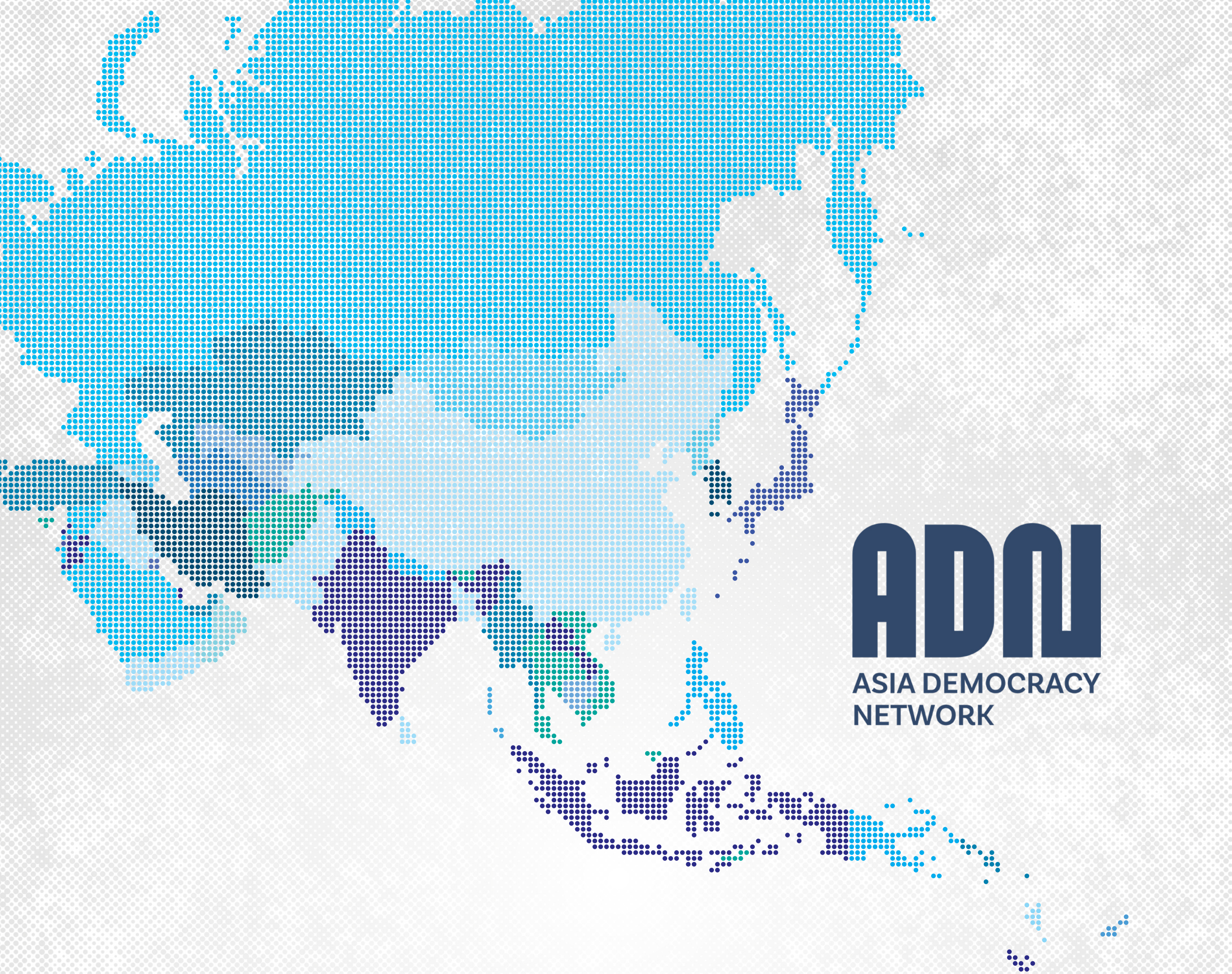

Signals from the Streets:

Civic Resistance and Democratic Trajectories in Asia

Democracy Overview 2025

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Executive **Summary**

Across Asia, 2025 marked a decisive moment in youth-led democratic mobilization. In Nepal, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Mongolia, young people emerged as central political actors, sustaining collective action that challenged corruption, elite impunity, and governance failures that had long been normalized. These mobilizations unfolded in very different political systems, yet shared a striking convergence: youth moved beyond episodic protest to assert sustained public presence, moral authority, and political pressure.

The protests documented in this Overview were shaped by accumulated frustrations rather than isolated triggers. Economic precarity, shrinking civic space, and the visible concentration of power among political and economic elites acted as accelerants, sharpening long-standing legitimacy crises. Youth mobilization in 2025 was deliberate and political, organized through informal networks, coordinated across digital and physical spaces, and grounded in demands for accountability, dignity, and institutional credibility.

While outcomes varied, the mobilizations forced responses. In Mongolia, sustained protest culminated in the resignation of the Prime Minister. In Nepal and Bangladesh, youth-led action reopened public debate on corruption and democratic legitimacy. In Indonesia and the Philippines, protests collided with entrenched systems of militarized governance and dynastic politics, exposing how democratic forms coexist with narrowing democratic substance. Even where formal concessions were limited, the political terrain shifted: protest legitimacy expanded, public scrutiny intensified, and youth repositioned themselves as democratic watchdogs.

This Overview brings together five country chapters to document how youth mobilization unfolded in practice during 2025, how movements formed, how states responded, and what changed as a result. It does not seek to impose a single explanatory model. Instead, it offers grounded accounts of a shared political moment, while reserving broader regional interpretation and democratic implications for the concluding analysis.

Together, these cases suggest that youth mobilization has become a defining feature of democratic contention in Asia, revealing both the possibilities and limits of participation under current governance arrangements, and raising urgent questions about how civil society, institutions, and political systems will respond moving forward.

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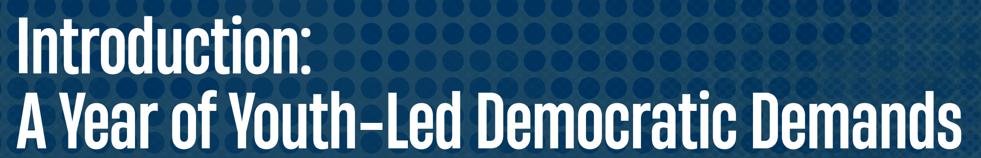

Introduction: A Year of Youth-Led Democratic Demands

- Why 2025 Became Impossible to Ignore
- What This Overview Sets Out to Do
- How Youth Mobilization Took Shape in 2025
- How States Responded and What That Revealed

Introduction:
A Year of Youth-Led Democratic Demands

By Sabra Zahid
Asia Democracy Network

WHY 2025 BECAME IMPOSSIBLE TO IGNORE

The year 2025 marked a watershed moment for youth civic mobilization across Asia. In multiple national contexts, young people emerged as central political actors, driving sustained collective action that moved beyond episodic protest to articulate clear demands for accountability, transparency, and institutional reform. These mobilizations were notable not only for their scale and geographic spread, but also for their persistence, organizational capacity, and strategic use of both digital and physical spaces. While the specific triggers varied, from economic precarity and governance failures to high-profile incidents symbolizing elite impunity, the underlying dynamics reflected a broader generational rupture with existing political systems.

Youth mobilization in Asia was already part of the political landscape well before 2025. Movements in Hong Kong, Thailand, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka had demonstrated both the force of youth-led resistance and the constraints imposed by state power, repression, and political fatigue. In Nepal, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mongolia, and the Philippines, protests were triggered by specific national crises, yet they exposed shared structural pressures.

These mobilizations emerged under very different regimes and institutional arrangements. Yet across contexts, similar dynamics surfaced. Protest sites became sustained civic spaces rather than symbolic gatherings. Messaging evolved in real time, shaped by digital networks and collective deliberation. Youth organizers adjusted tactics as pressure mounted, absorbing repression, narrative attacks, and fatigue while continuing to mobilize. In several cases, the state responded through negotiations, recalibration, or overt coercion. In others, the response took the form of delay, deflection, and selective enforcement. Either way, youth mobilization altered the political terrain, even when formal outcomes remained constrained.

In Mongolia, sustained public pressure culminated in the resignation of the Prime Minister, an outcome that reshaped how youth understood the limits and possibilities of collective action. In Nepal and Bangladesh, youth mobilization while resulting in regime change, also reopened public debate around corruption, accountability, and political legitimacy, challenging the normalization of elite impunity. In Indonesia and the Philippines, protests collided with deeply entrenched power structures, militarized governance, dynastic politics, and elite collusion, exposing how dissent is managed in systems that retain democratic form while narrowing democratic substance.

Taken together, these moments made visible a broader political condition. Democratic institutions remained intact on paper, yet their capacity to respond to public demand especially from younger generations appeared increasingly strained. By 2025, accumulated frustration had translated into sustained political presence. Youth were no longer engaging episodically or symbolically; they were intervening directly in how power was exercised, justified, and contested. This shift has significant implications for how democratic legitimacy is negotiated in contexts where formal institutions are increasingly mistrusted.

This Overview begins from that empirical reality. It treats 2025 as a year when youth mobilization surfaced long-building democratic stress and brought it into public

view through occupation, persistence, and collective insistence on accountability.

WHAT THIS OVERVIEW SETS OUT TO DO

This report brings together five country chapters, Nepal, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mongolia, and the Philippines, as a way of capturing how youth-led mobilization unfolded across distinct political settings during 2025. Each chapter is anchored in a specific protest moment, tracing the conditions that shaped it, the forms of organization that emerged, the state responses it provoked, and the kinds of shifts it produced.

The focus throughout is on youth mobilization as lived political practice. The chapters follow how young people organized under constraint: how networks formed outside formal hierarchies, how credibility and leadership emerged through action, how digital spaces and physical presence reinforced each other, and how movements navigated engagement with political parties, state institutions, and established civil society actors. Attention is given to decision-making, symbolism, moral language, and tactical adaptation as they unfolded on the ground.

This Overview places these cases side by side to illuminate a shared political moment shaped by different national histories and power structures. The aim is to document how youth mobilization functioned in practice during 2025, and how it interacted with democratic systems under pressure.

Broader regional interpretation, democratic implications, and reflections on what these movements signal for civil society and governance across Asia are taken up explicitly in the concluding section. This opening section sets the scene: grounding the Overview in the events of 2025 and outlining how the chapters that follow should be read.

HOW YOUTH MOBILIZATION TOOK SHAPE IN 2025

Across the five country cases, youth mobilization in 2025 carried a distinct political texture. While each movement responded to its own national conditions, the way young people organized, communicated, and sustained pressure reflected a shared sensibility shaped by contemporary realities: digital fluency, distrust of formal intermediaries, and a deep awareness of how quickly movements can be diluted, misrepresented, or shut down.

Organization was decentralized, yet far from chaotic. Decision-making circulated through dense networks rather than formal committees, allowing movements to remain flexible while still moving with collective intent. Protest actions, messaging shifts, and tactical decisions emerged through rapid consultation often across encrypted chats, social media platforms, and nightly assemblies on the ground. This structure enabled movements to absorb pressure,

respond to disinformation, and continue operating even when individual organizers were targeted.

Leadership emerged through practice rather than position. Individuals became influential because they coordinated logistics, articulated demands clearly, mediated internal tensions, or held the movement together under stress. Visibility was earned through contribution, consistency, and trust. These roles were rarely fixed. As conditions changed, so did who stepped forward, who receded, and who carried responsibility at different moments.

Digital and physical spaces functioned as a single political arena. Online platforms were used to organize, debate, and shape narrative in real time, while occupation of streets, squares, and campuses signaled commitment and collective resolve. Images, livestreams, memes, and slogans circulated alongside physical presence, reinforcing legitimacy and extending reach beyond the immediate protest site. The boundary between online action and offline mobilization remained fluid throughout.

The language of mobilization leaned heavily on symbolism, morality, and shared experience. Humor, cultural references, music, and visual imagery carried political weight, often communicating grievances more effectively than policy statements. Demands were framed in terms of dignity, fairness, accountability, and legitimacy values that resonated broadly and cut across class, regional, and ideological lines.

Throughout, movements maintained a cautious distance from political parties and formal advocacy structures. Engagement with institutional actors was strategic and conditional, shaped by a desire to preserve autonomy and avoid co-optation. This distance did not signal disengagement from politics; it reflected a recalibration of how political participation could occur when trust in established channels had eroded.

Taken together, these organizing practices offer a way to read the chapters that follow not as isolated eruptions, but as variations of a shared political moment shaped by common constraints, tools, and generational instincts.

HOW STATES RESPONDED AND WHAT THAT REVEALED

State responses to youth mobilization across the five countries followed familiar political logics, even as tactics varied by context. Rather than declaring outright bans or suspending democratic procedures,

authorities frequently relied on calibrated forms of control that limited dissent while preserving the appearance of normalcy.

Repression was often indirect and uneven. Protests were allowed to occur, but within narrowing boundaries shaped by administrative delays, selective policing, legal ambiguity, and discretionary enforcement. Permits were withheld or postponed, protest routes redirected, and organizers subjected to questioning or surveillance. These measures constrained mobilization without triggering the kind of public backlash that overt crackdowns can provoke.

Narrative control played a central role. Youth protesters were subjected to campaigns of moral delegitimization that questioned their motives, credibility, and character. Accusations of manipulation, irresponsibility, foreign influence, or personal impropriety circulated through aligned media outlets, online networks, and informal political channels. In several cases, personal identities and private lives became targets, turning dissent into a site of social vulnerability as well as political risk.
Selective enforcement further exposed how democratic norms were applied unevenly. While youth protesters faced intimidation or arrest, counter-mobilizations and elite actors often operated with little consequence. This asymmetry reinforced the perception that legality itself had become politicized, less a neutral standard than a tool deployed to discipline particular forms of challenge.

These responses revealed the fault lines within contemporary democratic governance in Asia. Electoral processes and constitutional frameworks remained intact, yet sustained youth-led mobilization tested how far states were willing, or able to accommodate challenges to authority that questioned legitimacy rather than policy detail. The reactions documented across these chapters point to democracies under strain: systems managing dissent through containment, narrative distortion, and selective tolerance rather than open political engagement.

Youth were no longer engaging episodically or symbolically; they were intervening directly in how power was exercised, justified, and contested. This shift has significant implications for how democratic legitimacy is negotiated in contexts where formal institutions are increasingly mistrusted.

2

Two days in September: Youth, Corruption, and the Crisis of Democratic Legitimacy in Nepal

- Political Crisis and Public Frustration
- Youth Mobilisation and Protest Dynamics
- Inspiration and Influences
- The Road Ahead

Two days in September:

Youth, Corruption, and the Crisis of Democratic Legitimacy in Nepal

By Pranaya Rana

On Sept. 8 and 9, Nepali citizens did the unthinkable. In just two days of a youth-led protests, they toppled the entire Nepali state architecture. The prime minister was forced to resign, with his executive seat and the federal Parliament he represented set ablaze. The protesters, loosely organized under the generational 'Gen Z' umbrella, demanded an end to the corruption that had long plagued the nation, the lack of accountability and transparency in public governance, and the myopia that trumped public interest in favor of private gain for a few, privileged, citizens.

Nepal: At a Glance

Youth protests in Nepal during 2025 reflected growing frustration with entrenched corruption, elite impunity, and the failure of democratic institutions to deliver accountability. Triggered by high-profile corruption scandals and governance failures, young citizens mobilized rapidly through decentralized networks, transforming urban public spaces into arenas of sustained civic pressure. Demonstrations demanded investigations, institutional reform, and an end to political patronage that has long shielded powerful actors from scrutiny. Although the protests forced public debate and compelled authorities to respond, structural change remained limited. The movement nevertheless exposed the widening gap between democratic promise and lived governance realities, highlighting how disillusioned younger generations are increasingly willing to challenge political elites directly.

POLITICAL CRISIS AND PUBLIC FRUSTRATION

Unlike earlier democratic ruptures in Nepal or similar recent movements elsewhere in South Asia, such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, Nepal's September uprising was one generation's reckoning with a deeply flawed governance structure that had the trappings of democracy but was hollow on the inside.

September heralded the breakdown of an entire established democratic order, in which all state institutions were deemed illegitimate.

This phenomenon was in stark contrast to 'people's movements' that had swept Nepal and toppled those in power in the past. The first such movement in 1990, dubbed the 'Jana Andolan', brought an end to the autocracy of King Mahendra, instituting a multi-party democracy and a constitutional monarchy.

In 1996, the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist waged a decade-long 'People's War' to put an end to feudalism, class and caste discrimination, as well as economic and political inequality. By the time the civil insurgency came to an end in 2006, it had claimed 17,000 lives.

Decades later, toward the final months of 2025, Nepal witnessed a profound breakdown of the social contract between young people, who make up more than 40 percent of the country's population, and the political power structure governing them.

Elections occurred regularly, yet the same individuals remained in power. The media reported on massive corruption scandals, yet high-profile politicians embroiled in the alleged malfeasance emerged unscathed.

The constitution proclaimed federalism, but service delivery remained weak and unresponsive to the average Nepali.

To the young protesters, the so-called 'new Nepal' – the post-conflict democratic republican order symbolized by the mainstream political parties and the institutions they governed – had utterly failed to deliver on its promises of equality, inclusion, and accountability.

Their spontaneous collective act was not an indictment of democracy itself but of its practice, brought about by a confluence of long-simmering grievances against the state and the political parties that had monopolized state power. The unfortunate killings on Sept. 8 may have been the immediate trigger for the violence that unfolded the day after, but the protests brought to the fore a deep-seated public disenchantment with a government widely perceived to have failed the people miserably.

YOUTH MOBILISATION AND PROTEST DYNAMICS

The youth-led uprising in September was not the first demonstration of young Nepalis' willingness to rise to the challenge and confront state power.

In previous people's movements, Nepali youth were on the frontlines, braving batons, tear gas, water cannons, rubber bullets, and eventually live ammunition.

But the September protests – overwhelmingly youth-driven – stood out in one crucial aspect – they were driven by youth believed to be largely apolitical. In the past, youth wings of the political parties or established NGOs mobilized and led similar movements. This time around, there were no party flags. The protests were decentralized and organized informally via social media, with no designated leader.

More recently, in 2020, young Nepalis' unconventional approach to organizing collective action, in part through the use of digital tools, similarly unfolded. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Nepalis organized over social media to stage peaceful protests against the government's lackluster response to the global health crisis.

Gen Z eschewed Nepal's traditional mode of protests, which were either organized by political parties or by civil society activists and NGOs with a clear set of demands. They rejected formal hierarchies, favoring decentralized coordination and digital connectivity.

This marked a sea change in how young Nepalis engage with democracy as they relegated the traditional actors – political parties and NGOs – to the sidelines, and rejected structured, donor-friendly advocacy. Their demands were sweeping – good governance, transparency, accountability, and an end to corruption – a wholesale transformation of the state that went hand in hand with their broad-based institutional disillusionment.

In the aftermath of the most recent protests, once the government resigned and the protest movement claimed victory, discussions on the way forward took place online. Gen Z infamously 'elected' the prime minister of the interim government via Discord, a social media platform popular with gamers.

INSPIRATIONS AND INFLUENCES

In today's globalized, digital world, no movement takes place in a vacuum. For instance, Indonesia's anti-government protests in August last year saw the flying of a unique cartoon pirate flag from the Japanese anime One Piece. The flag represented anti-authoritarianism and the fight for equality and justice. In Nepal, protesters flew the same flag.

Their spontaneous collective act was not an indictment of democracy itself but of its practice, brought about by a confluence of long-simmering grievances against the state and the political parties that had monopolized state power.

The large movements that toppled governments in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh in 2022 and 2024, respectively, were perhaps also in the minds of the Gen Z protesters in Nepal.

When student protesters deposed the government of Gotabaya Rajapaksa in the Sri Lankan Aragalaya, and Bangladeshi youth invaded the residence of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and sent her fleeing to India, there were murmurs that Nepal needed a similar movement. Images of Nepali youth overrunning the premises of the Singha Durbar, the seat of the executive, in September were eerily similar to Bangladeshi students doing the same at the Ganabhaban.

Nepal, in turn, has inspired other movements. Those in Kenya, Madagascar, Georgia, Peru, Mexico, Timor-Leste, and Morocco have all echoed similar sentiments and have often explicitly cited the Nepali example. In Georgia, protesters even flew the Nepali flag as inspiration.

These collective youth actions share the same template as Nepal – decentralized protests against widespread corruption, mainly organized over social media, and led primarily by youth.

THE ROAD AHEAD

While the Gen Z movement in Nepal may not immediately lead to sweeping political reforms, its impact is nonetheless significant. There has been a discursive shift in how the Nepali state treats young people and how young people engage with the state and with democracy. Gen Z was once perceived as apathetic, apolitical, and too obsessed with social media. But no longer. Through the protest and its aftermath, Gen Z has demonstrated that it is as politically aware as any other generation that came before it.

Immediate changes also signal a narrative shift. Corruption, accountability, transparency, and youth inclusion have dominated conversations. Political parties led by septuagenarians are now facing internal challenges in handing over leadership to a younger generation. New political parties are incorporating youth into their decision-making bodies and including Gen Z agendas in their party manifestos. Participation itself has become a form of empowerment for the youth.

Long marginalized from positions of power, despite constituting a majority of the population, the nation's youth are now claiming spaces of their own and demanding a voice in shaping their future.

Against the backdrop of the Gen Z-led people's movement, other challenges remain. Elections have been scheduled for March, but even a government with a new mandate, change will be slow and incremental. It will take decades of institutional work for Nepal to achieve even a semblance of what Gen Z has demanded.

There is also the danger that conservative forces demanding that Nepal return to a Hindu kingdom and a constitutional monarchy could make a comeback. Disillusionment with the current secular, republican system has led many youth to romanticize the monarchist past. Achievements like federalism and inclusion are also being challenged, often by Gen Z itself, as unwanted burdens on a poor, fledgling state.

Calls to return to a Hindu kingdom might appear incongruous alongside demands for accountability and transparency, but these contradictions reveal a deep-seated frustration with the current democratic order. The attraction to the erstwhile monarchy stems from a political landscape in which all political actors and institutions feel compromised. The resurgence of the monarchy represents the failure of the post-2006 order to provide a template for a functioning democratic state.

Cognizant of an established narrative of a democratic secular state that has been found wanting, young Nepalis are looking for an alternative, be it the monarchy or actors outside the political mainstream and are therefore open to political experimentation.

Transparency and accountability are difficult to ensure in a chaotic multi-party democracy with hundreds of political parties. If the system is intransigent and actors refuse to change, Gen Z could once again be pushed toward disengagement or radicalization.

Regionally, Nepal offers both a warning and a lesson. Authoritarianism and a concentration of power – like in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka -- are not the only threats to democracies. Institutional failure and a lack of moral legitimacy can be just as compelling reasons for citizens to rise up and demand radical change.

Nepal's September uprising should not be seen solely as a national crisis but also as a moment of reflection for the broader South Asian region, where most countries share the same material and political conditions. Democratic malaise and political stagnation, too, can tear down governments.

A larger lesson not just for South Asia but also the world over is that the youth of today – world-wise, digitally connected, and frustrated by political and economic precarity – are not passive recipients of political outcomes but active political agents just as capable of redefining the state and its moral legitimacy.

3

Apathetic or Unheard?: Rethinking Youth Participation and Mobilisation in Bangladesh's Political Future

- Introduction: Youth at the Centre of Democratic Reckoning
- An Uprising Among Generation Z
- A Spark in a Long-Dry Field: What Triggered the Mobilisation?
- Who Mobilised and How Did the Movement Take Shape?
- State Response and Its Aftershocks: When Youth Bear the Cost
- After the Peak: Continuity, Reform, and Insecurity
- Targeted Violence and the Price of Political Visibility
- What Changed: In Practice and in Imagination
- Civil Society and Evolving Forms of Civic Engagement
- Risk, Tension, and the Unfinished Struggle
- Conclusion: From Moral Clarity to Democratic Possibility

Apathetic or Unheard?: Rethinking Youth Participation and Mobilisation in Bangladesh's Political Future

By Rezaur Rahman Lenin
Activist Academic, Bangladesh

By Sazia Sharmin
Independent Researcher and Activist

INTRODUCTION: YOUTH AT THE CENTRE OF DEMOCRATIC RECKONING

In a world where younger generations are often characterised as politically apathetic or civically disengaged, the mobilisation of Bangladeshi youth presents a markedly different narrative. Rather than withdrawing from public life, students and young individuals have taken a proactive role in a national awakening, emerging as key figures in a movement that contested authoritarian consolidation and advocated for the principles of fairness, dignity, and civic participation.

The youth-led uprising of July–August 2024 represents a significant milestone in Bangladesh's democratic trajectory since the cessation of military dictatorship in 1990. What began as a student demonstration over a contentious Supreme Court decision on public-sector employment quotas swiftly expanded into a comprehensive civic movement. The matter that originally mobilised students—whether civil service positions should be partially reserved by quota or awarded exclusively on the basis of examination results—was of profound importance to individuals who had dedicated years to their education.

However, its significance swiftly transcended mere technical debate. For many young Bangladeshis, the quota issue epitomised a deeper crisis: a system in which loyalty and political affiliations held greater importance than competence, fairness, or equal citizenship.

Bangladesh: At a Glance

Bangladesh's July–August 2024 uprising began as student protests against the reinstatement of civil service job quotas but rapidly evolved into a nationwide youth-led movement challenging authoritarian consolidation, corruption, and shrinking civic space. Organized through decentralized digital networks and campus-based mobilization, Generation Z activists reframed a technical policy dispute into a broader struggle over fairness, dignity, and democratic participation. The state's violent crackdown resulted in widespread casualties and human rights violations, transforming public perception of the protests and contributing to the collapse of the incumbent government and the formation of an interim administration. Yet the aftermath has remained fragile, marked by political violence, institutional instability, and uncertainty over whether youth demands will translate into lasting democratic reform.

AN UPRISING AMONG GENERATION Z

Although "Generation Z" originated as a Western demographic label, it has clear analytical relevance in the Bangladeshi context. Here, Gen Z refers less to a fixed age group than to a cohort shaped by prolonged political consolidation, economic precarity,

and rapid digital expansion. This generation came of age amid shrinking civic space and heightened surveillance of communication, while simultaneously developing high levels of digital fluency and networked communication.

The July–August 2024 uprising can be understood as a Generation Z movement not only because it was initiated by Generation Z, but also because of how it unfolded. Organisation was decentralised and adaptive, leadership was fluid, and digital platforms played a crucial role in coordination, narrative construction, and evasion of censorship. The language of the protests diverged from traditional partisan formats, instead employing satire, visual culture, and informal political expression that resonated broadly among younger participants. These characteristics reflected a generational political style characterised by horizontal participation and skepticism towards formal authority.

The movement drew on the formative experience of the 2018 road safety protests, which left behind organisational memory rather than institutional reform; when authority fractured in August 2024, this same cohort—now older and more politically experienced—stepped into the vacuum, coordinating traffic, organising neighbourhood patrols, and maintaining basic order in the absence of effective law enforcement.

What makes this Gen Z lineage politically significant is not only its memory of protest but its demonstrated capacity to organise informal governance during institutional breakdown. Through trust-based networks and digital coordination, the uprising blurred the boundary between protest and governance, raising a central question for Bangladesh's democratic future: whether formal institutions can incorporate this generational agency or whether it will remain visible only in moments of crisis.

A SPARK IN A LONG-DRY FIELD: WHAT TRIGGERED THE MOBILISATION?

The immediate catalyst for the uprising was the Supreme Court's June 2024 decision reinstating elements of the job-quota system that had previously been scaled back. To many students already facing economic precarity and shrinking employment prospects, this decision appeared to represent yet another narrowing of opportunity. Young graduates who had believed in the promise of social mobility through education now questioned whether merit still mattered.

The quota ruling was not the root cause of the movement but the spark that ignited accumulated frustrations: a political system seen as increasingly centralised, everyday experiences of bureaucratic unfairness and elite privilege, restricted media and digital space, declining trust between citizens and the state, and the marginalisation of youth voices from policymaking. Many young

people felt that despite hard work, they remained excluded from meaningful participation in public life. The protests began on college campuses but quickly spread to towns, workplaces, small cities, and rural communities. Parents marched with children; teachers sheltered students; alumni networks reactivated. There was a sense that something larger than regulatory reform was at stake.

WHO MOBILISED AND HOW DID THE MOVEMENT TAKE SHAPE?

From the beginning, the uprising was youth-led and youth-identified. Students in public universities initiated the earliest protests, but they were soon joined by students from private universities, unemployed graduates, young professionals, and large numbers of previously "apolitical" youth. Although participation was concentrated in major urban centres, it cut across class and background. The movement was led not only by activists affiliated with major public universities, which have historically been prominent in political participation, but also by comparatively newer private universities and madrasas. Gender diversity was visible and courageous, even if traditional norms and safety concerns limited full inclusion.

Equally distinctive was the form of the mobilisation. This was not a movement built through party machinery or hierarchical leadership structures. Instead, it relied on a networked, decentralised, adaptive organisation, the kind of structure increasingly associated with youth activism worldwide (Brown, J. M. (2021). Student groups operated through loose coordination rather than top-down direction. Leadership rotated and diffused, providing both protection and resilience. Information travelled through encrypted chat groups, informal peer networks, and social media platforms, enabling participants to narrate events as they unfolded.

Although political parties occasionally attempted to align themselves with the protests, the mobilisation during its peak in July and August remained largely youth-led and campus-based, with many participants deliberately avoiding partisan affiliation due to deep distrust of traditional political institutions.

STATE RESPONSE AND ITS AFTERSHOCKS: WHEN YOUTH BEAR THE COST

The state's response to the July–August 2024 youth-led mobilization was rapid, coordinated, and forceful, transforming a peaceful protest movement into a profound

stress test for Bangladesh's democratic institutions. Security forces deployed lethal and non-lethal measures against demonstrators, resulting in large-scale loss of life, injuries, and widespread trauma. Human rights organisations and international observers documented patterns of excessive force, arbitrary detention, intimidation, enforced disappearances, and restrictions on media and internet access. Assessments by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights characterised the response as involving serious and systematic violations and called for accountability (UN OHCHR, 2024).

Rather than restoring order, repression reshaped public understanding of the movement. What had initially appeared to some as a narrow dispute over civil-service recruitment came to be recognised as a broader struggle over democratic space and state legitimacy. The targeting of students proved especially consequential. In Bangladesh's political imagination, students have long occupied a symbolic position as custodians of national aspiration and moral authority. Violence against them, therefore, carried a resonance that extended far beyond campuses. By treating peaceful youth protesters as existential threats, the state exposed its own insecurity and deepened public outrage.

For young participants, protest became an act of citizenship undertaken at extraordinary personal risk, with no safety measures in place. While the uprising contributed to the collapse of the incumbent government and the formation of an interim administration, the political transition did not immediately end repression or insecurity. Trauma persisted well beyond the peak of mobilisation. Families continued to grieve, and many young people carried the psychological and emotional consequences of violence into the post-uprising period.

AFTER THE PEAK: CONTINUITY, REFORM, AND INSECURITY

Although mass mobilisation subsided after mid-2024, its consequences extended into 2025 and early 2026, shaping both institutional reform efforts and everyday political life. The interim government announced a transition roadmap that included parliamentary elections and a referendum scheduled for early 2026, alongside commitments to reform the electoral system, judiciary, and police. Legal changes were initiated, including revisions to procedural laws and the repeal of repressive cyber legislation, and a “July Charter” was articulated to signal a break with authoritarian governance practices.

Reform unfolded alongside instability. The dismantling and restructuring of law enforcement institutions in late 2024 produced significant security gaps, contributing to rising mob violence, retaliatory attacks, and political killings throughout 2025. Human rights organisations warned that public trust in formal justice systems had eroded sharply, leaving youth—highly visible in public life—particularly vulnerable.

TARGETED VIOLENCE AND THE PRICE OF POLITICAL VISIBILITY

The post-uprising period revealed how visibility itself became a source of vulnerability for youth leaders. While the 2024 protests resulted in many student and civilian deaths, the killing of identifiable youth organisers carried particular symbolic weight. Early in the uprising, the death of a student organiser in Rangpur marked a turning point, signalling that the protests had crossed into lethal confrontation. The incident underscored the risks faced by those who emerged as public figures within the movement and foreshadowed the dangers that would continue into the post-uprising period.

Violence against youth leaders did not end with the political transition. In December 2025, Sharif Osman Hadi, a prominent youth organiser and spokesperson for a grassroots mobilisation platform, was shot in Dhaka and later died from his injuries. His killing occurred during what was formally described as a period of political transition, heightening fears that targeted violence was being used to intimidate or fragment youth-led political engagement ahead of elections. Reports soon followed of another youth leader being shot, while protests and unrest spread across several cities, including attacks on media offices, cultural institutions, and diplomatic sites.

By late 2025, the initial optimism of the uprising had given way to anxiety and uncertainty. A study found that 67% of university students reported moderate to severe anxiety or PTSD linked to the violence of the “July Uprising.” Despite their central role in the protests, many grassroots youth organisations reported exclusion from post-revolution governance discussions. At the same time, economic pressures intensified: inflation remained high at 8.48%, graduate unemployment stood at 13.54%, and nearly 20% of young people were classified as NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training).

Together, these developments illustrated how the democratic opening created by the uprising remained fragile and unresolved.

WHAT CHANGED: IN PRACTICE AND IN IMAGINATION

The July–August 2024 uprising did not resolve Bangladesh's democratic challenges, but it altered the political landscape in meaningful ways. The protests forced open a period of political transition and created limited new space for youth voices in national debates. Issues long treated as peripheral—such as institutional reform, decentralisation, rule of law, human rights, and the future of student politics—gained renewed urgency and public visibility. The movement also produced a temporary shift in power dynamics. During the height of the

Through trust-based networks and digital coordination, the uprising blurred the boundary between protest and governance, raising a central question for Bangladesh's democratic future: whether formal institutions can incorporate this generational agency or whether it will remain visible only in moments of crisis.

protests, the military's deployment became a pivotal moment: unlike police and paramilitary forces, the armed forces did not become the primary instrument of repression, and the withdrawal of support for a violent crackdown ultimately contributed to the end of the incumbent government's authority. At the same time, this restraint did not result in a military takeover, diverging from Bangladesh's historical pattern of coups and instead leading to a civilian-led interim period that stabilised the immediate crisis without resolving deeper questions about democratic governance.

Equally significant were the symbolic transformations that followed. The uprising punctured the long-standing narrative of youth apathy and revealed a generation capable of collective political action. For many young Bangladeshis who had come to associate opportunity with leaving the country, the protests reopened the possibility of political belonging and civic responsibility at home. Public spaces—both physical and digital—were reclaimed as arenas for debate and dissent, and a new political subjectivity emerged grounded less in loyalty to parties or patronage networks and more in ethical claims about fairness, accountability, and dignity in public life. While Bangladesh's democratic future remains uncertain, the

uprising reshaped how young people understand their role within it, demonstrating that entrenched authority can be challenged and that the terms of political engagement can be renegotiated.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND EVOLVING FORMS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The uprising also raised important questions about how Bangladesh's established civil society and advocacy institutions relate to emerging forms of youth mobilisation. Many formal organisations, including large NGOs and advocacy groups, struggled to engage a movement that unfolded rapidly through decentralised networks and informal coordination. Existing advocacy models are typically built around sustained dialogue, programmatic engagement, and formal policy processes rather than spontaneous, large-scale civic action.

The experience reflects a broader shift in the civic landscape. While organised civil society continues to play an important role in service delivery and policy advocacy, the youth-led mobilisation showed that civic action can also emerge through informal networks, shared moral claims, and digital coordination operating outside institutional mediation. For civil society actors, this moment invites reflection on how advocacy approaches might adapt to engage forms of political participation that are increasingly horizontal, fluid, and skeptical of traditional gatekeeping.

RISK, TENSION, AND THE UNFINISHED STRUGGLE

The key question facing Bangladesh after the July–August uprising is not whether youth can mobilise again, but whether the political system can evolve in ways that make repeated rupture unnecessary. While the transition period has opened some space for reform, it has also exposed how fragile gains from mass mobilisation can be. The durability of youth-centered democratic politics will depend on whether institutional pathways emerge that allow participation to be absorbed without neutralising it.

Several risks are already visible. Youth leadership remains vulnerable to co-optation within a political system shaped by patronage and alliances. Decentralised movements driven by moral urgency may struggle to sustain cohesion as electoral competition and internal divisions intensify. At the same time, slow or uneven reform risks deepening frustration among young people who expected tangible change, raising the possibility of renewed confrontation or disengagement.

At the heart of this moment lies a tension over how democratic transition should unfold. Many political actors prioritise restoring procedural normalcy through elections and institutional continuity. Youth activists, however, argue that without deeper reforms—such as stronger rule-of-law guarantees, protection of rights, and the

depoliticisation of student spaces—electoral processes alone will reproduce existing exclusions. Whether Bangladesh can adapt to these evolving expectations of participation will shape whether this moment becomes a turning point or the beginning of another cycle of confrontation.

CONCLUSION: FROM MORAL CLARITY TO DEMOCRATIC POSSIBILITY

The July–August 2024 uprising reaffirmed a fundamental truth about Bangladesh's democratic life: youth, and particularly the Gen Z cohort at the movement's core, remain its moral and political centre. When institutional channels narrowed and formal politics failed to respond, young people stepped forward not as a special interest group but as democratic actors articulating widely shared demands for fairness, dignity, and accountability. In doing so, they decisively challenged narratives of youth apathy and reaffirmed participation as the foundation of participatory democracy.

Bangladesh now stands at a crossroads. The years following the uprising will determine whether youth mobilisation becomes the basis for a more participatory and accountable democratic order or whether the civic energy unleashed in 2024 dissipates through repression, exhaustion, or co-optation. The outcome will depend less on rhetoric than on tangible reform. Credible rule-of-law guarantees, revitalised local governance, depoliticised student spaces, and institutionalised pathways for youth participation are no longer optional; they are central to democratic legitimacy in a country shaped by its young population.

Despite generational differences, advancing democracy will depend on building a shared reform agenda capable of restoring trust, strengthening participatory representation, and clarifying the political legacy of the July–August uprising.

What is now undeniable is that this generation, with Gen Z at its leading edge, has altered how democracy is imagined in Bangladesh. They have shown that democracy is not simply an electoral mechanism or a constitutional promise but a lived commitment to fairness, dignity, and shared responsibility with accountability and transparency. Whether Bangladesh can transform this moral clarity into lasting democratic institutions will determine not only the future of its politics but also the fate of an entire generation in the face of the possibility of change.

4

LET THE RAGE FLOOD: Lessons from the Youth Mobilizations Against Corruption in the Philippines

- "Ghost" Projects, Corruption and the Permanent Crisis of Democracy in the Philippines
- Rage, Rupture and The September 21st Uprising of Youth Protesters
- Civil Society and the Politics of "Legitimate" Resistance
- Fracture, Possibility, and the Future of Democratic Struggle

LET THE RAGE FLOOD:

Lessons from the Youth Mobilizations Against Corruption in the Philippines

By Faith Sadicon
Camp Queer

Philippines: At a Glance

In late 2025, youth-led mobilizations erupted across the Philippines following revelations of massive corruption involving "ghost" flood-control projects worth up to one trillion pesos. For young Filipinos already facing climate disasters, economic precarity, and weak public services, the scandal symbolized a deeper pattern of elite impunity embedded in the country's political system. Gen-Z activists mobilized through digital investigations, street protests, cultural expression, and decentralized organizing, sustaining public outrage nationwide. Tensions escalated during the September 21 demonstrations in Mendiola, where clashes between young protesters and police exposed sharp divisions over what forms of dissent are considered legitimate. The episode highlighted deeper class dynamics within civil society and raised broader questions about the limits of democratic participation and accountability in the Philippines.

The latter part of 2025 saw a wave of youth-led mobilizations across the Philippines, as communities already battered by typhoons and recurrent flooding were shaken by an exposé on widespread corruption involving non-existent flood control projects. Gen-Z activists – alongside broader sectors of the population – mobilized both online and in the streets to reject a long history of democratic crisis and the prospect of facing a future defined by insecurity and precarity. Using a range of tactics to investigate, expose, and challenge state accountability, their actions were often decentralized and spontaneous. However, their expressions of rage raised questions on which forms of dissent are deemed legitimate, revealing internal fault lines that carry significant implications for the trajectory of democratic struggle in the country.

"GHOST" PROJECTS, CORRUPTION AND THE PERMANENT CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY IN THE PHILIPPINES

"Ghost" flood control projects lie at the core of the mobilizations: hundreds of fully-funded public infrastructure meant to prevent and mitigate flooding in different places in the Philippines have been found to be missing or substandard. Sources estimate a total of 200 billion to as high as one trillion pesos have been stolen from the projects. The issue first gained public attention in July-August 2025 after President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and the Congress initiated investigations into anomalous project contracts, and the subsequent government audit yielded the initial findings that at least 421 out of 8,000 examined projects are non-existent. Senate hearings to probe these allegations uncovered a complex kickback system involving budget inflations and a rigged bidding system favoring private contractors, with a wide range of government officials (including officials from the Marcos administration themselves) being complicit in the corruption scheme. At present, the hearings have failed to charge the key figures involved and have been marred by frequent stalling and blame-shifting, leaving Filipinos with little hope for accountability.

This recent corruption scandal is nothing new. In the Philippines, corruption is not an aberration but a mode of governance that is intimately linked with the country's social and political history. It can be traced back to the system of patronage and elite control during the Spanish and US colonial period, and later reproduced within democratic mechanisms – such as elections and legislatures – dominated by landed families and political clans. Corruption reached systemic levels under Ferdinand Marcos Sr.'s authoritarian regime through large-scale plunder and crony capitalism. While the massive mobilizations of 1986 People Power Revolution formally restored democratic functions, it left intact the political economy of elite dominance that normalizes corruption. Since then, Philippine "democracy" has been a cycle of corruption scandals arising every few years, civil society mobilizing in protest of it, and accountability processes being dragged out and ultimately leading to impunity.

Meanwhile, the material costs of systemic corruption are borne by the majority of Filipinos whose lived realities of economic precarity are further worsened by the constant risk of flooding. For young people particularly, this translates to damages in already inadequate schools, class disruptions, and safety risks as taxes are siphoned off from public goods and disaster infrastructure into the pockets of officials and contractors. It further means anxiety and insecurity about their future survival.

RAGE, RUPTURE AND THE SEPTEMBER 21ST UPRISING OF YOUTH PROTESTERS

For months, public anger over the ghost flood-control scandal simmered, with young people at the helm of sustaining its force. They used platform-based tactics that made the issue of systemic corruption glaring and immediate: crowdsourcing data and conducting digital lifestyle checks on suspected officials, posting content exposing "nepo babies" who flaunt elite excess online, and circulating memes with pop culture references to mock and condemn those who benefitted. Universities and streets became sites of walkouts, pickets, and demonstrations, as online indignation translated into embodied protest demanding accountability. Rap

music also became a key language of dissent, especially among poor and working class youth, as Gloc 9's Upuan regained popularity as a metaphor for a democracy where those in power remain insulated from the lived realities of poverty, and Moro Beats' Anak Ka Ng Pu**! highlighted the need for radical change to break the cycle of impunity. The leadership of the young Filipinos undoubtedly strengthened the broader movement against corruption in its emphasis on civil society vigilance and insistence on a structural reading of corruption. They brought renewed energy and creativity to the movement, using every available platform and tool to voice an impatience with incremental reform and a growing openness to rupture.

Rupture did take place on September 21st when a group of young protesters spontaneously clashed with the police in Mendiola, a historic site of confrontation with state power in Manila. The Mendiola protesters – mostly young, poor, and unaffiliated with civil society or activist groups – moved off-script from what was intended to be a contained protest. From the Baha sa Luneta ("flood in Manila") demonstration where thousands gathered, they marched to Mendiola as part of a smaller split-off contingent led by leftist mass organization, Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (BAYAN). As the protest program ended and organizers announced dispersal, the young protesters began hurling objects at police barricades. The police responded with extreme and disproportionate brutality as the confrontation unfolded – first with water cannons, tear gas and batons, and towards the evening, in armed "mopping-up" operations by SWAT teams that killed one passerby. A total of 216 individuals, including 103 minors, were arrested, and reports from rights groups detailed testimonies of torture and abuse under the hands of the police.

What state officials dubbed as the Mendiola "riot" was just one of the many expressions of public outrage that day, as civil society groups organized "Trillion Peso March" protests in various places in the country. Tens of thousands mobilized in the biggest demonstration under the current Marcos regime, including students, workers, church groups, and civil society organizations. Yet it was young people who come from marginalized backgrounds who led the shift from controlled demonstrations to direct confrontation with the state, pointing to their stakes in pushing against the limits of civil participation under a democratic order that not only perpetuates systemic corruption but also shapes their lived realities of economic dispossession and state violence.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE POLITICS OF "LEGITIMATE" RESISTANCE

As clashes progressed in Mendiola, a parallel discursive battle took place over the legitimacy of the Mendiola protesters' actions. With little verified information circulating, speculation filled the vacuum,

and condemnation came quickly. A familiar script re-emerged: young protesters were dismissed as unruly, irrational, or bayaran, their grievances minimized and their political agency denied. Government officials highlighted this framing, branding them as “thugs” and batang hamog (“street urchins”) who were paid to incite disturbance – all while denying any use of violence against the protesters.

Meanwhile, some of the more established civil society actors were quick to distance themselves from the events in Mendiola, framing the rupture primarily as violence and disorder. A political party, AKBAYAN, in a statement expressed that it “does not condone acts of violence”, and that it is “wary of the possibility that the turmoil was deliberately inflamed by malevolent actors.” Similarly, an NGO called Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates expressed “deep concern” at the police’s violent dispersal while simultaneously stating that the actions of Mendiola protesters risk undermining the “legitimacy of people’s struggles.” These responses prioritized the protection of the broader movement’s credibility and politics of civility, casting the Mendiola protesters as political outsiders and as potential provocateurs.

In isolating the Mendiola contingent from the earlier mobilizations, civil society reproduced a moral – and ultimately classed – binary between the “peaceful” protester and the illegitimate troublemaker. The distinction mapped closely onto the socio-economic position of the protesters. Earlier demonstrations, largely composed of students, church groups, NGOs, and middle-class participants, were praised by state officials for their discipline and civility. President Marcos himself encouraged protest – so long as it remained peaceful – revealing how orderly dissent can be accommodated, even co-opted, precisely because it poses limited risks for the status quo.

This reveals the boundary-setting role that institutionalized civil society has taken in the Philippines since the People Power Revolution, and the class politics that underlies it. This non-violent revolution has long served as the blueprint of mass mobilizations and shaped the culture of dissent in the Philippines, setting the limits of democratic discourse and narrowed the possibilities for a democracy shaped by those living at its margins. Established groups disowning the Mendiola protesters reinforced a hierarchy of dissent in which orderly, programmatic, and middle-class-led protests are recognized as legitimate, while more spontaneous and risky forms of resistance that are often undertaken by marginalized youth are dismissed and framed as threats to democracy itself.

FRACTURE, POSSIBILITY, AND THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRATIC STRUGGLE

The experience of the youth protesters in Mendiola highlights the need for institutionalized civil society to reflect on how class politics shapes their notions of legitimate democratic struggle and which expressions of rage are acceptable. The

recent uprisings in Nepal and Bangladesh have shown that the unruly rage of young people is what it takes to shake regimes, and yet the most confrontational and potentially transformative energies of the Mendiola protesters were curtailed rather than sustained.

The challenge for the broader democratic struggle in the Philippines is to return to its “others” – to retrace its path and reckon with its past – now fully aware of how its formation has marked and marginalized certain subjects. It must confront what it has inadvertently or deliberately excluded and re-center those long pushed to its peripheries. Beyond romanticizing “Gen-Z” as a generational force, the challenge for older activists, civil society, and the middle class is whether they are willing to learn from the political sensibilities emerging from young people in the margins. To learn from them means to take seriously the urgency, the necessity of risk, and refusal of containment that shape their politics. It requires these civil society actors to move away from disciplining dissent toward building forms of solidarity and political practices that do not abandon those who push it beyond the boundaries of respectability. Without this, youth anger will continue to be isolated, absorbed by repression, or dissipated between cycles of scandal and forgetting. The path forward may not lie in returning to the language of civility that has long contained dissent, but in allowing the ungovernable anger of a generation – shaped by precarity, disaster, and betrayal – to swell beyond the limits set for it. What is at stake is no longer reform alone, but whether a livable future can still be wrested from a system that has repeatedly failed to deliver one.

Beyond romanticizing “Gen-Z” as a generational force, the challenge for older activists, civil society, and the middle class is whether they are willing to learn from the political sensibilities emerging from young people in the margins. To learn from them means to take seriously the urgency, the necessity of risk, and refusal of containment that shape their politics. It requires these civil society actors to move away from disciplining dissent toward building forms of solidarity and political practices that do not abandon those who push it beyond the boundaries of respectability.

5

Indonesia: Militarized Governance, Corruption Networks, and Youth Pushback

- Militarization and the Hollowing of Civic Participation
- Youth Mobilization in Search of a New Path to Democracy
- Escalating State Repression of Dissent
- Democratic Reconfiguration
- Regional Resonance
- Reimagining Democracy

Indonesia:

Militarized Governance, Corruption Networks, and Youth Pushback

By KontraS

Indonesia: At a Glance

Following Indonesia's 2024 general election, growing militarization of governance, non-participatory lawmaking, and shrinking civic space triggered widespread youth mobilization in 2025. The revised TNI Law and other "express" legislative processes deepened public distrust, while civil liberty violations and corruption scandals intensified frustration among young citizens. Students and first-time protesters organized decentralized demonstrations across major cities, combining street protests, digital mobilization, and symbolic actions to defend democratic norms. State responses included arrests, intimidation, and judicial harassment, with over 5,000 protest-related arrests recorded. Despite repression, youth activism reshaped democratic participation by integrating protest with legal advocacy and civic education, reinforcing demands for accountable, meaningful democracy.

Indonesia entered 2025 amid growing concerns about the direction of its post-election democracy. Developments following the 2024 General Election signaled a shift toward deeper militarization of governance and narrowing civic space — trends that would soon provoke a strong public response.

In Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and Makassar, students occupied major intersections and university gates, carrying hand-painted placards rejecting the return of military influence in civilian life. Night-time protests became routine, with teach-ins and public assemblies unfolding despite the growing presence of security forces. For many first-time protesters, this moment marked their direct encounter with the risks and necessity of dissent.

These developments signal a new administration that increasingly relies on the military to carry out governance functions, positioning it not only as a defense force against external threats but also as a central actor in domestic administration and economic management.

Alongside this shift, several major laws were drafted and passed with limited public participation. Legislative processes were conducted in compressed timeframes, undermining principles of meaningful public consultation and academic scrutiny. In addition to the revised TNI Law, expedited deliberations around the Criminal Procedure Code (KUHAP) revisions (ratified December 2025) and the Disinformation Bill reinforced perceptions that lawmaking had become insulated from citizen input. This pattern of "express" legislation deepened a growing trust deficit between the legislature and the public.

The consequences were tangible. In the first half of 2025 alone, 76 incidents of civil liberty violations were recorded, most linked to state responses to demonstrations opposing the TNI Law. The majority of perpetrators were state actors, primarily police and military personnel, reinforcing perceptions that security institutions were being deployed to manage political dissent.
At the same time, economic pressures compounded political frustration. Corruption scandals involving state officials, alongside

public controversies over the conspicuous and hedonistic lifestyles of members of parliament, further alienated young citizens who already felt excluded from decision-making processes.

MILITARIZATION AND THE HOLLOWING OF CIVIC PARTICIPATION

This moment reveals a significant shift in how democracy plays out in Indonesia. While constitutional guarantees of civic participation remained intact, participation itself was increasingly symbolic rather than substantive. Legislative processes moved swiftly with minimal consultation, dissent was framed as disruption, and security-based approaches dominated state response to dissent. For young Indonesians, this gap between formal democratic procedures and lived exclusion became the central grievance animating protest.

This situation prompted the Indonesian youth to respond with various acts of protest. Multiple waves of demonstrations through peaceful assembly and expression occurred throughout 2025 against controversial legislation and repression of civic freedoms.

Government response to the protests, including actions taken, if any, are well worth exploring against the backdrop of the active and courageous participation of young people in the protests.

YOUTH MOBILIZATION IN SEARCH OF A NEW PATH TO DEMOCRACY

The waves of demonstration were significantly bigger than just a series of one-off protests, as they; it became a movement. Bound by a shared story of discontent, young people didn't just show up for a single cause; they stayed in the streets to challenge the entire governance system.

Mobilization was driven primarily by students and young people through decentralized and informal networks. University student councils, student collectives, civil society coalitions, and even popular culture networks played active roles

in the collective action. Coordination was deliberately fluid and non-hierarchical, enabling rapid coordination across cities while reducing vulnerability to co-optation or decapitation through arrests. Digital platforms functioned not only as tools of mobilization but also as spaces for political education, narrative contestation, and solidarity-building.

Protest tactics emphasized visibility and moral clarity rather than confrontation. Symbolic actions, such as silent marches, coordinated social media blackouts, and collective readings of constitutional articles, framed the movement as a defense of democratic norms rather than a partisan challenge. These strategies resonated strongly with the public, earned public support and threw a monkey wrench into state efforts to portray youth protesters as disorderly or violent.

Many were first-time protesters drawn together by peer networks and shared digital spaces. This marked a generational shift in how political legitimacy and trust were constructed, and signaled two things about Indonesia's democratic landscape.

First, it has become a generational reconfiguration of democratic participation: youth were not merely responding to state agendas but constructing alternative participatory practices outside formal institutions. Second, the scale and persistence of youth involvement challenged the state's ability to manage dissent through conventional repressive strategies. Youth participation was sustained, networked, and increasingly difficult to isolate or dismiss.

ESCALATING STATE REPRESSION OF DISSENT

In contrast, state response to the youth-led protests in 2025 were marked by escalating violence and repression. Police and, in

some instances, military forces were deployed in large numbers, often using excessive force, arbitrary arrests, and intimidation. Protesters were portrayed as threats to public order rather than rights-bearing citizens to justify securitized government response.

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Crackdowns intensified when protests directly challenged entrenched political interests, pushed back against the revised Military Law and elite privilege. Youth leaders, legal observers, paramedics, journalists, and civil society actors were selectively targeted. The intimidation of independent media outlets reporting on the protests, among other issues, including the delivery of threatening packages to journalists, illustrated an effort to control narratives.

The arrest and prosecution of figures such as Delpedro Marhaen, director of the civil liberties organization Lokataru, exemplified the criminalization of legal advocacy when it intersected with sustained criticism of state power. These patterns point to the political intent behind state repression: not crowd control but crushing dissent and youth mobilization.
The scale of arrests linked to recent public protests was unprecedented in the post-Reformasi period: at least 5,000 arrests and 959 individuals formally charged. Detainees included students, activists, researchers, legal observers, paramedics, and organizers, blurring the boundary between democratic participation and criminal conduct.

These arrests reveal a deliberate state strategy. Rather than relying solely on physical force, authorities increasingly deployed criminal law as a tool of judicial harassment. Legal processes themselves became punitive, imposing psychological, financial, and social costs on protesters. This strategy was designed to produce chilling effects, fragment movements, and demonstrate the dangers of dissent. Repression, rather than retreat, became part of the political terrain youth were forced to navigate.

DEMOCRATIC RECONFIGURATION

Despite extensive repression, the youth movement of 2025 left a durable political and social imprint. While no single

organization or unified platform emerged, youth activism reshaped democratic expectations. Repression did not dismantle youth mobilization; it reshaped its terrain. Courtrooms became new spaces for political engagement, as young people attended trials, supported detainees' families, and coordinated legal defense. Legal aid organizations and civil society groups were mobilized to provide legal representation, while students documented proceedings and disseminated information through digital platforms. Individual arrests were transformed into collective political causes, reinforcing solidarity across regions and sectors.

Organizationally, repression prompted adaptation rather than retreat. Youth organizing increasingly integrated street protest with legal advocacy, courtroom monitoring, digital campaigning, and mutual aid for detainees and their families. Trials became new sites of political engagement, fostering legal literacy and reframing activism around rights, due process, and accountability. Networks grew more resilient, cross-regional, and legally informed. The most enduring impact of the movement was not policy reversal but a recalibration of democratic expectation. Participation was no longer understood as episodic or electoral, but as continuous, collective, and confrontational. As such, youth activism in 2025 did not reject democracy but reinforced its commitment to it — meaningful, truly participatory, and equitable to serve the interests of those governed.

REGIONAL RESONANCE

The Indonesian youth mobilizations of 2025 unfolded as part of a broader regional pattern rather than an isolated national episode. Across Asia, youth-led movements increasingly emerged in response to accumulated governance failures; corruption, elite capture, shrinking civic space, and the securitization of politics rather than single policy decisions. In this sense, the Indonesian protests echoed similar movements in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Mongolia, where young people framed dissent as a demand for accountability and democratic integrity rather than regime change.

A shared feature across these movements was the rejection of formalistic participation. Much like Gen Z mobilizations in Nepal and Bangladesh, Indonesian youth articulated frustration with democratic systems that preserved electoral procedures while hollowing out genuine public participation, prompting young people to reclaim streets, campuses, and digital platforms as alternative democratic spaces, asserting their right to substantive, not token, participation in governance.

The tactics youth employed also reflected regional convergence. Decentralized organizing, digital-first mobilization, and symbolic actions rather than hierarchical leadership or party affiliation mirrored strategies seen across Asia. These movements brought to the fore moral legitimacy, visibility, and collective education, often blending protest with civic pedagogy. Such approaches complicated state narratives that sought to portray youth dissent as disorderly or externally driven.

State counter action to dismantle the Indonesian people's right to protest followed a familiar regional script: The criminalization of protest, judicial harassment, and the use of legal ambiguity to suppress dissent. The Indonesian government's action amid protest reinforced the regional pattern: Rather than outright bans, governments increasingly relied on administrative, legal, and security mechanisms to raise the cost of civic participation while maintaining the democratic a veneer.

Finally, the Indonesian case highlights a shared regional tension confronting youth movements: how to sustain the emergent Gen Z-led mobilization without being co-opted by the existing political structures. This Asian dilemma underscores the challenge ahead. While youth movements have demonstrated their capacity to disrupt, reframe, and reenergize democracy, the long-term question remains how these energies can reshape institutions without losing their autonomy or legitimacy.

REIMAGINING DEMOCRACY

Alongside their ability to mount constructive disruption, young protesters have also shown they can innovate under pressure, sustain solidarity despite fragmentation, and redefine civic participation beyond elections and formal institutions. This is against a backdrop that should inspire caution and further reflection to nurture youth-led protest movements: Civic space continues to shrink, securitization is increasingly normalized, and criminal law remains a potent tool for suppressing dissent.

Yet this grim scenario offers cause for optimism: The legacy of the 2025 protests lies in a reimagined democratic practice. Young people contested democracy in the face of repression, demanded accountability as a cornerstone of public governance, and redefined public participation in governance beyond elections.

Looking ahead to 2026, Indonesia's democracy remains precarious at best. Formal democratic institutions may persist, but their legitimacy risks further erosion if unwarranted heightened security measures persist.

The persistence and adaptability of youth-led activism suggest that democratic renewal remains possible. Future mobilization is likely to integrate street protest with strategic litigation, digital advocacy, and regional solidarity networks.

The political agency demonstrated by young Indonesians throughout 2025 reveals a generation that does not shirk from democratic engagement despite intensified state crackdown. Hopes are high that they will continue to defend and expand civic space, thus ensuring that democracy in Indonesia becomes truly responsive to the needs and clamor of those most invested in its future.

6

"It Is Easy to Resign": Youth Pushback Against Power and Privilege in Mongolia

- Dawn of a new era
- What went before the movement took shape
- Evolution of radical mobilization
- Tactics, strategies, innovations
- Leadership Visibility and Gender dynamics
- State response and democratic implications
- Movement impact: What changed?
- How civil society fits
- Beyond Mongolia
- What's Next?

"It Is Easy to Resign": Youth Pushback Against Power and Privilege in Mongolia

By Gerelee Odonchimed
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For years, Prime Minister Oyun-Erdene Luvsannamsrai repeatedly invoked the phrase 'Amargui' (It is not easy) to explain stalled reforms and systemic failures. By 2025, however, this refrain had lost its persuasive power. Despite the ruling party's firm grip on power, reinforced by structural advantages in the electoral process, corruption levels remained unchanged, civic spaces continued to narrow, and a steady brain drain had already taken hold. For many young Mongolians, everyday life felt increasingly disconnected from the government's promises of progress.

In May 2025, the frustration crystalized around a moment that felt deeply personal. As inflation hovered between 7 and 15 percent, images of extravagant consumption by the Prime Minister's son and daughter-in-law circulated widely on social media.

What might have once been dismissed as gossip became a political spark. In a striking display of linguistic subversion, protesters spun the Prime Minister's rhetoric on its head, coining the term 'Ogtsrokh Amarkhan' ('It is easy to resign'), a pointed critique suggesting that if living modestly as a civil servant or reforming the system is not easy, then stepping down is a straightforward alternative. This slogan became a unifying chant at the main square and during the marches around the Government house, effectively shifting the burden of 'difficulty' onto the state.

Chanted across the Sukhbaatar Square in Ulaanbaatar, the capital of Mongolia, and echoed during marches around government buildings, the phrase quickly became the rallying point of the 22-day massive protests that demonstrated how a digitally triggered moment of outrage evolved into a sustained, hybrid movement.

Led largely by Gen Z, backed by civil society and the broader public, the protests not only achieved a historic institutional outcome – the resignation of the cabinet – they also exposed deeper tensions around power, representation, and the limits of Mongolia's development model. Ultimately, the

Mongolia: At a Glance

In Mongolia, youth-led protests in 2025 emerged in response to corruption scandals, economic frustration, and a growing sense that political elites had failed to deliver meaningful reform. Organized through decentralized networks and sustained occupation of public spaces, the movement combined civic protest with creative cultural resistance, using music, humor, and symbolic rituals to maintain momentum and broaden participation. Demonstrators demanded accountability and the resignation of political leaders, culminating in the Prime Minister stepping down under sustained public pressure. While the protests revealed the mobilizing power of digitally connected youth and briefly reshaped Mongolia's political landscape, they also exposed deeper structural challenges, including elite dominance, gender inequalities within activism, and uncertainty over whether meaningful institutional reform will follow.

mobilization transformed 'political apathy' into active engagement, setting a new precedent for youth political participation in the region.

DAWN OF A NEW ERA

The ensuing fundamental shift in the Mongolian democratic landscape triggered by the May 2025 protests led to the Democratic Revolution 2.0 as some people claimed on social media. In this historic shift, youth, once - dubbed the most apathetic voter demographic based on poll turnout, ceased to be marginalized in political discourse. The political system has ceased to be exclusive and detached from lived reality.

The massive youth-led uprising reclaimed the civic space and broke the state-imposed silence, re-animating a social dialogue that had been frozen by the ruling party's pervasive political branding.
Prior to the protests, a viral social media exposure of the luxurious lifestyles of the Prime Minister's son and daughter-in-law in May 2025. The massive backlash couldn't have come at a worse time: inflation was squeezing daily life, and the transition from a winter of extreme air pollution to a dusty, soil-contaminated spring in Ulaanbaatar only deepened the public's distress.

In contrast, previous protests were fragmented or absorbed into state-managed performances such as "Ajlaa hii" (do the work)

campaign. This time around, public outrage did not readily dissipate. The rapid transition from a single text message exchange and a meeting of a group of youth to an occupation of the central square demonstrated that for the digital generation, mobilization is spontaneous, horizontal, and driven by a profound sense of relative deprivation.

For almost a month, or 22 days to be exact, the square served as a makeshift classroom as students, first-time protesters, and other individuals who admitted they had never been politically engaged participated in political discourse facilitated by academics and activists alike. These earnest discussions validated their personal frustrations and grievances around inequality, corruption, and unequal representation, which were gradually reframed as collective political demands.

The movement symbolized shared agency. Youth participation was no longer abstract or symbolic; it was visible, sustained, and public. Reopened civic space and revived democratic engagement in Mongolia, which felt honest, urgent, and real.

WHAT WENT BEFORE THE MOVEMENT TOOK SHAPE

For the youth occupying the main square, the pressure was not merely economic but existential. With over 6.1 percent of the population forced to seek employment opportunities abroad, last year's mobilization represented a decisive stand for those trapped in economic limbo.

This sense of urgency unfolded within a hostile political environment characterized by rampant populism and black PR campaigns targeting those who speak out against the state. Thus organizers faced immense psychological warfare from the state's disinformation machinery: with troll armies stoking disinformation – and state-sponsored narratives infiltrating personal circles, prompting even those with close ties to the organizers to ask if the movement was 'sponsored' by elite interests.

Such distrust is rooted in political memory. Mongolia's leaders, including the President and the then Prime Minister, had strategically utilized street activism to rise to prominence, only to revive the very system as they claimed to have fought against once in power. This legacy of 'strategic ladder-climbing' has created a pervasive public skepticism. Which is further exacerbated by a manipulating trend where high-ranking officials from the ruling party—who hold absolute power—continually pose as 'system-fighters,' creating a paradoxical norm of battling a system they themselves lead and maintain.

A historical obstruction of youth participation also helped shape the collective protests. Formal political entry points were traditionally controlled by state-aligned bodies like the Mongolian Student Union and the Mongolian Youth Association, which was perceived as male-dominated and bureaucratic conduits into the ruling People's Party.

As the protests bypassed these closed systems, the 2025 occupation functioned as an "open-source" platform, reclaiming political agency for the unaligned majority, who had long feared and avoided being involved in public mobilization.

Such fear may well be rooted in the events of July 1, 2008, when a post-election protest ended in the deaths of four citizens. For two decades, the fear of state-sanctioned violence shaped how far citizens believed protests could go.

Fast forward to 2025. Three weeks of peaceful occupation of public space and pro-democracy protests vanished that deep-seated fear and demonstrated that mass civic action did not necessarily lead to bloodshed or political co-option, redefining both the risks and possibilities of public dissent for a new generation.

> *While the daily operations of the occupied square drew on the diverse expertise of participants across the movement, overcoming entrenched structural biases proved to be a challenge*

EVOLUTION OF RADICAL MOBILIZATION

Unlike traditional reform advocacy, the movement had no project proposal. It formed through organic coalescence of young media professionals, social media influencers, human rights defenders, and LGBTQ+ activists. To maintain moral authority, they modeled the accountability they demanded from the state. While demanding the Prime Minister prove his sources of income for his family's lavish lifestyles, the organizers published real-time financial reports of every donation, from wooden crates to bottled water. This radical transparency neutralized state attempts to discredit the movement as "politically sponsored."

TACTICS, STRATEGIES, INNOVATIONS

The movement's coordination combined digital precision with physical resilience. Organizers leveraged their reach as social media influencers to bypass politically-controlled media and counter online backlash. When individuals were targeted by coordinated troll attacks, the network collectively mobilized to defend one another.

The ensuing protests were marked by creative mobilization and collective

resilience. The occupied site functioned as a vibrant civic ecosystem, wherein political education went hand in hand with cultural engagement, thus ensuring that protests remained inclusive, energized, and sustainable over time.

Key features of this ecosystem included:

A. Civic pedagogy and safety: The square hosted educational lectures and continuous briefings on citizen rights and safety protocols. A culture of radical solidarity was fostered through the recurring slogans, ‘Remain calm and remain seated! even in the face of attack’ and ‘Don't leave each other behind,’ cementing a sense of mutual protection among the youth.

B. Fun-infused cultural resistance: By incorporating DJ sets, stand-up comedy, music performances, and informal social gatherings, the movement humanized the struggle and helped prevent burnout. These moments of joy allowed participants to sustain momentum while broadening the movement’s appeal beyond seasoned activists.

C. Visual activism: A campaign known as the "Marathon of Shame" publicly called out actors, singers, and influencers perceived to be aligned with the ruling party, helping establish a new social norm: that flaunting wealth derived from corruption is no longer acceptable. Others including professional photographers and designers also contributed to a strong visual narrative that amplified the movement online.

D. National unity and state infiltration: The movement's reach was truly national, drawing participants from all 21 provinces. Each night concluded with the singing of the national anthem, a powerful symbolic ritual that even forced state-sponsored counter-protesters to join in solidarity, momentarily dissolving political divisions before they withdrew at the end of their scheduled 6:00 PM “shift”.

The movement did not just demand change; it modeled a new civic culture grounded in participation, care, creativity, and collective responsibility.

LEADERSHIP VISIBILITY AND GENDER DYNAMICS

The movement emphasized a horizontal and decentralized structure. Yet, in practice, a small number of organizers inevitably became its public faces, bearing the brunt of state-sponsored attacks. Targeted harassment extended into the private lives of the individuals, with family relationships, gender identity, and sexual orientation weaponized in calculated attempts to demoralize them. This reflects a normalized, yet toxic, feature of Mongolian political culture, where private identities are routinely used as political leverage particularly against female politicians, journalists, and activists.

While the daily operations of the occupied square drew on the diverse expertise of participants across the movement, overcoming entrenched structural biases proved to be a challenge. In high-stakes negotiations with political parties, for example, the movement was represented primarily by men, even though women and queer-identifying organizers, among others, provided much of the intellectual and

logistical leadership on the frontlines.

As a result, the public and political face of the movement partially reverted to traditional, gendered norms of authority — even within a mobilization that otherwise positioned itself as progressive and transformative.

STATE RESPONSE AND DEMOCRATIC IMPLICATIONS

The state's response unfolded as a multi-layered effort to undermine morale and fracture the movement.

A. Urban crowding (Astroturfing): Authorities organized so-called "Open Door" events and state-aligned counter-protests (elders and Gen Z youth) to physically encroach on the occupied square by deploying aggressive, large-bodied men behind a front line of elderly citizens. These agitators specifically targeted male organizers to provoke violent confrontations that could justify repression. In response, small-framed female protesters formed human shields to block escalation, effectively disrupting efforts to stoke chaos. The repression extended beyond the Square itself. Organizers reported being followed by unidentified vehicles carrying groups of men in an evident ploy to intimidate the protesters and discourage their participation.

B. Psychological warfare: The state and its aligned networks weaponized the private lives of organizers through coordinated smear campaigns, targeting family relationships, personal histories, gender identity, and sexual orientation. This form of backlash — commonly referred to as "Black PR" in Mongolian politics — is a well-established tactic used to delegitimize political opponents by shifting attention from public demands to personal scandal.

C. In several instances, organizers were subjected to deeply personal accusations and defamatory narratives designed to inflict reputational harm and psychological distress. These attacks did not remain confined to online harassment; they spilled into the protest space itself, where coordinated provocations sought to publicly shame and isolate individual leaders. The strategy was clear: to erode trust within the movement, strain personal relationships, and deter continued participation by making activism socially and emotionally costly.

Particularly concerning was the use of moral stigmatization, including homophobic slurs circulated online and amplified through coordinated digital networks. In a context where such language carries strong social stigma, these attacks functioned not merely as insults but as tools of political exclusion.

Police negligence: While police maintained a physical presence, they frequently engaged in selective passivity, failing to intervene when counter-protesters assaulted the youth. This reinforced perceptions that law enforcement functioned as a political instrument rather than a neutral guarantor of public safety.

MOVEMENT IMPACT: WHAT CHANGED?

The 2025 protest fundamentally altered the

state’s perception of the younger generation. Historically, Mongolian political elites viewed youth as a passive demographic, easily ignored or politically managed. The protest shattered that assumption. By sustaining a disciplined 22-day occupation of the central square, young protesters forced state response to their demands at the highest level, culminating in the resignation of Prime Minister Oyun-Erdene and the cabinet.

This marked a moment of systemic validation: sustained civic pressure yielded a concrete political outcome. The movement also signaled a shift from widespread political disengagement toward an emerging culture of continuous public oversight.

The mobilization demonstrated that sustained, peaceful civic pressure could disrupt entrenched party dominance and force institutional action, even within a highly centralized political system. In doing so, the movement reopened heretofore closed public political space to demand reform and accountability while facilitating meaningful participation.

The protest reshaped social norms. Public displays of wealth by politically connected elites retreated from digital platforms, reflecting a newly enforced boundary of public scrutiny and moral accountability.

The visible retreat of the elite from social media, the concealment of luxury consumption, marked the emergence of a new social cost for corruption. Public tolerance for conspicuous wealth tied to political power has sharply declined.

The opening up of public space to a broader public reckoning with state-sponsored disinformation practices was unprecedented. So, too, was the emergence of open and sustained discussion challenging the use of black propaganda, political manipulation, and deployment of psychological warfare by political parties and elite actors.

Together, these shifts suggest that the

mobilization did not end with a resignation, but reshaped the norms through which power, accountability, and legitimacy are publicly contested in Mongolia.

HOW CIVIL SOCIETY FITS

The 2025 movement navigated what many youth-led protests face – a "crisis of authenticity and representation" – through decentralized organization instead of formal institutional backing. In this scenario, civil society organizations working on democracy and social justice provided physical meeting spaces and shared their experiences and lessons learned from previous protests. This support offered practical ideas and a sense of protection against forced disappearance and arbitrary repression without directing or intervening in the mobilization.

As they stepped back from their traditional roles in protests, the youth protesters defined their own agenda – a mostly marked shift within Asian civil society, which traditionally functioned as lead advocates.

BEYOND MONGOLIA

Mongolia's 2025 protest mirrors broader trends in the collective struggle for democratic resilience elsewhere in Asia. Similar to Thailand's "Milk Tea Alliance" and Nepal's Gen Z protest, the visible contrast between unwarranted elite privileges and youth economic precarity served as a powerful moral trigger.

The slogan Ogtsrokh Amarkhan ('It is easy to resign') echoes the power of value-based protest campaigns that have been seen in Hong Kong and Myanmar, where protest movements repurposed official rhetoric to expose state hypocrisy. Like their regional counterparts, Mongolian youth blended local grievances with transnational protest and online narratives, illustrating a shared mode of digitally mediated mobilization.

Across the region, youth movements confront recurring challenges: entrenched patriarchal leadership norms, the risk of co-optation by party–state structures, and the difficulty of translating victories from the streets into lasting institutional reform. The central question remains unresolved—how Gen Z–led mobilizations can move beyond moments of rupture toward intergenerational, structural democratic transformation.

WHAT NOW?

This is the same structural challenge that now confronts Mongolia's Gen Z, alongside all those who joined the 2025 protest movement: how to translate a moment of rupture into sustained democratic transformation. The resignation of a Prime Minister marked a powerful institutional outcome, but it did not automatically dismantle the deeper patterns of elite continuity, administrative inertia, and political exclusion that fueled the uprising. Moreover, despite his resignation, he has yet to transparently verify the sources of his income.

However, "Ogtsrokh Amarkhan" ("It is easy to resign") was more than a slogan. It was a generational mandate for value-based, humane reform at every level of governance. The phrase inverted state rhetoric, but it also articulated a broader demand: that political office is a public trust, not a vehicle for insulation from accountability. In that sense, the protest was not only a rejection of one leader, but a rejection of a political culture premised on impunity, opacity, and distance from lived realities.

The deeper question now concerns institutional absorption. Can the existing system accommodate this demand for transparency, fairness, and intergenerational representation? Or will administrative power remain concentrated within an entrenched old guard, reproducing what many young protesters described as "development aggression" — growth measured in infrastructure and extraction rather than social justice — alongside persistent systemic stagnation in governance reform?

If the latter prevails, the conditions that produced the 2025 mobilization will remain intact. Yet if youth participation evolves from episodic protest to sustained oversight, institutional engagement, and cross-generational coalition-building, Mongolia may be witnessing not merely a protest cycle, but the early stages of democratic recalibration.

The 2025 movement demonstrated that fear can recede, civic space can reopen, and political apathy can be reversed. Whether that shift consolidates into durable democratic renewal now depends not only on the state's willingness to reform, but on the continued resolve of a generation that has already demonstrated it can move from outrage to organized, sustained civic action.

7

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Regional Analysis and Conclusions

7.1 Regional Governance, Corruption and Youth Demand for Clean Politics

By Ilham Mohamed
Regional Advisor for Asia at Transparency International

PATTERNS OF GOVERNANCE FAILURES ACROSS THE REGION

In 2025, across Asia and the Pacific, we saw a fresh wave of youth-led uprisings where triggers varied from scandals around flood control in the Philippines to social media bans in Nepal. Across the region young people came together to confront what they saw as a cumulative sense of betrayal by obstructed democracies held together by governments increasingly resorting to security forces to maintain power. In some instances, like in Bangladesh and Nepal, this led to the ousting of regimes, with incoming politicians promising reform and fair governance.

The emergence of hashtags like #SEAblings and the use of symbols like the 'Jolly Roger' flag from the anime One Piece show that young people in Asia Pacific don't see their struggles as isolated events within their state boundaries. They identify a similar root cause across borders. That of disproportionate political influence based on affluence. They can link problems such as nepotism, hidden influence, militarised governance, elite collusion, and institutional erosion to wider economic and social problems. Across Asia, young people recognise that these systems have allowed a privileged group of people to stay in power for decades.

While governments resort to harsh militarised 'crowd control' tactics and digital

authoritarianism through censorship and surveillance, young organisers are bypassing these tactics like water, learning from each other in real-time, using decentralised apps for coordinating and learning across borders, showing a sense of generational solidarity and regional consciousness.

CORRUPTION, ELITE IMPUNITY AND LEGITIMACY CRISIS

In all these protests, there seems to be a widespread popular perception that elite groups have captured state decision-making processes neglecting to cater to the needs of the majority of the population. This discontent was already reflected in 2020 in the findings of the Transparency International survey Global Corruption Barometer in Asia.

The survey showed that nearly three out of four people in Asia think that corruption is a big problem in their country and nearly one in five people who accessed public services, such as health care and education, paid a bribe in the preceding year. This equates to approximately 836 million citizens in the seventeen Asian countries surveyed.

Linking corruption further to public discontent, Transparency International's research also found that lower Corruption Perception Index scores are associated with societies where wealthy people enjoy a virtual monopoly on political power, and the influence of average citizens, particularly marginalised groups, is minimal. On the other hand, the highest CPI scores are associated with contexts where political power is more equally distributed across different groups of society. This year, once again, we saw the Asia Pacific regional average score for the CPI stagnate at 45, showing little to no progress in governments delivering on anti-corruption measures.

The cost of corruption is severe and definitive to the economic and social hardship to young people. In Asia where many countries face alarming rates of youth unemployment, young people are growing up witnessing the flaunting of wealth by the children of the elite. Young protesters in Nepal and Mongolia saw this as a visceral reminder of the widening wealth gap and aptly nicknamed such people #NepoBabies on platforms like TikTok, leading to popular uprisings resulting in immediate change.

WHEN CORRUPTION BECOMES A LEGITIMACY CRISIS

The response to such legitimate and peaceful civic pushback has often been brutal and militarised. In Indonesia, one of the world's largest democracies, we saw popular protests when the government sought to appoint military officials to civilian cabinet posts, effectively bypassing the 1998 Reformasi changes. This peaceful civic push back was met with deadly violence. Similar use of tactical vehicles and 'crowd-control' weapons often resulting in many fatalities, has become a standard tool of civic space restriction both in Indonesia and also in the wider region.

In the Philippines, in the collusion of bitter rivals for the 2022 Uniteam alliance between the Marcos and Duterte families, we saw the ultimate symbol of elite consolidation. Even as this alliance

fractured in 2025, it revealed a political class more concerned with dividing the spoils than with public service as shown in the flood-control scandal.

In Bangladesh the student-led Monsoon Revolution, initially triggered by protests against the civil service quota system, toppled the fifteen-year regime of Sheikh Hasina within a month and brought about the country's first free and fair election in seventeen years. The student movement successfully led the formation of a codified charter for reform, designed to dismantle what they called competitive authoritarianism, prevent the return of a political duopoly, and put in safeguards against dynastic dominance.

While the Monsoon Revolution is being held by many as a regional model to successfully demand constitutional resets and institutional reform, rather than just a change in leadership, the 2026 election that followed has given a landslide victory to the Bangladesh National Party, led by the son of a former Prime Minister.

WHEN PROTEST MOMENTUM MEETS OLD POWER

History shows us that often, popular protest movements optimistically termed by commentators as Springs, turn out to be false springs. In some cases, the enthusiasm and rhetoric fizzle away without translating into sustainable structural change that effectively brings about fairer and more predictable access to resources.

In others, changes that are brought about by leaderless and horizontal uprisings are hijacked by populist leaders capitalising on dissatisfaction or even by a fresh layer of the old elite in the form of the next generation of generals or dynastic families.

The political bargaining for greater voice and representation and the elections that follow

these large-scale outpourings of youth discontent are regularly shaped by hidden influence, conflict of interest and misused public resources that aren't properly safeguarded, while poorly designed institutions struggle to keep pace with increasingly sophisticated corruption risks.

In strong democracies, transparency in political finance is a bulwark against stake capture, and helps to level the playing field of electoral politics by opening up political finance systems to public scrutiny. Who donates how much to which campaign can link and expose entrenched privileges and disproportionate influence and create more daylight between governments and private interests. Comprehensive political finance integrity standards and effective and meaningful disclosure mechanisms reduce opacity and help link those financing politics to potential conflict of interest of power holders.

Across Asia Pacific, citizens in most countries are voting blindly without knowing who is paying for their candidate's campaign. Where regulation exists around political finance, the space is riddled with loopholes, inconsistent rules and limited independent oversight capacity. This makes the existing democratic spaces rife with hidden influences that undermine public trust. These dynamics are visible across the country contexts examined in this report, including entrenched dynastic politics in the Philippines and Bangladesh, weak enforcement and institutional fragility in Nepal and Mongolia, and persistent opacity around campaign finance and misuse of state resources in Indonesia.

These governance failures are further reinforced by the increasing use of securitized approaches to manage political contestation. While elections continue to take place, coercive enforcement, selective application of the law, and the growing role of security institutions have become important mechanisms through which entrenched interests are protected. This convergence of corruption risks and securitized governance limits meaningful accountability and deepens public distrust, particularly among younger generations seeking fair and predictable political systems.

For young people across the region, these

governance and corruption dynamics are not abstract institutional concerns, but lived political realities that shape access to opportunity, voice, and security. Opaque political finance systems, elite capture of public institutions, and weak enforcement directly affect who benefits from growth, who is protected from accountability, and whose interests are prioritized. As a generation that is highly educated, digitally connected, and acutely aware of inequality, youth are particularly sensitive to the gap between democratic form and democratic substance. In this context, corruption is experienced not only as economic injustice, but as a barrier to political participation and a source of deep uncertainty about the future.

In Asia, research by TI shows that only one in three countries in the region publishes any political finance data online and many of those that do publish, publish in formats that are hard to access and analyse. This in turn effectively discourages journalists, watchdogs, and ultimately the voters to follow the money through parties, candidates and election cycles. Lack of easy access or postponed availability of this data reduces the potency of this information. Information that could act as safeguards against conflict of interest, lobbying, and even foreign influence in domestic politics. It is also shown that a lack of enforcement of existing campaign finance regulation is associated with lower scores on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index.

Fragmented disclosure mechanisms that require journalists, watchdogs and voters to dedicate time to travel to certain locations and make payments to access, acts as impediments to public access to this data. Proactive, timely, open, accessible and digital disclosure is the first step towards shining a light on who is paying for the politics that we, as a society, are practicing.

FROM COMMITMENTS TO CONSEQUENCES

Almost all the countries in the Asia Pacific region are party to the United Nations Convention on Anti-Corruption. In December 2025, these countries gathered in Doha, Qatar and reiterated their commitment to keep corruption out of politics in the form of a resolution on global minimum standards aimed at reducing opacity and keeping illicit finances in check in party and campaign financing.

The resolution is a commitment to basic standards and expectations including online publishing of data, stopping of anonymous and foreign donations, measures on misuse of state resources in campaigning, and recognising the importance of women's participation as well as the role of civil society as election observers.

Building on this, Asia Pacific countries now have an opportunity and an obligation to take the first steps towards creating a strong political finance infrastructure for clean and effective democracies serving all segments of society.

Realising these commitments is essential to maintain public trust, and to heed the call of young people across the region to keep our democracies safe and free from nepotism, clientelism, patronage and state capture.

For young people across the region, these governance and corruption dynamics are not abstract institutional concerns, but lived political realities that shape access to opportunity, voice, and security. Opaque political finance systems, elite capture of public institutions, and weak enforcement directly affect who benefits from growth, who is protected from accountability, and whose interests are prioritized.

7.2 Rebellion, Disruption or Rupture? What Youth Mobilizations in 2025 Signals

By Dr. Rajesh Tandon
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RECENT YOUTH MOVEMENTS IN ASIA

Several countries across Asia have witnessed youth-led mobilizations in recent years. Student and youth protests have been recurring features of the region's political landscape since many Asian countries gained independence after the Second World War. Such movements have appeared at different historical moments, including the JP Movement in India in the mid-1970s, the Assam movement in the early 1980s, and the India Against Corruption movement in 2011, as well as youth mobilizations in South Korea, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere.

The five country cases examined in this Overview — Bangladesh, Nepal, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Mongolia — represent more recent expressions of this longer tradition of youth civic engagement. While each movement emerged from distinct national contexts, together they reveal several common dynamics shaping youth mobilization today. The cases illustrate how young people are responding to political and economic conditions that have generated growing frustration with governance, representation, and opportunity.

Across these contexts, youth mobilization cannot be understood only through immediate triggers. Rather, the protests documented in the preceding chapters reflect deeper structural pressures that have accumulated over time and created fertile ground for collective action.

STRUCTURAL DRIVERS OF YOUTH MOBILIZATION

Over the past decade, many Asian countries have experienced relatively rapid economic growth, with GDP expanding at annual rates of 5–8 percent in several economies. Yet the benefits of this growth have been unevenly distributed. Economic inequality has widened, while historically disadvantaged regions and social groups have remained excluded from the gains of development. In several of the countries examined in this report — including Nepal, Mongolia, and Bangladesh — infrastructure investment and economic expansion have not translated into broad-based improvements in opportunity.

At the same time, demographic changes have produced a much larger youth population across the region. Young people now constitute a significant share of the population in many Asian countries, raising expectations that demographic change would generate a "demographic dividend." However, these expectations have often remained unmet. Expanded access to higher and professional education has produced a generation of educated and aspirational youth, yet employment opportunities have not kept pace with rising qualifications and expectations. Youth unemployment in countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh has remained high in recent years, and many educated young people have increasingly sought opportunities abroad. For many, migration has become a difficult but necessary response to limited prospects at home.

Governance failures have compounded these frustrations. Across the five cases examined in this report, corruption and elite capture have eroded public trust in democratic institutions. Political leaders and public officials have frequently been perceived as diverting public resources for private gain, while efforts to address corruption have often remained weak or ineffective. Large-scale corruption scandals have appeared in infrastructure projects in countries such as Nepal and Mongolia, while long-standing concerns over political corruption have shaped public debates in the Philippines and Bangladesh.

Elite capture has also limited meaningful political participation. In several countries — including Nepal, Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Indonesia — political leadership has remained concentrated within a relatively small number of families or entrenched networks. Even where elections are regularly held, political parties often operate through closed leadership structures that offer limited space for new voices or generational renewal. As a result, many young people perceive formal democratic institutions as distant from their own experiences and aspirations.

At the same time, civic space has narrowed in many contexts. Governments have increasingly relied on legal restrictions, surveillance, and administrative controls to manage dissent, including in digital spaces. While democratic institutions formally remain in place, the scope for open political participation has often become more constrained. For many young citizens, these dynamics have produced a growing sense that established political systems are unable — or unwilling — to respond to their concerns.

Taken together, these structural pressures help explain why youth mobilization emerged across the five countries examined in this report. Rising inequality, limited employment opportunities, entrenched corruption, and restricted political participation created a climate of frustration among young people. In this context, protests became an avenue through which youth sought to challenge existing power structures and demand greater accountability from political institutions.

IMMEDIATE TRIGGERS OF PROTEST

While the structural conditions described above including governance failures, corruption, and exclusionary electoral systems had been developing over time across these countries, the immediate triggers for youth mobilization differed in each context.

In Indonesia, the passage of a revised Military Law by parliament became a key flashpoint. Many citizens perceived the law as expanding the military's role in civilian governance and

undermining democratic reforms. Public frustration grew as critics argued that the legislation had been passed without meaningful consultation, prompting widespread student-led protests across major cities.

In Bangladesh, the reintroduction of a job quota system through a Supreme Court ruling after earlier reforms had scaled it back sparked anger among students and young job seekers. Many felt the policy unfairly restricted opportunities in an already competitive employment environment, reinforcing broader frustrations about exclusion from economic and political decision-making.

In the Philippines, revelations surrounding large-scale corruption involving funds allocated for flood control projects triggered widespread public outrage. The perception that political leaders had diverted public resources while facing little accountability helped galvanize nationwide protests. September 21, a historically significant date marking the declaration of martial law in 1972 became a symbolic moment for renewed civic mobilization.

In Mongolia, youth protests were ignited by public displays of wealth and privilege by the children of political elites, widely criticized online as examples of “nepo-baby” culture. These displays were seen as emblematic of corruption and elite impunity, intensifying frustration among young citizens already disillusioned with governance and economic inequality.

In Nepal, growing youth mobilization around corruption and political accountability intensified after authorities imposed restrictions on internet access and social media platforms. The attempt to limit online criticism and coordination instead triggered wider protests, as young activists viewed the measures as an effort to silence dissent.

Although these movements were sparked by different events, they were rooted in deeper structural frustrations. In each case, visible displays of elite privilege, perceived corruption, and exclusion from opportunity reinforced a growing sense among young people that political systems were unresponsive to their concerns. Long-standing assumptions that younger generations were politically disengaged were challenged as youth mobilization expanded across these contexts.

YOUTH POLITICAL CULTURES AND PROTEST PRACTICES

Understanding the recent wave of youth mobilization also requires attention to the changing political culture of younger generations. For many established political leaders and institutions, these forms of

engagement appear unfamiliar. Contemporary youth activism often moves fluidly between physical and digital spaces, creating what some observers describe as "phygital" participation — a seamless blending of online communication and on-the-ground mobilization. These modes of interaction shape not only how young people organize, but also how they express dissent and build solidarity.

This generation's political engagement is frequently misunderstood as apathy or disengagement. In practice, however, many young people are deeply attentive to questions of governance, accountability, and fairness, even if they do not participate through traditional institutional channels. Across the five cases examined in this report, youth mobilization reflected a preference for decentralized coordination, informal leadership, and flexible networks rather than rigid organizational hierarchies.

Digital communication played a central role in sustaining these movements. Social media platforms, messaging applications, and visual content including memes, satire, and short videos helped disseminate information and shape shared narratives. In Bangladesh and Nepal, digital networks enabled rapid coordination across cities and campuses, particularly when state repression intensified. In the Philippines, widespread public awareness of corruption helped fuel mobilization, while in Mongolia online discussions about elite privilege helped crystallize frustrations around governance and inequality.

As protests expanded, authorities in several contexts attempted to restrict digital communication or control online narratives. These efforts often proved ineffective. Activists adapted quickly, finding alternative platforms and communication strategies to maintain coordination and visibility. The ability to navigate digital spaces allowed youth movements to sustain momentum even when traditional forms of organization were disrupted.

The protests also reflected a broader shift away from centralized leadership. Across the five cases, youth mobilization was largely decentralized and non-partisan. Rather than relying on single spokespersons or formal organizations, movements operated through networks of students, activists, and community members who contributed in different ways, organizing events, sharing information, or sustaining protest spaces.

Cultural expression also became an important element of mobilization. Music, satire, street art, and creative protest practices helped sustain morale and attract broader participation. In countries such as Nepal and Indonesia, cultural performances and creative expression blended with political messaging, creating protest spaces that combined civic debate with collective solidarity.

Taken together, these features illustrate how youth activism in the region is evolving. Rather than operating primarily through traditional political organizations or formal civil society structures, contemporary youth movements often rely on decentralized networks, digital communication, and cultural expression to articulate demands for accountability and democratic reform.

LESSONS FOR DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE DEMOCRATIZING GOVERNANCE

The experiences documented in the five country cases highlight a growing tension within electoral democracies across the region. While formal democratic institutions such as parliaments, courts, and executive bodies continue to operate, many citizens increasingly perceive them as distant from everyday concerns. In several contexts — including Nepal, Bangladesh, and the Philippines — political leadership has remained concentrated within established networks or families, limiting opportunities for broader participation and accountability.
These patterns contribute to a perception that democratic governance has become exclusionary, particularly for younger generations. The protests examined in this report suggest that youth mobilization is often driven not only by specific grievances but also by a broader demand for more responsive and participatory forms of governance.

CITIZENS, NOT SUBJECTS

Across the five cases, a recurring source of frustration has been the perceived collusion between political and economic elites. When

political leadership appears closely aligned with business interests or displays visible wealth and privilege, public trust can erode rapidly. In Mongolia and the Philippines, for example, public displays of elite privilege became powerful symbols of inequality and impunity.

For many young citizens, such dynamics reinforce the perception that political systems treat citizens primarily as periodic voters rather than active participants in shaping public decisions. The protests documented in this report illustrate a growing expectation among youth for greater transparency, accountability, and meaningful engagement in democratic processes.

EXPANDING SPACES FOR YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Another important lesson emerging from these cases concerns the spaces through which political participation occurs. In many contexts, young people perceived formal institutional channels as inaccessible or ineffective. As a result, they created alternative spaces for participation through civic mobilization, social networks, and community organizing.

Rather than indicating a lack of political interest, these forms of engagement reflect evolving modes of participation. The protests across Nepal, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mongolia, and the Philippines demonstrate how youth activism can generate new arenas for political dialogue and public accountability beyond traditional institutional structures.

> *This generation's political engagement is frequently misunderstood as apathy or disengagement. In practice, however, many young people are deeply attentive to questions of governance, accountability, and fairness, even if they do not participate through traditional institutional channels.*

NAVIGATING DIGITAL AND PHYSICAL PARTICIPATION

Digital communication has become central to contemporary youth mobilization. Online platforms allow young people to share information, coordinate activities, and shape public narratives quickly and across wide geographic areas. At the same time, digital engagement frequently intersects with physical forms of participation, including protests, assemblies, and public gatherings.

This interaction between digital and physical spaces has become a defining feature of modern civic activism. In several of the cases examined in

this report, authorities attempted to regulate or restrict online communication, often prompting further mobilization rather than limiting it. These developments highlight how digital participation is increasingly intertwined with broader democratic engagement.

DEMOCRACY AND EVERYDAY LIBERTIES

Finally, the protests documented in this report also reflect broader concerns about personal freedoms and everyday forms of citizenship. Many young people view democratic participation as extending beyond formal political institutions to include the protection of personal liberties and individual choices in everyday life.

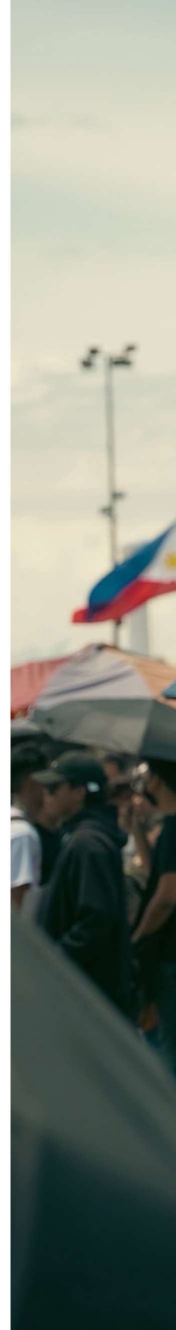
Questions of identity, expression, association, and personal autonomy increasingly intersect with political debates about governance and accountability. For younger generations, democratic legitimacy is closely linked to whether institutions respect these freedoms and accommodate social diversity. When these expectations are constrained, frustration can translate into civic mobilization and protest.

LESSONS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

The youth mobilizations documented in this report also raise important questions for organized civil society. In many contexts, formally structured civil society organizations (CSOs) appeared initially unprepared for the speed and scale of youth-led protest. This suggests a widening gap between established advocacy structures and the more spontaneous, networked forms of participation emerging among younger generations. In several of the cases examined — particularly Nepal and Bangladesh — professionalized CSO sectors coexist with youth movements that operate largely outside institutional frameworks.

Part of this disconnect reflects the evolving role of many civil society organizations. A significant number of CSOs today work closely with governments and international donors, often focusing on service delivery, development programs, or policy advocacy. While these roles remain important, they can also gradually orient organizations toward institutional engagement rather than grassroots mobilization. As a result, younger, urban, digitally connected citizens who do not participate in CSO programs may remain outside these networks of engagement.

The protests examined in this report suggest that youth participation increasingly occurs through informal networks, peer-to-peer communication, and digital spaces rather than through traditional organizational



channels. These forms of engagement often emerge quickly in response to political events, making them difficult for established organizations to anticipate or mediate. In the Philippines, for example, some civil society actors maintained informal relationships with youth groups, which helped them better understand emerging grievances. In other contexts, such connections were weaker or absent.

Another tension concerns the pace of change. Many CSOs pursue evidence-based advocacy aimed at incremental policy reform, working within existing institutional frameworks. Youth movements, however, often express impatience with gradual change and demand more visible transformation in governance and accountability. Navigating this difference remains a challenge for civil society actors operating under regulatory environments that may allow limited reform advocacy but constrain broader political mobilization.

The changing media landscape also shapes these dynamics. Traditional media institutions — once considered an important component of civic space — are increasingly perceived as aligned with political or economic elites in several countries. As a result, many young activists rely more heavily on digital platforms and alternative media to share information, mobilize supporters, and challenge official narratives. This shift further widens the distance between institutional channels of communication and youth-driven civic engagement.

At a deeper level, these developments reflect evolving understandings of citizenship among younger generations. For many young people, democratic participation is closely linked to dignity, recognition, and the ability to shape the social and political communities in which they live. Civil society institutions therefore face an important task: not simply representing youth voices, but creating spaces where younger citizens can participate directly in shaping democratic life. Recognizing and engaging these evolving forms of participation will be essential for strengthening democratic practice in the region.

In Conclusion: This Overview of five recent youth movements in Asia raises important questions about the functioning of electoral democracies in the region. The countries examined — Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mongolia, Nepal, and the Philippines — all share youthful demographic profiles and have experienced similar structural pressures. Across these contexts, economic growth has often been accompanied by rising inequality, limited employment opportunities for educated youth, persistent corruption, and visible displays of elite privilege. In many cases, political parties and governing institutions have become increasingly insulated from broader citizen participation.

Against this backdrop, youth voices often remained marginal within formal political processes. Yet specific events in each country triggered large-scale mobilization, bringing underlying frustrations into public view. The protests documented in this report demonstrate how contemporary youth movements operate through fluid networks, digital communication, and decentralized

organization, enabling young citizens to mobilize rapidly and challenge entrenched power structures.

Several lessons emerge from these experiences. Democracies in the region will need to create broader and more flexible avenues for youth participation, including informal, digital, and community-based spaces for engagement. At the same time, political institutions and civil society organizations may need to reconsider how they connect with younger generations whose forms of participation differ from traditional models of representation and advocacy.

Ultimately, these youth mobilizations signal more than episodic protest. They reflect a broader effort by younger generations to claim voice, dignity, and agency within democratic life. In doing so, they are reshaping public debates about accountability, participation, and the future trajectory of democracy in Asia.

LOOKING AHEAD

The youth mobilizations documented in this report reflect a broader pattern in modern political history: younger generations have often challenged established political orders when democratic institutions appear unresponsive. From earlier student movements across Asia to global protests such as the Arab Spring and Occupy movements, youth activism has repeatedly brought attention to questions of accountability, opportunity, and political participation. Two recurring drivers of such mobilizations have been economic uncertainty among educated youth and widespread perceptions of corruption and impunity within political leadership.

The experiences of Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mongolia, Nepal, and the Philippines suggest that these dynamics are once again shaping democratic politics in Asia. In each case, youth protests were triggered by specific events but rooted in deeper structural frustrations, including unequal economic opportunities, limited channels for political participation, and declining public trust in governing institutions. Whether such mobilizations lead to lasting institutional change remains uncertain. Previous waves of youth protest around the world have sometimes produced political transitions, but not always deeper transformations in political culture or accountability.

The longer-term impact of the movements examined in this report will therefore depend on whether political institutions respond to these demands for greater participation and transparency. In some contexts, protests have already altered public debate and placed new issues on the political agenda. In others, the underlying structures of power remain largely unchanged. The example of Sri Lanka's recent protest movement illustrates how mass mobilization can lead to significant political disruption while leaving deeper patterns of elite influence relatively intact.

At the same time, these youth mobilizations have already challenged one persistent assumption: the idea that younger generations are politically apathetic. Across the five cases examined in this report, youth demonstrated a capacity to organize, communicate, and mobilize rapidly through both digital and physical networks. These forms of engagement suggest that contemporary political participation is evolving rather than declining.

Perhaps the most immediate impact of such movements lies in the expansion of public debate. The protests generated widespread discussion about corruption, governance, and democratic accountability, encouraging citizens to question existing power structures and political practices. Even where institutional change remains limited, this process of public engagement contributes to the gradual strengthening of democratic citizenship.

Taken together, the youth mobilizations documented in this report highlight an important reality: democratic systems remain dynamic and contested. Periodic civic mobilization can serve as a corrective force, reminding political institutions that legitimacy ultimately depends on responsiveness to citizens. Whether governments, political parties, and civil society actors can adapt to these evolving expectations will shape the future trajectory of democracy across the region.

As this Overview goes to publication, developments in the region continue to evolve. Fresh elections have been held in Bangladesh and Nepal. In Bangladesh, an established opposition party has returned to power, while in Nepal, a new political formation led by a youth figure appears poised to form a government.

These shifts raise an open question: whether this moment signals a new phase of democratisation — or a continuation of existing patterns under new actors.

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Democracy Overview 2025

Signals from the Streets:

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