



Research Article

Structures of A Structureless Movement: A History of Disillusionment and The Emergence of Digitally Networked Gen Z Protest in Nepal

Prashant Das 

Department of Sociology, South Asian University, New Delhi, India.

***Correspondence**

Prashant Das

Email: dasprashant169@gmail.com**Article History**

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Abstract

Recent youth-led protests, termed the Gen Z protest, in Nepal have attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly because of their reliance on digital platforms and divergence from earlier party- or organisation-led movements but also because of the swift fall of the government. While existing literature acknowledges youth frustration with chronic corruption, unemployment and socio-economic problems plaguing the country, less attention has been paid to how historical processes produced disillusionment with political parties and the electoral process and shaped the movement. This article examines the Gen Z protest in Nepal by situating it within the long trajectory of disappointment resulting in deepened disillusionment. It argues that the series of movements led by various parties and ideological organisations failed to produce the promised result leading to historically produced distrust of party politics and electoral institutions. Simultaneously, the growing use of digital platforms like TikTok among the younger generation has enabled them to coordinate collective action outside of formal structures of political parties or ideological organisations. Drawing on the theories of social movements and digital communication, particularly the works of Manuel Castells (2009, 2015), Tufekci (2017), W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2012), and Freeman (2013) the article shows how the Gen Z protest was shaped by the intersection of two distinct phenomena—generational disillusionment and digitally networked communication. The article, therefore, extends arguments in the literature on networked protest by suggesting that the turn towards decentralised and leaderless forms of mobilisation may be shaped not only by the affordances of digital communication but also by historically produced distrust of formal political organisations.

Keywords

Gen Z, Social Movement, Nepal, Social Media, Networked Protest.

1. Introduction

In September 2025, Nepal witnessed one of the swiftest government collapses in recent history. One of the shortest movements completely overthrew the ruling government within a mere 48 hours. Unlike previous political movements in the country, the protest was not led by any political parties, ideological organisations or identity groups. Instead, it took shape on digital platforms through mediated networks of young citizens who rejected not only the ruling government but also the broader political and economic elites.

The organisation and the structure, or the lack thereof, makes this movement theoretically significant. For a nation that takes pride in never being colonised, Nepal, throughout its history, has witnessed multiple mass movements and regime changes. The 1951 anti-Rana movement, the Jana Andolan of 1990, the Maoists' People's War, and the People's Movement of 2006 were all organised through mass mobilisation by political parties or ideological organisations. These movements at different times in history have ushered in a new period in Nepali politics and society generating renewed expectations of socio-economic transformation. The Gen Z movement of 2025 signalled a moment of departure from this historical trajectory in two significant ways. Most visibly, the mobilisation for the movement occurred primarily through digital platforms. This organisational shift also meant that protesters consciously distanced themselves from all political organisations. The central question, then, is not simply why the youth protested—youth have always been active participants in Nepal's political movements—but why they chose to do so outside of formal political organisations and institutions.

Existing literature has only partially answered this question. A substantial body of literature attributes the Gen Z movement to growing frustration due to rampant corruption, unemployment, economic inequality, and limited opportunities for youth (Aryal, 2025; Barma & Thapa, 2025; Bhandari, 2025; Dahal, 2026; Dhiman, 2025; Gyawali, 2025; Magar, 2025; Sapkota, 2026). Another set of literature focuses on the role of social media platforms, particularly TikTok, in facilitating rapid mobilisation, decentralised communication and organisation of the protest (Hasugian et al., 2025; Koirala, 2025). Together, these literatures provide valuable insight into the immediate grievances that fuelled the protest and digital infrastructure deployed for mobilisation.

However, the existing scholarship on the Gen Z movement also leaves two important questions unresolved. Firstly, while they rightly identify youth dissatisfaction, they fail to explain why this dissatisfaction translated into a wholesale rejection of all political parties rather than engendering another party-led movement. Economic grievances and disappointment in the government can explain what led to youth frustration but not why political institutions ceased to be the legitimate instrument to express those grievances and bring about political change. Secondly, though these studies recognise the significance of social media in mobilising masses and coordinating the protests, they largely treat digital platforms as a neutral instrument of communication, ignoring how digital media might have shaped the organisational logic of the movement.

This article explains the Gen Z protest as a consequence of the intersection of two long historical processes. The first is the years of accumulated resentment due to the disillusionment produced through the repeated cycle of revolutionary mobilisation followed by perceived failure of the political transformation. Successive political transitions and regime changes instilled hope for a better future in the citizens of Nepal, yet for many young Nepalis the hope did not materialise. The resulting disillusionment destroyed trust not only in successive governments but also in the entire political establishment as well as electoral processes. The second process is the expansion of digital communication platforms providing an alternative for the disillusioned generation to transform their shared frustration into collective action without having to rely on formal party organisations or identity groups. The emergence of Gen Z protest, therefore, does not merely reflect immediate grievances with the government and the availability of social media platforms but the convergence of two long historical developments.

To develop this argument, the article adopts a qualitative historical-sociological approach and draws on the literature on social movements and digital communication, particularly that of Manuel Castells (2009, 2015), Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2012), Zeynep Tufekci (2017) and Jo Freeman (2013)¹. Empirically, it draws on academic literature on Nepal's political history, political movements and the contemporary Gen Z protest, alongside newspaper reports and publicly available statistical and government sources. These materials are used to reconstruct the longer trajectory of political transformation and disillusionment in Nepal and to situate the emergence and organisational form of the Gen Z movement within that history. The analysis then interprets these developments through theories of communication power, connective action, structurelessness and digitally networked protest.

2. Literature Review

The Gen Z protest in Nepal has attracted considerable scholarly attention (Aryal, 2025; Barma & Thapa, 2025; Bhandari, 2025; Dahal, 2026; Dhiman, 2025; Gyawali, 2025; Hasugian et al., 2025; Koirala, 2025; Magar, 2025; Sapkota, 2026; Shakya, 2025; S. Thapa, 2025). This literature explores the motivation, organisational characteristics, and political implications of the Gen Z movement. While they offer valuable insight into the dynamics of the movement, they primarily

¹Freeman's essay was written in 1970 and first published in *The Second Wave* in 1972. This article cites the 2013 reprint in *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*.

explain the movement through immediate socio-economic grievances and digital communication practices without fully situating the movement within Nepal's historical context.

Several of the studies on Gen Z movement attribute the rise of the movement to widespread dissatisfaction among the youth with economic conditions and governance failures. They particularly highlight issues such as corruption, unemployment and political apathy as key drivers of youth frustration (Aryal, 2025; Barma & Thapa, 2025; Bhandari, 2025; Dahal, 2026; Dhiman, 2025; Gyawali, 2025; Magar, 2025; Sapkota, 2026; S. Thapa, 2025). Such explanations resonate with broader scholarship on youth political participation which suggests that economic uncertainty and declining opportunities often stimulate protest mobilisation among younger generations (Dalton, 2007; Norris, 2011). Some of this literature does acknowledge the history of protests and movements in the country (Dahal, 2026; Gyawali, 2025) but do not explain how repeated cycles of political mobilisation and disappointment shaped the current distrust of political parties. Similarly, while some articles do refer to Gen Z movement as a sign of declining legitimacy of traditional political institutions (Barma & Thapa, 2025; Magar, 2025; S. Thapa, 2025), they do not specifically explain the historical process through which this legitimacy declined and how this erosion of trust shaped the organisational structure of the Gen Z movement.

A second set of studies, mainly by Koirala (2025) and Hasugian et al. (2025), focuses on the role of social media in facilitating mobilisation during the protest. Hasugian et al. (2025) highlight how digital platforms have changed the features of political communication and the political legitimacy of traditional political organisations now needs to be negotiated outside older territorial limits and within the networked architecture of social media. These studies explore how social media platforms enabled rapid dissemination of protest messages, forged cross-border solidarity and facilitated swift political coordination among the young users.

While these studies provide useful descriptive accounts of the movement, they exhibit several limitations. First, most analyses treat youth frustration as a largely contemporary phenomenon linked to current economic and political conditions. Consequently, the movement is analysed in isolation from earlier waves of political mobilisation in Nepal. They rarely examine how this dissatisfaction may be historically rooted in the repeated instances of political transformation that have characterised Nepal's modern political history. This approach overlooks the possibility that the organisational form of the movement—particularly its rejection of political parties and formal leadership structures—may itself be shaped by historical experiences of political disappointment.

Second, although existing studies recognise the importance of social media in facilitating protest mobilisation, they often treat digital platforms primarily as communication tools rather than as arenas in which political authority, legitimacy, and public meaning are contested. Scholarship on digital politics has increasingly emphasised that communication networks themselves are sites of political power where governments, media institutions, and social movements compete to shape public narratives (Castells, 2009).

Third, existing literature largely describes the Gen Z protests as “leaderless” or “spontaneous” without engaging with the broader theoretical debates on horizontal organisation in social movements. The critique developed by Jo Freeman in her essay *The Tyranny of Structurelessness* (2013) highlights how movements that reject formal leadership structures may nevertheless reproduce informal power hierarchies. Applying Freeman's critique to the Nepali case can provide a deeper understanding of the organisational dynamics of the Gen Z movement.

This article argues that the organisational form of the Gen Z movement emerged from the confluence of two historical processes. First, a repeated cycle of political mobilisation followed by perceived failure of institutions led to deep distrust of political parties and electoral institutions. Second, digital communication platforms provided an alternative space through which years of disillusionment could be translated into collective action. The article therefore situates the movement within Nepal's longer political history while examining how digital communication reshaped the organisation of protest.

3. One Battle After Another

Although Nepal prides itself on never having been colonised, it has seen multiple movements and regime changes within a relatively short span of time. Nepal's history is marked by repeated episodes of mass revolutions that promised fundamental political, economic and social transformation. The anti-Rana movement of 1951 brought an end to a century of oligarchic rule, while the movement of 1990 dismantled the Panchayat system and reintroduced multiparty democracy.

More recently, the 2006 People's Movement paved the way for the abolition of the monarchy in 2008, transforming Nepal into a federal republic. The election of the Constituent Assembly in 2008 meant that, for the first time, a constitution would be drafted by a 601-member Constituent Assembly, of whom 575 were elected and 26 nominated. The fact that CPN (Maoist) emerged as the largest party with 209 seats in the CA and Pushpa Kamal Dahal-Prachanda became the second Communist Prime Minister of the country signalled people's frustration with the old guard and their trust in the new political party which had been crucial in overthrowing the 240-year-old monarchy and placed the country in the hands of its people. However, after the promulgation of the new Constitution, Dahal's party, which had been renamed CPN (Maoist Centre) after a series of mergers and splits, merged with CPN (UML) after the 2017 elections. This unity would not last long due to internal power struggles and the two parties would part ways in 2021. A series of such alliances meant that Nepal saw eight different governments between 2015 and 2025 but the office of Prime Minister rotated among only three leaders—K. P. Sharma Oli of CPN (UML), Sher Bahadur Deuba of Nepali Congress and Pushpa Kamal Dahal of CPN (Maoist Centre).

With the establishment of the republic, many in Nepal hoped that the long period of political instability—marked by royal coups, street protests, popular movements, civil war, repeated regime changes, and multiple constitutional experiments—had finally come to an end. The abolition of the monarchy and the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution were widely seen as the beginning of a peaceful phase of governance focused on development and prosperity. However, these expectations were soon shattered. Persistent struggles among the three major political parties to acquire and retain state power meant that the larger tasks of governance and development were sidelined. As a result, many of the promises made during the constitutional moment remained unfulfilled, and Nepal continued to experience a familiar cycle of fragile governments, frequent collapses, and shifting power alliances, suggesting more continuity than rupture in the country's political trajectory.

Youth categorised as Gen Z—born between 1997 and 2012—did not participate in the earlier movements but grew up in the aftermath of the Maoist insurgency and the fall of the monarchy. They hold faint memory of the first Constituent Assembly election in 2008 and the second in 2013. As [Alexander \(2004\)](#) suggests, collective traumas do not simply arise from events but are socially mediated. Although the youth belonging to generation Z did not live through these transformations, they did experience the failures of these movements. Many young Nepalis also come from families with members working or studying abroad. Their parents or other family members who did actually live through historical political events act as carriers of this trauma and project it onto the younger generation ([Alexander, 2004](#)). For many young Nepalis, the perceived failure of earlier democratic movements is not encountered as historical knowledge but as lived reality—manifest in unemployment, migration pressures, and distrust toward political parties. These everyday experiences translate the outcomes of past political struggles into present forms of dissatisfaction. Growing up in the shadow of historic political transformations, the gap between democratic promises and everyday political realities for the younger generation contributed to growing scepticism toward established political institutions. In such context, traditional political parties may be viewed by the younger generation not as vehicles of social change but as organisations controlled by aging elites.

4. A Never-ending Cycle of Disappointments

The political instability found its principal victim among the working population of the country aged between 15 and 64, who make up 65.2 percent of the total population². The Rana rulers had kept Nepal isolated from the rest of the world and limited the education and economic growth of the country. They believed that over-exposure of citizens to education and economic independence would make the population politically conscious, driving them to demand political rights and socio-economic development ([Ghimire, 2024, p. 13](#)). This meant that Nepalis had to migrate for education and jobs. Most of the first generation of political leaders were educated in India. Lack of industrial development meant that a large percentage of the population depended on agriculture, but not everybody owned land and non-agricultural employment opportunities were extremely limited. This made India, which allowed unrestricted movement for Nepali citizens through its open borders, an attractive destination for migrant workers as well as students. British rulers in India also started to recruit Nepalis into the army for the Gurkha regiments sometime in the 19th century, which began to attract large numbers of Nepalis. Nepalis were aggressively recruited during the two World Wars in the early twentieth century as well ([Subedi, 1991, pp. 85–86](#)). Some industries such as match factories and jute mills were set up after 1930 but they were not enough to solve the unemployment crisis ([Pokhrel, 2024, p. 45](#)). In fact, the emigration of labour from Nepal increased steadily and between 1942 and 1981, the rate of emigration almost doubled from 1.40 to 2.61 percent ([J. Adhikari et al., 2023](#)). With neoliberalisation after 1990, the Nepali government lifted restrictions on travelling to other

²https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/results/files/result-folder/Final_Population_compostion_12_2.pdf.

countries and also started granting licences to recruitment agencies for hiring workers for foreign-based companies. This opened up opportunities for skilled and low-cost Nepali labour in newly industrialising countries such as Malaysia and the Gulf countries. Between 2007/08 and 2018/19 alone, around 4 million Nepalis went abroad for work (J. Adhikari et al., 2023, p. 70). From 1993/94 to 2013/14 the number of approvals for the foreign employment issued by the government jumped from a mere 3,605 to 527,814.

With a large number of Nepalis, especially from rural Nepal, migrating for work, Nepal has come to depend heavily on remittances. As a matter of fact, remittance constitutes 22.7 percent of total GDP of the country (Pant, 2024). Between 2010/11 and 2022/23, the total remittance received in the country jumped from NPR 259,088.5 million to NPR 1,042,507.9 million. While 55.8 percent of households received remittance in 2010/11 the figure has jumped to a staggering 76.8 percent in 2022/23³. Remittance also makes up nearly a quarter of the country's GDP, and while increasing remittance has helped poor households raise their living standards, it also makes the economy of the country dependent on external factors. Disturbances in host regions such as the Middle East or South Korea can have a profound impact on the economy of Nepal. Overdependence on remittance income among rural households has made young people shy away from agriculture and move abroad, resulting in a shortage of labour in the country and a decrease in local food production, further increasing dependence on imports (A. Adhikari, 2024; Bhandari, 2025, p. 3).

The precarious working condition with no guarantee of labour rights or work security has resulted in the deaths of a number of migrant workers over the years. The arrival of migrant workers' coffins at Tribhuvan International Airport is no longer a rare sight. In the year 2023/24 alone 1,300 Nepali workers died abroad; 192 of these died of suicide. On average, four Nepali workers are said to die abroad every day (The Annapurna Express, 2024). From 2010 when Qatar won the rights to host the Football World Cup till 2022, at least 2,100 Nepali workers had died in Qatar, more than any other countries (Panja & Sharma, 2022).

While the younger generation grew up witnessing the hardship of earlier generation and hoping for a better future for themselves, things had barely changed when they came of age. Increasing unemployment, slow economic development and compulsion to migrate abroad to work in precarious conditions had left the youth of the country desperate for change. A series of revolutions and regime changes had failed to bring about any tangible change in the lives of the citizens. When the new Constitution was promulgated in 2015, they hoped that the political leaders who had been in a long battle to wrest power away from the monarchy would finally work towards better living conditions within the country. In fact, the success of the Maoist movement in overthrowing the monarchy had helped raise the political consciousness of the entire population. The ethnic movements in Nepal that had started to take shape in the 1990s grew more aggressive and violent after 2006. Confined to demanding multi-party democracy with limited role of monarchy in the 1990s, these groups started demanding more rights, equal representation and complete states (Lawoti & Hangen, 2013, pp. 5–6). The peaceful protest with limited violence of 1990s turned into armed conflicts after 2006 and ethnic groups like the Madhesi started to wield considerable influence in political decision making during the drafting of the constitution. The new constitution, therefore, born out of larger political participation, which declared Nepal a secular state and structured it into seven provinces, was considered the most participatory and progressive so far. However, it still failed to address the demands of several ethnic minority groups as well as women (Shakya, 2025; M. Thapa, 2015). The hope that these demands could be addressed through future amendments sustained people.

But one after another, several frauds and scams exposed deep-rooted corruption in Nepal involving the politicians of all three major political parties, bureaucrats, financiers and other social elites. In 2023, officials of the Home Ministry, top government officials, and ministers were charged with defrauding 115 Nepali citizens of at least NPR 288.17 million on the promise to send them to the US by passing them off as Bhutanese refugees. Former Home Minister Bal Krishna Khand from Nepali Congress and former Deputy Prime Minister Top Bahadur Rayamajhi belonging to CPN (UML) were also among those arrested for their involvement in the scam (Shrestha, 2023). While this scam exposed the depth of corruption in Nepal it also illustrated the desperation of the people who were willing to pay millions of rupees to leave the country. In another case, the Commission for the Investigation of the Abuse of Authority (CIAA) revealed a widespread network operating a 'visit visa scam' with the help of officials at the immigration office at Tribhuvan International Airport. The controversy also led to allegations against then Home Minister Ramesh Lekhak of Nepali Congress, who denied wrongdoing (Giri, 2025). Most recently, a large number of people took to the streets in protest against what came to be known as the cooperative fraud, when a number of cooperatives were unable to return depositors' money and were declared crisis-ridden. The controversy also extended to newer political actors. Rabi Lamichhane, chair of the relatively

³https://giwmscdnone.gov.np/media/app/public/36/posts/1719375782_27.pdf.

new Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), had been accused of taking illicit loans from cooperatives while serving as managing director of Galaxy Television. Politicians and families of political leaders belonging to several political parties were found not to have repaid their loans to cooperatives that were declared crisis-ridden (Thakuri, 2024). These are just a few examples. There have been numerous other scandals like the 33-kg gold smuggling case, the NPR 14 billion embezzlement in Pokhara airport construction, the NPR 3.2 billion procurement of the Telecommunications Traffic Monitoring and Fraud Control System (Teramocs), the public land grabbing scam, bribery and extortion cases and many more implicating political leaders from various parties (The Kathmandu Post, 2025; Mulmi, 2025).

Although students and youth have always been a crucial part of political transformations throughout Nepal's history, they have been kept out of political decision making processes. As Amanda Snellinger (2009, p. 39) explains, 'youth' in Nepal, especially in Nepali politics, is not an age category but a state of deferment. The top leadership in all political parties, who are well into their seventies, are unwilling to let go of their positions, which makes the 'younger generation' of leaders those in their fifties and sixties. In fact, people above forty are often referred to as student leaders. The older generation leaders are oblivious to the aspirations and needs of youth and incapable of connecting with them at the ideological levels creating a general apathy towards not only towards political parties but towards politics as a whole among the younger generation.

A glimpse of frustration with older traditional parties and the need for change among the citizens was felt in 2012 when a young entrepreneur, activist and social worker Ujwal Thapa founded Bibeksheel Nepali, a party consisting mostly of young leaders with no prior political affiliations, and fielded four independent candidates in the 2013 Constituent Assembly elections. Party was officially registered in 2013 and contested the mayoral election in Kathmandu but could not win. Later in 2022, three independent candidates, Balen Shah, Harka Bahadur Sampang and Gopal Hamal won the mayoral elections in Kathmandu, Dharan and Dhangadhi respectively, which could be interpreted as an indication of voters' disillusionment with the existing political parties. Inspired by the result, a new party mostly comprising leaders from non-political backgrounds, Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), was founded in the same year. RSP contested the 2022 General elections of Nepal but could secure only 13 seats and the power at the centre once again became a game of musical chairs among the three traditional parties. Although the elections could be taken as a sign of need for change by the people, the electoral process had, once again, failed to bring any substantial transformation.

When party- or identity-group-led movements had failed to bring any substantial change and the electoral process kept the people imprisoned within the same political stagnation, they turned to one space that offered them a perceived freedom to vent their frustration. Within this context, digitally networked protest movements provided alternative channels for political participation that bypassed formal party structures. And when even this avenue was denied to them, they moved to the streets.

5. And the Levee Breaks

Until then, the protests and movements had been led by one political party or identity group, backed by different student organisations, aimed at toppling the government and taking over power, and engaged in strikes, speeches, gheraos and sustained negotiations with the authority. These groups had identifiable leaders who presented the demands, negotiated with the government, were responsible for the decision making in the movements and also had to bear the consequences of their decisions. None of this was visible on 8 September when a large crowd gathered around Maitighar Mandala and moved towards the Parliament House. There was no identifiable leader or organisation driving the protest, nor any clearly laid out agenda. The goal was not merely to topple the government but to question and attack the entire establishment. The entire system of governance and domination was put on trial.

The protesters called themselves Gen Z and also adopted the Straw Hat Pirates' Jolly Roger flag from the Japanese manga One Piece. The flag in the manga represents the Straw Hat Pirates, the protagonists of the series who fight for the liberation of the oppressed. The flag had already become a sign of protest after the protesters in Indonesia who also referred to themselves as Gen Z used the flag in their protest just before the protests broke out in Kathmandu. This was the third youth-led protest in South Asia, after Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, both of which also led to the toppling of their respective governments, albeit the immediate triggers and modes of mobilisation of these protests were different. The movement in Nepal predominantly took shape on social media.

Days before the protest, the Nepali digital sphere was filled with posts targeting kids of Nepali political and social elites. Tagged with the hashtags #nepokids and #nepobabies these posts showed kids of politicians and businesspeople posing with expensive branded gifts or holidaying in exotic foreign locations while some juxtaposed these images with images

of ordinary Nepalis living in poor conditions, migrating abroad, and protesting in streets (Baskar, 2025; Kshetri, 2025). Another video highlighted expensive branded clothes and accessories worn by politicians. In a country where more than 20 percent of population lives below poverty line (World Bank, 2025), 22.7 percent of youth between 15-24 are unemployed, (Bhandari, 2025), and the absolute increase in per capita income of the richest 20 percent between 1995/96 and 2022/23 was more than four times that of the poorest 20 percent³, the vulgar display of wealth by the children of the elites not only felt like a betrayal but also rubbed salt into the wounds of an already frustrated younger generation. Soon the social media sites like TikTok and Reddit were filled with posts criticising these kids' ostentatious display of wealth and luxury. Social media thus became a space for collective grievance sharing and connecting for the youth. It is when people communicate and share their grievances that an individual concern becomes a problem of the collective.

The movement's heavy reliance on technology and the short span within which it took place make the protest in Nepal difficult to explain through classical social movement theories that emphasise sustained and organised campaigns, social movement organisations, and a collective claim (Tilly, 2010, pp. 3–8). More contemporary theorists of social movement in the technology age describe movements that employ digital technology as networked protest or movements (Castells, 2015; Tufekci, 2017) wherein what Tilly (2010) calls the "claim-making performances" mostly move to the digital medium. Social media platforms allow young citizens to express political grievances, mobilise collective action, and challenge dominant political narratives without relying on traditional institutions. Research on digital activism suggests that such platforms facilitate new forms of collective action through personalised forms of engagement rather than through membership in formal organisations (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Political messages circulate through online networks where participants share content, mobilise supporters, and coordinate protest activities, enabling individuals to act together through networked communication systems (Castells, 2015). Digitally mediated protest movements frequently exhibit organisational structures that differ significantly from earlier forms of collective mobilisation. Rather than relying on centralised leadership or formal membership structures, many contemporary protests operate through new forms of "networked power" or loosely connected networks of participants (Castells, 2015). Scholars describe this form of mobilisation as connective action, in which individuals participate through personalised forms of digital engagement rather than through traditional organisational identities (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

Modern theorists claim that contemporary movements differ from protests that occurred before digital technologies because they see technology in these movements not as a mere tool but as an agent with capabilities that inspire new imaginations and novel practices in the movements (Tufekci, 2017). In Nepal, TikTok has become an important space for political commentary and public discussion, particularly among younger users. Short video content often combines humour, satire, and criticism of political elites, creating a style of political communication that differs significantly from traditional media discourse. TikTok has rapidly become one of the most widely used social media applications among younger audiences worldwide. Most TikTok users are aged 16–24, the age group to which most of Generation Z belongs (Balcioğlu & Artar Biyiklar, 2025; Tang & Zhang, 2024). Its algorithm-driven content distribution system allows videos to reach large audiences even when posted by users with relatively small follower networks (Zulli & Zulli, 2022)

It is on digital platforms that the call for protest on September 8 was given. Journalists have traced it to the organisation called Hami Nepal, an NGO chaired by Sudan Gurung, which issued a call for protest on its Instagram page (Firstpost, 2025). However, the call for protest spread on various platforms like Reddit and TikTok through anonymous handles and thus without a clear leader or organiser. The use of social media helped the protesters reach wider public and create a larger network. Tufekci (2017) calls it the power of weaker ties on social media. People form strong ties with a limited number of people with whom they interact with every day and or who play important part in their lives. People often remain connected to their strong ties no matter where they are and what technology is available. People often have weaker ties with distant friends, acquaintances and colleagues. People do not regularly keep in touch with these contacts unless there is technology like social media. Because strong ties tend to share one's political views, content gains new reach only when it passes to weak ties; when political comments and criticism are shared on social media, they reach weak ties, who can then forward them to their own weak ties, creating a larger mass of previously unconnected people.

The #nepokids and #nepobaby trend on social media did exactly this. A disparate group of people across the country as well as abroad all had grievances against the ruling elites of the country, but social media allowed them to communicate this to their weaker ties, who then forwarded it to their own circles, creating an online movement of sorts. An individual's private feeling of anger and frustration was transformed into a collective emotion by aligning those feelings with an external object. An individual subject becomes a part of collective by assigning their feelings to a common 'other', an external enemy, thus creating a dichotomy of us and them (Ahmed, 2010). Nepali youth had anger and frustration building up within them due to decades of political instability, corruption, structural inequality and lack of opportunity. But there was no single political party, organisation or individual who could be held responsible for their predicament. The entire

social and political class was the problem and hence the anger was against the system, an abstract entity. The nepobaby trend gave a physical form to their enemy, a face, an identifiable group of people towards whom now they could direct their anger. Then, on 5 September, the K. P. Oli government banned social media.

In November of 2023, the Prachanda government came up with directives on the operation of the social media sites in Nepal that required social networking platforms to register ([The Kathmandu Post, 2023](#)). Although the directive gave three months for the social networks already operating in the country to register, within a few days before the deadline TikTok was banned for “disrupting social harmony and impacting family structures and social relations” ([Al Jazeera, 2024](#); [Pokharel & Sharma, 2023](#)). The ban was lifted after nine months by K. P. Oli government when TikTok agreed to register its office in Nepal, appoint a liaison officer and adhere to other conditions set by the government ([Giri, 2024](#)). Citing the same directive, however, the Oli government issued a notice to the social networking sites to register. After several deadlines were ignored, the government on August 8, 2025 set a seven-day deadline and finally banned all except seven social networking sites on September 5, 2025 ([Satgainya, 2025](#)). Although the government cited the need for these platforms to register and appoint a liaison officer in order to better regulate social media usage, curtail illicit activities and curb hate speech, the timing of the ban, which came right when the #nepokids trend was going on in the online public sphere, has led experts to call it an attempt to silence dissent and control all online activities ([Satgainya, 2025](#)).

Social conflict, according to [Touraine \(1981\)](#), is a struggle of social forces for the control of historicity and the action of society. By historicity Touraine refers to the “pattern of knowledge, type of investment and cultural model”. The ruling class wants to retain control over the pattern of knowledge and cultural model to keep the system functioning in a way that allows them to exercise control. With social media the ordinary citizens were taking control of communication and culture into their own hands and creating what [Castells \(2015\)](#) calls networks of counter-power. Those in power exercise control by shaping meaning in people’s minds, since violence has its limits. These meanings can be challenged by those acting against the ruling class by creating a counter-narrative or a different meaning. Social media allowed people of Nepal to create this meaning through messaging and frames that were free from state control. Going beyond the interpersonal space of communication, social media allowed these protesters to engage in a wider socialised form of communication to create a collective meaning that goes beyond any individual meaning a person makes within their own personal world.

The series of decisions and actions that the government took to regulate the social media must be seen within this context. With social media, the state loses control over the spaces of communication and hence the means to manipulate the meaning in the minds of its citizens. Allowing the general public to take control of the political discourse takes away the power of the state to set the agenda. Therefore, bringing in the social media directive, banning social media and pushing for the registration of social media in Nepal cannot be seen simply as an attempt to regulate social media against illicit and offensive contents. In fact, it may be read as an attempt by the government to take control of the cultural meaning-making device to keep exercising power over public opinion.

But banning the social media at such a critical juncture backfired. It pushed the protesters from the safety of the internet to the streets. It also generated more public support for the protesters as the ban on 26 social media platforms affected not just the protesters but the general public as well. With internet penetration at 55.8 percent, Nepal had 16.5 million internet users at the beginning of 2025, while 14.3 million social media user identities made up 48.1 percent of the total population⁴. People rely on internet and social media to connect with their friends and families abroad. Small business owners rely heavily on social media to promote their products through pages on Instagram and Facebook. The social media ban not only cut people off from their loved ones but also affected their livelihoods. But in a digitally connected world, completely blocking communication is not possible. Soon enough people started using Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to bypass the blockade and intensify the protest online. It was in this period that the call to take the movement to the streets was given, leading some reports to call it a protest against the social media ban ([Ellis-Petersen, 2025](#); [Muzaffar & Croft, 2025](#); [PTI, 2025](#)). But as we have seen, the tension had been brewing for quite a while among the agitated youths and social media ban was just a trigger. Excluded from the political circle for decades, these youths had used social media as one place to vent their anger and also to find a community where previously inarticulate experiences could be expressed, mutually understood, empathised with and affirmed. The shutting down of the social media platforms felt like a final assault—closing off what was perceived as the last democratic and free space, forcibly silencing voices.

And so, on 8th of September a large number of people gathered on the streets of Kathmandu at Maitighar Mandala and started moving towards the Parliament House. As the protesters neared the Parliament building, and tried to break

⁴<https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-nepal>.

through the security barriers a clash ensued with the police. Police and security officials responded with tear gas, batons, and water cannons. Rubber bullets and live rounds were also fired and a total of 19 people died and more than 200 were injured on the very first day of the protest (Ellis-Petersen, 2025). A curfew was imposed in Kathmandu following the clash. But the government's insensitive handling of the situation and the brutal, indiscriminate firing at the protesters angered people all across the country as well as abroad. The demonstrations turned much more violent and bloody the next day and spread across the country. Vengeful crowds torched government buildings, looted police stations and vandalised the homes of politicians and businesspeople; a five-star hotel and a supermarket chain in multiple cities were burned down, and the death toll reached more than 70 (Mulmi, 2025). Many politicians and ministers, including Prime Minister Oli, had to flee and take shelter in army camps. The broad demand of ending corruption became more concrete with the demand for mass resignation of the government ministers. It was no longer an organised, peaceful protest but a violent crowd out for revenge, torching and destroying symbols of power and wealth.

6. The Leaders of the Leaderless Movement

Social media allowed the youths of the country to form a horizontal, egalitarian association and the movement, therefore, unlike all previous movements, was not hierarchically led by a single organisation or leader. Having relinquished control to party leaders each time, letting them take over the movements and the task of nation-building, and having been disappointed, the youths decided this time to take matters into their own hands. The structureless, leaderless movement did achieve the repeal of the social media ban and fall of the government, but once the authorities responded brutally and people were killed, there was no face of the movement to take decisions and direct people towards more sensible steps. In networked protest, the unstructured nature of the movement is more like "adhocracy" wherein actions are taken in an ad hoc manner by whoever shows up (Tufekci, 2017, p. 53). The adhocracy worked when there was a call to gather for protest. People showed up on their own and protested with whatever means they knew. But once the protest moved onto the streets, the unstructured nature of the movement created more problems than it solved, as communication among the dispersed crowd in the absence of centralised leadership became extremely difficult and people had less control over the direction the movement would take (Freeman, 2013, pp. 240, 243).

But as Freeman (2013) suggests, there is no such thing as a structureless group. Any number of people who gather together form some kind of structure. The only difference is that an explicit structure with well-defined leadership and communication channel facilitates information flow and assigns clearly defined tasks and responsibilities to people while an implicit structure means there are leaders or 'elites' driving the protests without the larger mass of people realising it. Chudamani Basnet (2022), in his work on Nepal's People's Movement II, has demonstrated that although the civil society actors involved in the movement under the name Citizens' Movement for Democracy and Peace (CMDP) claimed that they had no formal organisation or leadership, a hierarchy within the group emerged during the movement. Basnet (2022) further explains that those who took the leadership roles in the movement came from positions of considerable cultural, social and symbolic capital. These studies (Basnet, 2022; Freeman, 2013) further bolster the claim that a movement that might start as structureless slowly moves towards a more structured form, one way or the other. The speed with which violence spread across multiple cities, targeted properties were identified and buildings were set on fire may indicate that more organised groups were operating within the broader mobilisation. However, the available evidence does not establish whether such actors were protesters, infiltrators or other organised networks. In the absence of an explicit leadership structure, participants who opposed the violence had no clear platform through which to coordinate or address the wider crowd (Mulmi, 2025).

So, when the movement enters a new phase where adhocracy does not work and the lack of an explicitly defined structure becomes a problem rather than a solution, the movement begins to falter (Freeman, 2013, p. 233). The lack of explicit decision making structure, mechanism for collective action and absence of a visible organisation when the initial phase of expressive demonstration had ended led to a 'tactical freeze' wherein the movement does not know the future path to take (Tufekci, 2017, p. 77). The absence of an organisation meant that the protesters had no ideology, no organisational values or vision for the future, and the protesting youths therefore did not have a clear blueprint for after the government had been brought down. The motivation behind the movement had been the anger and frustration against the current system of corrupt leaders and their cronies. The only purpose for which they had gathered in the streets was to bring the system down, but they had no idea what to replace it with. And therefore, when the time to negotiate, effect policy change or design a system of governance that would address their demand came, it could not be done in the offline world where the participants did not identify a clear leader.

So they went back to social media, which offered a seemingly egalitarian, horizontal space allowing thousands of protesters and other citizens to participate from all across the country as well as abroad. When the negotiations started with the

President and the protesters were asked to name a leader whom they wanted to see take the reins of the country and steer it out of this chaos back to stable governance, they turned to Discord, a free instant messaging service designed initially for gamers but now popular outside the gaming community as well. More than 10,000 members joined the discussion and 6,000 watched the live stream on YouTube (Kharel, 2025). After hours of discussion and debate, the group chose Sushila Karki as their candidate for the interim Prime Minister.

As Herbert Blumer (1995) has explained, social movements, in their initial stage, are amorphous and poorly organised but with time they develop a form and organisation, a set of principles and recognizable leaders. In the aftermath of the movement, many leaders have emerged. One of them is the organisation Hami Nepal and its leader Sudan Gurung, who were also the ones who organised the online discussion on Discord and have been seen involved in discussion and negotiations with the government on a regular basis. But within a few days of the movement, multiple groups adopting the name Gen Z emerged, calling themselves Gen Z Front, Gen Z Movement Alliance, The Council of Gen Z etc. (Kaphle, 2025). As the movement moved into the phase of negotiations and policy decision making it required an ideology and a vision for the future which in turn required organisations and leaders with clear political thought and understanding about political processes and system. But in the absence of an organisation with a strong ideological base multiple leaders with differing views and interests emerged after the movement, resulting in ideological clashes.

7. Conclusion

The analysis presented in the article suggests that the recent Gen Z movement in Nepal cannot be understood solely through contemporary socio-economic grievances or the prevalence of social media platforms. Instead, the movement reflects the coming together of historical political disillusionment and the emergence of new digital communication platforms to shape the political imagination of the younger generation.

An important argument that the article puts forward is that the movement emerged within a broader context of generational political disillusionment. Nepal's modern political history has been shaped by repeated mass revolutions that promised fundamental political, economic and social transformation. However, the perceived failure of these movements gradually eroded public trust in political institutions (Hachhethu, 2002; Jha, 2014). This perception contributed to the reluctance among young protesters to engage with any party during the protest. The case therefore adds a historical dimension to the literature on networked protest. While Castells (2009, 2015) and Bennett and Segerberg (2012) explain how digital communication enables decentralised forms of mobilisation outside conventional organisational structures, the Nepal case suggests that the preference for such forms of mobilisation may also be shaped by historically produced attitudes towards formal political organisations. Digital platforms alone did not produce the rejection of party organisation; they provided an alternative means of collective action at a moment when political parties had already lost legitimacy among a section of the younger generation.

In this context, digitally mediated political activism offered an alternative way of political participation. Social media platforms allowed youth to translate individual frustrations into collective grievances through memes, videos and images shared on these platforms. This allowed the protesters to mobilise collective actions and construct a shared narrative without relying on traditional organisational structures. The organisational form of the movement can therefore be understood as emerging from the interaction between the affordances of digitally networked communication and a historically developed distrust of established political organisations.

Although the article highlights the growing use of digital communication technologies in shaping contemporary political conflicts, it also explores the limitations of digitally driven leaderless movements. Once the movement moved from digital platforms to the streets, and later from protest to negotiation and political decision-making, the absence of a central organisation and clearly defined leadership complicated coordination among participants. As Freeman (2013) and Tufekci (2017) suggest, the organisational features that enable rapid and decentralised mobilisation may become limitations when movements have to make collective decisions, negotiate with political institutions or formulate longer-term programmes. The Nepal case therefore also demonstrates the tension between the effectiveness of networked movements during the phase of mobilisation and their capacity to sustain collective action once the immediate objective of protest has been achieved.

The Nepal case can be situated alongside the recent youth-led movements in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. All three movements reflected widespread dissatisfaction with established political elites and made significant use of digitally mediated communication, yet the sources and organisational expression of this dissatisfaction differed. Sri Lanka's Aragalaya in

2022 emerged amid a severe economic crisis and developed into a broad and decentralised movement against the Rajapaksa government, while the 2024 movement in Bangladesh began with student opposition to the government employment quota system before expanding into a wider challenge to the Sheikh Hasina government (Imtiyaz, 2026). The Nepali case differed in that the immediate grievances were embedded within a longer history of repeated political transformations and growing distrust not merely of a particular government but of established political parties more generally. The comparison therefore suggests that digitally networked and decentralised mobilisation may emerge from different political trajectories. What connects these cases is not simply their identification as 'Gen Z' movements or their use of social media, but the capacity of digital networks to provide alternative channels for collective action when existing political institutions are perceived as incapable of adequately representing popular grievances. At the same time, one must be cautious not to treat these movements as instances of a single, uniform South Asian model of Gen Z protest given differences in leadership, organisation and relations with formal political actors.

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