

Leadership Failures and Youth Uprisings in South Asia:

A Comparative Study of Sri Lanka, Nepal, and
Bangladesh



A BALPP Research Monograph

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Abstract

South Asia's demographic landscape is characterized by a rapidly expanding youth population, often framed as a potential demographic dividend capable of driving economic growth and democratic renewal. However, in several countries, rapidly expanding youth populations have increasingly been associated with political uprisings rather than socioeconomic transformation. This research examines the paradox of youth abundance amid persistent political instability in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh, arguing that leadership failures which are distinct from, but interacting with, economic hardship and demographic pressures are central to explaining youth uprisings. The study distinguishes between leadership failure, reflected in the actions of political elites such as corruption, exclusion, and lack of accountability, and governance failure, which refers to systemic weaknesses in institutions, policy implementation, and state responsiveness. While structural pressures create underlying vulnerabilities, these failures shape how such pressures are experienced, often intensifying youth grievances and mobilization. Drawing on comparative qualitative analysis, the study shows how weak governance erodes public trust and deepens marginalization, while also highlighting the rise of digital activism and creative resistance among youth. It concludes that without inclusive leadership and institutional reform, these states risk undermining their demographic potential and reinforcing cycles of instability. Furthermore, the study provides policy recommendations to promote inclusive governance, strengthen institutional accountability, implement education and skills reforms, ensure meaningful youth participation, and mobilize support from regional and international partners to transform demographic pressures into sustainable political, economic, and social stability.

Key Words: youth uprisings, leadership failure, governance, South Asia, political instability, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh

Introduction

South Asia [1], home to nearly one-quarter of the global population, has undergone a profound demographic transformation over recent decades. Declining mortality rates and improved child survival, coupled with relatively high fertility, have produced a significant “youth bulge.”[2] At its peak, the region counted approximately 385 million individuals aged 12–24, marking the largest demographic shift in its history (UNFPA, 2023). Development economists and political theorists have long emphasized the transformative potential of such demographic structures, suggesting that youthful populations can generate economic dynamism, technological innovation, and democratic renewal when supported by effective governance and inclusive institutions (Bloom et al., 2003; World Bank, 2024).

[1] South Asia is a densely populated subregion comprising of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Home to over 2 billion people, the region is bordered by the Indian Ocean, Himalayas, and Arabian Sea.

[2] The youth bulge refers to a demographic phenomenon where a significant proportion of a population consists of young people, typically defined as those aged 15 to 29.

While a young workforce can energize labor-intensive industries and drive entrepreneurship, the promise of this dividend remains largely unrealized in the South Asian region. Persistent socioeconomic challenges such as high unemployment, poverty, resource constraints, and gender inequality have transformed this youth bulge into a source of instability rather than prosperity. The International Labour Organization (ILO) reports that South Asia's youth unemployment rate (15-24 ages) stands at approximately 15%, the highest in the Asia-Pacific region. Moreover, the region exhibits the world's largest gender gap in NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) status, with 31% of young women excluded from productive engagement (ILO, 2024).

These structural vulnerabilities have fueled frustration among the South Asian youth, who increasingly perceive governance and economic systems as unresponsive and riddled with corruption. Consequently, youth uprisings have emerged as a defining feature of South Asia's political landscape, manifesting in mass protests, islandwide strikes, digital activism, and demands for systemic change. The recent three major youth uprisings in the region underscore this trend:

- **Sri Lanka's "Aragalaya" Movement (2022)**- triggered by economic mismanagement, shortages of essential resources and political corruption .
- **Bangladesh's Quota Reform Protests (2024)**- sparked by perceived injustice in public-sector recruitment, political repression and democratic backsliding.
- **Nepal's Gen-Z Uprising (2025)**- catalyzed by digital restrictions, and widespread corruption.

While each case reflects distinct triggers, the underlying drivers converge around youth unemployment, governance failures, and generational inequities.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to examine the relationship between leadership failures and youth uprisings in selected South Asian countries through a comparative qualitative analysis of Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. **Identify** the key socio-economic and governance-related factors contributing to youth uprisings in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh.
2. **Analyze** how leadership failures such as corruption, weak institutional accountability, and exclusionary governance shape youth grievances and political mobilization in each national context.
3. **Compare** the forms, strategies, and dynamics of youth mobilization across the three countries to identify common patterns and country-specific variations.

4. **Assess** the extent to which governance deficits and leadership practices influence the escalation and sustainability of youth-led protests.
5. **Develop** policy-relevant insights and recommendations aimed at addressing leadership gaps, enhancing youth inclusion, and mitigating future civic unrest in the South Asian region.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to the existing literature on youth politics and governance in South Asia by moving beyond demographic and economic explanations of youth uprisings to foreground the critical role of leadership failures and governance deficits. By adopting a comparative approach, the study highlights both shared structural challenges and country-specific political dynamics, thereby enriching scholarly understanding of youth mobilization in diverse political contexts.

Second, the research offers practical relevance for policymakers, political leaders, academics and civil society activists by identifying governance gaps that erode youth trust in political institutions. The findings provide evidence-based insights that can inform leadership reform, youth-inclusive policymaking, and institutional accountability mechanisms across South Asia.

Third, the study emphasizes the importance of ethical leadership, participatory governance, and intergenerational equity in societies experiencing demographic transitions. At a time when youth constitute a substantial proportion of the population in South Asia, understanding the consequences of leadership failures and governance weaknesses is essential for transforming youth discontent into constructive civic engagement rather than political instability.

Finally, by focusing on recent youth uprisings and movements in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh (2022-2025), this study offers timely insights into evolving patterns of political participation and protests in the region. It thereby serves as a foundation for future empirical research and contributes to ongoing debates on democratic resilience, governance reforms, policy planning and implementation and sustainable development in South Asia.

Problem Statement

Despite the potential for a demographic dividend, South Asia faces a challenging situation in which a growing youth population has increasingly become associated with political uprisings. In Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh, young people experience structural economic marginalization, high unemployment, and limited access to quality employment. These socioeconomic challenges are compounded by restricted opportunities for political participation and systemic exclusion from decision-making processes.

Leadership failures characterized by corruption, weak governance institutions, and deficits in accountability have further undermined public trust in state institutions. Political elites in the three countries have often prioritized short-term political survival over inclusive development, leading to elite capture of state resources and persistent governance failures. As a result, youth perceive political institutions as unresponsive, inefficient, and disconnected from their aspirations.

Although youth uprisings are evident in recent political developments in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh, there is limited comparative research exploring how leadership and governance failures influence youth grievances and mobilization across these contexts. Existing studies often focus on economic factors or demographic pressures in isolation, overlooking the central role of governance and leadership. This study addresses this gap by systematically analyzing the relationship between leadership failures and youth uprisings and by identifying governance gaps that perpetuate socioeconomic and political instability in South Asia.

Research Questions

This paper aims to address the following three(03) research questions:

1. What are the primary socio-economic and governance-related drivers of youth uprisings in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal?
2. How do the patterns and dynamics of youth mobilization differ across these three countries?
3. How do leadership failures contribute to youth grievances and the escalation of youth uprisings in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal?

Literature Review

Youth Bulge and Political Instability

The relationship between youth demographics and political instability has been widely debated in social sciences. A large youthful population can be considered as a great asset as it has the potential to contribute to economic growth and social development of a state(Bloom et al; 2003). Research suggests that countries with effective education systems, labor market integration, and inclusive governance can harness youth potential to stimulate productivity and technological progress (Canning & Schultz, 2012).

However, scholars such as Henrik Urdal warn that unmanaged youth bulges often correlate with violent conflict and instability (Urdal, 2006). Large youth cohorts often intensify competition for limited resources, education, employment, and political influence, contributing to social instability.

The youth bulge theory posits that a disproportionately large cohort of young people relative to the general population can increase the risk of political instability, especially when economic opportunities and political inclusion are limited. When a large, educated, or unemployed youth population faces poor economic prospects and slow political reform, they are more likely to participate in civil unrest, revolutions, or riots, as seen in the Arab Spring (Muldering, 2013).

Research across countries shows that youth bulges correlate with higher levels of political instability and political uprisings particularly when large numbers of young people experience unemployment and disillusionment with existing political structures. Studies on Latin America, particularly focusing on Brazil, Venezuela, and Central America, find that youth bulges, when combined with high levels of socio-economic inequality, are strongly associated with increased gang violence, heightened political instability, and declining public trust in democratic institutions (UN-Habitat, 2008).

Scholars argue that structural constraints such as weak labor markets, low-quality education systems, and limited vocational training often hinder young people's ability to contribute meaningfully to socio economic development and political stability (Singh, 2025; Farzanegan & Gholipour, 2021) . In South Asia, despite steady GDP growth in countries such as Bangladesh, this expansion has not generated sufficient quality employment for youth, thereby constraining the realization of the demographic dividend (World Bank, 2024). Comparable challenges are evident in other South Asian states such as Sri Lanka and Nepal, where institutional weaknesses and ineffective policy frameworks continue to limit the productive integration of young populations into decision making processes.

Socioeconomic Marginalization and Youth Uprisings

A recurring theme in the literature is the economic marginalization of youth in South Asia. High unemployment rates, informal sector dependence, and skills mismatch are consistently reported across Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh (ILO, 2021). For example, the ILO (2021) notes that while Bangladesh has a large youth labor force, nearly 70% of young workers are employed in informal or low-paying jobs, limiting their economic mobility and security. In Nepal, World Bank (2020) studies highlight the urban-rural divide in employment opportunities, which exacerbates regional inequalities and frustrates young people seeking stable livelihoods.

Socioeconomic marginalization has profound implications for political engagement. Scholars such as Hickey and Mohan (2004) argue that economic exclusion diminishes trust in state institutions and fosters political alienation. In Sri Lanka, research shows that youth unemployment during the post-war reconstruction period contributed to social frustration, particularly among urban and semi-urban populations (Jayasuriya, 2019).

These findings suggest that economic grievances are closely intertwined with perceptions of state inefficiency and governance deficits, which can fuel social instability and trigger uprisings when coupled with political exclusion when coupled with political exclusion.

Leadership Failures and Governance Deficits

Leadership quality and governance are closely related yet analytically distinct concepts that are central to understanding youth uprisings in South Asia. Governance refers to the broader system of institutions, rules, and processes through which authority is exercised and public resources are managed, while leadership concerns the decisions, priorities, and conduct of those in positions of power who shape how these systems function. Weak governance manifested through corruption, elite dominance, and limited institutional accountability, creates structural constraints that hinder effective policy implementation (Transparency International, 2022). At the same time, leadership failures, such as nepotism, and economic mismanagement can actively reinforce and deepen these governance weaknesses.

This interconnection is evident across the region. In Bangladesh, the concentration of power within a narrow political elite reflects both a governance deficit in terms of limited institutional checks and a leadership failure to ensure inclusive and responsive policymaking, contributing to youth disillusionment (Riaz, 2016). Similarly, in Nepal, frequent government turnovers and factional politics point to fragile governance structures, while also highlighting leadership instability that restricts consistent policy direction and meaningful youth engagement (Hachhethu et al., 2008).

Sri Lanka presents a particularly compelling case of this dynamic interaction. Leadership failures preceding the 2022 economic crisis, characterized by corruption, economic mismanagement, nepotism, and short-term political decision-making did not occur in isolation but were enabled by weak governance structures with insufficient accountability mechanisms. Together, these factors eroded public trust and triggered unprecedented youth-led mobilization (Priyadarshani, 2024; Timberman, 2025).

Taken together, these cases illustrate that governance deficits provide the structural environment within which leadership operates, while leadership failures can either mitigate or exacerbate these weaknesses. Their interaction is critical in shaping youth perceptions of political exclusion, ultimately influencing patterns of civic unrest, social stability, and long-term economic resilience.

Youth Political Participation and Mobilization

The existing literature also emphasizes the role of governance and institutional responsiveness in shaping the political behavior of youth.

Research shows that youth in South Asia respond to governance failures and dissatisfaction with leadership through a range of mobilization strategies, including street protests, strikes, online activism, and organized political movements. A study conducted in Pakistan shows that university students exhibit moderate political participation, primarily through voting and digital activism, while showing low levels of trust in key democratic institutions due to perceived corruption and weak representation. Despite this distrust, youth remain politically engaged, but tend to show their dissatisfaction through informal and online platforms rather than traditional political structures (Mubeen, 2025).

In Bangladesh, student-led protests against political corruption and unsafe public transport exemplify grassroots mobilization in response to governance and institutional gaps (Jackman, 2020). Nepalese youth have historically mobilized through student unions and party-affiliated networks, often reacting to weak government accountability and slow socioeconomic reforms (Shrestha and Subedi, 2022). Sri Lanka's 2022 protests further demonstrate how youth mobilization can escalate rapidly when leadership failures coincide with economic mismanagement and perceived systemic injustice (Priyadarshani, 2024; Uyangoda, 2023; DeVotta, 2022). Monappa (2025) argues that recent youth uprisings in South Asia reflect a crisis of ontological security [3], where governance failures disrupt stability and identity. Youth protests emerge as responses to these "ruptured realities," seeking to restore agency, meaning, and trust in weakened institutions. By observing the recent uprisings in Sri Lanka (2022), Bangladesh (2024) and Nepal (2025), Monappa highlights how these disruptions fueled collective youth mobilization, with digital platforms playing a central role in organizing resistance.

Taken together, the literature indicates that youth uprisings extend beyond economic or demographic explanations, highlighting governance quality and leadership effectiveness as key drivers of youth political mobilization.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based exclusively on secondary data sources to examine the relationship between leadership failures and youth uprisings in South Asia. The analysis draws on a wide range of publicly available materials, including web-based reports, newspaper articles, and policy documents that document recent youth-led uprisings in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal between the period of 2022- 2025. These sources provide contextual information on the timing, triggers, and trajectories of protest movements, as well as insights into their social, economic, and political underpinnings.

[3] Ontological security is a stable sense of order, continuity, and self-identity, where individuals or states feel secure in their existence and routines despite a changing environment

In addition, the study analyses scholarly articles/ academic literature on South Asian politics, youth civic engagement, economic governance, and leadership dynamics. This literature is used to situate the selected cases within broader theoretical and empirical debates, identify recurring governance failures, and assess how leadership practices influence youth grievances and mobilization. A comparative analytical framework is employed to identify both shared patterns and country-specific variations in the drivers and dynamics of youth uprisings across the three cases.

Data was analyzed thematically, with particular attention to recurring themes such as youth unemployment, political exclusion, corruption, inequality, institutional accountability, and leadership responsiveness. By integrating evidence from media reports and academic literature, the study strengthens the credibility of its findings while recognizing the inherent limitations of secondary qualitative research. The methodological approach enables a systematic comparison of the three recent youth uprisings and supports the development of policy-relevant insights aimed at improving leadership accountability, strengthening youth inclusion, and mitigating future youth uprisings in the South Asian region.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides a comparative analysis of youth uprisings in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal between the period of 2022-2025, several limitations must be acknowledged.

This study relies entirely on secondary sources such as media reports, academic literature and web reports. Although these sources provide valuable insights, they may not fully capture the lived experiences, contributions and nuanced perspectives of South Asian youth on the ground. The absence of fieldwork and face-to-face interviews, along with the lack of primary data collection by the author, constitutes a limitation, as the study relies primarily on secondary sources and reported events, which may not fully reflect the scope or depth of youth discontent in the three countries.

By concentrating on three countries, the study necessarily excludes other South Asian contexts where youth uprisings are also significant, such as Pakistan and India. While the selected cases provide diversity in terms of drivers and dynamics, the conclusions cannot be generalized to the entire South Asian region.

Youth uprisings are a dynamic phenomenon that evolves rapidly in response to political and economic changes. This study focuses on developments in the region up to mid-2025, but subsequent events may alter the trajectories of youth mobilization. The findings should therefore be understood as a snapshot rather than a definitive account.

In sum, the limitations of this study stem from its reliance on secondary qualitative data and its temporal and comparative scope. These constraints do not undermine the value of the analysis but highlight the need for further empirical research, particularly fieldwork that engages directly with young people from the region.

Youth Uprisings in South Asia- 2022-2025

Youth uprisings have emerged as a persistent and influential force across the South Asian region, reflecting deep-rooted political, economic, and social challenges. In recent years, youth uprisings in Sri Lanka (2022), Bangladesh (2024), and Nepal (2025) have highlighted widespread dissatisfaction among young people with the governing systems of these countries.

The Sri Lankan government faced widespread criticism from protesters over economic mismanagement that triggered soaring inflation, a foreign exchange crisis, shortages of essential goods such as fuel, cooking gas, and medicines, and frequent power cuts that disrupted daily life and intensified tensions nationwide. As the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) observes, a defining characteristic of the Aragalaya (the 2022 citizens' protest movement in Sri Lanka) was the heightened and visible engagement of youth. Youth played a pivotal role in organizing these protests, many of which were centered at "Gota Go Gama" (the Village of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's Departure), a symbolic protest site that came to represent the voice of a fragile nation. Youth activists were at the forefront of the demonstrations, actively raising placards and chanting anti-government slogans. Several political analysts interpreted this as a significant moment of youth awakening, signaling the potential for political transformation through the rejection of entrenched corruption and patronage-based politics (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2023). As a result, the Aragalaya came to be widely described as the "protests of a new generation." As the government failed to meet public needs, these youth-led mobilizations escalated into a broader mass uprising, ultimately leading to the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in July 2022.

Active participation of youth was clearly visible in the protests that took place in Bangladesh and Nepal as well. In Bangladesh, student led protests sparked by anger over job quotas and corruption, escalated into nationwide civic unrest which resulted in ousting Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August 2024. In Nepal, social media restrictions sparked islandwide protests, predominantly organized and led by youth activists. The significant participation of individuals aged 13–28, led to the protests being labeled as Gen Z protests, underscoring deep dissatisfaction among youth with governance structures widely viewed as fragile, corrupt, and ineffective (Harvey et al., 2025). The protests caused vandalism of government buildings, luxury hotels, and private property, which eventually led to the resignation of Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli on September 09, 2025.

Staniland argues that these protests mark a dramatic shift in South Asia, a region long known for large-scale political protests demanding systemic change and policy reform, but seldom for movements that overthrow regimes (Sharma, 2025). These uprisings differ significantly from earlier military coups, conflicts and political movements that removed leaders in the region due to several factors. Unlike earlier movements, recent uprisings in Sri Lanka (2022), Bangladesh (2024), and Nepal (2025) have been predominantly youth-driven and digitally coordinated, with a strong emphasis on economic mismanagement, anti-corruption and demands for accountability from entrenched dynastic and elitist political classes, contributing to a wider disillusionment with conventional political parties. These protests show how frustrated young people are with weak leadership practices and poor governance. Additionally, they highlight ongoing socio-economic and political issues within the three countries, which have played a major role in fueling unrest and instability.

While each country has a distinct historical and political trajectory, youth uprisings in these contexts reveal common structural drivers as well as important national specificities. It is important to examine the causes, forms, and consequences of youth uprisings in the three countries, highlighting both shared patterns and divergent outcomes.

Leadership Failures and Youth Uprisings in Sri Lanka

Economic Mismanagement and Youth Marginalization

Sri Lanka has experienced repeated waves of youth uprisings and protests throughout its modern history. These uprisings are closely linked to leadership failures and governance failures including, corruption, economic mismanagement, poor policy planning and the exclusion of young people from meaningful decision-making. When leaders fail to respond to the needs and aspirations of young people, growing frustration can eventually culminate in mass uprisings.

The insurgencies led by the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna) in 1971 and 1988-89 as well as the Tamil youth uprisings in the 1970s reflect deep frustration among young people who felt marginalized and excluded by the political leadership of the country. These uprisings stemmed from unemployment, rural poverty, caste marginalization, ethnic discrimination, and limited opportunities for youth. Disillusionment with leadership, ideological appeal, and violent state repression—especially after 1971 and 1983, intensified these grievances, driving both Sinhalese and Tamil youth toward radicalization and militant mobilization. These uprisings took a more violent form, resulting in widespread destruction, large-scale loss of life, and democratic backsliding.

In contrast, the more recent mass youth uprisings (2022) were largely peaceful in character, involving the mass occupation of key urban spaces, the display of placards, flags, and other symbolic expressions, and the creative use of art, technology, and social media to mobilize support and popularize pro-democracy movements (Silva and Ramasamy; 2024).

Uyangoda sees the Aragalaya as a historic rupture in the country's traditional political structure, driven especially by a new generation demanding systemic change (Uyangoda, 2024). The youth played a significant role in organizing and sustaining the protest movement, signaling a breakdown in traditional channels of political participation. These protests were driven by underlying socio-economic grievances and a profound loss of confidence in political leadership, which was seen as corrupt, unresponsive, and ineffective to the demands of the people. A Sri Lanka Barometer survey found that 49.5% of Sri Lankans reported decreased confidence in political leadership during the crisis, while 39.5% saw no change and 11.1% reported increased confidence. This reflects widespread disillusionment and a strong public demand for reforms in leadership and governance structures. (Sri Lanka Barometer, 2023).

The slogans that were used by protestors during the 2022 Aragalaya, such as Gota Go Home (Demanding the Immediate Resignation of the President), Ekawa Nagitimu (Let's Rise Together), Api Thama Rate Balaya (We are the Force of the Nation) reflect how youth can become a powerful force in highlighting socio-economic grievances and demanding for systemic change.

Kelegama (2014) identified long-standing structural weaknesses in Sri Lanka's economic governance, worsened by poor fiscal management and short-term policy decisions, which later contributed directly to the 2022 economic crisis. Despite periods of economic growth, these flaws remained unresolved, leading to severe hardship, particularly for young people. As Professor Hettige argues, although Sri Lanka has repeatedly suffered the consequences of youth uprisings and violence, governments have consistently failed to prioritize youth needs. These leadership failures fueled widespread youth frustration and protests, reflecting a deep loss of confidence in political leadership. Professor Hettige has also emphasized that high unemployment among the youth is a serious concern in Sri Lanka, caused by the failure of successive governments to reform and improve the education system to meet labor market needs and to diversify the economy to generate sufficient employment opportunities (Rupasinghe, 2019).

Sri Lanka's economic crisis, which peaked in 2022, was far more severe than previous downturns, as it stemmed from a combination of long-term unsustainable policies and poorly planned decisions. Unlike earlier crises that could be managed with short-term measures, the 2022 crisis led to a complete depletion of foreign reserves and the country's first-ever sovereign default in April 2022.

These structural weaknesses, policy missteps, and external shocks—including rising debt, currency depreciation, and the collapse of key revenue-generating sectors such as tourism, construction, and services—not only triggered the broader economic collapse but also had severe effects on the youth population, profoundly shaping both their material conditions and political behavior (Timberman, 2025; Bhowmick, 2022).

Educated youth were particularly affected by the crisis, as the economy failed to absorb graduates into stable and suitable employment, forcing many into informal, low-paid, or insecure work unrelated to their qualifications. The widening gap between young people's aspirations and the harsh economic realities they faced intensified frustration, undermined confidence in political leadership, and ultimately contributed to their active participation in the mass protests of 2022. Youth unemployment was a key structural factor behind the Aragalaya, with the youth unemployment rate reaching 23.8% in Q3 2022, the highest among all age groups, reflecting severe economic pressure and limited job opportunities for young people (Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey Annual Report, 2022).

Education had long been seen as the main path to upward mobility, but the crisis exposed a gap between educational attainment and economic opportunity in Sri Lankan society. Graduates experienced delayed entry into employment, increasing pressure to migrate, or prolonged dependence on their families. This situation generated a strong sense of discontent, as educational effort and qualifications no longer translated into expected economic rewards.

High inflation, currency depreciation, and the rising cost of living sharply increased the prices of essential goods and services, affecting the income of households. These pressures limited the ability of youth to continue education, training, and job searches, while power cuts and fuel shortages disrupted study routines and employment. Together, these hardships deepened youth frustration and played a significant role in mobilizing young people during the 2022 uprisings.

Amidst the crisis, the growing tendency of young people to seek work or study abroad reflects a deeper failure of political leadership and governance. Persistent economic mismanagement, short-sighted policy decisions, and the absence of long-term development planning deprived the economy of the capacity to generate meaningful opportunities for the youth. Studies show that economic insecurity and limited prospects compelled many young people to migrate, accelerating a brain drain particularly among skilled and English-educated youth of Sri Lanka (Gnanaweera and Yahampath, 2024). This outward migration underscores a profound loss of confidence in national leadership, as migration was increasingly viewed not as a choice but as a necessity arising from leadership failure. Furthermore, these protests underscore that youth uprisings are not merely a product of economic hardship or demographic pressure, but a consequence of deeper governance and leadership failures.

Corruption and Systemic Weaknesses

Sri Lanka's 2022 crisis revealed deep-rooted governance and leadership failures, with persistent corruption, weak institutions, and nepotism at the center. Corruption was pervasive at multiple levels of government, diverting public resources away from essential services and infrastructure, and undermining economic stability. In the 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), Sri Lanka received a score of 36 out of 100 and was ranked 101 out of 180 countries. This score indicates systemic corruption vulnerabilities within the public sector. Falling well below the global average of 43, the index reflects a society where corruption is not just anecdotal but deeply embedded in governance and administrative processes (Transparency International, 2022)

Nepotism entrenched inefficiency by allowing key positions in politics, the civil service, and state-owned enterprises to be filled based on familial or political connections rather than merit. This practice weakened institutional capacity, as leaders and officials were often unqualified or unaccountable, leading to poor policy formulation and implementation as well as mismanagement of public resources. These systemic weaknesses eroded public trust, creating a perception that the state served elite interests rather than the welfare of ordinary citizens. Analysts have argued that this combination of corruption and institutional weakness severely limited Sri Lanka's ability to respond to economic shocks, leaving citizens—particularly young people, highly vulnerable to unemployment and declining living standards (Gunatilake, 2024).

These governance and leadership failures directly contributed to the widespread protests of 2022. Young people, very well educated and skilled yet unable to find meaningful employment, felt alienated by a system that rewarded political connections over competence. Economic hardships, such as soaring inflation and shortages of cooking gas, fuel, food and medicine, were seen as the direct result of corruption and mismanagement, fueling anger and distrust. Nepotism and elite capture of the political system amplified the perception of injustice, motivating youth to take to the streets demanding accountability, structural reforms and resignation of top-level politicians.

These protests demonstrated how sustained corruption and weak institutions can erode social cohesion, mobilize a generation, and challenge the legitimacy of a political regime, ultimately leading to the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and several top-level leaders amid unprecedented public pressure. Furthermore, these protests reflect how the interaction between leadership failures and governance deficits shape youth perceptions of political exclusion and economic marginalization.

The COVID-19 pandemic and concurrent global shocks intensified youth grievances in Sri Lanka not only by worsening economic conditions but also by exposing and amplifying underlying leadership and governance failures (CPA, 2023; Wignaraja, 2024). While the pandemic disrupted livelihoods, particularly in tourism and the informal sector and global crises such as the Russia-Ukraine War drove inflation and shortages of essential supplies, it was the state's response that transformed these pressures into widespread political discontent.

Governance weaknesses, including poor policy coordination, lack of transparency, and weak institutional accountability, limited the country's ability to effectively manage the crisis. At the same time, leadership failures such as delayed decision-making, inconsistent economic policies, and perceived prioritization of short-term political interests over long-term stability exacerbated the situation. For instance, inadequate crisis management strategies and poor economic decisions deepened public mistrust, particularly among youth who were already facing shrinking opportunities.

The abrupt shift to organic fertilizer in 2021, along with the launch of loss-inducing, large-scale infrastructure projects that generated minimal returns and were often driven by political priorities rather than economic viability, further worsened the crisis (Drechsel et al., 2025; Jayasinghe, 2025). These decisions and projects reflected weak policy planning and exposed significant shortcomings in leadership and strategic decision-making. Furthermore, these challenges were significantly worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent global shocks, which disrupted supply chains, reduced export earnings and intensified inflationary pressures, thereby deepening the overall economic crisis.

This intersection of external shocks and internal mismanagement heightened perceptions of political exclusion and state inefficiency, ultimately catalyzing youth-led mobilization during the Aragalaya. In this sense, the pandemic and global crises exposed weaknesses in governance structures and the effects of inefficient leadership, ultimately turning socio-economic grievances into large scale youth uprisings demanding systemic changes.

The uprisings demonstrated that youth were not only reacting to immediate socio-economic hardships but were also demanding long-term changes in governance, fairness, and social inclusion. Their involvement highlighted the pivotal role of the younger generation in shaping Sri Lanka's political and social future, showing how leadership and governance failures can mobilize citizens and catalyze widespread movements for reform.



Images Courtesy of the Author

Leadership Failures and Youth Uprisings in Bangladesh

Poor Policy Planning and Gaps in Governance

Bangladesh's long tradition of student activism directly underpins contemporary youth uprisings, as today's mobilizations draw on a historical legacy of political engagement and resistance. From the Language Movement of 1952 to the 1971 Liberation War and the 1990 anti-autocracy uprising, students have consistently acted as catalysts for political change, establishing a culture of youth-led dissent. In the present context, this legacy has evolved into protests driven less by nationalist struggles and more by systemic grievances such as unemployment, inequality, and weak governance. Movements like the Shahbagh protests (2013) and the 2018 road safety and quota reform demonstrations reflect how youth continue to channel their frustrations into collective action, using protest as a familiar and legitimate tool of political expression. Thus, youth uprisings in Bangladesh is not an isolated or recent phenomenon, but rather the continuation of a deeply rooted tradition of student activism, now reshaped by contemporary socio-economic and governance challenges.

The 2024 quota reform movement in Bangladesh began as a focused protest against the public service job quota system, which many students and young graduates viewed as discriminatory and outdated. Initially driven by demands for merit-based recruitment and fair access to employment, the movement quickly gained momentum among university students and unemployed youth. As protests spread nationwide, the issue expanded beyond quotas and became a broader expression of frustration with entrenched political leadership, economic inequality, and limited opportunities for meaningful youth participation in governance.

What began as a sector-specific grievance ultimately escalated into a nationwide mass movement, with protesters calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and advocating for comprehensive systemic reforms.

This escalation highlights how the absence of inclusive and responsive policy dialogue can intensify youth dissatisfaction. Rather than engaging constructively with protesters, the state's reliance on violence deepened youth alienation and normalized confrontation as a legitimate form of political expression. Such responses transformed a negotiable policy dispute into a symbolic struggle against perceived political exclusion, reinforcing the belief among young people that institutional channels were ineffective or inaccessible.

The movement demonstrates a broader governance challenge: when young people lack credible avenues for participation, consultation, and influence, they are more likely to mobilize through mass protest and, in some cases, confrontational or violent means. The 2024 uprising in Bangladesh illustrates how policy failures combined with exclusionary political communication can rapidly convert isolated grievances into a nationwide political uprising. It underscores the urgent need for governments to institutionalize youth engagement mechanisms that allow dissent to be addressed through dialogue rather than escalation, thereby strengthening democratic resilience and social stability.

Economic Mismanagement and Youth Discontent

Over recent years, Bangladesh sustained strong economic performance, with GDP growth averaging around 6–7 percent annually for much of the past decade and reaching higher rates before global disruptions such as COVID-19 (World Bank, 2024). This growth was supported by dynamic expansion in the apparel sector, which remains a primary driver of export earnings and industrial employment, as well as ongoing infrastructure development that has facilitated trade, innovation and connectivity. The resulting economic growth contributed to significant poverty reduction, with extreme poverty falling substantially over the 2010s, and helped improve access to basic services and education outcomes.

Despite notable macroeconomic progress, persistent challenges such as high youth unemployment, mounting public debt, escalating inflation, rising living costs, and pervasive corruption have undermined economic stability, ultimately fueling civic unrest and widespread youth uprisings across the country. As per the data released by ILO (International Labor Organization), nearly 70 percent of Bangladeshi youth are employed in the informal sectors, which limits economic mobility and security (ILO, 2024). Even with progress made in education and welfare sectors, high unemployment among the youth remains as a critical issue, exacerbated by widespread corruption, economic mismanagement and governance failures.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly intensified existing vulnerabilities in Bangladesh, transforming a public health emergency into a multidimensional crisis that deeply affected the economy and social stability of the country. More than 80% of the workers in the informal sector lost their jobs, severely affecting their families and dependents. This contributed to social instability and rise of poverty (Hossain and Alam; 2022).

These factors resulted in fueling widespread civic unrest across Bangladesh contributing to political mobilization and mass protests demanding for state accountability and systemic reforms such as 2024 quota reform movement.

Youth unemployment in Bangladesh stems from structural, economic and governance failures, including skills mismatches, limited job creation despite economic growth, corruption and nepotism. As in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh's education system remains poorly aligned with the demands of the modern labour market (World Bank, 2020). This supports the analysis of Singh (2025), that structural constraints such as weak labor markets, low-quality education systems, and limited vocational training often hinder young people's ability to contribute meaningfully to socioeconomic development and political stability.

In the context of Bangladesh's 2024 crisis, the slogans used by protesters reflected deeper shortcomings in leadership and governance. Chants such as "Bhoy pele tumi shesh, rukhe daraley Bangladesh" ("If you fear, you are finished; if you stand up, you stand up for Bangladesh"), "Lakho Shohider Rokte Kena, Deshta Karo Baaper Na!" ("Bought with the blood of a hundred thousand martyrs, this country belongs to no one's father"), and "Quota na medha? Medha, medha!" ("Quota or merit? Merit, merit") expressed growing frustration with economic inequality, social injustice, and the failure of state institutions to respond effectively to public concerns (Anika, 2025). These slogans encouraged citizens to overcome fear, reclaim their rights and national identity, and challenge systems seen as unfair and unaccountable. More broadly, they demonstrated how public resistance became a response to persistent weaknesses in leadership and governance, emphasizing that the strength of Bangladesh lies in collective action against injustice.

Escalating inflation, rising costs of living, gaps in welfare provision, and rising public debt reflect not only economic pressures but also weaknesses in policy coordination, accountability, and inclusive decision-making. These governance failures have undermined economic resilience, destabilized job markets, and constrained opportunities for stable employment and innovation. Consequently, youth protesters' calls to prevent elite dominance in policy planning and to ensure free and fair recruitment processes represent broader demands for transparent, responsive, and accountable leadership and economic stability. These protests underscore the extent to which economic mismanagement, compounded by governance failures, fuels widespread unrest and instability.

Economic mismanagement created material hardships, while governance failures blocked pathways for fair participation and upward mobility. Together, these factors fueled youth discontent, which manifested in widespread unrest across the country.

Lack of Accountability Mechanisms and Institutional Failures

Research highlights that weak social accountability mechanisms, where leaders and public officials are not effectively held accountable, undermine governance and reduce state responsiveness, eroding public trust in institutions and marginalizing voices of citizens. In Bangladesh, weak accountability has historically limited civic space and deterred civil society from holding elites to account because bureaucratic opacity and minimal checks on power discourage transparency and citizen engagement. Studies of social accountability in Bangladesh emphasize that restricted information flows, ineffective institutional oversight, and the absence of strong legal protections for civil society limit ordinary peoples' ability to influence policy and compel leaders to respond to public needs (Hasan et al, 2019). This governance deficit has especially disadvantaged youth, a demographic whose concerns over fairness and opportunity are frequently dismissed or co-opted by entrenched political interests (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2024).

In the context of Bangladesh's 2024 uprising, these accountability gaps interacted with acute economic pressures to produce widespread civic unrest. High youth unemployment with estimates indicating that large numbers of young people are neither in education nor in employment and fierce competition for a limited number of government jobs were central grievances, with students calling for merit-based recruitment instead of quota systems perceived to benefit politically connected elites. The protests initially focused on demands for recruitment reforms, rapidly expanded into broader critiques of economic mismanagement, perceived cronyism, and lack of political accountability, institutional weaknesses, gaps in welfare as inflation surged and job growth stagnated. These factors eroded trust in institutions and fueled youth discontent, contributing to nationwide demonstrations that challenged not only specific policies but also the governance culture that enabled exclusion and undermined trust in state capacity.

The movement's pressure contributed to partial judicial reversals of the quota policy, meaning that courts introduced limited modifications—such as scaling back or suspending specific provisions—rather than fully abolishing the system. This outcome underscores deeper systemic issues. In this context, systemic governance failure refers to structural weaknesses in public sector recruitment, including limited transparency and the state's inadequate responsiveness to youth demands. Leadership accountability, meanwhile, denotes the obligation of political and administrative actors to justify and revise contested policies in light of public scrutiny.

Institutional integrity relates to the perceived fairness and impartiality of key bodies, particularly the judiciary and recruitment institutions. While these concepts are closely interconnected, they are not synonymous: governance failure reflects system-level deficiencies, leadership accountability concerns the actions of decision-makers, and institutional integrity pertains to the credibility of the rules and bodies that govern decision-making. Together, they illustrate how youth mobilization in Bangladesh not only challenged a specific policy but also exposed broader weaknesses in the relationship between the state, its leaders, and its institutions.



Images Collected from Publicly Available Online Sources

Leadership Failures and Youth Uprisings in Nepal

Institutional Weaknesses and Gaps in Governance

Leadership failures and institutional weaknesses played a key role in fueling youth uprisings across Nepal. The Gen Z protests, initially sparked by opposition to a proposed social media ban, rapidly evolved into a nationwide, youth-led movement challenging deeper governance failures, including corruption, lack of accountability, unemployment, and political elitism.

Nepal has long struggled with political instability. Since the abolition of the monarchy in 2008 and the establishment of a federal republic, the country has witnessed frequent changes in government, forming 14 different cabinets and prime ministers with none completing a full five-year term, thus undermining policy continuity and long-term planning. This revolving door of leadership has weakened state capacity, stalled development projects, and eroded public trust in political institutions, contributing to a pervasive perception that the government is disconnected from the needs and grievances of citizens (M. and Nayak, 2026). Such leadership volatility directly contributes to governance failures.

Short-lived administrations often focus on coalition survival and political infighting rather than structural reform, leaving systemic issues—such as corruption, economic stagnation, and chronic unemployment—largely unresolved (Cla.com.np, n.d.). These governance gaps have deepened frustration among ordinary Nepalis, especially young people facing limited socio-economic opportunities at home.

Weak institutions in Nepal have made young people even more frustrated. Government decision making bodies and accountability systems are seen as ineffective because of political influence, unfair enforcement, and favoritism (Cla.com.np, n.d.; M. and Nayak, 2026). For Nepali youth, this translates into persistent unemployment despite higher education, limited economic opportunities, uneven and inefficient delivery of public services, and minimal accountability for corruption (NDTV, 2025, Sachipani, 2025). These problems have caused young people to lose trust in public institutions and governance systems, making protests a more realistic way of expressing their grievances. Thus, the recent uprisings in Nepal cannot be seen merely as protests against social media restrictions; they represent a broader pushback against entrenched corruption and a call for enhanced public services and greater economic opportunities.

Economic Mismanagement and Lack of Opportunities

Critics argue that successive governments in Nepal have not effectively tackled structural economic issues including low investment in job creation, skills development, or innovation, leaving economically insecure. Research on youth unemployment in Nepal finds a disconnect between education and labor market needs and inadequate vocational training, leading to underemployment or unemployment and thus low socio-economic contribution by youth (Sharma and Paudel, 2023).

Research conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East, East Asia and Western Europe show that when large youth populations are supported by effective governance and inclusive institutions, they can drive economic dynamism and technological innovation, fostering democratic renewal and socio-economic stability (Bloom et al., 2025). However, high youth unemployment and economic mismanagement in Nepal indicate that young people and their skills have not been fully utilized, largely due to weaknesses in the country's governance systems.

Furthermore, Nepal's high youth unemployment rate highlights the disproportionate labour market challenges faced by young people. Youth unemployment in Nepal remains high with about 20.8% of those aged 15–24 unemployed in 2024, significantly above the overall national rate highlighting the difficulty young people face in finding work even as the labour force expands (Macrotrends, 2025). Therefore, it is evident that similar to the experiences of Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, the economic structure of Nepal has failed to generate sustainable employment opportunities for its youth.

The social media shut down on September 04, 2025, exacerbated these vulnerabilities by directly threatening the livelihoods of many Nepali youth who rely on these platforms for free-lance work and digital entrepreneurship (GWP,2025). Although the proposed social media restrictions served as the immediate trigger of youth uprisings in Nepal, they were far from the sole cause of the mass uprisings. Deep seated issues such as high youth unemployment, coupled with underemployment and limited access to quality jobs, have compounded the frustrations stemming from weak governance and institutional inefficiencies. For many young Nepalis, higher education does not guarantee meaningful employment, leaving them disillusioned with the state and its capacity to address their needs. This economic stagnation, intertwined with political instability and systemic corruption, has created fertile ground for youth-led movements, as seen in the Gen Z protests. In this context, the uprisings cannot be understood solely as reactions to social media restrictions; they are also expressions of deeper socio-economic grievances and a demand for structural reforms that provide tangible economic opportunities for youth to showcase their skills, creativity and talents.

Socio-economic Inequalities and Political Elitism

One of the main slogans in Nepal's Gen Z protests, "Hamilai aba Nepo Babies chahidaina - Saman awasar sunischit gara" (No More Nepo Babies-We Demand Fair Opportunities) served as a major rallying cry rather than a single fixed slogan. It was used alongside several others to highlight the contrast between the lavish lifestyles of children of political elites and the economic struggles of ordinary youth. This highlights the frustration of Nepali youth with a political elite perceived as primarily concerned with their own privileges and disconnected from the needs of ordinary citizens.

Disparities in wealth, opportunities, and political representation in Nepal have significantly amplified feelings of marginalization among young people. Wealth remains highly concentrated, with the richest segments of society holding many times the resources of the poorest, and average incomes far below levels seen in more developed economies Nepal's standing on global corruption indices remains weak, with a CPI (Corruption Perceptions Index) score of 34 out of 100 and a rank near the lower half of countries surveyed, indicating pervasive perceptions of public-sector corruption that erode trust in governance (Transparency International, 2025). The unequal distribution of resources and high levels of corruption has heightened socio-economic tensions, especially among youth who often struggle to access quality education, healthcare, and meaningful employment while seeing affluent lifestyles displayed by members of the political elite and their families. Viral online trends such as #NepoKids, which highlight the privileges of children of elites, have reinforced perceptions of systemic inequality, where the demands of political elite are favored over the grievances of ordinary citizens.

This growing awareness of inequality leads to a broader frustration with political elitism. Nepali youth increasingly view the ruling class as self-serving and disconnected from the needs of ordinary citizens, prioritizing their own interests and privileges over public welfare and inclusive policy-making. These perceptions are further strengthened by persistent corruption, patronage politics, and the repeated rotation of the same political elites in positions of power, which erode public trust in democratic institutions and deepen the belief that the state prioritizes narrow interests over the wellbeing of the public (M. & Nayak, 2026). As a result, socio-economic inequality and political elitism have become core grievances driving the Gen Z protests, motivating young citizens not just to oppose specific policies but to demand systemic reforms and changes in leadership that address inequality, improve accountability, and expand opportunities for all Nepalese. Similar to Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, the developments in Nepal highlight both leadership and governance failures. Leadership failures are reflected in issues such as corruption, political exclusion, and a persistent lack of accountability, while governance failures point to deeper structural weaknesses within institutions and policy planning processes.



Images Collected from Publicly Available Online Sources

Forms and Expressions of Resistance

After examining the socio-economic and political drivers behind the uprisings in the three countries, it is also important to analyze the diverse forms and expressions of resistance that emerged across them.

Youth uprisings in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal have taken diverse but interconnected forms, reflecting shared structural challenges such as corruption, governance failures, unemployment, nepotism and socio-economic inequality, while also responding to country-specific political contexts. Across all three cases, young people emerged as key political actors, using both traditional and non-traditional platforms and mechanisms to express dissent and mobilize collective action.

Sri Lanka

The Aragalaya of Sri Lanka began with large-scale street protests, demonstrations by student activists and trade unions as well as resistance against state policies through artistic expression and technology. Initially emerging as scattered voluntary, unorganized citizen protests across the country in response to mounting economic hardships, the movement soon converged around Gota Go Gama, a symbolic protest site in Colombo (Uyangoda, 2023). Protestors who gathered here demanded the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapakse and his government citing economic mismanagement and corruption. Similar protests sites were established in other parts of the country, which attracted a large group of people who were struggling due to economic hardships. Youth participation was significant in sustaining momentum over months, with the protests drawing diverse ethnic and religious groups united by shared economic grievances and political disillusionment rather than formal political party leadership.

Modern technology played a crucial role in highlighting grievances and mobilizing citizens for political change in Sri Lanka. This development represented a clear departure from traditional forms of protest in Sri Lanka, which were mostly large-scale street protests, poster campaigns, strikes or satyagraha. Students, young professionals and artists, civil society activists used social media and hashtag campaigns to organize protests, circulate real-time updates, and convene large demonstrations at Gota Go Gama (Pathirana, 2022). Viral Hashtags such as #GotaGoHome and #Givebackourstolenmoney were instrumental in rallying millions of citizens and gaining international attention towards Sri Lanka's economic and political situation. Young Sri Lankan entertainers, athletes, and other public figures leveraged platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram to mobilize protesters, share updates, document state responses, counter mainstream media narratives, and sustain global attention on the Aragalaya movement (The Sun Sri Lanka, 2025). Beyond sharing updates and drawing large crowds, young celebrities, and social media influencers functioned as informal leaders by translating complex socio-economic grievances into relatable, easily shareable content that resonated widely with youth audiences, in the absence of a central leader and formal authority.

These digital practices allowed participants to announce protest times and locations, broadcast events from key sites such as Gota Go Gama and draw both national and international attention to the movement, amplifying its reach beyond traditional media (Toda Peace Institute, 2025).

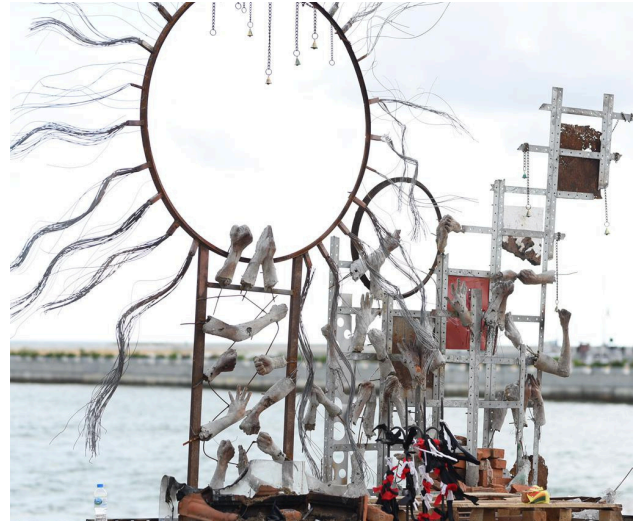
Throughout Sri Lanka's youth uprisings during the 2022 Aragalaya, performing and visual arts functioned as powerful forms of cultural resistance that challenged dominant power structures and articulated political dissent. James C. Scott's notion of everyday resistance helps explain how artistic acts stemming from the grassroots level, such as protest murals, music, dance, and street performances, served as accessible, non-institutional modes of opposition that resonated widely with the public, allowing participants to contest authority without relying on formal political channels (Scott, 1985, 1990). From a cultural studies perspective, Stuart Hall's work on representation highlights how these artistic expressions reshaped meaning and identity within the movement, fostering collective consciousness and emotional solidarity (Perreault, 2023). During the Aragalaya, the People's University at Gota Go Gama became a hub for dialogues on leadership, governance, and economic issues, while open-air theatre performances and poetry readings educated the public on their rights and amplified dissent. In this way, Gota Go Gama functioned as a physical manifestation of Scott's "hidden transcript"—a space where subaltern groups could openly articulate grievances, challenge elite narratives, and mobilize broader public support. Artistic activism thus became both a symbolic and practical tool within the movement, demonstrating how culture and creativity can advance political engagement and resistance.

Studies on Sri Lanka's 2022 youth uprisings further underscores the political role of visual communication and art during the Aragalaya: semiotic analyses of political visuals show how protest visuals simplified complex emotions and mobilized publics, encoding ideology and shaping collective identity (Wattegedara & De Silva, 2025). Other local studies emphasize how resistance art including paintings, theater, poetry, and digital visuals, actively expressed dissent and expanded engagement throughout the movement (Gamage, 2023; Abeyawardene, 2025). Owing to their aesthetic appeal and symbolic power, these forms of artistic expression enhanced public engagement and facilitated the large-scale mobilization of Sri Lanka's youth during the Aragalaya.

Youth protesters in Sri Lanka, leveraged digital platforms and artistic expressions not only to mobilize support but also to document and broadcast leadership failures, turning the movement into a national and international critique of governance, demonstrating how mass youth activism can function as a mechanism for holding political elites accountable.

Ultimately, the movement's pressure contributed to the resignation of the president, prime minister and cabinet ministers, highlighting the political impact of youth-driven mass mobilization through symbolic expression. Despite arrests, protest restrictions, and other forms of repression, the Aragalaya movement significantly reshaped Sri Lanka's political landscape.

It weakened public trust in the traditional political elite and contributed to voters rejecting the old establishment in the 2024 presidential and general elections, paving the way for new leadership (Timberman, 2025).



Artistic Expressions at Gota Go Gama - Photography Credits - Sudeepa Dhananjaya, Priyantha Bandara Travel Photography, Cane Mario, Asela Sampath, Poornima Ranadheera

Bangladesh

The July 2024 quota reform protests in Bangladesh were led predominantly by university students and youth activists, challenging a civil service quota system that favored descendants of 1971 war veterans—a policy widely perceived as undermining meritocracy and reinforcing political patronage. Initially emerging as campus-based demonstrations, the movement rapidly expanded into nationwide protests, including marches, sit-ins, and mass rallies. Social media platforms, especially Facebook, served as the connective infrastructure of the movement, enabling decentralized coordination, real-time information sharing, and collective identity formation. Drawing on Castells's Network Society framework (Castells, 1996, 2000), these online networks allowed students to overcome geographical and institutional barriers, transforming localized activism into a cohesive national movement and amplifying the political voice of Generation Z youth (Abir, Chowdhury, & Rahman, 2025; Islam, Nur, & Mahmud, 2025).

Alongside digital mobilization, artistic expressions became a central form of cultural resistance during the protests. Graffiti, murals, street art, and symbolic slogans transformed public spaces into arenas of dissent, conveying collective frustration with both the quota policy and the broader inequities embedded in governance structures. Music and protest anthems, such as “Awaaz Utha” (Raise the Voice) [4], further unified youth, generating emotional solidarity and amplifying messages beyond physical protest sites (Dhaka Tribune, 2024; Anika, 2025). These artistic practices not only communicated political demands but also made systemic injustices visible, turning walls, streets, and online feeds into platforms that documented both state negligence and authoritarian policymaking. By providing tangible, symbolic evidence of structural inequities, art and music complemented online networks, amplifying the movement's reach and legitimacy.

The interplay between digital platforms and artistic expression was particularly effective in exposing leadership and governance failures. Social media platforms enabled citizens to document protests, disseminate eyewitness accounts of state responses, and critique government decisions in real time. Simultaneously, murals and street art visualized the consequences of policy favoritism, corruption, and bureaucratic intransigence, translating abstract grievances into compelling narratives accessible to both local and international audiences (Dhaka Tribune, 2024). These tools made failures in accountability, transparency, and meritocracy highly visible, pressuring political leaders to respond and demonstrating how youth-led networks can function as both watchdog and corrective mechanism within weak governance systems.

[4] "Awaaz Utha" is a Bangladeshi hip hop protest song composed in the context of the 2024 youth protests, written, composed and voiced by popular Bangladeshi artist Hannan Hossain Shimul

Ultimately, the protests underscored the capacity of youth activism, digital networks, and artistic resistance to challenge entrenched power structures and influence governance outcomes. By combining decentralized online coordination with visible, symbolic artistic acts, Bangladeshi youth not only mobilized masses but also highlighted systemic governance failures, reframing public debates around leadership accountability and institutional integrity (Abir, Chowdhury, & Rahman, 2025; Islam, Nur, & Mahmud, 2025).



Images courtesy of [The Daily Star](#), from the article *“The Rebel Within You: Painting the Memory of a Movement.”*

Nepal

Nepal's 2025 Gen Z protests manifested through a combination of physical demonstrations, digital protest networks, leaderless online coordination, and viral campaign symbols. The immediate trigger was the government's decision to ban access to 26 major social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, and X—after they failed to comply with registration requirements under new regulations, a move widely interpreted by young Nepalis as censorship and an attack on freedom of expression. Thousands of youth protestors took to the streets with slogans such as “Stop corruption, not social media” and creatively used hashtags and symbols like #NepoKids to highlight perceived elite privilege, nepotism, and government corruption. Despite attempts to control communication channels, protesters used VPNs and alternative platforms to share updates and coordinate actions, underscoring both technological savvy and decentralized organization (Firstpost, 2025).

The protests highlight the synergy between digital networks and offline activism, reflecting principles from Castells's Network Society framework (Castells, 1996, 2000). Digital tools allowed young Nepalis to circumvent state-imposed restrictions and maintain communication and mobilization despite the ban, while online organization enabled participants to form collective identities and disseminate protest narratives widely. Leaderless coordination through encrypted and alternative communication platforms emphasized the capacity of youth to self-organize, challenge hierarchical governance structures, and sustain momentum despite suppression attempts. Offline demonstrations such as street rallies, sit-ins, and public gatherings, reinforced digital campaigns, creating a feedback loop between physical and virtual protest spaces that amplified visibility and participation (Firstpost, 2025).

Cultural resistance theory, which focuses on how marginalized groups use cultural tools (symbols, humor, music, art, and traditions) to challenge, undermine, and subvert the authority of a dominant power, is highly applicable to the Gen Z of protests in Nepal [5]. Viral hashtags, digital memes, and visual protest symbols functioned as performative acts of resistance, transforming both online and offline arenas into spaces for articulating grievances, mobilizing peers, and critiquing elite corruption. Protesters often used dramatic, symbolic spectacles to express political frustration, such as staging “mock funerals” of the state or using anime characters like the “Straw Hat Pirate” flag (from Japanese Anime One Piece) to represent youth defiance and a rejection of traditional political hierarchies. The protestors used this symbol as a sign of youth solidarity against corruption mirroring the protagonist Monkey D. Luffy's fight against corruption and injustices.

[5] Cultural resistance theory explains how subordinate groups contest power not only through direct political action but also through symbolic, cultural, and communicative practices that challenge dominant power structures and ideologies

The use of such symbols reflects a shift in how Gen Z articulates resistance, drawing on digital-age cultural expressions to communicate political grievances, build collective identity, and contest traditional political hierarchies (Grenier, 2025).



Image: Sunil Pradhan/Anadolu/picture alliance



Image: Sebastiano Bacci/ZUMA Press Wire/IMAGO

By blending aesthetic expression, humor, and digital literacy, the movement translated complex socio-political frustrations into accessible and compelling messages that resonated nationally and internationally, drawing attention to demands for transparency, accountability, and political reform (Shamim, 2025).

The recent uprising in Nepal further underscores the role of digital activism and symbolic cultural practices in exposing leadership and governance failures. By leveraging technology and creativity, youth protesters documented state overreach, including violent clashes in which security forces used lethal and non-lethal force, and circulated evidence of policy missteps and censorship, compelling authorities to lift the ban on social media platforms following mass uprisings and fatalities. In response to state actions perceived as repressive or unjust, Gen Z activism has effectively combined networked digital communication with cultural forms of expression to challenge entrenched political structures, amplify socio-political grievances, and assert a more active role in national decision-making and policy formulation. (Jaiswal & Thapa, 2025).

Comparative Analysis- Youth Uprisings and Mobilization in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal

The findings of the study emphasize that the youth uprisings in Sri Lanka (2022), Bangladesh (2024), and Nepal (2025) reveal common patterns in Gen Z activism, yet also highlight context-specific differences shaped by political systems, economic conditions, and state responses. Across all three cases, digital platforms played a central role in organizing protests, disseminating information, and amplifying grievances beyond traditional media channels. In Sri Lanka, platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Instagram enabled young activists, celebrities, content creators and civil society members to mobilize crowds at symbolic sites such as Gota Go Gama (Pathirana, 2022; The Sun Sri Lanka, 2025). Similarly, in Bangladesh, students coordinated campus-wide protests against the 1971 war veterans' quota using Facebook and WhatsApp, while in Nepal, youth relied on VPNs, Discord servers, and alternative platforms to circumvent the government's ban on 26 major social media sites (Firstpost, 2025). In each case, decentralized and networked forms of coordination—often described as “leaderless” but better understood as distributed leadership—enabled youth to self-organize, sustain momentum, and adapt to state suppression, illustrating Castells's Network Society framework. (Castells, 1996, 2000). This mode of organization is widely regarded as a defining feature of contemporary youth-led movements.

Artistic and cultural forms of protest were another shared feature across the three contexts. In Sri Lanka, protest murals, street theater, and digital visuals functioned as accessible forms of resistance, fostering collective identity, raising awareness and emotional solidarity (Scott, 1985, 1990; Wattedgedara & De Silva, 2025). In Bangladesh, creative expressions such as graffiti, campus murals, music, and memes amplified critiques of patronage politics and inequitable quotas systems (Abir, Chowdhury, & Rahman, 2025). In Nepal, viral hashtags, digital memes, and visual symbols such as #NepoKids—served as performative acts of resistance, highlighting weaknesses in political leadership, economic planning and governance systems. All three cases illustrate how youth transformed their political and socio-economic grievances into symbolic, widely resonant forms of dissent through artistic expression.

Youth uprisings in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal were triggered by distinct immediate factors, yet they converge around a broader pattern of leadership and governance failures characterized by policy inconsistencies, limited accountability, and declining institutional legitimacy. In Sri Lanka, the protests were driven by a severe economic crisis marked by hyperinflation, fuel shortages, and foreign currency depletion, reflecting deep failures in macroeconomic governance and fiscal management. In Bangladesh, protests emerged from perceptions of structural inequality in civil service quotas, exposing shortcomings in merit-based recruitment, transparency, and widespread concerns about political patronage.

In Nepal, youth mobilization was sparked by government censorship, particularly the banning of major social media platforms, which was widely seen as an infringement on freedom of expression and a lack of transparent governance.

Despite these differing triggers, the three cases share a common critique of entrenched governance failures and weakened leadership accountability. In Sri Lanka, corruption, nepotism, and economic mismanagement under the Rajapaksa administration eroded public trust and fueled mass mobilization (Jayamaha, 2022). Bangladesh's protests highlighted dissatisfaction with unequal access to public employment and perceived elite favoritism (Dhaka Tribune, 2024; Abir, Chowdhury, & Rahman, 2025), while Nepal's Gen Z protests exposed concerns over censorship, elite corruption, and restricted digital freedoms. As Meenakshi Ganguly, Deputy Asia Director of Human Rights Watch notes, the overthrow of powerful regimes by youth-led movements in these countries shares common roots in persistent socio-economic inequality and pervasive corruption among entrenched political elites, which have left them disconnected from younger generations. The Covid-19 pandemic intensified these trends, as prolonged youth isolation and increased social media use encouraged broader participation in youth-led movements, enabling Gen Z to challenge traditional political parties and elite dominance (Sharma, 2025).

According to *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America*, edited by Arturo Escobar and Sonia E. Alvarez, social movements that emerged in Latin America during the 1980s in response to economic crises, social exclusion, and authoritarian rule are defined by three key dimensions: collective identity formation among marginalized groups, innovative strategies that challenge dominant power structures, and contributions to democratization through alternative development visions and efforts to transform political and social relations (Escobar and Alvarez, 1992). Similarly, the youth uprisings in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh reflect comparable dynamics, as South Asian youth have forged a common identity across ethnic and religious divides, shaped by common frustrations with governance and leadership failures and strengthened through digital connectivity. Similar to the Latin American shift towards "democratizing social relations," these movements moved beyond traditional party structures and electoral participation, instead adopting leaderless, digitally enabled forms of mobilization that challenged entrenched political structures while demanding systemic accountability, transparency, and an end to corruption and nepotism.

Staniland (2025) identifies a shared feature of South Asian youth uprisings: their capacity to envision a more just political and economic future while recognizing the gap between aspirations and existing conditions. This gap between reality and expectation is a critical driver of youth frustration.

When examined carefully, the slogans used by protesters across Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal highlighted shared concerns over unemployment, inequality, resource scarcity, nepotism, limited civil liberties, political exclusion, and governance failures, articulating widespread youth frustration with entrenched elites and ineffective governing systems.

In summary, the similarities across the three South Asian cases include:

1. Centrality of digital platforms for coordination, mobilization, and information dissemination.
2. Use of artistic and cultural expression as symbolic resistance and a means of shaping collective identity.
3. Predominantly leaderless, decentralized networks, reflecting generational innovation in organizing social movements (Uyangoda, 2023; Shivamurthy, 2025).
4. A focus on exposing leadership failures and holding authorities accountable.
5. Shared concerns articulated in protest slogans reflecting socio-economic inequalities, political exclusion, and systemic corruption.

The differences are primarily shaped by context:

- **Triggers:** The youth uprisings in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal were each sparked by distinct yet systemic grievances: in Sri Lanka, severe economic collapse fueled public discontent; in Bangladesh, structural inequality in civil service quotas galvanized student-led protests; and in Nepal, government-imposed digital censorship triggered widespread Gen Z mobilization.
- **Spatial Organization:** Youth protests in South Asia utilized context-specific organizational strategies, with Sri Lankan activists gathering at symbolic physical sites like Gota Go Gama, Bangladeshi students coordinating through campus-based networks, and Nepali youth employing hybrid digital and offline methods to mobilize nationwide protests.
- **State Response:** State responses to youth uprisings in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal differed significantly in intensity, strategy, and timing. Bangladesh's response was the most militarized and violent, with authorities treating protesters as security threats and using lethal force, whereas Sri Lanka relied more on crowd control measures and emergency regulations with comparatively limited use of extreme violence. In Nepal, digital censorship imposed by the state itself triggered the uprising, while in Bangladesh, internet shutdowns were used unsuccessfully to suppress ongoing protests.

The speed of political concessions also varied, with Nepal's leadership stepping down relatively quickly after early fatalities, in contrast to the more prolonged resistance to pressure seen under Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh and Gotabaya Rajapaksa in Sri Lanka.

The speed of political concessions also varied, with Nepal's leadership stepping down relatively quickly after early fatalities, in contrast to the more prolonged resistance to pressure seen under Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh and Gotabaya Rajapaksa in Sri Lanka.

Overall, these cases highlight how Gen Z youth activism in South Asia leverages technology, creativity, and decentralized organization to challenge entrenched power structures, navigate restrictive political and authoritarian environments, and amplify socio-political grievances, establishing a distinctive generational approach to political participation, resistance, and civic accountability. By examining these three protests, Monnappa (2025) argues that youth mobilization emerges as a collective response to uncertainty, where protests reflect not only material grievances but also attempts to reclaim agency, restore meaning, and rebuild a sense of belonging within weakened and unresponsive governing systems.

Importantly, the protests that took place in these countries demonstrate that a youth bulge does not mechanically produce violence but becomes destabilizing when institutions fail to absorb youth aspirations through employment, inclusion, and accountable governance. Henrik Urdal's (2006) study suggests that large youth populations can elevate the risk of political uprisings by providing both the motive and opportunity for collective action, particularly when combined with economic hardship, high youth unemployment, and restricted political freedoms—conditions that were evident in the recent youth uprisings in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal.

The findings of the study support the argument that youth uprisings in South Asia cannot be understood solely through economic and demographic lenses. Leadership accountability and quality of governance are critical determinants of whether youth populations become agents of development or sources of instability.

Consequences of Recent Youth Uprisings in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal

Youth uprisings in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal have produced profound and multifaceted consequences across political, institutional, social, and economic spheres. These movements have not only challenged existing power structures but also reshaped norms of civic engagement and state accountability. This section explores the political, institutional, social, and economic consequences of these uprisings, emphasizing both their transformative potential and the inherent challenges they pose for achieving long-term stability and inclusive governance.

Political Consequences

Youth uprisings in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal have had profound political consequences by challenging established leadership and redefining the relationship between citizens and the state. In Sri Lanka, sustained protests by young citizens played a pivotal role in compelling President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to resign amid economic collapse, highlighting the political power of organized youth movements (Jayamaha, 2022). In Bangladesh, youth mobilization around employment quotas and governance issues weakened the legitimacy of the ruling administration, forced partial policy concessions, and demonstrated that young citizens are increasingly willing to contest political authority (Abir, Chowdhury, & Rahman, 2025). In Nepal, protests by Gen-Z activists accelerated leadership changes and reignited debates over constitutional governance, showcasing the capacity of youth to influence political transitions in a historically fragmented system (Jaiswal & Thapa, 2025). As a result of these uprisings, public discourse in all three countries shifted from mere political opposition to broader calls for systemic reform, while moving away from elite-dominated narratives toward more grassroots-driven policy dialogues focused on transparency, accountability, and inclusive governance (Yusuf, 2025).

However, though these protests succeeded in challenging entrenched leadership and amplifying demands for accountability, their long-term political impact remains uncertain. At present, newly emerging leadership in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal faces critical challenges, including reforming governance structures, strengthening public institutions, improving economic and social conditions, and fostering community resilience. These challenges are closely connected to the political consequences of youth-led uprisings, which disrupted established power structures but did not automatically produce durable systems of governance. While youth mobilization successfully expanded political participation and accountability, the absence of clearly institutionalized pathways for sustained youth engagement has placed pressure on new leaders to convert protest-driven legitimacy into effective and inclusive governance.

Failure to address these challenges risks political fragmentation, declining public trust, and the potential re-emergence of authoritarian practices, thereby limiting the long-term political impact of youth activism. Teixeira (2024) notes that, although youth participation in protests can be a powerful force for political transformation, its impact often remains limited in the absence of clear strategies to translate collective action into lasting institutional or policy change.

Institutional Consequences

Youth uprisings in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal have exposed significant institutional weaknesses, highlighting public distrust in state governance. In Sri Lanka, the economic crisis and protests revealed flaws in fiscal management, centralized executive power, and weak accountability mechanisms (IMF, 2023). In Bangladesh, law enforcement and regulatory bodies were seen as politicized instruments of repression, undermining civil liberties and public confidence (OHCHR, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024). Nepal's inconsistent handling of protests, including restrictions on digital communication, exposed gaps in administrative coordination and governance capacity (Jaiswal & Thapa, 2025).

These weaknesses pose a long-term threat to political and socioeconomic stability: without institutional reform, temporary concessions risk fostering repeated mobilization, perpetuating public distrust, and leaving governments vulnerable to crises. As Staniland (2025) observes, regime change alone cannot ensure stable democracy; robust institutions are needed to support meaningful participation. Consistent with Hickey and Mohan's argument, restoring public trust requires transforming institutions to be more inclusive, accountable, and responsive to structural inequalities (Hickey and Mohan, 2004).

Social Consequences

Youth uprisings have the potential to reshape civic culture and collective identity by providing a platform for young people to share their political demands. Protests in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal have fostered a sense of political agency among young people, who increasingly view civic engagement, both online and offline, as a core responsibility rather than optional participation. Social media has been central to this transformation, enabling rapid mobilization, dissemination of protest narratives, and the creation of networks of solidarity. In Sri Lanka, physical protest spaces such as Gota Go Gama became hubs of interaction between youth, civil society, and ordinary citizens, promoting dialogue and shared civic responsibility. However, these movements also expose social vulnerabilities. In contexts where protests are met with violence, surveillance, or repression, as observed in Bangladesh, social polarization can intensify, eroding trust within communities and between citizens and the state (OHCHR, 2024).

Achieving long-term stability requires not only continued civic engagement but also institutional mechanisms to mediate conflict and integrate youth voices into decision-making and policy planning mechanisms to prevent societal fragmentation.

Economic Consequences

Economic factors were both a driver and consequence of youth uprisings in South Asia. In Sri Lanka, protests were triggered by economic collapse, including soaring inflation, food and fuel shortages, and rising unemployment, directly linking governance failure to material hardship and public dissent. In Bangladesh, youth dissatisfaction with employment quotas and structural inequality highlighted the disjunction between national economic growth and equitable opportunity for young people. Nepal's youth protests disrupted tourism, commerce, and public services, exacerbating existing economic challenges and highlighting the vulnerability of economic systems to civic unrest (Shamim, 2025). The challenge for long-term stability lies in addressing these structural economic grievances. Addressing these structural economic grievances through policies that reduce youth unemployment, enhance equitable access to resources, and build resilience in critical economic sectors is essential for breaking cycles of civic unrest and ensuring sustainable development. Without such interventions, the economies of the three countries will remain susceptible to repeated cycles of protest, social tension, and political instability.

Conclusion

Recent developments in Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh highlight that youth uprisings are not merely caused by economic, and demographic factors. It reflects deeper governance and leadership failures including political exclusion, corruption, nepotism, lack of transparency, and policy paralysis that have created environments where young people feel marginalized and disillusioned. Socio-economic pressures such as unemployment, inflation, and limited access to quality education have exacerbated these grievances, but it is the inability of leaders to effectively address these structural challenges that often transform frustration into organized protests, demonstrations, and at times violent mobilization. The repeated cycle of unmet expectations and governance deficiencies not only undermines trust in political institutions but also diminishes the capacity of the state to harness the demographic dividend represented by its youth.

Therefore, addressing youth grievances requires more than temporary or reactive interventions; it demands a shift toward accountable, inclusive, and strategic leadership. The findings of the study suggest that leaders must prioritize participatory governance, transparent decision-making, and policies that directly respond to the aspirations of younger generations.

By implementing such measures, these countries can transform their response to youth uprisings into an opportunity for fostering inclusive governance, where young people play a central role in advancing social and economic progress.

Ultimately, evidence from these three nations underscores a central lesson: national stability and prosperity are inextricably linked to leadership quality, and youth empowerment is both an indicator and a catalyst of effective governance.

Policy Recommendations

The analysis indicates that effectively addressing youth grievances necessitates comprehensive governance reforms, rather than relying solely on narrowly targeted programs. Effective policy interventions must address the structural political, institutional, social, and economic drivers of discontent, rather than treating symptoms in isolation. In this regard, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

- **Strengthen Governance and Political Inclusion**

Governments should develop mechanisms to integrate youth voices into formal decision-making processes, such as youth councils, participatory budgeting, and advisory boards. Ensuring youth representation in policymaking helps translate protest-driven legitimacy into durable reforms, reducing the risk of instability and authoritarian resurgence (Teixeira, 2024).

- **Institutional Reforms for Transparency and Accountability**

Institutional reforms aimed at enhancing transparency and accountability are crucial for strengthening governance in Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh. Implementing anti-corruption measures, establishing independent oversight bodies, and introducing merit-based civil service reforms can restore public trust in institutions, governance, and leadership. Regular reporting, citizen engagement mechanisms, and public access to information can empower citizens to hold institutions accountable. At the same time, strengthening legal frameworks to safeguard the rights of protestors, while ensuring public order, helps ensure that civic mobilization contributes to democratic engagement without escalating into social fragmentation. Together, these reforms can rebuild public trust, enhance social cohesion, and support long-term political stability in the region.

- **Foster Civic Engagement and Social Cohesion**

Encouraging civic education, promoting ethical leadership, and fostering inclusive political participation can help build resilient socio-economic and political systems that prioritize public welfare and citizens' rights over political gain. By reforming education systems and implementing targeted training programs, countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal can strengthen social cohesion, advance sustainable development, and enhance long-term political stability.

Civic education programs should focus on political literacy, conflict resolution, policy studies and digital literacy. Governments, schools, higher education institutions and civil society organizations can collaborate to encourage constructive civic participation and reduce polarization. Social media platforms should be monitored for disinformation, while promoting safe spaces for youth dialogue, preventing manipulation of youth movements.

- **Address Economic Grievances and Youth Employment**

Economic marginalization was identified as a primary driver of uprisings. Policies should focus on reducing youth unemployment, improving equitable access to education and skills training, and creating opportunities in emerging sectors. To mitigate uprisings and strengthen youth participation in the labor market, youth empowerment programs should be designed around youth-identified needs, align education and vocational training with labor market demands, and ensure equitable access for marginalized groups to reduce structural grievances (Sethy, 2025; Sato, 2024). Furthermore, these programs must institutionalize meaningful political inclusion, integrate economic opportunities with social and psychosocial support, strengthen state capacity, accountability, and trust in public institutions.

- **Conflict-Sensitive Policy Design**

Policymakers should adopt approaches that anticipate the social and political impact of reforms. Early warning systems for social unrest, participatory policy consultation, and rapid-response mechanisms for grievances can mitigate escalation. Integrating youth feedback into policy evaluation ensures that reforms respond to their priorities, fostering long-term political and social stability. By combining anticipatory planning, inclusive consultation, and adaptive implementation, policymakers can reduce the risk of social instability and strengthen trust in institutions.

- **Regional and International Cooperation**

The instability in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka has implications beyond their borders, reshaping regional geopolitics, trade, and economic flows. Therefore, ensuring the stability of these nations is essential not only for their domestic development but also for the broader security, economic integration, and prosperity of South Asia (Shahid et al, 2024). Regional and international organizations should adopt a coordinated policy approach to mitigate youth uprisings in the three countries by institutionalizing the exchange of best practices; mobilizing targeted financial and technical assistance; facilitating structured knowledge transfer in priority areas such as education reform, public health, social protection, welfare, vocational skills development, and political inclusion; and strengthening national and local capacities to monitor, evaluate, and ensure that reforms are effective, inclusive, and responsive to youth needs.

SAARC [South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation] and BIMSTEC [Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation] member states should jointly establish an integrated regional labor market framework, anchored in the mutual recognition of professional and vocational qualifications and regulated cross-border labor mobility, to expand youth employment opportunities, reduce domestic labor market pressures, and address the structural drivers of youth uprisings, in partnership with international organizations to ensure sustainability and inclusivity. International and regional actors can play a critical role in guiding and incentivizing national leaders to prioritize youth empowerment as a core pillar of development agendas, through policy dialogue, conditional support, and targeted capacity-building initiatives.

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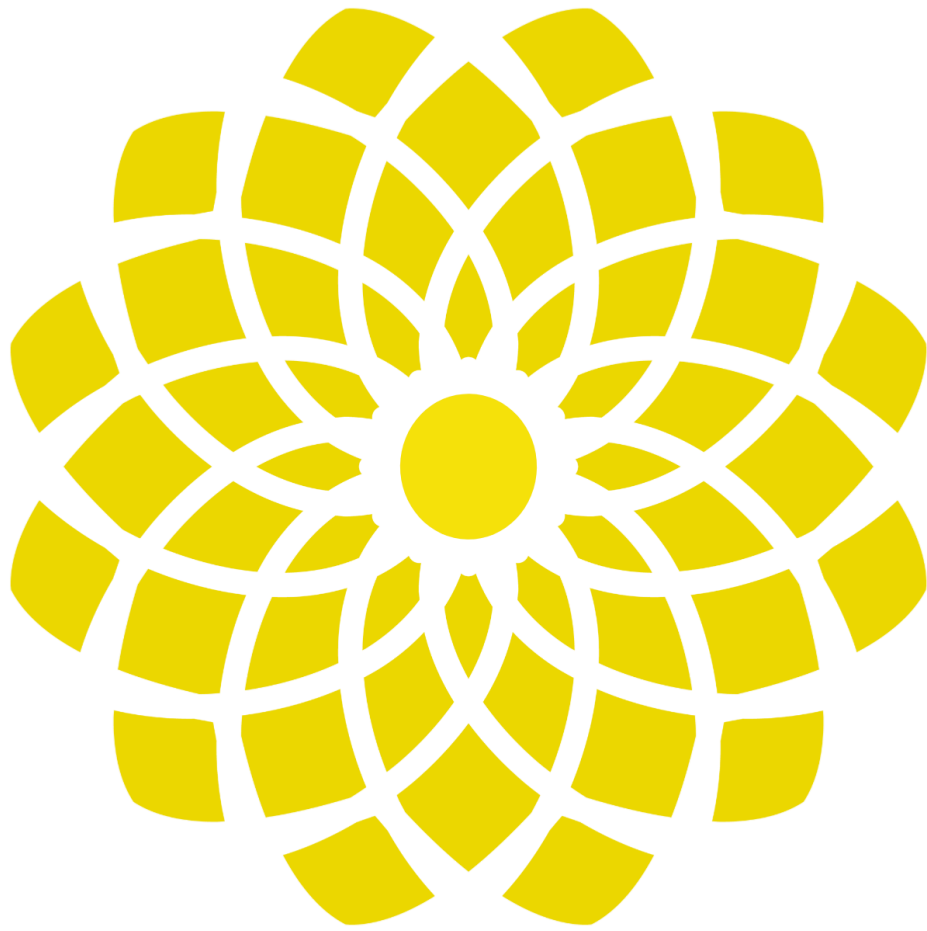
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