

Review of “Leadership Failures and Youth Uprisings in South Asia: A Comparative Study of Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh”

This study by Jayasinghe (2026) offers a comparative analysis of recent protest movements in Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh. It argues that failures of political leadership and governance deficits, including corruption, institutions failing their mandate, and weak state accountability, alongside mounting economic pressures such as rising youth unemployment and lesser avenues for socio-economic mobility, have been central drivers of contemporary mass protests in South Asia.

Importantly, the study touches on ‘a strong sense of discontent [among the youth], as educational effort and qualifications no longer translated into expected economic rewards’ (p. 14). This emerging intergenerational gap has increased the perception of welfare erosion in postcolonial countries such as the three under consideration, where there is a general expectation of the state as having a historical duty to play a central role in public social upliftment. Through this lens, these crises are part of a broader, systemic erosion of state capacity to maintain a continuous growth trajectory and provide welfare in health, education, and housing, not as corrective handouts, but as central mechanisms of social mobility. Not only are states increasingly incapacitated, but narratives of state legitimacy are also being delegitimised. Can new narratives emerge that capture and sustain public trust, and what might the sources of that trust be? The underlying question here is whether there is a more fundamental shift taking place in how societies believe the state-society equation should work, how these roles may be negotiated and assumed, and how social mobility itself can be (re)imagined and secured.

As the study points out, anti-establishment sentiment is not new to this generation of youth. We have had many cycles of youth-led uprisings in our countries. The political activism of the recent protests has been marked as an anomaly due to a narrative that the Gen Z were politically apathetic and had no strong ideological leanings. Such narratives are likely, in any case, poor diagnoses.

What was distinct in this wave of protests, as Jayasinghe records, was its largely democratic and ‘peaceful’ expression, particularly in the Sri Lankan case, and second, in their ‘success’ in changing governments before their term ended. The Nepal and Bangladesh cases exhibited higher levels of state violence, and this can be understood in the historical conditions that determined the coercive capacity and deployment of the state’s repression apparatus in each context. There is also the possibility that these governments became increasingly insecure and reactive when they observed destabilising protest movements in neighbouring countries, contributing to cycles of anticipation, containment, and escalation.

Second, the study notes that these movements moved beyond traditional party structures and adopted leaderless, horizontal forms of mobilisation that challenged entrenched political structures (p. 33). In the elections held afterwards, we see non-frontrunner political parties, particularly in Nepal and Sri Lanka, coming to power in the wake of these protests, signalling a disruption of the established party systems.

There are two premises in the study I would like to unpack and question here. First, the idea of “youth protests” requires deeper introspection. Is it predominantly youth who face the frustrations of ‘unfulfilled promises’ of national development, either because of their numerical presence in protests or the role they appear to assume, or because they are relatively more disadvantaged as a demographic with unfulfilled aspirations compared to previous generations? While it is true that Gen Z cohort is more technologically and social media familiar, and that these digital networks enabled

forms of mobilisation that appear distinct in these contemporary protests, this does not necessarily mean that the underlying grievances or even the participants themselves are primarily youth-driven or youth-comprised. If one looks at many of the frontrunners of the protests (especially in Sri Lanka and Nepal), and at the political leaders who came into power in the elections after the protests, it is the Millennials and Gen X who are strongly represented among them.

This framing may obscure the cross-generational composition and wider structural issues underlying the protests. Many of the frustrations associated with unemployment and underemployment are shared across other generations as well, particularly in the context of broader debt stress faced by developing countries, economic turbulence following the pandemic and its longer-term rollover effects, and emerging structural shifts such as the rise of AI and changing labour markets. In this sense, it can be argued that framing these protests as “youth protests” or “Gen Z protests” may end up simplifying a more complex ideological expression of class discontent with the prevailing national and global political economy order.

Second, the role and nature of political ideology within these protests could be more fully developed in the analysis. While corruption and governance reforms became central slogans during the protests, the protests also provided the space for marginalised voices – of farmers, labourers, and others from working-class backgrounds – to articulate the need for a more inclusive, equitable political economy. There are multiple and sometimes competing articulations of “system change” within the protests; some with demands for a more equitable economic order in which redistributive justice is central to its politics; and other more governance-focused critiques that emphasise institutional and ‘political-administrative’ reform as a precursor (or as a higher among equals) to delivering social justice.

These differences point to the fact that the ideological content of these movements is more layered and fragmented than is often assumed. Importantly, there is not an absence of ideology or a failure of its articulation; rather, it may reflect the lack of an established political groundwork through which these diverse demands could be coherently synthesised into a unified ideological project.

The study then turns to how social media influencers functioned as informal leaders by translating complex socio-economic grievances into relatable, easily shareable content that resonated widely with youth audiences, particularly in the absence of centralised leadership and formal authority (p. 25). I suggest that this account would benefit from an examination of the close and complex relationship between mainstream and digital media. Issues of media ownership and broader operational models remain important in understanding how information circulates in democratic societies. Mainstream media has also increasingly migrated into digital spaces, which means that while social media expands participatory expression, it can also (due to platform algorithms) reproduce, and at times intensify, the influence of established media interests within those same digital ecosystems.

A critique of the “youth bulge” thesis (p. 1) in the study is that it approaches large youth populations as inherently destabilising or prone to unrest. This sidelines the structural conditions that produce unrest, and which have long persisted in peripheral economies (such as the South Asian countries under consideration) within the global political economy. Although the study does engage with some of the structural political economy drivers behind these protests, it would benefit from placing greater analytical emphasis on these conditions, rather than giving equal weight to demographic factors, agency-based explanations (such as political leadership behaviour), and institutional accounts. This would provide greater conceptual clarity and analytical coherence.

In the section on consequences of the protests, the study notes that ‘the absence of clearly institutionalised pathways for sustained youth engagement has placed pressure on new leaders to convert protest-driven legitimacy into effective and inclusive governance’ (p. 36). This raises two questions in the post-protest moment: what has actually been done to build greater trust in institutions and to make political processes more inclusive? And is the absence of any major progress on this front due to it not really being a priority for most of the public? Across the region, there continues to be a demand for strongman politics, often in populist forms. This suggests that there is a deeper tension here that needs further unpacking.

Finally, in the recommendations section, the study suggests that ‘international and regional actors can play a critical role in guiding and incentivising national leaders to prioritise youth empowerment as a core pillar of development agendas’ (p. 40). However, the practicality of this claim is open to question in a global context where increasingly, power defines what is right. Among the three countries under consideration, it is only the Sri Lankan government that worked closely with cross-border actors, especially India, in the aftermath of the protests. In Bangladesh and Nepal, bilateral relations with India deteriorated significantly during their protest episodes. The protests themselves were an articulation of a fundamental mistrust that elites, national or transnational, could provide a platform to ensure the realisation of the rights of the many. So, can we realistically expect collective political imaginations of this kind led by transnational elites, and if so, at what level are they meant to materialise?

The study offers a useful reflection on the future of protests as openings for reform and political change, while also advancing conversations that situate protests as part of an ongoing democratic process beyond moments of rupture.

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