

Gen-Z Protests and Public Deception: Exploring Leadership, Accountability and Governance in Nepal and Bangladesh since 2022

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Abstract

This dissertation examines Gen-Z protests in Nepal and Bangladesh since 2022, focusing on issues of public deception, leadership, accountability and governance. The study aims to understand why young people took to the streets, how governments responded and what these protests reveal about the functioning of political systems in both countries. Gen-Z, being highly connected through social media, has emerged as an important political force that challenges traditional authority and demands transparency. The research uses a comparative case study approach based on secondary sources such as news reports, academic articles, NGO publications and government statements. Through thematic analysis, the study identifies key patterns in protest causes, state responses and governance issues. The findings show that although the immediate triggers of protests differed- such as the social media ban in Nepal and the job quota system in Bangladesh- the underlying causes were similar. These include unemployment, corruption, lack of transparency and declining trust in political leadership. The study also finds that governments in both countries attempted to control narratives through information management, which often increased public distrust. Furthermore, the protests highlight gaps in accountability and weaknesses in governance systems. State responses, including police action and restrictions on digital platforms, raised concerns about democratic practices. At the same time, Gen-Z protests represent a shift in political participation, as young people use digital tools to organise and express their demands. The dissertation concludes that these protests act as a reflection of deeper governance problems and signal a growing demand for transparency, accountability and inclusive leadership in South Asia.

Keywords: Gen-Z Protests, Public Deception, Governance, Accountability, Digital Activism

Introduction

With young people questioning existing power structures and demanding reforms in politics, economy, and society, youth movements have become increasingly important in global politics during the last decade. Among these groups, Generation Z (Gen-Z), which comprises those

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born from the mid-1990s onwards, has become a notable and influential group in politics (Britannica, n.d.; Le Monde, 2025). Gen-Z has grown up with social media, instant messaging, and rapid information sharing, unlike earlier generations. This has changed how young people participate in politics, organise protests, and challenge those in power.

In South Asia, Gen-Z political activism has become more visible since 2022, a period marked by economic uncertainty, rising unemployment, inflation, shrinking democratic spaces, and declining public trust in political institutions. Countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh have seen large-scale protests led by young people, many of which were driven or strongly supported by Gen-Z participants. These protests were influenced by long-standing governance issues and dissatisfaction with political leaders. As a result, Gen-Z protests have become a way to better understand issues of leadership, accountability, and governance.

Gen-Z is different from earlier generations of political activists in many ways. In the past, student movements in South Asia were often connected to political parties, ideological groups, or labour unions. In contrast, Gen-Z protests focus on issues, are not controlled by one person or group, and do not rely on formal leadership. They use online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and messaging applications to mobilise, coordinate, and communicate. These platforms help share information, pictures, videos, and protest narratives, allowing young people to organise on a large scale within a short period of time (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025).

This new form of protesting has both positive and negative effects on democracy. On the one hand, Gen-Z can make their voices heard through the use of the internet. On the other hand, the absence of clear leadership often makes these movements harder to negotiate with and easier for governments to ignore. As a result, Gen-Z protests often face strong reactions from governments rather than constructive dialogue. Gen-Z protests in South Asia can be better understood by looking at the case studies of Nepal and Bangladesh. Both these countries face governance-related issues such as corruption, declining public trust in leadership, lack of accountability, and limited transparency, despite having different political systems.

Nepal's political instability, poor governance, and frequent leadership changes have caused frustration among young people. They also face economic difficulties, unemployment, and the belief that powerful elites prioritise their own interests over citizens, which has increased dissatisfaction (Reuters, 2025). Protests increased after 2022 when the government attempted to control and restrict online platforms. Many young people viewed such actions as attempts to suppress free expression and considered them unfair and undemocratic. These protests exposed deeper issues of institutional weakness and leadership credibility.

In Bangladesh, youth protests were driven by issues such as unemployment and restrictions on freedom of expression. These protests quickly expanded into broader movements questioning government policies and leadership after beginning with specific demands. Through public engagement and online mobilisation, Gen-Z played an important role in sustaining the protests. Government responses, including the use of police force, arrests, and media control, increased public concern about democratic accountability.

This dissertation's main idea is that public deception plays an important role during protest movements. Public deception refers to the use of misleading information, selective narratives, or information control by those in power to shape public perception. In the digital age, this can occur not only through official government statements but also through media framing, internet restrictions, and the spread of misinformation online (Bhandari, 2024).

In both Nepal and Bangladesh, public perception of Gen-Z protests has been significantly influenced by such practices. Governments have often avoided addressing the core concerns raised by protesters and have justified restrictive actions by portraying protests as threats to national stability and security (The Diplomat, 2025). At the same time, misinformation on social media has sometimes created confusion and division by distorting protest narratives.

This interaction between digital activism and information manipulation has weakened trust between citizens and the state. When young people feel that leaders are hiding information or shifting blame, dissatisfaction increases and protests intensify. Public deception therefore becomes not only a communication issue but also a governance problem, affecting fairness, transparency, and accountability.

The way political leaders in Nepal and Bangladesh respond to Gen-Z protests provides important insights into governance systems. Leadership is tested by how effectively dissent is managed, how transparent decision-making is, and whether democratic rights are protected. However, state responses often prioritise control over dialogue, raising concerns about accountability (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

Accountability means holding leaders responsible for their actions and decisions. When protests are met with violence, silence, or misinformation, it becomes more difficult for citizens to demand accountability. This creates a cycle of declining trust, increasing unrest, and unstable governance. In this way, Gen-Z protests highlight deeper governance failures.

A comparison between Nepal and Bangladesh helps in understanding how youth protests operate in different political contexts. Bangladesh has experienced a concentration of power and restrictions on opposition, while Nepal's multi-party democratic system faces instability. Despite these differences, youth in both countries' express dissatisfaction with leadership and governance (Freedom House, 2025).

A comparative approach highlights both differences and similarities in protest movements and state responses. It also helps identify common governance challenges such as lack of transparency, weak institutions, and declining trust. This broader perspective allows for a better understanding of youth politics in South Asia rather than focusing only on individual countries. While existing research has examined Gen-Z protests in Nepal and Bangladesh separately, there is limited analysis linking these protests to public deception, governance, leadership, and accountability. Most studies focus on the events themselves rather than their broader political implications.

To address this gap, this dissertation compares Gen-Z protests in Nepal and Bangladesh since 2022. It examines the causes of these protests, the role of misinformation and public deception, and what these movements reveal about governance and leadership. In doing so, the study

contributes to a deeper understanding of youth politics and democratic challenges in South Asia.

Gen-Z as a Political Generation in South Asia

Generation Z, commonly referred to as Gen-Z, includes people born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s. This generation has grown up at a time of rapidly developing technology, widespread internet access, and constant exposure to global political and social issues (Britannica, n.d.). Unlike earlier generations, Gen-Z has grown up in a world where they can get information instantly and observe political debates through online platforms. This has had an impact on how Generation Z thinks about politics, what they expect from leaders, and how they participate.

Scholars and international organisations describe Gen-Z as a generation that is less interested in traditional political parties and more focused on issues that directly affect them, such as unemployment, freedom of speech, lack of accountability, and corruption (UNDP, n.d.). Gen-Z relies on protests, public demonstrations, and online campaigns to make their voices heard. This has transformed political participation in the South Asian region.

South Asian politics has traditionally included youth movements. Student activism has played an important role in demands for political reform, anti-colonial struggles, and democratic movements. In the past, youth movements had well-defined leadership and were closely linked to political parties or ideological organisations.

However, today's youth politics is changing. Many young people feel disconnected from political institutions but remain politically aware. Issues like corruption, unemployment, and lack of transparency have caused dissatisfaction among youth in South Asia. These concerns intensified after 2022 due to economic challenges and declining public trust in political institutions. As a result, young people increasingly turned to protests to express frustration and demand accountability.

The concept of a "political generation" helps explain why Gen-Z interacts with politics differently. Scholars argue that shared historical experiences shape how a generation views participation, authority, and citizenship. Globally, Gen-Z faces issues such as economic instability, climate change, digital surveillance, and democratic decline (Le Monde, 2025).

These global challenges combine with regional issues in South Asia, such as limited employment opportunities and unequal political representation. Many Gen-Z individuals feel that political institutions do not represent them or include them in decision-making processes. As a result, they focus more on current issues and demand ethical and transparent leadership rather than ideological loyalty.

One key feature that distinguishes Gen-Z from earlier generations is its reliance on digital platforms. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X play a crucial role in organising protests, shaping political opinions, and spreading information. Digital activism enables rapid mobilisation and wide reach without relying on traditional media.

Reports on South Asian protests show that local issues can quickly become national movements through online mobilisation. The sharing of images, videos, and personal experiences increases visibility and awareness of protests. However, this can also increase tensions between protesters and the state.

At the same time, misinformation and rumours are major challenges of digital activism. False or unverified information can create confusion and division among people. Leaderless movements may also struggle to negotiate with authorities or sustain long-term organisation. These challenges are visible in Gen-Z protests in Nepal and Bangladesh.

Gen-Z activists use online platforms not only to mobilise but also to shape political narratives. Visibility is central to their activism, as they record events, question official statements, and demand accountability. In countries like Nepal and Bangladesh, images and videos—especially of police actions—have influenced public perception (Human Rights Watch, 2025; Amnesty International, 2024).

However, this visibility also exposes activists to risks such as surveillance, arrests, and punishment. Governments respond by regulating digital platforms, restricting internet use, or framing online activism as a threat to national security. This reflects a broader conflict between Gen-Z's demand for transparency and the state's desire to control narratives. Gen-Z protest movements are often decentralised and lack formal leadership. They operate through digitally connected networks rather than hierarchical structures. This makes them difficult to control but also harder to negotiate with authorities. Their issue-based focus allows wider participation but may limit long-term political impact.

Narrative control is central to these movements. Gen-Z actively challenges government and media portrayals of protests. When governments respond with repression or misinformation, it increases conflict between protesters and authorities (The Diplomat, 2025). In South Asia, the relationship between youth protesters and the state has historically been complex. While youth movements have contributed to change, governments often view them as disruptive. Gen-Z protests continue this trend in a digital context.

Governments in Nepal and Bangladesh often respond through control rather than dialogue. Measures such as arrests, media restrictions, and policing are justified as necessary for maintaining stability, but critics argue that they weaken democratic governance. These protests highlight tensions between authority and dissent. Government responses reveal priorities and the strength of accountability systems. Research shows that Gen-Z activists often distrust political leadership, believing leaders are unresponsive or dishonest. This mistrust increases when governments use force, misinformation, or suppression.

Declining trust in leadership is linked to lack of transparency, limited participation, and governance failures. Gen-Z protests are therefore not only about policies but also about rejecting leadership styles perceived as unaccountable. Even when protests do not lead to immediate policy changes, they influence public perceptions of governance. They expose systemic weaknesses and reshape political discourse by demanding transparency and accountability. Gen-Z protests also highlight the gap between political promises and lived realities in countries like Nepal and Bangladesh. They reveal the difficulty governments face

in responding transparently and responsibly to youth demands. To understand contemporary protests in South Asia, it is essential to view Gen-Z as a politically active group. Their issue-based approach, distrust of traditional leadership, and use of digital platforms are transforming political participation and state-society relations.

Public Deception and Misinformation in Protest Politics

Public deception refers to the deliberate use of misleading or false information by those in power to influence public opinion. During protests, this can include exaggerating threats, denying responsibility, or portraying protesters as violent or anti-national (Bhandari, 2024). Unlike direct censorship, deception shapes perception rather than restricting access to information. The rise of social media has made public deception more complex. Governments now use multiple platforms—including digital media and traditional outlets—to influence narratives (Journal of Communication; New Media & Society). Such actions are often justified in the name of maintaining stability or national security, but they raise concerns about transparency and accountability.

Misinformation and disinformation spread widely during protests, especially through social media. Gen-Z often relies on online sources rather than traditional media for information. While this enables fast communication, it also makes verification difficult. Research shows that conflicting narratives—government-controlled and unofficial—create confusion and weaken trust (Kathmandu Post, 2025). Governments may label genuine protest information as “fake news” to discredit dissent.

Authorities play a key role in shaping public perception through media control, legal measures, and official statements. Common strategies include downplaying protests, blaming opposition groups, and justifying the use of force. In Nepal and Bangladesh, governments have justified restrictive measures as necessary to control misinformation and maintain order. However, critics argue these measures are often used to suppress dissent and limit freedom of expression (Freedom House, 2025).

Public deception is often linked to political pressure. Governments may minimise economic issues or deny responsibility for violence. Official narratives may contradict eyewitness accounts and digital evidence shared online. In Nepal, attempts to regulate social media were justified as efforts to control misinformation, but many young protesters saw them as attempts to suppress free speech. Similarly, in Bangladesh, authorities framed protests as politically motivated while avoiding core issues such as unemployment (Al Jazeera, 2024).

Such actions weaken public trust, especially among Gen-Z, who rely on multiple information sources. When government narratives differ from lived experiences, distrust increases and protests intensify. Media plays a crucial role in shaping protest narratives. Independent media can promote accountability, but in many South Asian contexts, media operates under pressure and restrictions. This can lead to the repetition of official narratives without verification.

Digital regulation has become a key tool for governments. Laws controlling online speech are often justified as necessary for stability, but international organisations warn they may restrict freedom of expression. Public deception is therefore not just a communication issue but a

governance problem. It undermines transparency and accountability, which are essential for democratic systems. Gen-Z protests highlight how deception erodes trust and deepens political divisions. In countries like Nepal and Bangladesh, deceptive practices during protests reveal broader governance issues, including weak accountability and poor communication. These problems extend beyond protests and affect long-term political stability. Ultimately, Gen-Z protests show that controlling narratives does not necessarily restore order. Instead, it can increase resistance and deepen dissatisfaction. The interaction between digital activism and public deception has reshaped protest politics in South Asia, making transparency and accountability more important than ever.

Leadership, Accountability and Governance in Times of Protest

Leadership is very important when there are problems in a country and people are protesting. In democratic and semi-democratic countries, leaders are expected to engage in dialogue and act transparently rather than relying on force. Therefore, leadership during protests is not only about maintaining order but also about showing responsiveness and responsibility.

Protests are often seen as a test of leadership. They can lead to positive change and strengthen democracy when leaders respond constructively. However, when leaders ignore demands, use force, or rely on misleading information, public trust declines (The Diplomat, 2025). In South Asia, leadership responses to protests often reveal deeper governance issues rather than temporary political challenges. Accountability requires leaders to explain and justify their actions. It includes not only legal and political accountability but also moral responsibility. Effective accountability systems allow citizens to question authority and seek solutions through democratic processes (UNDP).

Protests occur when people feel that their voices are not heard in decision-making. Therefore, accountability becomes especially important during such times. When governments respond without transparency, accountability mechanisms weaken. Research on governance shows that lack of accountability often worsens conflicts instead of resolving them. In theory, accountability systems such as judicial review, parliamentary oversight, and watchdog institutions exist in countries like Nepal and Bangladesh. However, in practice, these systems often weaken during political crises. Protests reveal the fragility of these mechanisms. Governance includes the use of power, management of public resources, and decision-making processes. Good governance requires transparency, participation, rule of law, and responsiveness.

In many South Asian countries, state responses to protests focus more on control than dialogue. Governments use policing, legal restrictions, and media control to suppress dissent. While these measures are justified as necessary for maintaining order, governance experts argue that excessive control weakens democratic legitimacy. Since 2022, Gen-Z protests have shown that governance systems struggle to adapt to decentralised mobilisation and digital activism (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025).

During protests, leadership behaviour reflects how power is exercised under pressure. Leaders can either engage with citizens through dialogue and reform or resort to repression and narrative control. These choices shape public perceptions of legitimacy. Reports from Nepal

and Bangladesh show that governments often portray protests as politically motivated or disruptive rather than addressing underlying issues. This shifts blame onto protesters instead of acknowledging governance failures, increasing public dissatisfaction.

When leaders fail to engage with protesters, it highlights a gap between the state and citizens. This leads to long-term distrust and further mobilisation. Gen-Z protests expose weaknesses in accountability systems. Questions arise about who monitors state actions and protects citizen rights when governments restrict protests, speech, or internet access. Human rights organisations repeatedly highlight the lack of accountability when excessive force or restrictions are used (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

In Nepal, frequent government changes and coalition politics make it difficult to assign responsibility. In Bangladesh, concentration of power and weak institutional checks reduce accountability during protests. These gaps encourage Gen-Z to view protests as an effective way to demand attention and change. The rule of law is a key part of governance, ensuring equality before the law. Governments often use laws related to national security, public order, and digital regulation during protests. While such laws may be necessary, their excessive or selective use raises governance concerns. Broad or vague laws give authorities significant discretion, increasing the risk of misuse (Freedom House, 2025).

In both Nepal and Bangladesh, laws related to protests and digital activity have been criticised for limiting freedom of expression and peaceful assembly (Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2025). When laws are used primarily to suppress dissent rather than protect rights, governance legitimacy declines and public trust weakens. Gen-Z protests also highlight the issue of youth participation in governance. Despite forming a large part of the population, young people often feel excluded from political decision-making. Governance studies show that lack of youth inclusion can lead to instability and dissatisfaction. Gen-Z protests demand not only policy changes but also greater inclusion in governance processes.

In Nepal and Bangladesh, underrepresentation of youth in political institutions has widened the generational gap. Many young people believe that protests are the only way to make their voices heard. This reflects a failure of governance systems to integrate youth perspectives. Protests are critical moments that test leadership. Government responses can shape long-term public perceptions. Transparent and responsive leadership strengthens democracy, while repression and misinformation weaken it.

Gen-Z protests demonstrate that suppressing dissent through force or misinformation does not resolve underlying issues. Instead, it increases dissatisfaction and reduces trust in the state. Leadership credibility is therefore closely linked to governance quality during protests. In both Nepal and Bangladesh, responses to Gen-Z protests have revealed limitations in transparency and accountability. In the digital age, where information spreads quickly and citizens demand immediate accountability, governance becomes more complex. Gen-Z protests have forced governments to confront these challenges, even if responses remain inadequate. Studying leadership and governance in the context of protests is therefore essential for understanding contemporary politics. These ideas provide the foundation for the following sections, which analyse Gen-Z protest movements in Nepal and Bangladesh as case studies. By applying these

concepts, this study examines how governance systems function under sustained protest pressure.

Gen-Z Protests in Nepal since 2022

Since gaining its republican status in 2008, Nepal has seen recurring political instability. These involve long-standing public frustration over corruption, poor governance, lack of economic opportunities, and frequent changes in government (Freedom House, 2025). A large part of Nepal's population consists of Gen-Z, those born after the mid-1990s, who have increasingly spoken out about these issues. The Gen-Z protests, which began in 2025, addressed not only specific policies but also deeper problems within Nepal's political system and governance (Reuters, 2025).

On 4 September 2025, the government of Nepal decided to ban 26 social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, X, and YouTube. This decision triggered the Gen-Z protests in the country. The Ministry of Communication and Information Technology justified the ban by stating that these platforms had not complied with new registration requirements. However, critics viewed the ban as an attempt to suppress youth voices, limit political discussion, and control dissent. For many young people in Nepal, social media serves as a platform not only for communication but also for learning, business, and political discussion. With a large percentage of the population using the internet, the restriction affected millions and led to widespread anger. Many protesters believed that the ban violated their right to freedom of expression.

Although the protests were triggered by the social media ban, it soon became clear that young people were protesting against broader issues. These included corruption, political exclusion, and economic concerns. As noted by participants, the ban acted as a trigger that brought long-standing frustrations into the open. Many citizens felt that political leaders were self-serving and disconnected from the needs of the youth. The protests reflected deeper structural problems. Widespread corruption and nepotism within Nepal's political system played a major role in mobilising youth. Allegations of misuse of public office, political instability, and frequent leadership changes have weakened public trust. Protesters often carried banners criticising corruption and demanding accountability from leaders.

Economic challenges were also a key factor. High unemployment, low wages, and limited opportunities for advancement created frustration among young people. These issues made many feel excluded from the political and economic system. At the same time, there was growing dissatisfaction with traditional political leadership, which was seen as dominated by older elites who had failed to bring meaningful change. Protests began on 4 September 2025 and spread rapidly across the country by 8 September. In major cities like Kathmandu, large numbers of young people, including students in school and college uniforms, gathered to demand the lifting of the social media ban and broader political reforms (Reuters, 2025). Demonstrations took place near key public locations, including areas around the federal parliament.

The demands of protesters went beyond restoring access to social media. They included:

- Ending corruption and nepotism in government
- Ensuring freedom of expression and digital rights
- Holding leaders accountable
- Creating economic opportunities for youth

Protesters expressed these demands through slogans, placards, and online content. Many emphasised unity and the need for youth voices to be heard in national politics.

Reports from human rights organisations and international media indicate that the protests were largely leaderless and decentralised. Digital platforms and informal networks played a key role in mobilisation and coordination. While this allowed rapid mobilisation, it also made it difficult for authorities to negotiate with a single representative group. By 8 September, protests had intensified, with tens of thousands of people participating. Security forces, including police units, were deployed in large numbers. According to human rights reports, law enforcement used measures such as tear gas, water cannons, batons, rubber bullets, and in some cases, live ammunition. The clashes led to multiple deaths and hundreds of injuries

Human Rights Watch reported that the use of force was at times excessive and indiscriminate, with police firing at protesters who posed no immediate threat. The organisation called for investigations and accountability for those responsible. The protests attracted significant domestic and international attention. Initially, the government maintained the ban and emphasised the need to restore order. However, increasing pressure from civil society, international media, and human rights organisations forced the government to reconsider its position. Government officials later acknowledged that the protests reflected broader concerns beyond social media restrictions. Emergency meetings were held to address the situation and reduce tensions. Human rights organisations emphasised that the scale of the protests highlighted serious governance and accountability issues.

On 9 September 2025, the government lifted the ban on social media platforms, describing it as a temporary measure while new regulatory guidelines were developed. This decision demonstrated the impact of youth mobilisation and public pressure. However, lifting the ban did not end the protests. Many participants continued to demand accountability, economic reforms, and protection of digital rights. The protests raised questions about leadership credibility, as many young people viewed political leaders as disconnected and unresponsive.

The use of force during protests raised serious concerns about the protection of civil liberties and lack of transparency in governance. Civil society organisations and independent media documented human rights violations and highlighted differences between official narratives and ground realities (Kathmandu Post, 2025). Social media continued to play an important role even after the ban was lifted. Protesters used digital platforms to share updates, document events, and maintain visibility. This showed how online spaces can act as tools for accountability and public participation. The Nepal protests revealed several governance weaknesses. The government's slow and reactive response, along with its reliance on force, exposed problems in crisis management and responsiveness. At the same time, the lifting of the ban demonstrated the power of public pressure in influencing policy decisions.

Scholars argue that these events highlight the importance of transparency, inclusion, and responsiveness in governance. Digital platforms have strengthened the ability of citizens, especially youth, to demand accountability and influence political outcomes.

The first wave of Gen-Z protests in Nepal highlights several key points:

- Gen-Z has emerged as a powerful political force capable of influencing government decisions
- Digital platforms play a crucial role in mobilisation and narrative-building
- Poor communication and delayed responses increase public dissatisfaction
- Weak accountability mechanisms remain a major governance challenge

These insights are important for understanding broader patterns of youth protest and will be further explored in comparison with Bangladesh.

Gen-Z Protests in Bangladesh since 2022

Bangladesh has witnessed one of the largest youth-led political movements in South Asia since 2022. The movement was mainly made up of university students and young professionals belonging to Gen-Z, who became the driving force behind widespread protests. These protests initially focused on employment disparity but later expanded to include criticism of political leadership, lack of accountability, and ineffective governance. After being in power for more than fifteen years, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina stepped down and left the country in 2024 due to the major political crisis that resulted from these protests (Reuters, 2025). This section examines how Gen-Z protests in Bangladesh began, developed, and their aftermath. It focuses on how misinformation, governance practices, and leadership responses shaped the movement. It also highlights how digital activism enabled youth mobilisation and how the state attempted to control it.

As Bangladesh entered the post-2022 period, young people were increasingly affected by structural issues. Despite strong economic growth in previous years, job creation did not match the needs of the growing youth population. Reports indicate that millions of young people were unemployed or not in education or training, limiting their access to stable employment. At the same time, democratic space declined. Concerns grew about unfair elections, suppression of opposition, and restrictions on media (Freedom House, 2025). Scholars and human rights organisations noted a shift toward more authoritarian governance with weak accountability systems. Gen-Z, having grown up in a digital environment and exposed to global democratic values, became politically aware and frustrated rather than apathetic. A major trigger for protests was the reintroduction of the government job quota system in June 2024. This decision revived earlier debates over reservations linked to the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War.

Students argued that the quota system reduced merit-based opportunities during a time of high unemployment and mainly benefited those connected to the ruling political elite. What began as peaceful university protests quickly spread across the country and was coordinated through social media platforms such as Facebook and messaging applications. Initially, protesters did not oppose all forms of reservation. They demanded a fair and transparent recruitment system

that ensured equal opportunities. As protests intensified, their demands expanded to include broader governance issues such as corruption, suppression of opposition, and misuse of state power. Researchers described the quota issue as a “trigger” that exposed deeper dissatisfaction with leadership and corruption.

The movement distanced itself from traditional political leadership and emphasised moral legitimacy over formal authority. It presented itself as people-driven and independent of political parties. However, the state’s response escalated tensions significantly. Police used tear gas, rubber bullets, and in some cases live ammunition. Human rights organisations reported deaths, injuries, and large-scale arrests of students and activists. Authorities imposed curfews and internet shutdowns, disrupting daily life and access to information. Amnesty International described these measures as violations of fundamental rights, including freedom of expression and peaceful protest (Amnesty International, 2024). Instead of reducing unrest, repression increased public anger and support for the protesters.

A major contributing factor to the crisis was the lack of transparency in political leadership. The government portrayed protesters as extremists or politically motivated and blamed opposition groups for unrest. Public statements by Sheikh Hasina, including referring to protesters as “razakars,” intensified tensions and public dissatisfaction (Al Jazeera, 2024).

The use of selective information, denial of responsibility, and state-aligned media narratives created confusion and weakened public trust. At the same time, social media became both a space for expression and a tool that the state attempted to monitor and control. Gen-Z protesters relied heavily on digital platforms to organise demonstrations, share videos and images of events, and challenge official narratives. Research shows that digital content such as videos, memes, slogans, and live streams helped create unity and sustain mobilisation even during communication disruptions. This use of digital media distinguished Gen-Z protests from earlier movements. It reduced reliance on formal leadership and strengthened collective action. Despite state restrictions, digital activism played a key role in maintaining visibility and pressure.

Due to continuous protests, international scrutiny, and internal pressure, Sheikh Hasina resigned and fled the country by August 2024, marking a major turning point in Bangladesh’s political history (Reuters, 2025). This demonstrated the power of youth-led protests in challenging established authority. However, analysts note that leadership change does not automatically ensure structural reform, and the interim government faced challenges related to stability and governance.

The protests revealed serious governance weaknesses. The use of force, lack of independent investigations, and widespread arrests exposed weaknesses in accountability systems. Human rights organisations continue to call for reforms in policing, governance, and justice systems (Amnesty International, 2024).

Gen-Z protests also showed that when formal systems fail, citizens can mobilise to demand accountability. Public participation becomes a key way to influence governance when institutional mechanisms are weak. Since 2022, Gen-Z protests in Bangladesh have gone beyond a single issue. They have highlighted broader concerns such as governance failure,

leadership weaknesses, and public deception. Protesters exposed the gap between official narratives and real experiences through both street demonstrations and digital activism.

The Bangladesh Gen-Z protests demonstrate that youth can play a powerful role in political change. However, they also show that achieving long-term institutional reform remains difficult. While leadership was challenged, deeper issues of governance and accountability remain unresolved. These developments provide a strong foundation for comparison with Nepal, which is discussed in the next section.

Comparative Analysis of Gen-Z Protests in Nepal and Bangladesh

A comparative approach helps us understand how similar youth-led protests can arise in different political environments while raising common questions about leadership, governance, and accountability. Nepal and Bangladesh both experienced Gen-Z-led protests after 2022, but their causes, state responses, and outcomes were different. Comparing them highlights common structural issues, the role of information and public deception, and how governments react when young people mobilise. In both countries, protests were triggered by specific government decisions that became symbols of broader dissatisfaction. In Nepal, the government's decision to ban social media angered many young people and quickly developed into wider protests about corruption and lack of opportunities. According to Reuters, young protesters demanded action against corruption and better economic prospects.

In Bangladesh, the reinstatement of the job quota system- benefiting descendants of 1971 war veterans- triggered protests. Many young people believed the policy was unfair and limited merit-based opportunities. Amnesty International reported that protests intensified when peaceful demonstrators were met with police force. Despite different triggers, both protests focused on similar concerns: justice, representation, and future opportunities. Protesters in both countries demanded accountability and respect for their rights, rather than only policy changes.

A major similarity between the two cases was the role of digital activism. In Nepal, the protests were directly linked to restrictions on social media, making digital space central to mobilisation. Reuters described these as “Gen-Z protests” due to their connection to digital rights and youth dissatisfaction. In Bangladesh, reporting by Al Jazeera highlighted how social media helped mobilise and sustain protests, allowing young people to coordinate and share information rapidly (Al Jazeera, 2024). In both cases, Gen-Z's familiarity with online communication enabled fast mobilisation, strong communication, and awareness of public narratives.

Public deception and narrative control played an important role in both contexts, though in different ways. In Nepal, the government justified the social media ban by citing concerns about misinformation and lack of platform regulation. However, many protesters believed the ban was intended to suppress dissent and control political expression. In Bangladesh, Amnesty International and Al Jazeera reported that government narratives portrayed protesters as disruptive or politically motivated, while denying responsibility for violence. Conflicting narratives between the state and protesters created confusion and weakened public trust. In both cases, attempts to control information or downplay protests increased public dissatisfaction.

Gen-Z protests were not only about demands but also about competing narratives and questions of truth.

Another key similarity was the strong state response. In Nepal, Human Rights Watch reported that security forces used excessive force, including firing at protesters, leading to deaths and injuries (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Reuters also reported casualties and widespread unrest. In Bangladesh, Amnesty International documented the use of force against peaceful protesters, which intensified tensions and increased demands for government accountability.

In both countries, the issue was not only the use of force but also the lack of accountability. Human rights reports emphasised that when investigations are weak or absent, public trust declines and democratic systems are weakened. Leadership responses differed significantly between the two cases. In Nepal, the government responded by lifting the social media ban after protests intensified. According to Reuters, officials acknowledged the need to reconsider the policy and announced an investigation into the events (Reuters, 2025). This reflects an attempt at crisis management through policy reversal and dialogue.

However, continued concerns about police violence suggest that accountability measures were limited, and trust was not fully restored. In Bangladesh, the protests developed into a larger political crisis. According to Al Jazeera, youth protests played a major role in the resignation of Sheikh Hasina in August 2024. Amnesty International noted that the use of force further escalated demands for government resignation.

This comparison highlights two different leadership paths:

- Nepal responded with policy reversal and limited reform
- Bangladesh experienced a major political change and leadership crisis

However, both cases show that youth protests can challenge the legitimacy of leadership, especially when governments are seen as unresponsive or dishonest. In terms of governance outcomes, both countries achieved short-term changes. Nepal lifted the social media ban and announced investigations, while Bangladesh saw a change in leadership. However, long-term governance challenges remain. Human rights reports stress that accountability, transparency, and protection of rights are still ongoing concerns in both countries (Human Rights Watch, 2025; Amnesty International, 2024). This suggests that immediate responses do not always lead to deeper institutional reform.

Similarities

- Clear triggers reflecting deeper dissatisfaction (digital rights in Nepal; job fairness in Bangladesh)
- Strong role of Gen-Z and digital mobilisation
- Use of force and human rights concerns
- Central importance of accountability and public trust

Differences

- Nepal's protests focused on digital restrictions; Bangladesh's on economic and employment issues
- Nepal responded with policy changes; Bangladesh experienced political instability and leadership change

Overall, this comparison shows that Gen-Z protests in Nepal and Bangladesh were not just reactions to specific policies but reflected broader concerns about governance, accountability, and leadership credibility. In both cases, public perception was shaped by narrative control, and government responses tested democratic legitimacy.

These findings form the basis for the next section, which examines what these movements suggest for the future of governance and accountability in South Asia.

Implications of Gen-Z Protests for Leadership, Accountability and Governance in South Asia

The Gen-Z protests in Nepal and Bangladesh since 2022 are important because they show how governments function under pressure, not just what happens on the streets. In both countries, young people have challenged those in power and demanded transparency and accountability. These protests also reflect how politics is changing in the digital era, where young citizens can organise quickly, document events, and question official narratives.

These movements have wider implications for leadership, accountability, and governance. They show how protests can reshape state–citizen relations, especially in terms of democratic legitimacy, public trust, and communication.

One important feature of Gen-Z protests is that leadership is now judged not only by formal authority but also by perceived honesty and transparency. In Nepal, protests erupted after the government-imposed restrictions on social media platforms, with reports highlighting anger over corruption and lack of accountability (Reuters, 2025). In Bangladesh, student protests over the quota system developed into a major political crisis affecting national leadership.

These cases show that when leaders appear to hide information, shift blame, or give unclear explanations, they are seen as dishonest. This is especially important for Gen-Z, who consume information in real time and compare official statements with online content and eyewitness reports. As a result, crisis management today requires:

- clear explanations of policies
- willingness to correct mistakes
- visible accountability

In Nepal, reports of police violence increased pressure on leadership and raised questions about accountability (Human Rights Watch, 2025). This shows that using force or denial can turn a specific issue into a wider legitimacy crisis.

Another key implication is the rise of social accountability. When formal institutions are weak, public pressure- especially from youth- can force governments to act. Human Rights Watch documented excessive force in Nepal and called for investigations. Similarly, Amnesty International reported crackdowns in Bangladesh, raising concerns about justice and accountability.

In both cases, protests demanded:

- independent investigations
- punishment for misuse of force
- institutional reforms

This shows that public expectations of accountability are now higher than institutional capacity. When governments fail to conduct fair investigations, trust declines and protests are likely to continue.

Gen-Z protests also highlight that information control is now a major governance issue. In Nepal, the debate over the social media ban was seen as a question of freedom of expression, not just regulation. Freedom House reports indicate that internet freedom conditions worsened during periods of unrest. In Bangladesh, restrictions on information and communication also raised concerns about transparency.

Governments now face a key choice:

- regulate misinformation in a transparent way
- or use it as a justification for censorship

When governments choose the second approach, protests often intensify because restrictions are seen as attempts to hide the truth. This shows that effective governance today requires:

- clear and fair digital regulations
- independent oversight
- protection of free speech

Another important implication is that Gen-Z protests are closely linked to governance outcomes such as employment, corruption, and fairness. In Bangladesh, protests were triggered by concerns over job opportunities and fairness in recruitment. Data from the World Bank shows that youth unemployment remains a major issue. In Nepal, corruption and governance failures were major concerns, with Transparency International reporting low scores in corruption perception.

This means governance reforms must focus on:

- creating economic opportunities
- reducing corruption
- increasing youth participation

Without improvements in these areas, protests are likely to continue.

Another clear lesson is that harsh crackdowns can make situations worse. In Bangladesh, Amnesty International reported that repression increased tensions rather than controlling them. In Nepal, Human Rights Watch showed how excessive force raised serious accountability concerns.

This highlights a key governance lesson: governments that rely on force may gain short-term control but lose long-term legitimacy. In the digital age, evidence of repression spreads quickly, making it harder for governments to control narratives.

For long-term stability, governments need:

- proportionate policing
- credible investigations
- dialogue with youth

Gen-Z protests also show a deeper shift in politics. Young people no longer see themselves only as “future citizens” but as active participants in the present. The United Nations Development Programme emphasises the importance of youth participation in governance and decision-making.

This creates important implications:

- ignoring youth voices can weaken political systems
- treating youth protests as disorder can increase instability
- involving youth in decision-making can reduce conflict

At the same time, these movements also carry risks. Misinformation can spread quickly in protest environments, especially when trust is low. Repeated cycles of protest and repression can increase instability. Reports by Freedom House also suggest that even after political changes, new governance challenges can emerge.

This means governance reform must balance:

- protection of rights
- maintenance of stability
- rebuilding trust in institutions

Overall, the cases of Nepal and Bangladesh suggest several regional lessons:

- legitimacy depends on accountability, not just authority
- information control is less effective in the digital age
- human rights violations can trigger larger crises
- youth concerns are closely linked to economic and governance issues

- long-term change depends on institutional reform

In conclusion, Gen-Z protests in Nepal and Bangladesh show that young people are now a powerful political force. They can challenge leadership, expose governance weaknesses, and reshape political debates. These movements highlight the importance of transparency, accountability, and trust in modern governance.

However, their long-term impact depends on whether governments respond with real institutional reforms—especially in areas like corruption control, youth participation, and digital rights. These insights lead directly to the final conclusion of this dissertation, which summarises the key findings and reflects on the future of democratic governance in South Asia.

Conclusion

This study examined Gen-Z protests in Nepal and Bangladesh since 2022 from the viewpoints of leadership, governance, accountability and public deceit. To understand the reasons behind youth protests, responses of states and implications of these protests say for politics in South Asia, a comparative approach has been used.

The study shows that Gen-Z protests in both Nepal and Bangladesh were not isolated or temporary youth responses. They rather stem from bigger issues such as unemployment, corruption and declining confidence in the state. A social media ban in Nepal pushed people to voice their long-standing frustrations. A new job quota system in Bangladesh gave rise to a movement that challenged the country's leadership and governance system.

Despite the exact causes being different, in both cases it can be seen that peoples protests were motivated by similar problems. Young people in both nations were dissatisfied not only with specific policies but also with governance failures. Their demands included justice, accountability and inclusion in the decision making processes. These protests demonstrate a transformation in what the youth expects from politics- they now demand leaders to be transparent and responsive.

The study's main focus is on the important role that deception and information control plays in protests. In both nations, governments attempted to influence narratives by labelling protests as disruptive and politically motivated or threats to national safety and security. They used measures like limiting access to internet, shaping narratives and selective disclosure of information which made people lose trust even more. Such acts appeared like attempts to conceal the truth rather than maintain stability to Gen-Z, who rely on online platforms for knowledge and mobilisation. This shows how public deception is a governance problem that has an immediate impact on legitimacy and stability.

In addition, the study also highlights the importance of accountability during protests. In both countries the state reactions included using a lot of police force. Human rights organisations challenged whether the use of force was appropriate and if investigations were impartial. People lose faith in the government, when it appears to them that accountability systems are inefficient or biased. The protests therefore revealed serious accountability weaknesses within the existing governance structures.

Another important conclusion is that Gen-Z mobilisation has transformed protest politics in the digital era. These protests, in contrast to traditional youth movements, were not controlled by one person or group and were organised online with focus on specific concerns. Social media made it difficult for governments to influence the narrative by enabling mobilisation and documentation of events which made it difficult for governments to influence the narrative. This shift meant that instead of trying to control people, the governments must adjust to new forms of citizen engagement.

There are both similarities and differences between Nepal and Bangladesh. The social media ban in Nepal was quickly lifted by the government but some bigger governance issues have still not been fixed. Protests in Bangladesh turned into a bigger crisis that resulted in a change to the country's leadership. Although, in both nations, long-term governance change remains uncertain. Institutional accountability and democratic strengthening are not always ensured by policy reversals or leadership resignations.

Overall this study concludes that Gen-Z protests show us flaws in governance systems. They demonstrate how leaders act, how responsible, open and responsive they are. These movements show that young people in South Asia participate in politics instead of merely observing it. They demand fair treatment, inclusion and honest governance.

Another implication is that if South Asian nations like Nepal and Bangladesh want stability then they must pay attention to the needs of the young people. To regain confidence, they need to strengthen transparency, make changes in the economic system, recruitment processes, safeguard digital rights and increase youth participation in institutions.

However, the study notes that young people who take part in movements also face the risk of being misinformed and polarised. Safeguarding democratic freedoms and responsible information regulation is important, in order to maintain stability of institutions.

In conclusion, Gen-z protests since 2022 demonstrate a transformation in the functioning of politics in South Asia. They bring attention to the increasing influence of the digitally connected youth. They are questioning the leadership and changing discussions around government. How the Gen-Z demands of transparency, inclusivity and accountability are met with by the state will tell if such protests will make democracy stronger in the future or simply trigger new protests.

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