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Nepal's 2025 Uprising: Geopolitical Entrapment, Neoliberal Failure, and Gen Z Activism

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Abstract

This paper examines the Gen Z September 2025 movement in Nepal to explain how endemic corruption, deep socioeconomic disenchantment, and digitally native activism converged to generate an unprecedented wave of political change. It aims to analyze the movement's rapid escalation, the constitutional "fault line" it exposed between revolutionary digital legitimacy and established constitutional legality, and the broader implications of this crisis in terms of regional contagion and governance instability. The study employs a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative textual analysis of geopolitical reporting with quantitative analysis of digital mobilization metrics. Empirical evidence includes data on digital participation, such as a Discord poll used to select a new Prime Minister, indicating that political authority was, in part, derived through digital channels. The findings suggest that the uprising was structurally shaped by the breakdown of neoliberal policies, entrenched high-level corruption, and the influence of external actors, including the United States through the MCC, India's geopolitical influence, and the role of INGOs and EDPs, which collectively contributed to domestic instability through weak institutional ownership. The paper concludes that the movement precipitated

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the downfall of the government and triggered a constitutional crisis. Its contribution lies in highlighting how digital political legitimacy can destabilize conventional constitutional frameworks when combined with systemic corruption, external geopolitical pressures, and severe social inequality, thereby underscoring the need to move beyond revolution-era accountability toward deeper structural reforms addressing governance failures and the contradictions underlying violent instability.

Keywords: Constitutional Crisis; Digital Legitimacy; Geopolitical Entrapment; Neoliberal Failure; Systemic Corruption

INTRODUCTION

The September 2025 Gen Z uprising marked an inflexion point for Nepal's democracy; its outcome was a confluence of age-old internal structural weaknesses and external foreign policy briefs. This paper explores the various roots of the uprising. It focuses on long-term corruption, widespread frustration with economic conditions, and proleptic calculations influenced by the activities of digitally native activists. An equally careful look will also be taken at the part played, inter alia, by three key external actors 106: the USA, India and INGOs/EDPs - in both fuelling and managing domestic volatility. Precisely the opposite of the above: Instead, what the movement succeeded in doing at one fell swoop was to thrash itself up into muddy constitutional dregs by chopping a deviously non-parliamentary prime minister down with an axe using just a digital vote and knocking over. In the end, what transpired in 2025 unveiled a legitimacy crisis between digital revolutionaries and traditional constitutional legality; at its core, it represented a stark challenge to Nepal's politics as usual.

This is an unprecedented move that demonstrates the spread of regional contagion, as youth-driven movements in Asia harness digital tools to challenge older political orders. They make up nearly 40% of the population and have come of age during a time of political chaos and frequent changes in government, with established media often seen as biased, while they see social media as more useful for political expression and mobilisation (Subedi, 2025).

Nepal experienced a youth-driven protest wave beginning in September 2025 that resulted in a political revolt commonly described as the most powerful upheaval in the

country's history. Erupting first in anger over a social media crackdown, the protests soon spiralled into widespread violence and dozens of deaths, along with burning down icons of elite wealth and political power like the Parliament building and the Kathmandu Hilton Hotel. The uprising was not just a response to specific and immediate government policies but the product of decades of overlapping historical systemic failures embedded in the country's economy, notably through systemic corruption and persistent socioeconomic exclusion (Jacobin, 2025). The movement constitutes a profound rejection of the older political class, including the traditional left, which was charged with failing to bring about truly sovereign policy and prosperity for the many (Shahid, 2025).

The speed of the regime change was unprecedented, leaving an entire political class prostrate in just 48 hours. This swiftness is crucial, not simply an event that happened by chance, but the point where tens of years of accumulated, latent social stress met the accelerating power of modern digital mobilisation. Rather than a slow-burning movement in which the arc of history can be felt over years, the swift disintegration of Oli's rule has shown that long-simmering discontent (fuelled by corruption and deep inequality) had reached an inflexion point, requiring little more than a digital spark to ignite revolutionary fervour. The Gen Z revolt provided a pressure relief valve for years of pent-up angst and demanded an immediate political reckoning. The significance of the paper also reflects in its scrutiny of the constitutional fault line that the movement has exposed- between revolutionary digital legitimacy and traditional constitutional legality (Jayakumar, 2025). The article further locates the crisis in Nepal within a broader South Asian context of spontaneous youthful digital protests, discussing it as a regional political "digital contagion" or set of possibilities (Shivamurthy, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a mixed-methods methodology of qualitative textual analysis (political reportage, academic literature) and quantitative measures of public opinion and digital mobilisation. Primary data consist of a detailed examination of social media communications (in particular, the Discord-based poll that selected our new Prime Minister) and an investigation into the structural mechanisms of digitally rendered political legitimacy. Secondary data include geopolitical reports, internal agency documents, such as those from external development partners (EDPs), and extant political science theories on state fragility

and aid dependence when discussing the external environment (Karkee & Comfort, 2016, pp. 1–5).

Theoretical Framework

A layered, interwoven theoretical framework is necessary to interpret Gen Z activism in Nepal. For a start, the movement easily complements the broader corpus of writing on Digital Native Activism, which carefully considers how Generation Z's use of information technology becomes a forceful lever for mass revolutionary movements, compared to old-style (party-based) mobilisation infrastructures dominating previous eras (Treré & Kaun, 2021, pp. 193-208).

Secondly, one must be able to utilise the theoretical concept of Neoliberal Failure in the Global South and use it as a springboard to understand this movement's structural background. The widespread social discontent is interpreted as a direct result of the inability of the theory of "neoliberal globalisation" to bring generalised benefits, which has resulted in mounting costs and stark disparities that have affected the "rural majority "now increasingly abandoned to scandalous neglect and exclusion (Torres, 2022, pp. 265-283). Finally, Nepal needs to be analysed as a country that is 'stuck' geopolitically and also suffers from an "over-reliance on aid," which creates further complexities within its socio-political backdrop, informing the Gen Z movement within this context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The uprising was not just a response to immediate policy decisions but an expression of long-developing systemic failures, intertwined and shaped by history and the economy. This includes the entrenched pattern of systemic kleptocracy and persistent socioeconomic deprivation, compounded by traditional media's perceived prejudice and young people's consequent resort to social media as a platform for political discussions.

Systemic Corruption and the Legacy of Extraction

Corruption is consistently cited as the "historically oldest" and largest factor in Nepal's discontent. The state was operating on an extraction model, in which government functionaries, such as customs officials, were not paid a stipulated salary but were allowed to extract revenue from the sources they served, a situation that virtually institutionalised corruption.

The legacy of supplementing gifts has persisted both in culture and in consequence, and "graviditas et facultas…credibly changed" immensely with political economy under the light of modernity. The corruption is currently linked to mass infrastructure and capital accumulation, as reflected in the widely held belief that political elites stands to gain handsomely from grand scams such – it was rumorantd at one time that a former Prime Minister's son had received colossal stake in ownership of Hilton Hotel (itself torched by protesters recently) for kickbacks related to building construction or import licensing (Rediff, 2025).

The physical devastation of the September 2025 riots bears this anger out. The burning of colleges and Parliament House, high-end hotels, corporate offices, and EV showrooms was not random; it was an act of symbolic attack on the physical reality of elite accumulation—the assets accumulated by corruption and neoliberal profit. As the old political class of CPN-UML, Nepali Congress, and others was believed to be doubly implicated in archaic extraction and modern privatisation (Rediff, 2025), the young directly assaulted the icons who had been representing their illegal link between capital and power, visibly as an institution they rejected in its entirety.

Socioeconomic Disenchantment and Generational Grievance

The insurgency was, in essence, driven by widespread rage at corruption, extreme inequality, and ongoing unemployment (Jacobin, 2025). The liberalisation of the past three decades has seen rapid social change, which has hit the poorest people the hardest. Nepal, an importing country, is reeling under rising prices and growing disparities, proving that globalisation is the engine of prosperity for most.

In ideological terms, it is a resounding rejection of the older political establishment, not even excluding the old left. It had the CPN-UML in its sights for its "stagnant politics of privatisation and commercialisation," enriching the ruling class on one side and jobless young workers on the other. This disillusionment left an ideological void that fed into a youth culture animated by a militant drive for revolution and justice, not "redress not justice," as revolutionaries exhort (Shahid, 2025).

This desire for immediate retributive justice, rather than institutional processes, shows a deep-rooted loss of faith in the judiciary, in the successful working of the electoral process, and in parliamentary rules for gradual reform on an issue. The youth's call for a 'directly elected PM' (Kharel, 2025) and their association with immediate justice show that

they have lost faith in the constitution, as it is perceived to be compromised and unable to ensure equality or justice; hence, the need for radical measures to bring about political transformation.

The Catalytic Role of Digitalisation and Social Media

The deep causes are systemic, but the immediate trigger and the movement's organisational velocity were digital. The first trigger in the "revolutionary fury" that swept the country was the government's move to introduce a social media ban. Nepal is described as one of the most "social media-saturated countries in the world," so information technology is not an optional lever for mass revolutionary movements. The internet proved an invaluable tool for "planning, dissemination, and coordination of the demonstrations" on social media platforms, which allowed a coordinated information strategy indispensable to the widespread success of the demonstrators. The movement was able to thrive by using "an imaginative mix of online and offline tactics to maintain the mass uprising" (Al Jazeera, 2025).

The farthest-reaching stunt was when the youth movement actually voted Sushila Karki to become the new Prime Minister via a Discord poll (Hindustan Times, 2025). This is far more than coordination; this is a digital-native form of political legitimacy. By choosing a leader beyond the constitutional limits of a non-state, encrypted service, the Gen Z movement sought to establish an alternative vision of politics in which digital consensus replaces traditional state structures. This is a move that, per se and structurally, undermines the entire representative-democratic edifice of Nepal.

Table 1. Primary Internal Drivers and Catalytic Events of the Gen Z Uprising

Driver/Factor	Description	Associated Outcomes
Systemic Corruption and Impunity	Deep-rooted historical practice, escalated by modern greed and high-profile elite wealth linked to governmental favours (e.g., Hilton Hotel)	Targeting and destruction of elite assets (Parliament, corporate offices)
Socioeconomic Inequality	Failure of neoliberal policies, rising joblessness, and surging costs in an import-dependent economy	Repudiation of stagnant political parties (CPN-UML) and adoption of "comeuppance" over "due process"
Digital Suppression (Catalyst)	An immediate governmental attempt to suppress communication via a social media ban	Rapid escalation into widespread "revolutionary fury" and coordinated mobilisation using IT

External Influences: Geopolitical Actors and Developmental Partners

Domestic factors provided the fuel, but it was the behaviour of external actors that structured the vulnerabilities and offered this metamovement a target to lash out at angrily. China and India, which have had centuries-old influence on Nepal, have used their economic investments and geopolitical ties to influence Nepal's domestic political landscape, at times creating dependency and furthering internal divisions. Moreover, the interventions of international actors, often espousing neoliberal orientations, have unwittingly fueled the social divisions and economic precariousness that underpinned the youth revolt (Snellinger, 2018, pp. 1043–1075).

Strategic Aid and Contested Sovereignty of the USA

The USA's influence is centred on the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC)'s compact, a $500m project earmarked for infrastructure, including road maintenance and electricity trade across the India border. Ostensibly a development policy, the compact was bogged down by serious political controversy arising from its geopolitical framing. US officials openly tied the MCC to the Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), which many in Nepal see as an anti-China military and strategic framework. This linkage was perceived as a direct assault on Nepal's non-alignment foreign policy principle for decades (Raj, 2023, pp. 446–454).

Moreover, the treaty included a provision that all future disputes would be resolved in accordance with it rather than Nepal's domestic laws, raising serious questions about the compromise of national sovereignty. In pressuring Nepali political elites to pass the MCC and tying aid to a divisive military strategy, however, the US unwittingly set in motion a severe political liability that had implications for the corrupt subset of Nepal's elite backing it. The youth, with its intense attention to global geopolitics (Raj, 2023, pp. 446–454), exploited the perceived loss of sovereignty to feed anti-elite and nationalist ideologies.

US influence extends beyond strategic assistance but also operates through structures of soft power. US-linked non-governmental organisations, including the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, reportedly trained young activists from 2020 to 2022 on federalism, Dalit rights, and youth participation (IFES, 2022). That implies there is a dual-track approach: the hard, strategic influence (MCC) provided a real target for nationalist anger. In contrast, the soft ideological influence (NGO training) increased the

organisational capacity of Gen Z and provided members with new ideological resources to advance support for democratisation.

India's Influence: Geopolitical Gravity and Economic Interdependence

Nepal has a structural anchoring of India's interests in its politics, and it seems to have political heft. That is just a reality of life for Nepal, as it is forced to sign "dozens of treaties with India" just to navigate the economic and strategic crossroads that dictate Nepali geopolitics.

The way India exerts influence tends to be structural: it is there, a fact of life, an obstruction of policy space in Kathmandu. However, India remains the very umbilical cord of its domestic political stability, particularly in financial links such as cross-border trade and power-sharing. This facility, it is worth pointing out, is often instrumentalised by Nepal's power structures. Nepal's upper crust was known to pursue foreign policy, including with India, to safeguard its own interests.

There is no proof that India helped coordinate Gen Z protests. However, the Indian baggage ties down whatever such a post-revolution regime might have been able to do regarding border arrangements, resource talks, and trade issues. Youth-quake has almost shied away from its policy-making elite anymore (Oli, Deuba), hence subliminally resisting the political class that never powers its way out of an assignation with sovereign because it is believed to return late at night, stinking not only of compromise as a musty body odour but also of fundamental reality under external and domestic circumstances.

The Influence of INGOs and External Developmental Partners (EDPs)

Nepal's dependence on foreign assistance has existed for over 60 years, making it one of the most aid-dependent countries. Foreign Development Partners (FDPs) and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) are engaged in all aspects of policy, program, and implementation in crucial areas of education, health, and local development, particularly in Nepal. The rapid proliferation of NGOs, particularly after the restoration of multi-party democracy in 1990, occurred because Nepal's "weak governance," inadequate national budgets, and high unemployment created a fertile environment for these organisations to fill gaps in essential services (Karkee & Comfort, 2016, pp. 1–5).

The impact of the (civil) development sector is ambivalent and contradictory. INGOs are involved in implementing critical programs and advocating for empowerment,

community involvement, and democracy. On the other hand, even with massive financial infusions, like $624 million for five years of reforming education . The heavy participation of EDPs is associated with a "continued loss of ownership" and centralised decision-making that seldom involves national stakeholders and communities (UNDP, 2001, p. 11).

This demission of institutional authority only compounds the youth's sense that the nation is structurally beholden to foreign diktat and ruled by a centralised elite that pays no heed to anyone. Although INGOs may help build pressure for accountability and rights (Karkee & Comfort, 2016, pp. 1–5) (and perhaps assist with activist training), their role in enabling policy capture subverts the legitimacy and autonomy of the state itself, further fueling the general anti-establishment sentiment now expressed by Gen Z in protests against corruption and political elites.

Table 2. Mechanisms and Impact of Key External Influences on Nepali Politics

External Actor	Primary Mechanism of Influence	Controversial Element or Impact	Relevance to Gen Z Movement
USA	Bilateral Strategic Aid (MCC Compact) and NGO Soft Power (NDI/IRI)	Linking $500M aid to Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS); perceived sovereignty compromise (legal stipulations); funding/training for youth activists	Provided concrete, nationalistic targets for anti-establishment protests; potentially enhanced activist organisation
India	Geopolitical Gravity, Military/Political Leverage, and Economic Interdependence	Unambiguous political influence requires multiple treaties and trade accommodations; elite manipulation of foreign policy for personal gain.	Structural constraint on Nepali sovereignty; backdrop for elite corruption and policy independence critique
INGOs/EDPs	Developmental Funding, Policy Design, and Rights Advocacy	Structural aid dependency leading to "loss of ownership" and centralised policy making in sectors like education/health	Fuels anti-elite sentiment rooted in institutional weakness; advocacy agendas may shape demands for democratic reform

Impact on Nepali Politics: Crisis of Constitution and Prospect for Governance

The Gen Z uprising caused an instant political shock and a systemic crisis in governance and constitutional stability. This singular youth mobilisation is a direct threat to the old political order and has indeed led to a reappraisal of conventional power structures and governance processes.

Immediate Political Disruption and Transfer of Power

On September 9, 2025, the government led by Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli was compelled to resign due to "revolutionary anger" that erupted into widespread rioting and burning (The Kathmandu Post, 2025). The movement soon filled the gap by selecting Sushila Karki as its next prime minister in a novel and unorthodox Discord vote (The Independent, 2025).

In response to the political vacuum, the state's security apparatus intervened. The Nepali Army declared a nationwide curfew, deployed troops in Kathmandu, and held talks with Gen Z members and other warring parties to restore peace and normalcy (Babushahi, 2025). This rapid military intervention also indicates that the Nepali "deep state" perceived the movement as posing a fundamental constitutional challenge and responded in order to control a revolutionary surge through dialogue, forestalling a total crumbling of structure as is commonly seen with states having weak civilian governance in South Asia (East Asia Forum, 2025). By contradicting the revolutionary leaders, the military effectively recognised the movement's legitimacy while also asserting its own authority as the final arbiter of security above the discredited civilian regime.

The Constitutional and Legal Quagmire

While the Oli government was indeed toppled, the political aftershocks have created a grave constitutional crisis. However, as Nepal's constitution usually bars the president from naming a prime minister who is not already a legislator, Karki's appointment stands on very shaky legal ground (Sharma & Ahmed, 2025). The legal ramifications are severe. The country risked plunging into "another round of political mayhem" if a writ petition challenged the presidential appointment, and the court would likely have to declare the act null and void (Bhattarai, 2025, pp. 117–134). In doing so, the movement has opened a critical organisational cleavage between constitutional legality and the official rules of the existing state. Moreover, revolutionary legitimacy is derived from the mass-collectivised popular will through the Discord election (Jayakumar, 2025).

The movement's primary demand is for a "directly elected PM," which is at odds with the Parliamentary arithmetic for electing a PM through provincial assemblies and a federal parliament (Jayakumar, 2025). The state machinery is in place, but the parliamentary wing has ceased to function and been delegitimised. The constitutional challenge is not a technicality; it is the political establishment's bid for survival by returning to formal law as

Gen Z tries to conjure a revolutionary consensus. Whether Nepal will tilt towards institutional reform or populist direct democracy would depend on how the legality-legitimacy crisis gets resolved.

Comparative Regional Context and Future Trajectories

The Nepal Gen Z revolution is not a one-off phenomenon but part of a larger South Asian trend of youth-led movements (Hien, 2025). These include Sri Lanka's 2022 Aragalaya protests and calls for fair elections in Bangladesh – indicating that youth across the region are utilising comparable digitalised tactics against similar structural constraints such as pervasive corruption, nepotism, and wrenching economic adversity (Menon, 2025).

The regional character of these uprisings also points to a political "digital contagion": mobilisations and slogans against corruption can easily be shared across borders with neighbouring countries, amplifying feelings of geopolitical instability in South Asia (Shivamurthy, 2025). For regional governments, what has transpired in Nepal is not seen as a senseless, localised outcome but rather a powerful canary-in-the-mine regarding the stability of extant political alignments in heavily unequal and aid-dependent low-income regimes with high internet coverage and an internationalised Gen Z population (Hien, 2025).

Future Political Implications

Nepal's politics was scandalised to the core by the 2025 Gen Z uprising, which led to an otherwise unthinkable dissolution of government power. Beginning as a protest against a social media blackout, it evolved into an outcry over systemic corruption, nepotism and chronic youth unemployment. Such widespread opposition led to the resignation of Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli and the dissolution of parliament within days, a complete rebuff to the status quo. The generational shift also underscored the deep divide between a country's ageing, wealthy political class and its young, struggling populace. The rage was amplified by virulent social media posts of "NepoKids" living like royalty, at a time when 56 per cent of Indians are under thirty and facing dismal economic prospects (Carnegie Endowment, 2025).

The movement shifted the political culture by offering up new standards of accountability. It institutionalised the desire for good governance and made impunity a riskier business for future incumbents. The old-guard parties that had been ruling since 2008 through back-room deals were rejected. Gen Z activists did not mobilise through conventional party channels; they met on a decentralised online platform such as Discord and piggybacked on the opportunity to vote for Nepal's first-ever female head of state,

Sushila Karki, as their de facto Prime Minister in an unofficial online poll (Indian Express, 2025). However, this citizen-designed pick, however extra-constitutional in body and spirit, established a precedent for civil-society engagement in top-tier political decisions.

The uprising solidified digital mobilisation as a lasting characteristic of Nepalese politics, demonstrating the full potential of an amorphous, leaderless, and issue-based movement through viral social media campaigns, such as "NepoKids". That new reality "necessitates that the incoming government address the economic precarity, as well as institutional decay and departure from typical patronage patterns". The political establishment must now come to terms with a strong, digitally native electorate that will not be shut out. Formally, the interim government and 2026 general elections offer a path forward. Beyond simply taking on systemic reform, PMC-shaped Gen Z becomes a force that could rapidly turn around and make things worse by applying rapid policy pressure from outside the centre at all levels of the system (The Diplomat, 2025).

CONCLUSION

The 2025 September Gen Z uprising is the ugly epitome of years of political and economic failures in Nepal. This research affirms that the movement was structurally propelled by the dismantling of neoliberalism, which intensified and systematised ever-present social inequity, chronic youth joblessness, and high-level corruption, among other things. The speed and scale of the revolution were driven by digitally native activism, most notably the Discord-assisted election of a new prime minister. This revealed the central constitutional fault line: a profound contradiction between the movement's revolutionary digital legitimacy, on the one hand, and the state's established constitutional legality, on the other.

Furthermore, external actors (most notably the USA through the MCC), India's geo-cultural gravity, and INGOs/EDPs only deepened this domestic crisis by facilitating policy-process bypassing, engendering a loss of institutional ownership, and providing patriotic flags to fuel youth anger. The rebellion was an existential threat to Nepal's political future, in other words. It is time for policymakers to act, preferably now, but at least eventually, even if it means addressing governance failures and the confusion over a grand bargain at the root of this disaster. Resolution necessitates full-blooded constitutional and anti-corruption reform to re-legitimise the state, coupled with a radical new economic policy that tackles inequality,

and an explicit refocusing of foreign policy so that what happens in Nigeria's development space is a function of the nation's undiluted sovereignty.

Policy Implications

The Gen Z wave is also demanding that policies change immediately across sectors. First, Constitutional and Governance Reform must align digital mandates with legal theory, with the legislature initiating amendment reforms to enhance executive accountability. Reform, in general, gets at just what the judiciary ordered: restoring democratic rule of law and downplaying the role of young people whose digital behaviour escalates. Secondly, the Socioeconomic Policy must address the limitations of neoliberal globalisation by tackling corruption and preventing unemployment and economic disparities through state intervention. Lastly, foreign policy should not only focus on averting the slide of institutional ownership, but also on ensuring that external links are managed to minimise policy capture and that national sovereignty constitutes the primary driver of development. These issues must be resolved, or anarchy will continue to reign.

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