

The Aftermath of Gen Z Protests: Assessing Political Outcomes Across Nations in South Asia

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Introduction

The world has entered a period where young people are no longer waiting for change to come through traditional politics alone. Across different regions, a new generation has stepped into public spaces with a clear message that governments must listen more carefully to the concerns of ordinary citizens. From Sri Lanka, Bangladesh to Nepal, India and beyond, many of the largest demonstrations in recent years have been driven by Generation Z. Although each movement has emerged from a different national context, they share a common belief that political leaders should be more accountable, transparent and responsive.

These protests have not followed a single pattern. In some countries they have influenced government decisions, forced policy changes or reshaped political leadership. In others they have met with resistance, produced only limited reforms or left behind unresolved tensions. This difference raises an important question. What happens after the crowds leave the streets. The answer is often more important than the protest itself because it reveals whether political systems are capable of responding to public demands.

The rise of Generation Z protests is therefore not simply a story about youth activism. It is also a story about the changing relationship between citizens and the state in the twenty first century. Young people are using digital platforms, new forms of organization and collective action to influence national politics in ways that were difficult to imagine only a few years ago.

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This commentary examines the political outcomes of these movements across different countries in South Asia. Rather than focusing only on the protests themselves, it explores what is happening afterwards and what these experiences reveal about the future of governance, public trust and democratic accountability.

The Protest Vote Does Not Always Become the Election Vote

The protest vote and the election vote are increasingly becoming two different political choices. Bangladesh provides a strong example. The 2024 ‘Monsoon Revolution’ successfully removed the Awami League government and elevated several protest leaders into national politics through the newly established the National Citizen Party (NCP). Yet in the 2026 parliamentary election, the party won a limited number of seats despite the central role its leaders had played during the movement. This outcome is particularly notable because Bangladesh is one of the youngest countries in South Asia. According to the United Nations' 2026 population estimates, the country has an estimated population of 177.8 million and a median age of 26.3 years.² It is also among the ten countries with the largest populations aged 15–24 years globally, indicating the significant electoral and political weight of its youth population.³ Despite this demographic advantage, younger voters did not overwhelmingly support a party identified with their own generation. Instead, many voted for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).



² Worldometer, "Bangladesh Population (2026)," based on the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, World Population Prospects 2024 Revision, accessed August 4, 2026, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/bangladesh-population/>

³ Worldometer, "Bangladesh Population (2026)"

There are, however, different interpretations of the election outcome. One perception is that what would have been the result if the National Citizen Party had not formed an electoral coalition with Jamaat-e-Islami? Following this decision, several members of the party, particularly female leaders, left the NCP and contested the election independently.⁴ For many voters, Jamaat-e-Islami remained a controversial political actor because of its controversial role during Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971. In the months leading up to the February 2026 election, public criticism of the party increased after several Jamaat leaders made controversial remarks about women and women's participation in the workforce. Some observers argue that these developments influenced voter perceptions and ultimately affected the election outcome, though Jamaat's Chief had later claimed that those information were "false and misleading".⁵

Another view is that the electoral result might have been different had the election been held shortly after 5 August 2024. At that time, the student-led movement had widespread public support and many people viewed the emerging young leaders with considerable optimism. As time passed, however, political dynamics changed, public expectations evolved and the initial momentum gradually declined. These interpretations remain analytical assessments rather than established conclusions, but they offer important perspectives on why protest popularity did not fully translate into electoral success.

Another perception observed during the election was that some voters voted for the NCP and Jamaat-e-Islami because neither party had previously been in power. Their reasoning was straightforward. They had already experienced governments led by the Awami League and the BNP and wanted to give a new political force an opportunity. Some voters also supported independent candidates who were not affiliated with any political party.

This concept deserves careful attention. While it reflects a desire for political change, it also highlights the importance of civic education and informed voting. Every citizen has the democratic right to choose a preferred candidate, but voting is also a significant responsibility. Through their vote, citizens select the individuals who will represent them and make decisions on behalf of the

⁴ "Angry NCP Women Leaders Pull Out of Elections, 2 Resign," Prothom Alo English, December 29, 2025, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/politics/a6gv6gevr3>.

⁵ Dhaka Tribune, "Jamaat Ameer Clarifies Party's Position on Women amid Social Media Controversy," Dhaka Tribune, February 1, 2026, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/politics/402301/jamaat-ameer-clarifies-party%E2%80%99s-position-on-women>

country. Therefore, electoral choices should be based not only on the desire for change but also on a careful assessment of the candidates, their qualifications and their ability to govern. At the same time, such expectations should be viewed within Bangladesh's political context. For many years, genuinely free and competitive elections remained limited, making it difficult to expect a fully informed voting culture to develop overnight. Strengthening civic awareness and encouraging voters to examine the backgrounds, policies and capabilities of candidates should therefore become a long-term priority.

However, BNP assumed office at a particularly challenging moment. The country has been facing a fragile law and order situation, rising crime and the economic consequences of wider geopolitical tensions, including disruptions in global energy markets. These challenges require careful and effective governance. In the coming years, the government's ability to respond to these issues will play an important role in determining whether it can maintain the confidence and trust of the public.

Winning Elections is Only the Beginning

Nepal presents a different trajectory from Bangladesh. Unlike the National Citizen Party in Bangladesh, Nepal's Gen Z-backed political force successfully converted protest momentum into electoral victory.

An important observation is the rapid decline of the post-election honeymoon period in Nepal. The same generation that demanded political change has proved unwilling to offer unconditional political support. Instead, it has held the new government to the same standards that it previously demanded of the political establishment. This became evident within the government's first month in office. Despite Prime Minister Balendra Shah's anti-corruption platform, two cabinet ministers left the government after becoming embroiled in separate controversies. Labour Minister Dipak Kumar Sah was dismissed over allegations of nepotism, while Home Minister Sudan Gurung resigned following public scrutiny of his financial dealings.⁶ Rather than protecting political allies, the government accepted their departure in an effort to preserve its reformist credibility. Yet the incidents also exposed how difficult it is for a government elected on promises of transparency

⁶ Agence France-Presse, "Nepal Home Minister Sudan Gurung Resigns In Weeks Over Financial Transactions," NDTV, April 23, 2026, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/nepal-home-minister-sudan-gurung-resigns-in-weeks-over-financial-transactions-11395370>

when ethical questions arise within its own ranks. As a result, the administration has come under growing public scrutiny much earlier than previous governments.

Another concept observed in Nepal is that unlike previous generations, Gen Z appears less willing to offer long-term political loyalty simply because a government emerged from a youth-led movement. The immediate trigger was the death of Ganesh Nepali, a 25-year-old ride-hailing driver, who died after allegedly setting himself on fire following a confrontation with municipal police over the confiscation of his vehicle in July 2026.⁷ The incident led to widespread protests, but the demonstrations soon expanded beyond the driver's death. Protesters raised concerns about forced evictions, policing practices, transparency and the government's slow progress in delivering the reforms it had promised. This suggests that the incident was not the only reason for the protests. Instead, it brought together public frustrations that had been growing for several months.



Many of those who had supported the new leadership during the election began questioning whether the government was meeting the expectations created by the 2025 movement. This highlights an important trend in post-protest politics. Gen Z appears less willing to give governments a long period to prove themselves. Instead, it judges governments by their immediate

⁷ Gaurav Pokharel, "Ride-Hailing Driver's Self-Immolation Sparks Debate over Municipal Police's Jurisdiction, Aggression," The Kathmandu Post, July 13, 2026, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2026/07/13/ride-hailing-driver-s-self-immolation-sparks-debate-over-municipal-police-s-jurisdiction-aggression>

actions and results. Electoral victory alone is no longer enough to maintain public confidence. Governments are expected to show visible progress on governance, accountability and public services within a short period of time. If they fail to do so, public support can decline quickly, even among the same young people who helped bring them to power. The Nepalese experience therefore suggests that for Gen Z-led governments, sustaining public trust has become just as important as winning public support during elections.

Prime Minister Balendra Shah promised a break from conventional politics and raised high expectations among Nepal's younger generation. However, many Gen Z supporters now see a widening gap between those promises and the government's performance. Concerns have also grown over the Prime Minister's limited public visibility.⁸ Adding to these concerns, three people were killed during Hindu Muslim clashes in the last week of July 2026, creating another major test for the government.⁹ How Prime Minister Shah responds to these governance and security challenges will play a crucial role in determining whether his government can restore public trust and sustain the confidence of the generation that helped bring it to power.

Removing a Leader Does Not Automatically Transform the Political System

Sri Lanka demonstrates that removing a government does not necessarily resolve the structural problems that gave rise to a protest movement. The 2022 Aragalaya emerged from an unprecedented economic crisis marked by shortages of fuel, food and medicine, prolonged power cuts and the country's first sovereign debt default. The movement succeeded in forcing President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to resign and fundamentally changed Sri Lanka's political landscape. However, the more difficult challenge began after the protests ended. The central demand of the movement was not merely a change of leadership but a broader "system change" that included greater transparency, accountability and better governance. Four years later, while the political leadership has changed, institutional transformation remains incomplete.

⁸ Jaya Singh Mahara, Gaurav Pokharel, and Anil Giri, "Inside the Strange, Disciplined, Unreachable World of Nepal's Prime Minister," Asia News Network, July 3, 2026, <https://asianews.network/inside-the-strange-disciplined-unreachable-world-of-nepals-prime-minister/>

⁹ Agence France-Presse, "Nepal's PM Urges Calm as Three People Killed After Hindu-Muslim Unrest," Al Jazeera, July 31, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/7/31/nepals-pm-urges-calm-as-three-people-killed-after-hindu-muslim-unrest>

One of the most significant developments after Aragalaya was the rise of the National People's Power (NPP) government under President Anura Kumara Disanayake following the 2024 elections.¹⁰ Unlike Bangladesh, where protest leaders established a new political party, Sri Lanka's anti-establishment sentiment largely benefited an existing opposition coalition that successfully presented itself as the political vehicle for reform. The demand for "system change" was effectively incorporated into the NPP's electoral campaign, particularly its commitment to fighting corruption and improving government accountability.¹¹ By 2026, the government's popularity had remained relatively strong, largely because many citizens continued to reject the traditional political parties that had dominated Sri Lankan politics before the economic crisis.

Nevertheless, the post-Aragalaya period also highlights the gap between political expectations and governance realities. Public expectations increased considerably after the protests, with many citizens expecting rapid improvements in governance, public services and economic conditions. In practice, however, the new government inherited severe fiscal constraints, high public debt and continuing obligations under the International Monetary Fund reform programme. As a result, many structural reforms have progressed more slowly than the public anticipated. This reflects a broader lesson that protest movements can accelerate political change but cannot eliminate long-standing economic and institutional constraints.

Another important observation is that the Aragalaya permanently altered political expectations even though it did not fully transform political institutions. The protests represented an unprecedented challenge to Sri Lanka's traditional political order, but they were followed by a gradual restoration of many existing political practices. Patronage networks, institutional resistance and elite influence continued to shape governance after the immediate political crisis subsided. Consequently, while the movement changed public attitudes towards corruption and accountability, the political system itself proved more resistant to rapid transformation than many protesters had expected.

¹⁰ International Crisis Group, Sri Lanka's Bumpy Road to a Political Reset, Asia Report No. 356 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, April 16, 2026), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/asia-pacific/sri-lanka/356-sri-lanka-bumpy-road-political-reset>

¹¹ Rajni Gamage, "Tracking the Next Generation of Leaders in Sri Lanka," National Bureau of Asian Research, May 29, 2026, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/tracking-the-next-generation-of-leaders-in-sri-lanka>

The Sri Lankan experience also demonstrates that economic recovery can gradually replace protest politics as the primary public concern. As shortages eased, inflation declined and economic stabilization measures began to produce results, public attention shifted from street mobilization to evaluating the government's administrative performance.¹² Citizens increasingly judged political leaders by their ability to improve living standards, strengthen public institutions and manage the economy rather than by their role during the protest movement. This indicates that protest legitimacy has a limited lifespan unless it is supported by effective governance and measurable policy outcomes.

Learning from the Mistakes of Others

India's 2026 Gen Z movement suggests that political leaders may be learning from the experiences of earlier youth-led uprisings in other countries. The protests began over examination paper leaks and demands for accountability in the education system, but they soon developed into a broader expression of frustration over youth unemployment, governance and opportunities for young people. The movement demanded the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan. Although the government initially responded with arrests and police action, including the use of tear gas and batons in some places, it also chose political engagement rather than relying only on force. Prime Minister Narendra Modi publicly addressed the crisis, announced reforms to the examination system and accepted the resignation of the education minister.¹³ These measures helped reduce tensions and prevented the protests from developing into a much larger political crisis.

The Indian response stands in contrast to Bangladesh's July 2024 student movement. In Bangladesh, the heavy use of force against demonstrators led to a sharp escalation of the crisis and eventually contributed to the collapse of the government. The July 2024 movement in Bangladesh began as a student protest demanding reforms to the public sector quota system. In its early stages, the movement focused primarily on fairness in public recruitment rather than broader political change. However, the political atmosphere shifted after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's remarks referring to Razakars during a discussion on the protests. Many students interpreted the statement

¹²International Crisis Group, Sri Lanka's Bumpy Road to a Political Reset

¹³ Al Jazeera, "India's 'Cockroach' Youth Call Off Protests After Education Minister Resigns," Al Jazeera, July 25, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/7/25/indias-education-minister-resigns-after-weeks-of-cockroach-protests>

as associating them with collaborators of the Pakistani army during the 1971 Liberation War. The remarks intensified public anger, expanded participation in the protests and accelerated the movement beyond its original demand for quota reform. While it is impossible to determine how events would have unfolded under different circumstances, the episode demonstrates the importance of political communication during periods of public unrest. An immediate clarification or public apology might have reduced misunderstandings and prevented further escalation at that particular stage. Although such a response would not necessarily have resolved the underlying grievances in Bangladesh, but the Indian case suggests that timely political concessions can sometimes help prevent a protest movement from developing into a wider political crisis.



Supporters of India's Cockroach Janta Party celebrate at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi, on July 25, 2026 [Source:Reuters]

Again in Bangladesh, during the student protests over the 2026 HSC examinations, the current Education Minister publicly apologized after his remarks about students triggered widespread criticism.¹⁴ Students demanded both his resignation and a public apology following the circulation of a leaked audio recording. In response, the minister expressed regret in Parliament, stated that he had not intended to offend students and acknowledged their concerns over the examination

¹⁴ "Milon Offers Apology Amid HSC Protests," The Daily Star, July 15, 2026, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/milon-offers-apology-amid-hsc-protests-4224161>

situation. The government also indicated that it would consider measures to address students' grievances, including the possibility of allowing some examinations to be retaken. Although the circumstances were different from the July 2024 movement, the response reflected a greater willingness to engage politically with student concerns at an early stage. The broader lesson is that contemporary political leaders should be paying closer attention to how other governments lost public support during major Gen Z movements and should be adapting their crisis management strategies accordingly.

Beyond South Asia

Outside South Asia, Gen Z protests have generally focused on improving governance. Although the immediate causes have differed across countries, the underlying grievances have been remarkably similar. In Kenya, young people protested against the proposed Finance Bill and rising economic pressures, leading President William Ruto to withdraw the legislation. In Indonesia, demonstrations were triggered by housing allowances and salary benefits for lawmakers that many considered unfair during a period of economic hardship. In Serbia, protests followed the collapse of the newly renovated Novi Sad railway station roof that killed sixteen people, with demonstrators blaming corruption and government negligence. In Morocco, Gen Z 212 protested corruption, unemployment and political exclusion, while in Madagascar, Gen Z Mada challenged poor governance and elite politics.¹⁵ In Mexico, youth-led demonstrations emerged after the assassination of a mayor and expanded into protests against organized crime and the government's security policies.¹⁶ In Peru and the Philippines, protesters demanded greater government accountability and succeeded in forcing the resignation of senior officials.¹⁷ Despite these different triggers, most movements shared common concerns over corruption, inequality, unemployment and the lack of economic opportunities. South Asian Gen Z movements have more consistently evolved from issue-based protests into broad political movements seeking regime change or political transition, whereas in most African, European and Latin American cases, the primary objective has remained policy reform, government accountability or the removal of specific

¹⁵ Clara Fong, "How Global Gen Z Protests Have Shocked and Transformed Governments," Council on Foreign Relations, November 20, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/how-global-gen-z-protests-have-shocked-and-transformed-governments>

¹⁶ Clara Fong, "How Global Gen Z Protests Have Shocked and Transformed Governments"

¹⁷ *ibid*

officials rather than the replacement of the political system. Governments often responded by withdrawing unpopular policies, removing individual officials or combining limited concessions with security measures to contain demonstrations. Even in Madagascar, where the government eventually fell, many young activists later argued that they had been excluded from the political transition. So, outside South Asia, Gen Z movements have been more successful in influencing government decisions than in fundamentally transforming political systems.

Conclusion

Youth-led movements have become an important global political force, but an important question remains. Is the world prepared to transform political systems in the way Gen Z expects? Across many countries, young people are demanding more than changes in leadership. They are asking for transparent institutions, equal opportunities, accountable governments and faster responses to economic and social challenges. However, political institutions often change much more slowly than public expectations. This gap between expectations and reality is likely to remain a major source of political tension in the coming years.

The experiences of the South Asian countries suggest that a successful protest movement does not automatically create a new political culture. While it can bring political change and raise public expectations, long-standing political practices, institutional weaknesses and social divisions often continue to shape governance. Over time, the unity that exists during a protest may weaken, making long-term reforms more difficult to achieve. This shows that lasting democratic change depends not only on removing leaders but also on strengthening institutions, promoting accountability and ensuring inclusive political participation.

Current developments also suggest that new waves of Gen Z protests remain possible. Countries where young people continue to face high unemployment, rising living costs, corruption, limited political participation or declining trust in public institutions are likely to remain vulnerable to future mobilization. However, whether these frustrations develop into another major protest movement will depend on country-specific political developments and government responses. The central lesson from recent years is clear. The future of Gen Z politics will be determined not only by the willingness of young people to protest but also by the willingness of political systems to adapt before public frustration turns into another national movement.