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Generation Z, Hybrid Regimes, and the Limits of Electoral Democracy in South Asia: Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan in Comparative Perspective



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Abstract: *This paper examines why youth-led mobilisation produced governmental turnover in Bangladesh in 2024 and Nepal in 2025, while comparable youth anger in Pakistan has remained contained. The argument is that the Generation Z protest did not succeed or fail because young citizens were more courageous in one country than another. It succeeded where regime coercion fractured and where protest acquired enough cross-class legitimacy to make repression politically costly. It stalled where the coercive apparatus remained cohesive and where digital and physical repression prevented mobilisation from acquiring national organisational depth. The study uses a structured, focused comparison of three South Asian cases and draws on two theoretical traditions: hybrid regime theory and civil resistance theory. Hybrid regime theory explains the gap between electoral procedure and liberal democratic substance; civil resistance theory explains why mass participation alone is insufficient without elite defection, nonviolent discipline, and organisational durability. Digital censorship is treated not as a separate theory but as a mechanism that shapes the timing, scale, and coordination of resistance. The paper finds that Bangladesh and Nepal demonstrate the power of student-centred mobilisation to reopen political space, but their post-uprising trajectories also show the limits of street politics. Pakistan, by contrast, reveals the ceiling imposed by a military-centred hybrid regime in which the security establishment is not merely a defender of the regime but one of its constitutive pillars. The paper contributes to comparative debates on democratic erosion, youth politics, and civil-military relations in South Asia.*

Keywords: Generation Z; Hybrid regimes; Civil Resistance; South Asia; Bangladesh; Nepal; Pakistan; Electoral Democracy; Military Politics; Digital Censorship

Introduction

South Asia has entered a restless phase of youth politics. In Bangladesh, a student-led uprising in the third quarter of 2024 began with anger over public-sector job quotas and widened into a national movement against Sheikh Hasina's long incumbency. Within weeks, Hasina fled to India, and an interim government led by Muhammad Yunus took office. In Nepal, protests in September 2025 began after a ban on major social media platforms and moved rapidly against corruption, nepotism, and the exhaustion of old party politics. Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli resigned, parliament was dissolved, and former Chief Justice Sushila Karki became Nepal's first woman interim prime minister (Fong, 2026). Pakistan, however, has seen intense youth frustration, especially around the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), the May 2023 protests, the imprisonment of Imran Khan, the contested February 2024 election, and repeated restrictions on digital communication (International Crisis Group, 2024), without a Bangladesh- or Nepal-style rupture.

The puzzle, therefore, is not whether South Asian youth are politically restless. They naturally are. The puzzle is why similar grievances have produced different outcomes. Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan share a regional political landscape; youth bulges, economic frustration, distrust of ruling elites, patronage-heavy parties, and a widening distance between electoral rituals and liberal democratic practice. Yet their protest trajectories diverged sharply. Bangladesh and Nepal witnessed governmental turnover; Pakistan witnessed containment.

Based on these interesting similarities yet different realities of South Asia, the paper asks three questions. First, why did

Generation Z-led mobilisation help remove incumbent governments in Bangladesh and Nepal but not in Pakistan? Second, how did the cohesion or fragmentation of the coercive apparatus shape these outcomes? Third, how did digital censorship function differently across the three cases: as a trigger, an accelerant, or a suppressive device?

The answer offered here is twofold. First, regime type matters, but not in a mechanical way. Electoral democracy, electoral autocracy, and competitive authoritarianism are not simply labels; they describe the distribution of real power between elected offices, courts, parties, military institutions, and media systems. Second, civil resistance succeeds when protest becomes too costly to repress and when key elites decide that abandoning the incumbent is safer than defending it. This is why the military question is central. In Bangladesh, the army eventually separated its institutional survival from Hasina's personal survival. In Nepal, the state lacked the coercive unity required to absorb nationwide outrage. In Pakistan, the military establishment remained cohesive and deeply embedded in the political settlement. That difference is decisive.

Theoretical Framework: Hybrid Regime, Civil Resistance and Electoral Democracy

Hybrid Regime Theory: Electoral Procedure and Liberal Substance

Hybrid regime theory is useful because it avoids a common analytical mistake in South Asian politics: treating elections as proof of democracy. Levitsky and Way (2002, 2010) define competitive authoritarian regimes as systems where formal democratic institutions exist and

opposition parties compete, but incumbents violate liberal norms so severely that the playing field is no longer fair. Elections occur, but they do not guarantee alternation in power; courts exist, but selective justice weakens restraint; media outlets operate, but censorship and intimidation narrow public debate.

This distinction is captured in the gap between electoral democracy and liberal democracy. V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index measures the quality of electoral contestation and participation, while its Liberal Democracy Index (V-Dem Institute, 2025) adds constraints on executive power, civil liberties, judicial independence, and rule of law. The distance between the two indices is important for this study. A state may retain elections while hollowing out the institutional guarantees that make elections meaningful. Bangladesh before 2024, Pakistan after the 2024 election cycle, and Nepal's volatile but more open system occupy different points on this spectrum.

For South Asia, this framework must be read through civil-military relations. In many Western cases, the coercive apparatus is assumed to be subordinate to elected authority. In Pakistan, that assumption fails. The army has directly ruled for long periods and indirectly shaped political outcomes even under civilian governments (Khan & Kuanert, 2024). In Bangladesh, the army remained influential but was not identical with the ruling party. In Nepal, the post-monarchy political order remained unstable and patronage-ridden, yet the coercive apparatus did not possess Pakistan's institutional dominance over electoral politics. Hybrid regime theory, then, explains the political field on which protest takes place.

Civil Resistance Theory: Participation,

Discipline, and Defection

Civil resistance theory explains why protests sometimes force political change. Chenoweth and Stephan's (2011) study of twentieth-century campaigns shows that nonviolent movements have historically succeeded more often than armed campaigns because they lower the cost of participation, attract broader coalitions, and make repression less legitimate. Four conditions are especially relevant: mass participation, social diversity, nonviolent discipline, and elite defection.

The last condition is central to this paper. Governments fall not only because citizens protest, but because key pillars of support stop obeying, financing, defending, or legitimising the incumbent. In authoritarian and hybrid regimes, the security establishment is often the most important pillar. If the army, police, or paramilitary forces remain united and willing to repress, protest faces a hard ceiling. If they fracture, refuse orders, or calculate that the incumbent has become a liability, the regime can unravel quickly.

Recent digitally mediated protests complicate this theory but do not overturn it. Tufekci (2017) shows that networked movements can scale rapidly without traditional organisation, yet this speed can produce a weakness: movements may be excellent at mobilisation but poor at negotiation, leadership formation, and post-transition governance. This paper therefore, treats digital media as a mechanism inside civil resistance rather than as a third theory. Platform bans, internet shutdowns, and surveillance affect how protests spread, but they do not replace the deeper variables of coercive cohesion and elite defection.

Method and Case Selection

The study uses a structured, focused comparison of Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan. The cases are similar enough to be compared: all are South Asian states with large youth populations, economic frustration, patronage politics, and recent youth-centred mobilisation. They differ on the outcome of interest: Bangladesh and Nepal experienced governmental turnover; Pakistan did not. The comparison is therefore designed to isolate the variables that help explain divergence.

The evidence is drawn from peer-reviewed scholarship, democracy datasets, and policy reporting where events are too recent for a settled academic literature. This is a necessary compromise. The Nepali and Pakistani episodes remain close to the present, and any paper on them must work with an evolving record. To reduce overclaiming, the analysis avoids treating protest success as democratic consolidation. Governmental turnover is not the same as liberal-democratic transformation.

Bangladesh: Student Uprising and the Return of Political Contestation

Bangladesh entered the 2024 crisis after more than a decade of Awami League dominance. Formal elections remained, but opposition activity, media freedom, and electoral competition had narrowed significantly. The immediate trigger for the uprising was the restoration of a quota system for government jobs that many students viewed as privileging descendants of 1971 liberation-war veterans and, by implication, networks associated with the ruling party (Hossain, 2025). What began as a student grievance became a wider indictment of authoritarian drift.

The state's response hardened the movement. Police violence, ruling-party

student wings, arrests, curfews, and internet restrictions did not isolate the protesters; they enlarged the moral constituency around them. The movement crossed the threshold from sectoral protest to regime challenge once repression confirmed the broader complaint that electoral procedure had become detached from liberal democratic accountability. Bangladesh's student politics has long carried historical weight, from the language movement to anti-military and anti-authoritarian mobilisation. In 2024, that memory returned with contemporary digital speed.

The turning point was elite defection. The army's refusal to continue defending Hasina removed the core coercive guarantee behind the government. This did not mean that Bangladesh had achieved democratic consolidation. Chowdhury (2025) argued that it meant that the incumbent had lost the institutional support required to survive mass mobilisation. The appointment of Muhammad Yunus as interim leader created a transitional bridge, but it could not instantly undo years of institutional capture.

The February 2026 election demonstrates this distinction clearly. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party won a historic majority, while youth-linked parties secured only limited parliamentary space. While the youth-driven National Citizen Party won only six seats in a 300-member parliament (Al Jazeera, 2026). This result does not make the uprising meaningless. It shows that street legitimacy and electoral machinery are different assets. Established parties possess district networks, candidate pipelines, and patronage memory. Student movements possess moral force, speed, and symbolic power. They can open a door, but they rarely walk through it as organised governing machines.

Bangladesh therefore confirms both theories used in this paper. Hybrid regime theory explains why a formally electoral system became vulnerable to anti-authoritarian rupture. Civil resistance theory explains why the movement succeeded: participation widened, repression backfired, and the army withdrew support. Yet Bangladesh also warns against romantic readings of youth politics. The fall of an incumbent is not the same as the construction of a liberal order.

Nepal: Networked Protest and the Exhaustion of Old-Guard Politics

Nepal differed from Bangladesh and Pakistan in one crucial respect: it retained a more open electoral environment. Yet openness did not mean satisfaction. Since the restoration of multiparty politics and the end of the monarchy, Nepal's party system has been marked by frequent government changes, coalition bargaining, and public frustration with corruption. Young citizens faced limited employment prospects, high migration pressure, and the spectacle of political families benefiting from the state while ordinary youth left the country for work.

The September 2025 protests were triggered by the government's ban on major social media platforms. The ban was intended to regulate or suppress digital space, but it was interpreted by young citizens as an attempt to silence criticism, especially around the viral discussion of elite children and conspicuous privilege (Panthee, 2025). Al Jazeera (2025) reported that the state misread the mood and, rather than weakening mobilisation, the ban transformed a digital grievance into a question of political dignity. Protesters shifted to alternative platforms, including Discord, and rapidly generated a shared

language of anti-corruption and anti-elite politics.

Nepal's movement succeeded quickly because the government lacked the coercive and political cohesion needed to withstand the protest wave. The killing of protesters deepened outrage; the burning of parliament symbolised the collapse of public trust; Oli resigned within days. Former Chief Justice Sushila Karki's appointment as interim prime minister gave the movement a figure with institutional credibility and anti-corruption appeal (Panthee, 2025). In civil resistance terms, Nepal had mass participation, a clear object of anger, and enough elite accommodation to permit a transition.

Yet Nepal also illustrates the organisational problem of digitally native protest. A Discord forum could help legitimise a transitional figure, but it could not by itself produce a durable party structure, policy programme, or governing coalition. The March 2026 election, in which Balendra Shah's Rastriya Swatantra Party won a landslide, suggests that Nepal's youth revolt had a stronger electoral afterlife than Bangladesh's. Still, the deeper challenge remains the same: converting anti-corruption energy into institutional reform. Nepal's history of unstable governments is not erased by one election.

The Nepali case is therefore more optimistic than Pakistan but less settled than celebratory accounts suggest. It shows that digital mobilisation can puncture a weak and discredited political order when coercive cohesion is thin. It also shows that youth politics becomes durable only when it builds organisations capable of surviving after the viral moment has passed.

Pakistan: Containment, Coercive

Cohesion, and the Military Veto

Pakistan presents the hardest case for youth-led democratic rupture in South Asia. Its youth population is large, its economic frustrations are severe, and its digital public sphere has repeatedly carried anti-establishment sentiment. The PTI movement, especially after Imran Khan's removal in April 2022, created the most direct challenge to military authority in recent memory. The May 2023 protests, triggered by Khan's arrest, crossed a red line by targeting military installations (Kaunert & Khan, 2025). That crossing changed the state's narrative from political contestation to national security.

Here, hybrid regime theory must be applied with care. Pakistan is not merely a weak electoral democracy with periodic manipulation. It is a system in which the military establishment exercises extraordinary influence over elections, government formation, security policy, media boundaries, and the permissible range of civilian authority. Freedom House notes that Pakistan holds regular multiparty elections but that the military exerts enormous influence over elections, government formation, and policy. This makes Pakistan structurally different from Bangladesh in 2024. In Bangladesh, the army could abandon Hasina and preserve itself. In Pakistan, the establishment would have to abandon a political order in which it is deeply invested.

The February 2024 election exposed this contradiction. PTI-backed independents performed strongly despite arrests, loss of the party symbol, campaign restrictions, and the imprisonment of their leader. Yet electoral strength did not translate into governing power. A coalition government led by Shehbaz Sharif emerged, while PTI's

mandate remained politically contested. The ballot box, like the street, encountered the military veto.

Digital repression also operated differently in Pakistan. In Bangladesh and Nepal, shutdowns and bans came during moments of active mobilisation and often intensified anger. In Pakistan, restrictions were more sustained and pre-emptive. Digital Rights Monitor (2025) noticed that, among other social media platforms, multiple restrictive tactics were used, but X was blocked from February 2024 and restored only during the India-Pakistan crisis of May 2025. Such restrictions did not eliminate dissent, but they disrupted coordination, visibility, and the formation of a continuous national protest rhythm. When combined with arrests, military trials, pressure on media, and the weakening of party structures, digital repression limited the movement's ability to transform grievance into a nationwide cross-class coalition.

The most important missing condition was elite defection. Pakistan's security establishment remained cohesive enough to absorb pressure. There was no equivalent of the Bangladesh army's refusal to fire or Nepal's rapid elite accommodation. The PTI retained public sympathy and electoral strength, but civil resistance theory predicts that mass support alone is insufficient when the regime's coercive core does not split (Basit, 2024). The Pakistani case therefore demonstrates the ceiling of leader-centred resistance in a military-anchored hybrid regime.

This does not mean Pakistan is politically stable. It means the state has contained rupture without resolving grievance. Youth discontent, economic precarity, migration, digital anger, and distrust of institutions

remain. The danger is not only revolution; it is prolonged corrosion, where citizens cease to see elections, courts, parties, or media as credible channels of change.

Comparative Discussion: Why Similar Grievances Produced Different Outcomes

The comparison shows that grievance intensity alone does not explain political outcomes. Pakistan's economic and political frustrations were at least as deep as those in Bangladesh and Nepal, yet its protest cycle did not produce governmental turnover. The decisive variables were regime structure, coercive cohesion, elite defection, and the timing of digital repression.

Bangladesh represents a late-stage hybrid regime where electoral legitimacy had eroded and state violence delegitimised the incumbent. The army eventually calculated that Hasina's survival was not identical with its own institutional survival. Nepal represents a more open but exhausted electoral order where old parties had lost credibility, and the state lacked the unity to suppress a rapid protest cascade. Pakistan represents a military-centred hybrid regime where the coercive apparatus remained the central organiser of political life and where repression was both physical and digital. Illustration-I summarizes the comparison.

Illustration-I

Comparative Summary: Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan
Youth mobilisation, regime profile, digital repression, elite defection, and political outcome

Bangladesh	Nepal	Pakistan
Regime profile Closed or late-stage hybrid regime before 2024	Regime profile Electoral democracy with weak parties and high volatility	Regime profile Military-anchored hybrid regime / electoral autocracy
Digital repression Shutdowns during mobilisation; repression backfired	Digital repression Platform ban triggered wider mobilisation	Digital repression Sustained and pre-emptive restrictions plus surveillance
Elite defection Army withdrew support from Hasina	Elite defection Elite accommodation through interim leadership	Elite defection No decisive defection from coercive core
Outcome Government fell; old parties later dominated election	Outcome Government fell; youth-linked electoral change followed	Outcome Resistance contained and restrictions on political freedoms

Source: AI-Generated Projection, Based on Comparative Synthesis of the Study

Three findings follow. First, youth mobilisation is strongest when it moves beyond youth as a demographic category and becomes a national moral claim. Bangladesh and Nepal achieved this expansion. Pakistan's movement remained powerful but politically polarised, and regional protest movements in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa did not generate the same all-Pakistan convergence.

Second, digital media can accelerate protest, but it cannot replace organisation. Bangladesh's students could mobilise moral outrage; Nepal's Discord spaces could coordinate anger and symbolically nominate leadership; Pakistan's online support for PTI could sustain narrative resistance. Yet none of these digital capacities automatically produce democratic consolidation. The decisive conversion happens through institutions: parties, courts, election commissions, legislatures, and security-sector restraint.

Third, elite defection remains the hinge variable. Civil resistance theory remains persuasive in South Asia, but it must be adapted to regimes where militaries are not politically neutral referees. In Pakistan, the military is not just an instrument available to incumbents. It is a corporate political actor with interests, narratives, and red lines. This is why the Pakistani case is not simply a delayed Bangladesh. It is a different type of regime problem.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Generation Z uprisings in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan reveal both the promise and the limits of youth politics in South Asia. Bangladesh and Nepal show that digitally connected youth movements can reopen political space, delegitimise entrenched

rulers, and force governing elites to retreat. Pakistan shows that comparable anger can be contained when the coercive apparatus remains cohesive and when the military establishment is structurally embedded in the political order.

The theoretical contribution is deliberately narrow but useful. Hybrid regime theory explains why elections alone cannot be treated as democratic substance. Civil resistance theory explains why mass mobilisation requires elite defection and organisational capacity to produce political change. Together, they account for the divergent outcomes better than a purely generational or technological explanation. Digital censorship matters, but it matters as timing and mechanism, not as an independent theory.

For policymakers and civil society, the lesson is not to romanticise youth uprisings. Youth can break political fear, but democratic consolidation requires civic education, coalition-building, legal strategy, party formation, and protection of associational life. For regional observers, the key indicators to watch are not only unemployment, inflation, or online anger. They are security-establishment cohesion, opposition organisational depth, the timing of censorship, and whether protest can become a cross-class democratic coalition.

The study has three limitations. First, the Nepal and Pakistan cases remain recent, so the evidence base still relies partly on policy reporting and contemporary journalism. Second, the comparison is regional and cannot automatically be generalised beyond South Asia. Third, the paper does not use interviews with activists, party workers, journalists, or security officials. Future research should add fieldwork and disaggregated protest data to test the

argument more rigorously.

Still, the comparative lesson is clear. South Asia's young citizens are not politically absent. They are present, impatient, and increasingly capable of disturbing regimes that confuse electoral management with democratic legitimacy. Whether this impatience becomes reform or merely another cycle of rupture will depend less on viral moments than on the harder craft of institution-building.

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