

Unrest and Reckoning: Nepal's Political Watershed

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Summary

What started as peaceful youth protests turned extremely violent and upended Nepal's political scene in less than a week. This event appears to have dismantled Nepal's status quoist politics for the better, but at the cost of unprecedented violence and destruction. As the country navigates through the turmoil, the coming days are challenging and should be managed with utmost care by all stakeholders.

On 8 September 2025, 19 people died of police bullets and hundreds of others were wounded, many in critical conditions, in Nepal.¹ The police's use of brutal force was in response to the protests organised by an independent group of Generation-Z youths (born between 1997 and 2012), termed Gen-Z. The trigger for the protests was the Nepal government's ban on 26 social media platforms that were not registered with the communication ministry.

The Supreme Court of Nepal, in its ruling in a case in September 2024, had said that social media platforms should be mandatorily registered in Nepal and monitored and supervised by a competent authority.² When the full text of this verdict was released almost a year later, the government issued a notice on 27 August 2025 calling all the social media companies to register within seven days. On the eighth day, the government ordered the internet service providers in Nepal to block those platforms that did not heed the government's call. While there were some who viewed the government actions as legitimate to effectively regulate the platforms to curb misinformation, hate speech and illegal activities, a large section of the Nepali society was against the blocking of the platforms.

Social media platforms have become an essential part of everyday life for the young and the old alike. The blocking of the platforms had an immediate impact on many people. It disrupted communications of migrant Nepalis with their families back home. Its impacts were felt by businesses, artists, social media influencers and almost everyone. The youths, which remain the most engaged in social media platforms, considered the ban an assault on their freedom.

¹ Gopal Sharma, 'Nineteen killed in Nepal in 'Gen Z' protest over social media ban, corruption', *Reuters*, 9 September 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/nineteen-killed-nepal-gen-z-protest-over-social-media-ban-corruption-2025-09-08/>.

² 'How top court helped government implement social media blockage', *The Kathmandu Post*, 5 September 2025, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2025/09/05/how-top-court-helped-government-implement-social-media-blockage>.

However, the blocking of the social media platforms was only a sparkle in the pent-up frustration with corruption, bad governance, political instability, nepotism, unemployment and other problems in the country.³ Days before the ban and the protest, there were campaigns with hashtags #nepokids and #nepobabies targeting politicians' children flaunting their luxury goods and foreign tours, and those of businessmen alleged to have amassed wealth through close associations with corrupt political leaders.

For long, the people had been outraged by the self-centred activities of political parties, particularly their top brass, who had been at the top-most echelon of Nepal's politics and governments for at least the past two decades. Frequent making and breaking of coalitions resulting in political instability, deepening of patron-client relations, politicisation of all state organs, high-profile corruption scandals and others had sickened the people. The disenchantment was not just among the Gen-Z; it was ubiquitous. Hence, when the Gen-Z called for peaceful protests on 8 September 2025, they received widespread support.

The Protests, Government Response and the Aftermath

The Gen-Zs had said that the protests would be peaceful. However, soon after these started, the protests turned violent.⁴ The protesters entered restricted territories breaching police barricades. As they marched towards the Parliament building, the police used water cannons and tear gas but that did not stop the protestors. The police then resorted to indiscriminate shooting.

It was reported that when the protests started turning violent, the main youth organisers had asked everyone to return home.⁵ However, the protesters continued defying the call and the curfew that was soon imposed after the violence. What was shocking was the excessive use of force by the police. In no other movement in the history of Nepal has so many people been shot and wounded in a single day.

Violence erupted in cities outside Kathmandu as well.⁶ Protestors (attempted to) set government buildings and leaders' houses on fire, including that of the sitting Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli in his constituency. Several people died in police shootings in these places away from Kathmandu.

In the emergency Cabinet meeting called in the evening, Home Minister Ramesh Lekhak resigned.⁷ The government decided to form a probe committee with a mandate to provide a

³ Daya Dudraj, "'Nepo kid' trend sparks anti-corruption campaign in Nepal", *The Kathmandu Post*, 6 September 2025, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2025/09/06/nepo-kid-trend-sparks-anti-corruption-campaign-in-nepal>.

⁴ Prasun Sangroula, 'Explainer: Gen Z protest and the government's brutal crackdown', *Onlinekhabar*, 8 September 2025, <https://english.onlinekhabar.com/explainer-gen-z-protest-gov-brutality.html>.

⁵ 'Gen-Z movement said: Those involved in vandalism and violence are not ours', *Setopati*, 8 September 2025, <https://www.setopati.com/politics/368662>.

⁶ Arjun Subedi, 'Two dead in Itahari protests', *The Kathmandu Post*, 8 September 2025, <https://kathmandupost.com/province-no-1/2025/09/08/two-dead-in-italahari-protests>.

⁷ Anil Giri, 'Home minister quits, leaders hold prime minister responsible for 19 protesters' deaths', *The Kathmandu Post*, 9 September 2025, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2025/09/09/home-minister-quits-leaders-hold-prime-minister-responsible-for-19-protesters-deaths>.

full investigation report within 15 days. The government also revoked the ban on the social media platforms.

The opposition parties, some senior leaders of the ruling parties and several professionals called for the Prime Minister's resignation as well. The legitimacy of the Prime Minister, Chairman of Nepali Congress Party Sher Bahadur Deuba and Maoist Chairman Prachanda was questioned, and they were asked to quit and make way for younger generation leaders.⁸ However, the Prime Minister refused.

The killing of 19 young people sent shockwaves across the country. The rapid circulation of pictures and videos of the dead and the wounded after the revocation of the social media ban added to the immense grief and outrage among the people.

On the second day, sensing the volatility of the situation, the government imposed curfews in the capital and several cities outside. However, given the outrage, it would not stop people from coming out on the streets. What followed was unimaginable and unprecedented destruction and chaos.

Houses of the top and several senior leaders of the major political parties, barring a few, and their offices were set on fire. Deuba – Chairman of Nepal's oldest and largest political party – and his wife, the sitting Foreign Minister, were attacked and injured in their house. Media houses, business-people's residences, stores and factories were burnt down too.

Most disturbingly, there was arson on the country's Parliament, Singha Durbar (the Central Government Secretariat), the Supreme Court, the President's office and official residence, official residences of the Prime Minister and other ministers, and several other public properties. This shook everyone to the core. Oli resigned as Prime Minister in the afternoon of the second day. The army rescued him, sitting ministers and their families, and several other leaders, and provided security to them in an army barrack on the outskirts of the city.

At the time of this writing, total death toll from the two-day violence had reached 72.⁹

Other Aids to the Violence

It is important to understand that Nepal's politics was passing through some turbulence. Only months ago, a movement calling for the restoration of monarchy had turned violent.¹⁰ It had subsided in due course, but the undercurrents remained.

⁸ Editorial, "Political relevance of Deuba and Oli is up", *Setopati*, 8 September 2025, <https://en.setopati.com/view/165167>.

⁹ Rama Parajuli, Kamal Pariyar, and Kelly Ng, 'Politicians get rich while we suffer - so I helped bring down our government in 48 hours', *BBC*, 17 September 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvg9n760gddo>.

¹⁰ Puspa Sharma, 'Restoration of Nepal's Monarchy: A Purposeless Call', ISAS Brief No. 1238, Institute of South Asian Studies, 15 May 2025, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/restoration-of-nepals-monarchy-a-purposeless-call/>

Durga Prasain, who was the commander of the violent protests for the monarchy, and who is on bail in the case, instantly backed the Gen-Zs on the recent protests.¹¹ Similarly, the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) provided strong official support to the protests.¹²

Rabi Lamichhane, the RSP Chair, is currently behind bars. He was arrested on the charge of illegally siphoning off money from several cooperatives while he was running a media company before he formed the RSP. The Supreme Court had refused to grant bail to him. Lamichhane and his party have alleged that his trial is a political vendetta.¹³ Several youths have taken to social media and other means against Lamichhane's trial.

During the recent protests, a group of people forced Lamichhane out of prison. Subsequently, over 14,000 inmates escaped from different prisons across the country.¹⁴ There are news reports and social media claims of the participation of people supportive of the RSP and various political parties in the protests.¹⁵

The independently elected mayor of Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC), Balen Shah, who has a strong youth following, was the strongest supporter of the Gen-Z protests.¹⁶ Two years ago, he had threatened to torch Singha Durbar when the traffic police had stopped a KMC vehicle, carrying his wife, for a routine check.¹⁷ Such a violent statement from a popular young leader, albeit as a sudden act of rage, is also being blamed for the instigation of the recent arsons.¹⁸

Another important factor that should not be overlooked is the role of several content creators and social media influencers in inflating the misdeeds of political leaders. For example, some months ago, stories such as the top leaders having billions of dollars in investments abroad and money in foreign bank accounts, without evidence, had gone viral. The Hilton Hotel in Kathmandu, which had started operations just last year, was set on fire in the recent protests because of unverified claims that Deuba's son, having no source of substantial income, had invested billions in the hotel.

¹¹ 'Durga Prasai pledges support for 'Gen Z' movement', *Republica*, 7 September 2025, <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/durga-prasai-pledges-support-for-gen-z-movement-23-24.html>

¹² Nepal News, "RSP urges govt not to suppress Gen-Z protests, expresses full support", 7 September 2025, <https://english.nepalnews.com/s/nation/rsp-urges-govt-not-to-suppress-gen-z-protests-expresses-full-support/>.

¹³ Ghanashyam Gautam and Dipendra Baduwal, 'Court refuses to release Rabi Lamichhane from custody in cooperative fraud case', *The Kathmandu Post*, 11 August 2025, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2025/08/11/rupandehi-court-orders-lamichhane-to-remain-in-custody-in-cooperative-fraud-case>.

¹⁴ 'Over 14,000 prisoners escape nationwide, 1,455 rearrested so far', *Onlinekhabar*, 11 September 2025, <https://english.onlinekhabar.com/over-14000-prisoners-escape.html>.

¹⁵ 'RaSwaPa municipal president quit party after finding his involvement in arson', *Setopati*, 14 September 2025, <https://www.setopati.com/politics/369303>.

¹⁶ 'Mayor Balendra Shah backs Gen-Z rally against corruption and social media ban', *The Kathmandu Post*, 7 September 2025, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2025/09/07/mayor-balendra-shah-backs-gen-z-rally-against-corruption-and-social-media-ban>.

¹⁷ Akshar Kaka, 'Balen Shah threatens to torch Singha Durbar after traffic police stops KMC vehicle carrying wife', *Setopati*, 3 September 2023, <https://en.setopati.com/political/161681>.

¹⁸ Tiktok videos, <https://www.tiktok.com/discover/singh-durbar-damage-caused-by-balen>, accessed 16 September 2025.

Unanswered Questions

In the aftermath of the Prime Minister's resignation and attacks on police posts and personnel, there was utter chaos and lawlessness. There are questions on why the army was not mobilised to protect important public properties, including the President's office and official residence given that the President is the Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Nepali Army.¹⁹ The Army Chief's meeting with Prasain, referring to him as a stakeholder of the movement, during negotiations for the formation of a new government, also provided opportunities for speculations.²⁰

These questions have remained unanswered. However, with the formation of a new government, speculations and fear of Nepal's political backsliding are over, at least for now. The President and the Army appear to have managed the crisis with utmost care. The Nepali Army demonstrated its apolitical character remaining under civilian control.

New Government

When the Gen-Zs came out to protest, they did not imagine that they would have the say in choosing the country's next Prime Minister just two days after the protests started. They did not have a candidate and were least prepared for the same. There were different choices among the different groups within. Finally, they picked Sushila Karki, a retired Chief Justice, who is the first, and so far, the only female Chief Justice of Nepal.

Karki is outspoken and has a clean image. What aided further in her becoming the youths' choice was her visit to hospitals to meet the wounded, solidarity with the protestors and strong rebuke of government actions as the violence was raging on the streets.

With Karki's appointment as the leader of the interim government, Nepal also got its first-ever female Prime Minister, although by overriding the constitution. The President's breaching of the constitution has, nevertheless, been broadly accepted since the new government is not an outcome of a regular process but that of a violent intervention. Since finding a solution from within the then-existing parliament was an outright rejection by the youth, a quick derailing from the constitution and swiftly getting back on track was perhaps the second-best option.

Looking Ahead

The chief mandate of the interim government is to conduct free and fair elections and hand over the reins to the new government. Elections have been called for 5 March 2026. The Parliament has been dissolved. The political parties initially decried the unconstitutional steps taken in dissolving the Parliament. However, they have gradually started expressing

¹⁹ Man Bahadur Basnet, 'Why is the army pulled into controversy?', *Himalkhabar*, 13 September 2025, <https://www.himalkhabar.com/144677/gen-z-protest-army>.

²⁰ 'Presence of Durga Prasai in army-Gen Z dialogue draws public scrutiny', *Republica*, 11 September 2025, <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/presence-of-durga-prasai-in-army-gen-z-dialogue-draws-public-scrutiny-19-73.html>.

support for the elections. Opposing the elections and not participating in it will invite further turmoil.

There are concerns among some youths and the general public about the same political parties making a comeback from the elections. Unless new parties emerge and defeat the old guards in the upcoming elections, it will certainly be a return to business-as-usual politics. Some threats of not letting the established political parties contest the elections have also surfaced.

However, the youths have clarified that they are not against the existing political system.²¹ They are for retaining the current political framework but want full transformation of the political parties and their leaders.

It is in the interest of all that the top brass who have been at the helm of Nepal's politics for decades to step aside immediately and the political parties overhaul themselves. This is the implicit demand of the youths. Re-invention of the parties can perhaps re-ensure their credibility and acceptability among the people.

Bringing all stakeholders on board and creating an environment where all political parties can participate in the elections without fear it is a challenge that the interim government must overcome. At the same time, it has the responsibility to investigate several corruption cases and bring the culprits to book. Investigations of the killings, arsons and vandalism of the two-day protests and uprooting impunity is another major responsibility of the interim government.

In a short timeframe of six months, the government may not be able to deliver anything substantial. However, it can set some precedence for good governance.

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²¹ 'Interview with Rakshya Bam, GenZ activist', *Onlinekhabar*, 16 September 2025.