

YOUTH-LED PROTESTS AND REGIME CHANGE IN SOUTH ASIA



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As traditional power structures face growing pressure from a new generation of citizens, it is critical to examine the structural undercurrents, digital mechanics and ideological shifts redefining the relationship between the state and the citizens.

Introduction

The state in South Asia remains a complex and evolving entity, currently navigating a period of profound transformation and popular challenge. As traditional power structures face growing pressure from a new generation of citizens, it is critical to examine the structural undercurrents, digital mechanics and ideological shifts redefining the relationship between the state and the citizens.

The International Conference on South Asia is the annual flagship event of the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore. The conference in 2026, titled ‘Youth-Led Protests and Regime Change in South Asia’, sought to analyse the recent wave of extra-electoral regime changes and mass uprisings that had reshaped the region since 2022.

The conference explored these phenomena across three primary dimensions. The first was the structural drivers of dissent, including economic debt stress and youth disillusionment. The second was the mechanics of mobilisation, specifically the role of decentralised, leaderless networks in the digital age. The third was the future of governance and the challenges of translating revolutionary momentum into lasting policy and constitutional reform.

In an effort to provide an in-depth perspective on these issues, the conference brought together scholars, practitioners and researchers from across disciplines, including political science, economics, sociology, international relations and communications. Gender served as a cross-cutting theme throughout the discussions, ensuring that feminist perspectives were integrated into the analysis of these political shifts.

The conference was organised into six panels: ‘Between Uprising and Revolution: Reading the New Politics of Protest in South Asia’; ‘Anatomy of Protest: Drivers of Dissent and the Politics of Visibility in South Asia’; ‘The Role of Ideology and Social Uprisings in South Asia’; ‘Anti-Corruption Movements and the Politics of Structural Change in South Asia’; ‘The Mechanics of Protest: Leadership, Networks and Mobilisation in a Digital Age’; and ‘What Next? Lessons and the Future of Uprisings in South Asia’. This special report is the outcome of the discussions on these themes.

Between Uprising and Revolution: Reading the New Politics of Protest in South Asia

In recent years, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal have seen mass protests change the political status quo in these countries. One of the significant characteristics in the recent revolutions has been the participation of a younger generation and its use and incorporation of technology into protests which shaped and affected new ways of dissent. However, the broader effects of these uprisings also held continuities with past waves of social protests in the region.

The Mediated Uprising in Bangladesh and the Dialectics of Defiance

In 2024, a reinstated quota system for government jobs in Bangladesh triggered a mass, youth-driven protest movement against longstanding issues under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's rule. Anger over specific policies snowballed into large scale protests against broader issues of unequal access to opportunities and restrictions of political freedoms through entrenched power structures. The scale of participation demonstrated the depth of public dissatisfaction and its ability to mobilise large numbers of the public.

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The protests mobilised and sustained themselves through decentralised forms of organisation and mobilisation and deployed alternative forms of communication, mainly graffiti, memes and slogans – the usage of which showed shifts in political expression and understanding.¹ The state had to contend with a new kind of politics, namely, the change of political vocabulary used by the youth. Some of the slogans 'Dhaka, not Delhi', contested India's influence on Bangladesh's domestic politics, including India's implicit support of Hasina and the Awami League government. Another slogan read 'We broke free from Pakistan's slavery; we will not accept Delhi's dominance', resurrecting older narratives surrounding Bangladesh's 1971 liberation war. Memes, political art and slogans served both as forms of expression and as tools for coordination, helping to build collective identity and solidarity among the protesters around some common demands and a vision of political change.

1 Masum Billah, "Bangladeshi rap, memes helped oust Hasina - now they're reshaping politics", *Al Jazeera*, 11 July 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2025/7/11/rap-memes-graffiti-bangladeshs-new-political-tools-a-year-after-hasina>.

Authoritarian practices associated with Hasina's rule, including extrajudicial killings and politically motivated arrests, had been sustained through state-sponsored narratives and symbols that became deeply embedded within Bangladesh's cultural and historical consciousness.² For example, in 2011, the 1972 Constitution was amended to stipulate that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's portrait, recognised as the 'Father of the Nation', should be "preserved and displayed at all government and semi-governmental offices, autonomous bodies, statutory public authorities, educational institutions of all stripes and Bangladeshi embassies and missions abroad".³ Additionally, according to the 2018 Digital Security Act, anyone who violated the sanctity of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman or spread and created negative propaganda would be fined roughly US\$120,000 (S\$153,500) or sentenced to up to 14 years in prison.⁴

In a state that had systematically curtailed media freedoms and open expressions of political dissent, the slogans that emerged during the uprising included a shift in political language, where familiar vocabulary was repurposed with new meanings.

In the face of such norms and rules, the protesters' acts of defacement, destruction and vandalism of public spaces and effigies can be understood as drastic and desperate forms of resistance. In a state that had systematically curtailed media freedoms and open expressions of political dissent, the slogans that emerged during the uprising included a shift in political language, where familiar vocabulary was repurposed with new meanings. This deconstructed the state's discourse and rewired associations and concepts that the Awami League government had built over time.

During state-authorised internet outages, the walls of Dhaka became the space to 'post' and mobilise others to protest. These graffiti, which emerged as a form of infrapolitics during the protests, played a prominent role in shaping protesters' mobilisation and their vision of a reformed Bangladesh. The graffiti reflected a response to the state discourse reshaped by the people, producing an intertextual layer of meaning within the graffiti itself and some historical continuity in the discourse. While graffiti and imagery of this nature are typically part of a concealed political reality within the system, during the uprising in Bangladesh, this "graffiti like the bodies in the street, is a material re-appropriation of public space".⁵ This "occupying of space counteracts the strategies of

2 BBC News India (@bbcnewsindia), "Is Bangladesh's youth turning against India?", *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DUr9UORJSV7/>.

3 Bangladesh, Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, *The Code of Criminal Procedure*, <http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/act-367/section-24552.html>.

4 Nusrat Sabina Chowdhury, "The Return of Politics in Bangladesh", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 36, no. 1 (January 2025): 65–78.

5 John Lennon, "Assembling a Revolution: Graffiti, Cairo and the Arab Spring", *Cultural Studies Review*, Vol. 20, no. 1 (March 2014): 244.

surveillance and erasure”, responding directly to opposition, reshaping its meaning and shaping a collective identity.

While the protests successfully ousted Hasina’s government, from the outset, the protest narratives appeared vulnerable to co-option by more powerful actors or interests and there were concerns over which social forces would shape the dominant narratives of the movement. The post-uprising environment revealed the growing prominence of both religious and gendered forms of political expression, raising questions about the ideological direction of the political mix of ideas. Consequently, the long-term effects of the protest remain uncertain as competing forces, particularly established political parties and orthodox and conservative narratives, vie for power in the political vacuum created by the disruption.

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What the post-protest moment shows is that opposition to repression alone is insufficient to transform democratic systems and the political culture and ideals that inform them. The central question facing the protests in their aftermath is how to convert mobilisation into sustainable political change while avoiding the shortcomings of previous reform efforts. In Bangladesh, due to regression in democratic politics over a sustained period, generations have grown up under increasingly restrictive political conditions and so may have limited experience of democratic participation, shaping both their expectations and political imagination. While many young people demonstrate significant political awareness, translating activism into long-term democratic engagement remains an ongoing challenge.

Aragalaya-Porattam-Struggle: A View from the Margins in Sri Lanka

The 2022 uprising in Sri Lanka, popularly known as the *Aragalaya-Porattam-Struggle*, represented the largest mass mobilisation in the country’s recent history, though not necessarily its most transformative. The *Aragalaya* was significantly facilitated by social media platforms that enabled mobilisation, sharing of information and coordination. However, its participants extended beyond a single generation or social group.

Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's concept of the 'national-popular',⁶ the *Aragalaya* showed how diverse social forces can be organised around a broad and popular demand that cuts across class and social divisions. From a Gramscian perspective, meaningful political transformation requires contesting dominant ideas and institutions across society, including cultural, political and civil society spaces rather than focusing only on official state institutions. In addition, Stuart Hall's concept of conjuncture⁷ captures how multiple crises and social forces can converge at a given historical moment, with digital culture, memes and protest repertoires helping to articulate and sustain collective action.

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Sri Lanka's political history includes periods characterised by resistance against the formal state, including a 1962 coup attempt but this did not succeed as the armed forces then lacked the capacity they eventually developed in the course of the war. The 1971 insurrection involved mainly southern Sinhala youth influenced by Maoist ideas which was met with severe state crackdown. During the same period, Tamil militant struggle emerged from longstanding political grievances and intensified following the anti-Tamil violence of 1983 which became a critical turning point in Sri Lanka's politics and society.

Describing the *Aragalaya* as a Gen Z movement reflects the visible role played by younger people who expressed frustration with the failures of previous generations of political leaders and the lack of socio-economic opportunities available to them. The movement articulated the concerns of mostly educated and politically-conscious youth whose aspirations for economic security, democratic governance and social mobility appeared increasingly hard to achieve. The protests also revived discussions about structural inequalities, economic systems and class dynamics, introducing once again, forms of political analysis that had largely disappeared from mainstream public discourse.

The movement united different sets of grievances under the theme of anti-corruption, contributing to change in political leadership. However, this did not thereafter translate into transformation of entrenched structural conditions. Many of the structural issues that animated the protests, including opposition to the Prevention of Terrorism Act, remain

6 Mark McNally, "Chapter 5", in *Gramsci and Global Politics: Hegemony and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2009), 58-76.

7 Robert Moore, Stuart Hall, Charles Critcher, Tony Jefferson and Brian Roberts, "Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order", *Journal of Social Policy*, Vol. 8, no. 3 (July 1979): 426-27.

unresolved. The deeply systemic issues of economic constraints, the influence of foreign capital flows and lending practices remained largely intact.⁸ The struggles of peripheral groups such as farmers, women and minority communities surfaced during the movement but they did not gain enough momentum to fundamentally influence and reshape the existing norms and structures in the country. The large-scale mobilisation and protests, while an efficient shock to the system, therefore, was not sufficient to maintain sustained change and effectively dismantle entrenched systems of power.

What is ‘Democratic’ about Nepali Democracy? Gen Z Protests and Mismatch of Measurement and Reality in Nepal

Despite Nepal’s improving scores on conventional indicators such as those of the Varieties of Democracy Institute, they failed to detect the growing frustrations and grievances that ultimately contributed to large-scale protests in the country. Existing democracy metrics often overlook aspects of governance that matter to ordinary people, such as the quality of decision-making within local-level state institutions and political parties. The success of Nepal’s new government should be measured by its ability to attend to the micro level, including whether there is actually a decline in the undemocratic ‘partisanisation’ of institutions which negatively affect the people’s everyday lives.

Existing democracy metrics often overlook aspects of governance that matter to ordinary people, such as the quality of decision-making within local-level state institutions and political parties.

Herman Cappelen’s critique of democracy⁹ measurement highlights how seemingly objective indicators can obscure important realities, with Nepal serving as a compelling example of the gap between quantitative scores and social dissatisfaction. In Nepal, the protests highlighted dissatisfaction with a system characterised by ‘partisanisation’ referred to as *bhagbanda*, where political parties maintain influence through collusive competition to influence economic opportunities across sectors such as education, healthcare, tourism and construction. Political brokers create symbiotic linkages between an industry or sector and party leadership, creating services and jobs in return for political facilitation of a market monopoly.¹⁰ This system has in the process created a two-

8 Sakeena Razick, “Sri Lanka’s Aragalaya: The role of a citizen movement during crisis”, *Stanford International Policy Review* (Stanford: Ford Dorsey Master’s in International Policy, 17 December 2025), <https://fsi.stanford.edu/sipr/content/sri-lankas-aragalaya-role-citizen-movement-during-crisis>.

9 Herman Cappelen, “The Concept of Democracy: An Essay on Conceptual Amelioration and Abandonment”, *Political Studies Review*, Vol. 23, no. 1 (February 2025): NP7-NP8, DOI: 10.1177/14789299241259582.

10 Amish Raj Mulmi, “From Streets to Discord: How Nepal’s Gen Z Toppled a Government”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 24 September 2025), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/09/nepal-gen-z-topple-government>.

tier economy, undermining internal party democracy, creating crony linkages and stalling innovation and human development, in the process advantaging upper class and upper caste groups and creating neo-patronage relationships.

Across these contexts, state responses, such as repression or internet shutdowns, often intensified anti-establishment sentiment within the protests.

The protests, particularly those associated with the younger generations, can be understood as a challenge to such embedded power structures rather than to the idea of democracy itself. The protests in Nepal, including critiques of ‘nepo babies’ functioning as part of the political upper class, were a direct challenge to this entrenched system of power.¹¹ Across these contexts, state responses, such as repression or internet shutdowns, often intensified anti-establishment sentiment within the protests. The ultimate test of democratic progress in Nepal may lie not in primarily measuring national-level democracy scores but whether everyday institutions become more autonomous, transparent and accessible to ordinary citizens regardless of political affiliation.

11 Tessa Wong, Sardar Ronie and Phanindra Dahal, “Two protests, two elections: How Nepal’s Gen Z succeeded where Bangladesh’s stumbled”, *BBC News*, 6 April 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cz673y3qqjlo>.

Anatomy of Protest: Drivers of Dissent and the Politics of Visibility in South Asia

While protests shaped by the youth took place in both Nepal and Bangladesh, the uprisings and their aftermath held different qualities and results in both countries. Alternatively, the lack of protests by the youth of Pakistan, despite having similar triggers as Nepal and Bangladesh, respectively, can be understood by taking ‘drivers of dissent’ and ‘politics of visibility’ as separate lenses. Drivers of dissent can be interpreted as the conditions necessary for protest; the deeper structural economic or political causes that drive the youth and the larger population to protest. Politics of visibility can be understood as the struggle of contending with the entrenched systems. Using these two lenses to break down the anatomy of protests offers deeper insights into the uprising in Bangladesh, the lack of regime-changing protests in Pakistan and the evolution of Nepal’s politics after the protests.

Politics of visibility can be understood as the struggle of contending with the entrenched systems.

***Towhidi Janata* and the Vicissitudes of Embodied Politics in Bangladesh**

In Bangladesh, the July 2024 protests began as student opposition to government job quotas before expanding into demands for regime change. India’s close relationship with the Awami League and its decision to provide refuge to Hasina also contributed to a significant shift in public attitudes and deep anti-India sentiment became increasingly visible among sections of the population.

The aftermath of the protests reveals how these drivers of dissent fragmented the incumbent government and in the vacuum that was created, new forms of political identity and mobilisation emerged. Most notably, the *Towhidi Janata* – which combines the word *Towhidi* (referring to the oneness of Allah) and *Janata* (the people) – functions as an umbrella term for those gathered under the banner belonging to disparate cultural and political organisations, making its emergence a significant political development.¹² *Towhidi Janata* became associated with acts of unruly public behaviour, including attacks on political opponents and institutions perceived to be aligned with the former

12 Saqlain Rizve, “The rise of coercive Islamist mobilisation in Bangladesh”, The Lowy Institute, 15 January 2026, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/rise-coercive-islamist-mobilisation-bangladesh>.

regime. Its presence has stoked anxieties about the consolidation of right-wing forces in an unprecedented political vacuum.

It also demonstrated increased legitimacy for popular forms of adjudicating moral wrongs that bypass formal institutional channels.

These groups were associated with acts of ‘popular justice’, including attacks on individuals and institutions linked to the former regime and described by critics as unruly ‘mob rule’ and by others as a legitimate expression. Two key developments occurred as a result: *Towhidi Janata* entered public consciousness as an agent of religiously motivated crowd action while the English word ‘mob’ became widely adopted even in Bengali discourse. This reflected the waning hegemony of a middle-class, quasi-secular political rhetoric. It also demonstrated increased legitimacy for popular forms of adjudicating moral wrongs that bypass formal institutional channels.

Towhidi Janata represents a form of faith-based collective politics that both challenges democratic ideals and is celebrated by some as an expression of popular justice. Sociologically, *Towhidi Janata* is often described as consisting largely of Muslim men, many but not all from working-class backgrounds. A recurring feature is the defence of the Prophet or Islam, more broadly, through methods that can involve intimidation or violence. *Towhidi Janata* and the secular, student-led *Chatro Janata* represent different political formations with distinct historical trajectories.

Attempts to erase symbols associated with the previous regime should be understood in the context of the political cultism that accompanied the Awami League’s authoritarian rule. Events such as the demolition of Mujibur Rahman’s historic residence (Dhanmondi 32), a site tied to Bangladesh’s political memory, illustrate how the drivers of dissent manifest in different narratives.¹³ The residence was a symbol of Bangladesh’s path to sovereignty and carried a deeply contested historical legacy. While some viewed such acts as an erasure of history, others interpreted them as a rejection of entrenched politics and as a spontaneous expression of public will.

Towhidi Janata is not a monolithic formation and includes individuals associated with Jamaat-e-Islami, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP),

13 Moudud Ahmmed Sujon, “Why a Bangladesh mob burned down home of independence icon Mujibur Rahman”, *Al Jazeera*, 7 February 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/7/why-a-bangladesh-mob-burned-down-home-of-independence-icon-mujibur-rahman>.

the Awami League, madrasa networks and local political interests. Local dynamics often shape mobilisation under this banner, including land disputes, communal tensions and local power struggles. The concept of ‘secular supremacism’ raises questions about who possesses the power to label a crowd as a legitimate public or an illegitimate mob. The argument highlights the role of cultural hegemony in shaping political narratives in Bangladesh. *Towhidi Janata* functions as an open-source political brand whose meaning remains contested. Some interpretations suggest that all of Bangladesh could be understood as *Towhidi Janata* depending on how ‘the people’ are defined. In 2025, leaders of Islamist movements argued that all believers in the oneness of Allah are *Towhidi Janata* and that violence committed in its name is a distortion of the concept.

The concept of ‘secular supremacism’ raises questions about who possesses the power to label a crowd as a legitimate public or an illegitimate mob.

Mobs have become a visible and influential political manifestation in Bangladesh following the uprising, much as Gen Z became a prominent political force in the lead up to the fall of the Awami League regime. To understand popular sovereignty after the uprising, it is necessary to pay attention to these embodied political actors rather than dismissing them as simple deviations from democracy. These developments invite a reconsideration of liberal democratic theory in contexts emerging from authoritarianism.

Explaining the Absence of a Youth-Led Political Uprising in Pakistan

The increasing occurrence of protest movements to achieve regime change outside normal electoral processes seemingly reflects a ‘new normal’ in South Asia. The loudest protesters do not necessarily represent the less visible segments of society, including minorities, women, the peasantry and the working class. Many of these uprisings appear to have been driven primarily by urban middle-class constituencies rather than reflecting the interests and aspirations of society as a whole. While many of these recent protest movements in South Asia have challenged the political veneer of governments, they have done so without fundamentally disrupting the ‘deep state’, that is, entrenched networks of elite power that are generally considered to influence political outcomes. Protest movements often focused on removing individual leaders or governments without addressing the deeper structural conditions that sustain existing power relations and many of these movements were unable to develop a composite counter-

Political mobilisation afterwards frequently revolved around charismatic leaders and individual figures rather than broader ideological programmes or institutional reforms.

narrative. Political mobilisation afterwards frequently revolved around charismatic leaders and individual figures rather than broader ideological programmes or institutional reforms.

In Pakistan, while the drivers of dissent, such as economic crisis, rising inequality, corruption and dynastic politics, are present, they have not translated into a sustained mass protest movement as seen in other South Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal. These movements reflected growing dissatisfaction with the assumption that regular elections alone are sufficient indicators of democratic governance and accountability. The narrative of these movements was one of systemic change but often without clearly defining the specific mechanics of such a structural transformation beyond the removal of a leader. In the end, the change was arguably not truly systemic, as the establishment elite (local and/or global) and the deep state often managed the transition in ways that allowed them to preserve their interests through alternative means and regather for the future.

In many cases, demands for institutional reform overlooked the deeper governance failures that had generated public dissatisfaction in the first place. Instead, greater attention should have been paid to performance legitimacy, as public grievances were primarily centred on corruption, dynastic politics and the unequal exercise of power.

Unlike Bangladesh and Nepal, where protests amalgamated into broad-based uprising, in Pakistan, structural and historical constraints shape a distinct politics of (in)visibility. Pakistan has a legacy of colonial governance with a structure of centralised power at the top and decentralised mechanisms of control at the local level. Historically, student movements were a potent political force but their decline following restrictions under military rule fragmented their organisational capacity. Contemporary youth activism remains largely mediated through political party structures, often functioning as party youth wings rather than autonomous movements. Student activism often reflects middle-class concerns about corruption, economic insecurity, dynastic politics and unemployment but has generally struggled to attract sustained mass support. Coupled with mobilisation along ethnic and religious lines, these existing structures inhibit the formation of a cohesive, cross-class protest movement.¹⁴

14 Mazhar Abbas, Samee Lashari and Amit Ranjan, "Social Movements in Pakistan: Struggles of Identity, Equality, and Justice", *Asian Affairs* (London: Taylor & Francis), https://think.taylorandfrancis.com/special_issues/social-movements-in-pakistan-struggles-of-identity-equality-and-justice/.

Widespread frustration with dynastic politics and corruption contributed to the rise of Imran Khan's right-leaning populist movement which channelled many anti-establishment sentiments. Pakistan's severe economic crisis, marked by inflation, debt pressures, rising inequality and widespread poverty, has created many of the socioeconomic conditions associated with protest mobilisation. While social media has become an important political tool, much of the online mobilisation associated with the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) has focused on the release of Imran Khan rather than a broader policy agenda or ideological programme.

Youth, Social Media and Political Change in Nepal

The protests in Nepal were strongly shaped by a generational divide in which youth-led protests framed politics as a struggle against entrenched and corrupt political elites. A central grievance was captured in the slogan 'nepo kids', referring to the privileged children of politicians perceived to benefit from inherited networks and, in some cases, allegedly ill-gotten wealth. In September 2025, youth-led uprisings emerged in response to a social media ban, widespread corruption and alleged state capture of state capture by entrenched political and economic elites. The circulation of social media content through slogans such as 'We Pay, You Flex', juxtaposing the lives of political elites' offspring with those to migrant workers, further sharpened this generational consciousness.¹⁵

The drivers of dissent in Nepal were channelled into a highly visible and organised movement. What initially began as peaceful and even celebratory protests, characterised by songs, slogans and cross-generational solidarity, quickly escalated into clashes between protesters and security forces, resulting in the deaths of 19 protesters on the first day. This further escalated on the second day into targeted attacks on key political institutions, including the parliament and the Supreme Court as well as the properties of business elites and the private residences of politicians.

The drivers of dissent in Nepal were channelled into a highly visible and organised movement.

Within days, intense negotiations, facilitated by the Nepal Army, resulted in an interim political settlement, including the appointment of Sushila Karki as a transitional leader, until elections were held in March 2026.¹⁶

15 Tessa Wong, Sardar Ronie and Phanindra Dahal, "Two protests, two elections: How Nepal's Gen Z succeeded where Bangladesh's stumbled", op. cit.

16 Bibek Bhandari, "Nepal's ex-chief justice Sushila Karki chosen as interim prime minister", *South China Morning Post*, 12 September 2025, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3325265/nepals-gen-z-protesters-back-ex-chief-justice-sushila-karki-interim-leadership>.

Youth experiences and aspirations in Nepal and South Asia have been shaped by wider political-economic conditions beyond individual agency.

This moment is significant not only for the speed of resolution but for the inclusion of actors outside traditional parliamentary structures, signalling a break from entrenched political processes.

While the movement itself appeared spontaneous, the protests drew on longstanding issues such as growing socioeconomic inequality. Youth experiences and aspirations in Nepal and South Asia have been shaped by wider political-economic conditions beyond individual agency. Rapid demographic change has produced a large youth cohort, intensifying political visibility and generational pressure within the Nepali society. While the youth had been increasingly exposed to liberal democratic values (such as rights, equality and justice) and materialist aspirations, the reality they confronted was of entrenched political patronage systems and shrinking opportunities for upward socio-economic mobility.

The organisation around the protests was built from youth-led social activism which was established after the 2015 earthquake relief efforts and extended to campaigns around anti-corruption, gender justice and caste equality.¹⁷ The movement reflected both generational contestation and gendered critiques of entrenched masculine political authority, grounded in a culture of sustained social activism.

17 Sangya Lamsal and Sudiksha Tuladhar, "Who, or What, is Hami Nepal?", *Nepali Times*, 11 September 2025, <https://nepalitimes.com/who-or-what-is-hami-nepal>.

The Role of Ideology and Social Uprisings in South Asia

Across protests in South Asia, there are precursors, such as persistent economic and political conditions which act as catalysts for society to mobilise and protest. The factors make some protests culminate in government change and those that remain confined to sustained political contention can be better understood through an analysis of ideologies underpinning or mobilised by the protests. Protests tread a fine line between a persistent paradox – between broadening their ideological and social base which gains them momentum, even as they foreground specific issues and identities which could risk marginalisation within dominant narratives.

Across South Asia, two interrelated dynamics help explain why some uprisings gain traction and translate into outcomes while others dissipate: first, whether a movement is able to transcend sectoral identity or group-based politics; and second, the dynamics of mobilisation, including its scale, structure and transformative capacity.

Transcending and Broadening Identity Politics – Populism and Protest

A key factor of whether uprisings gain traction is their ability to move beyond identity-bound claims and articulate a broader, macro-political narrative. The 2020-21 farmers' protest in India expanded its ideological scope and achieved broad and sustained mobilisation. Central concerns included fears that agricultural reforms would undermine state protections and expose farmers to market vulnerabilities. Even though it was rooted in specific economic grievances and practices such as land privatisation and fears of agrarian dispossession, the farmers' protest reframed itself in sovereign terms. It questioned the corporate model of development, linked agrarian distress to democratic decline and invoked sovereignty through land struggles.¹⁸

It questioned the corporate model of development, linked agrarian distress to democratic decline and invoked sovereignty through land struggles.

18 Jelvin Jose, "The Farmers' Movement and 'Anti-National' Messaging in India", *South Asian Voices*, 18 March 2021, <https://southasianvoices.org/the-farmers-movement-and-anti-national-messaging-in-india/>.

This highlights a broader gap between social mobilisation and electoral politics, where success at the level of discourse and mobilisation does not automatically translate into electoral power.

This expansion allowed the movement to transcend its sector specific ideology and aims and created a counter-hegemonic narrative. The movement succeeded in pushing back and securing concessions from the government, forcing policy rollback by repealing the laws that were meant to deregulate the agricultural market.¹⁹ However, its inability to translate this success into electoral outcomes was seen in subsequent victories of the ruling party in protest-heavy regions. This highlights a broader gap between social mobilisation and electoral politics, where success at the level of discourse and mobilisation does not automatically translate into electoral power.

In contrast, the anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) protests demonstrate the limits of movements that are framed within a specific identity and ideology. Although the issue had significant constitutional, democratic and moral implications, it became widely represented as a 'Muslim issue', reinforcing existing Hindu-Muslim polarisation.²⁰ This reflects a situation whereby minority movements must assert specificity to resist erasure under majoritarian politics; yet such assertion risks reproducing the very divisions it seeks to overcome and generating a cycle of fragmentation and exclusion.

Meanwhile, the Gen Z-led movement in India since 2025 centred on concerns about corruption and environmental issues, particularly mining in the Aravalli Range near New Delhi.²¹ However, unlike the farmers' movement, it did not develop a broader political programme beyond demands to halt mining activities and address corruption. The movement was largely leaderless, highly spontaneous and dissipated relatively quickly. It also appeared disconnected from the wider agendas and solidarities that characterised other contemporary protest movements, such as the farmers' and anti-CAA mobilisations.

At the same time, the movement reflected changing forms of social and political subjectivity among younger generations, marked by issue-based activism, digital mobilisation and a preference for decentralised forms of organisation. While a new social ethic was visible, the movement stopped

19 Soutik Biswas, "Farm laws: Why India PM Narendra Modi rolled back vexed reforms", *BBC News*, 19 November 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-59306356>.

20 J P Yadav, "Firm on CAA, BJP banks on polarisation", *The Telegraph India*, 23 January 2020, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/firm-on-cao-bjp-banks-on-polarisation/cid/1739144>.

21 A Dey, "Why India's Aravalli hills are at the centre of growing protests", *BBC News*, 22 December 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn5ln4wee7wo>.

short of challenging broader structures of power and development. It did not significantly engage with questions of neoliberalism, constitutional freedoms, authoritarianism, or corporate influence, instead treating mining largely as an isolated environmental issue rather than as part of a wider political-economic model.

Finally, the University Grants Commission Equity Regulations 2026 created opportunities for lower caste and marginalised students to challenge discrimination on Indian university campuses.²² Social elites mobilised against the regulations. They framed their opposition through a narrative of aggressive victimhood. They claimed that the reforms made dominant social groups vulnerable. Dominant social groups can also mobilise through performative narratives of victimhood. These groups possessed significant cultural and social capital. As a result, their protests received substantial media attention.

Dominant social groups can also mobilise through performative narratives of victimhood.

Overall, these cases illustrate that the ideological framing of protests plays a decisive role in determining both its reach and its political impact. At the same time, the politics of visibility and voice remain uneven, as groups with greater social and cultural capital are often better able to frame their grievances as universal concerns, shaping public discourse in ways that can overshadow more marginalised claims. These dynamics highlight that protest outcomes are not determined solely by the inherent urgency or legitimacy of grievances but by how effectively those grievances are articulated and positioned within broader structures of power and legitimacy.

Naming the Unthinkable: Protests in Bangladesh

The removal of the Awami League government was widely perceived as an unexpected political rupture that generated a strong sense of hope for change. The post-uprising period was marked by further instability and a shift from optimism to fear due to escalating violence and insecurity. The period also saw targeted attacks on media institutions and instances of mob violence, including the killing of a garment worker from the minority Hindu community. Widespread mob violence and inflammatory speech contributed to an environment of heightened communal tension.

22 Aditya Sinha, "India's equity rules are a court-mandated mirage", *Frontline*, 29 January 2026, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/columns/ugc-equity-regulations-caste-discrimination-campus-backlash/article70564182.ece>.

The multiplicity of ideologies underpinning the uprising went beyond the binary confrontation between the subdued Chatro Janata and Towhidi Janata, a fault line that predated the uprising in 2024.

The more inclusive student-led (*Chatro Janata*) alliance risked being displaced by more exclusionary religiously framed political formations such as *Towhidi Janata*. *Towhidi Janata* mobilised around the policing of perceived un-Islamic behaviour and cultural practices. The multiplicity of ideologies underpinning the uprising went beyond the binary confrontation between the subdued *Chatro Janata* and *Towhidi Janata*, a fault line that predated the uprising in 2024. Instead, the movement brought to the fore deeper questions of nationhood and identity, highlighting that the central issue is not only the contest between secularism and Islamism but the ways in which the nation-state constructs and privileges a particular ethno-political people. In this sense, the uprising reflected a broader crisis of belonging and representation, echoing Frantz Fanon's observation, "We revolt simply because, for many reasons, we can no longer breathe."²³

The movement demonstrated how university students transformed a conventional campaign for the reallocation of quotas into a full-fledged people's revolution. The concepts of *atonko* (terror) and *khob* (resentment) capture the political mood that underpinned this transformation. Here, *atonko* is understood as an extension and magnification of the everyday fear associated with a quasi-police state, characterised by harassment, intimidation, the threat of disappearance into the infamous *Aynaghar* (mirror house) and even death through extrajudicial violence. *Khob*, in turn, reflected the accumulated grievances and frustrations generated by these conditions, providing the emotional and political force that propelled the movement beyond its original demands.

Bangladeshi students' aspirations and frustration are shared by many youth and students globally, shaped by the intersecting forces of capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism and local political dynamics. Many students from upper working-class and lower middle-class backgrounds entered university with expectations of social mobility, only to confront limited employment prospects and a system that was constrained by neoliberalism and status quo development discourse, where progress is measured through narrow metrics of economic progress.

23 Qudsia Saeed, "Algeria to Palestine: Frantz Fanon's Call for a Conscious Evolution", Muslim Public Affairs Council, 23 February 2024, <https://archive.mpac.org/article/algeria-to-palestine-frantz-fanons-call-for-a-conscious-evolution/>.

Even though the removal of individual leaders, framed through metaphors of ‘cutting off the head’, did not necessarily dismantle the deeper institutional networks underpinning the Bangladeshi deep state, they still matter as different metrics of democratic change. The uprising was an intifada, a shaking off of everything associated with Hasina’s time. Despite differences between *Chatro Janata* and the people, the uprising represented a refusal of authoritarian rule and nationalist temporal order. Students refused nationalist time, with no attachment to 1971 and sought alternative temporalities including 1952.

Placards such as ‘From the plains to the hills, the freedom this time is for everyone’ challenged ethno-nationalism, as the 1971 war was fought in the name of ethno-nationalist Bengali majoritarianism, with non-Bengali speakers treated as second-class citizens.²⁴ Chants reminded Bengalis that *atonko* was long experienced in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Placards quoting Kalpana Chakma emphasised ongoing state violence and disappearances in the hills. Different framings of the July 2024 uprising either close down new imaginations of citizenship or open up critique of Bengali nationalist ethno-state. However, significantly, nationalist refusal was not an epistemic rupture; they could not fully break the idea of the nation.

Nationalist refusal was not an epistemic rupture; they could not fully break the idea of the nation.

Nepal’s Gen Z Movement: New Hopes but Old Challenges

In Nepal, there were several key structural drivers of the protests in 2025. First, there was economic stagnation and a persistent lack of opportunity. Since Nepal’s democratic transition in 1990, average economic growth has remained modest at around four per cent, with limited domestic job creation. As a result, labour migration has become a structural feature of the economy. Approximately 3,000 Nepalis leave the country each day for employment or education abroad while remittances account for roughly a quarter of gross domestic product.²⁵ This has produced a structural paradox of macroeconomic stability without corresponding domestic opportunity.

24 Shafi Md Mostofa, “Minorities in Bangladesh caught within political upheaval”, East Asia Forum, 22 March 2025, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/03/22/minorities-in-bangladesh-caught-within-political-upheaval/>.

25 S Khadka, “About 3,000 youths leave Nepal every day”, *myRepublica*, 8 December 2023, <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/about-3000-youths-go-abroad-every-day>.

Second, endemic corruption and state failure have further eroded public trust. Political elites and their associated networks are widely perceived to have captured state institutions, producing entrenched patterns of rent-seeking and impunity. Corruption scandals have become routine features of public life and the rise of social media has amplified their visibility and circulation, intensifying public awareness of state dysfunction and accountability deficits.²⁶

Third, chronic political instability has further undermined governance. Since the 1990s, successive governments in Nepal have been short-lived, with none of them completing a five-year term.²⁷ Frequent leadership changes and fragile coalition bargaining have fostered a perception of politics as self-serving and disconnected from public needs, weakening institutional continuity and long-term policy implementation.

Anti-establishment sentiment was already visible in earlier political outcomes, including the rise of new political actors and shifting patterns of electoral support.

There had been a gradual buildup of the youth's frustration in Nepal over several years, with youth-led campaigns both online and offline expressing dissatisfaction with corruption, limited opportunities and entrenched elite privilege. Anti-establishment sentiment was already visible in earlier political outcomes, including the rise of new political actors and shifting patterns of electoral support. Together, these conditions created a reservoir of discontent. The social media restrictions acted as a catalyst rather than the underlying cause, directly disrupting the primary space through which young people communicate, organise and express themselves. Once mobilised, digital networks enabled rapid escalation, allowing collective action to spread quickly without reliance on formal organisational structures.²⁸

This horizontal structure enhanced inclusivity and speed but constrained coherence and long-term strategic direction. There is a notable degree of ideological indifference among protestors. Many Gen Z activists do not strongly identify with traditional left-right ideological distinctions across political, economic or social axes. Instead, they view establishment parties, regardless of ideology, as similarly responsible for corruption, governance failure and systemic stagnation.

26 K Zipperer, "Digging up the dirt: Democracy, visibility and the 'crisis of corruption' in Nepal", *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 48(4), 2025, 763-781.

27 "Nepal's long history of political instability", *The Business Standard*, 2 March 2026, <https://www.tbsnews.net/explainer/nepals-long-history-political-instability-1374801>.

28 R D Lomzza and S G Gupta, "Hashtags, VPNs, and youth rage: Social media in Nepal's Gen Z protest", *South India Journal of Social Sciences*, 23(7), 2025, 104-109.

Finally, the movement highlights a distinction between democratic participation and political legitimacy. Nepali youth have not rejected democracy; their engagement in protests and elections indicates a continued commitment to democratic processes. In fact, many newly elected members of parliament are professionals in their respective fields, reflecting a partial reconfiguration rather than a wholesale rejection of expertise or leadership.

However, procedural legitimacy, derived from being elected, is no longer sufficient on its own. Performance legitimacy, based on delivering good governance, accountability and tangible results, has become the central criteria by which political authority is assessed. In this context, the movement has already produced rapid political change and elections have brought shifts in party composition and leadership. Whether these changes will translate into deeper structural transformation remains uncertain.

Nepali youth have not rejected democracy; their engagement in protests and elections indicates a continued commitment to democratic processes.

Anti-Corruption Movements and Politics of Structural Change in South Asia

The Corruption of Anti-corruption in Post-Aragalaya Sri Lanka

High-risk factors include the systematic erosion of accountability, manipulation of public procurement through unsolicited proposals and a shift from 'rule by family' to 'rule by party'.

Sri Lanka's system of governance has over time moved toward an entrenched form of kleptocracy, in which those in power systematically exploit public office to appropriate state resources for personal gain. Transparency International Sri Lanka identifies this system through 17 distinct elements categorised into high and medium-risk indicators.²⁹ High-risk factors include the systematic erosion of accountability, manipulation of public procurement through unsolicited proposals and a shift from 'rule by family' to 'rule by party'. This is bolstered by the weaponisation of social media to suppress dissent and by the use of professional gatekeepers to facilitate illicit financial transactions. Medium-risk indicators include appointing military allies to civilian rule and co-opting the judiciary, providing the institutional shielding necessary to sustain this evolution.

The *Aragalaya*, or People's Struggle, emerged within this context but achieved a change in leadership rather than a change in regime. This shift was largely cosmetic; the executive's exit allowed the establishment to transfer power to a handpicked successor while the parliamentary composition remained unchanged. The movement itself was fragmented, divided among dissident groups, liberal civil society and parties with conflicting agendas.³⁰ Furthermore, the presence of middle and upper-class resources suggests the struggle was subject to external manipulation by interests seeking 'stability' over structural reform. A turning point occurred on 9 May 2022 when government-organised attacks diverted the inclusive movement into violence, providing a pretext for the state to re-establish control under the guise of national security.

29 "Kleptocracy and State Capture", The Anti-Corruption Knowledge Hub, Transparency International Sri Lanka, <https://knowledgehub.tisrilanka.org/kleptocracy-and-state-capture/>.

30 Nalia Rafique, "Beyond the Protest: Sri Lanka's Aragalaya Movement and the Uncertain Future", Freedom House, 26 October 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/article/beyond-protests-sri-lankas-aragalaya-movement-and-uncertain-future>.

Systemic continuity is reinforced by the stagnation of dominant ideologies. Despite securing electoral victories with the support of ethnic minorities, continuities in Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarianism have nonetheless persisted. In 2026, three civil society representatives, all Sinhalese, were appointed to the Constitutional Council. Similarly, the Archaeological Advisory Committee, which oversees contested sites, consists entirely of Sinhala Buddhists.³¹ Such patterns highlight a governance model that prioritises majoritarian hegemony over inclusive representation.

In this landscape, the ‘Gen Z’ label given to the 2022 protests substitutes intersectional analysis of class and gender with a descriptor that allows the state to dismiss systemic demands as fleeting youthful idealism. Crucially, the state distinguishes between the more visible corruption and systematic corruption. It targets the former to project honesty while ignoring the latter. For example, the Employees Provident Fund valued at approximately LKR3.4-4 trillion (S\$13-15.4 billion), became entangled in Sri Lanka’s domestic debt restructuring process, raising concerns about the exposure of workers’ retirement savings to fiscal adjustment measures.³² More broadly, the restructuring process appeared to place a disproportionate burden on domestic savings.³³

‘Gen Z’ label given to the 2022 protests substitutes intersectional analysis of class and gender with a descriptor that allows the state to dismiss systemic demands as fleeting youthful idealism.

More recently, during Cyclone Ditwah in late 2025, disaster-relief communication systems were criticised for linguistic exclusion, with emergency warnings and administrative processes often failing to reach Tamil-speaking communities in an accessible form. Reporting highlighted that many Tamil-speaking residents received limited or delayed life-saving information due to systemic gaps in the dissemination of official communications in Tamil.³⁴ In the aftermath of the cyclone, the Malaiyaha Tamil community in the plantation sector has been disproportionately affected, with thousands of people still in temporary camps, often housed in schools without adequate facilities.

31 “No Tamils or Muslims to Advise the Sinhalese Government on Archaeology”, *Colombo Telegraph*, 13 November 2023, <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/no-tamils-or-muslims-to-advise-the-sinhalese-government-on-archaeology/>.

32 Darini Rajasingham Senanayake, “Wealth of Nations and the poverty of theory: debt restructuring as rocket science”, *InDepthNews*, 26 May 2024, <https://indepthnews.net/wealth-of-nations-and-the-poverty-of-theory-debt-restructuring-as-rocket-science/>.

33 “Sri Lankan trade unions to the IMF: Stop forcing the poor to pay the debt of the rich”, *Progressive International*, 31 August 2023, <https://progressive.international/wire/2023-08-31-to-the-ifm-domestic-debt-restructuring-in-sri-lanka-forcing-the-poor-to-pay-the-debt-of-the-rich/en/>.

34 Tharushi Weerasinghe and Sandran Rubatheesan, “Lost in Translation: How Sri Lanka’s Tamils face repeated disaster warning failures”, *The New Humanitarian*, 18 December 2025, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2025/12/18/lost-translation-how-sri-lankas-tamils-face-repeated-disaster-warning>.

Taken together, these developments and the broader pattern of institutional inertia suggest that it may be necessary to move from anti-corruption, understood primarily as a selective or instrumental mechanism deployed against political adversaries, towards a more systemic understanding of corruption that also encompasses what is described as “quiet corruption” embedded within institutional practices and policy processes.

Anti-Corruption as a Political Strategy in Pakistan

Ultimately, selective enforcement ensures that accountability becomes leverage for inducing defections and engineering a more ‘acceptable’ elite class.

In Pakistan, anti-corruption narratives have historically served as instruments of political delegitimisation and elite restructuring rather than as pathways to reform. Through the lens of the ‘overdeveloped’ postcolonial state, in which the military and bureaucracy wield disproportionate power, this imbalance generates a recurring four-step analytical cycle that begins with a crisis narrative framing corruption as a form of national moral collapse.³⁵ This is then followed by a period of ‘extraordinary politics’, in which intervention is presented as a rescue mission, leading to the deployment of legal tools such as disqualification orders and tribunals to restructure political competition.³⁶ Ultimately, selective enforcement ensures that accountability becomes leverage for inducing defections and engineering a more ‘acceptable’ elite class.

Historically, military regimes in Pakistan utilised ‘political cleansing’ to consolidate their dominance. In 1958, Ayub Khan used disqualification orders to retire 6000 rivals.³⁷ In 1977, General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq prioritised ‘retribution over elections’, using an indefinite accountability timeline to delay civilian rule.³⁸ This peaked in 1999 under Pervez Musharraf and the creation of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB).³⁹ With retrospective reach and 90-day detention powers, the NAB became the ultimate tool for political engineering.

The political rise of Imran Khan shifted this narrative to the ballot box, yet the underlying logic remained. Imran Khan’s mandate relied on

35 H Alavi, “The State in Post-Colonial Societies: Pakistan and Bangladesh”, *New Left Review*, 1972, 74, 59–81.

36 International Monetary Fund, “Life in the Economic Trenches”, *Finance & Development* 54, no. 2, June 2017, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2017/06/trenches.htm>.

37 Muhammad Waseem, *Politics and the State in Pakistan* (Islamabad: Lahore Progressive Publishers 1994).

38 Ayesha Siddiqi, *Military Inc: Inside Pakistan’s Military Economy* (Pluto Press, 2007).

39 Ibid.

the binary between ‘pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’.⁴⁰ However, once in power, the weaponisation of the NAB continued via arbitrary arrests of rivals. Post-2022, these tools were turned against Imran Khan himself; his subsequent convictions reflect the historical pattern where accountability instruments simply shifts hands.

Enforcement-first strategies fail to change underlying patronage incentives. True reform requires moving away from arbitrary enforcement toward deep institutional restructuring, including independent oversight for the NAB and reducing discretionary powers in procurement, party finance and the civil service. Without these shifts, anti-corruption remains a political weapon rather than a governance solution.

Protests, Electoral Politics and Nepal’s Future Trajectory

Nepal exists in a ‘seismic zone’, both geologically and politically, and political events in the recent past represent a ‘tectonic upheaval’. The 2025 protests in Nepal were characterised by decentralisation and digital coordination, with no formal leadership structure or limited direct control by political parties. In contrast, earlier political mobilisation in Nepal, including the 1990 People’s Movement, was organised through more formal political coalitions.⁴¹ The 2025 movement utilised social media as its primary vehicle, employing ‘manga memes’, inspired by the *Aragalaya* in Sri Lanka and protests in Bangladesh and Indonesia.⁴² Underpinned by a post-COVID-19 expansion of online political engagement, the protests coalesced around anti-corruption demands, economic insecurity and broader disillusionment with Nepal’s political order.

In contrast, earlier political mobilisation in Nepal, including the 1990 People’s Movement, was organised through more formal political coalitions.

An explosion of collective, largely youth-led outrage was sparked on 8 and 9 September 2025 following the government’s ban on 26 social media platforms.⁴³ On 8 September 2025, a march toward the parliament

40 Ihsan Yilmaz and Nicholas Morieson. “A Systematic Literature Review of Populism, Religion and Emotions.” *Religions* 12, no. 4 (2021), <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/12f7/936aad85f2ac451a8034340f5cc5c9503d8d.pdf>.

41 Harvard T H Chan School of Public Health, “The 2025 Gen Z Uprising in Nepal: A three-part analysis”, Atrocity Prevention Lab, 17 November 2025, <https://hsph.harvard.edu/atrocity-prevention-lab/news/the-2025-gen-z-uprising-in-nepal-a-three-part-analysis/>.

42 K C Luna, “Gen Z protests brought about change in Nepal via the powers and perils of Social Media”, *The Conversation*, 25 September 2025, <https://theconversation.com/gen-z-protests-brought-about-change-in-nepal-via-the-powers-and-perils-of-social-media-265365>.

43 Harvard T H Chan School of Public Health, “The 2025 Gen Z Uprising in Nepal: A three-part analysis”, op. cit.

turned violent, leading to clashes that left 19 people dead.⁴⁴ By that stage, the protests had expanded into widespread arson and vandalism. Much of the violence reflected accumulated frustration and anger, with some participants targeting symbols associated with wealth, privilege and the political establishment.⁴⁵ As the day progressed, the unrest became increasingly diffuse, with various groups acting on different grievances, contributing to a broader breakdown of order.

These revelations, often originating in traditional media, were widely circulated and amplified through social media platforms, contributing to a heightened sense of public anger and political outrage.

Within this context, the mainstream press, including journalists from established outlets, was often criticised by sections of the protesting youth as being part of the existing political system. This perception stemmed in part from the fact that many media actors had previously been aligned with pro-democracy movements, particularly during earlier popular uprisings and were, therefore, associated in public memory with both democratic transition and the political elites that followed. At the same time, it is important to recognise that the mainstream press played a significant role in exposing high-level corruption through investigative reporting. These revelations, often originating in traditional media, were widely circulated and amplified through social media platforms, contributing to a heightened sense of public anger and political outrage. In this sense, the dynamics of an open society and a relatively free press also helped generate the conditions for mass mobilisation.

Following the protests and resignation by the political leadership, an interim Prime Minister, a former Chief Justice, was elected through Discord, which is a popular messaging and online chat platform. In the elections held the following year in March 2026, the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) achieved a staggering victory, securing a near two-thirds majority.⁴⁶ Its campaign relied heavily on decentralised digital mobilisation, with supporters on TikTok, YouTube and Facebook playing a central role in disseminating campaign messages and shaping public discourse. The Nepali diaspora also proved influential, facilitating the transnational circulation of political narratives and amplifying the party's reach through social media networks.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Tulsi Rauniyar, "The Inside Story of How Gen Z Toppled Nepal's Leader and Chose a new one on Discord", *Wired*, 4 November 2025, <https://www.wired.com/story/nepal-discord-gen-z-protests-vote-prime-minister-election/>.

A degree of ‘saviour complex’ also became associated with the public persona of Balendra Shah, the former mayor of Kathmandu, who later aligned with the RSP. Over time, his public image acquired a larger-than-life quality. A former rapper known for producing music that spoke to the experiences of the underdog, he cultivated a markedly different political style from traditional politicians.⁴⁷ Shah’s non-traditional persona resonated with a public seeking a break from entrenched kleptocratic bureaucratic politics. Throughout his campaign and public appearances, Shah was noted for his brevity of speech and deliberately restrained communication style. This was widely interpreted as part of a broader attempt to project an image of action-oriented leadership, as someone who does not engage in extensive rhetoric but instead focuses on ‘getting things done’.

Throughout his campaign and public appearances, Shah was noted for his brevity of speech and deliberately restrained communication style.

However, despite pledges to form a lean cabinet of 15 ministers and appoint high-level technocrats, the new government faces significant structural constraints. The parliament itself is notably young and inexperienced in formal politics, with a median age of 33 years, raising questions about administrative capacity and policy continuity.⁴⁸ They must navigate an economic and energy crisis fueled by war in West Asia, an unchanged bureaucracy and friction with provincial governments that are still controlled by legacy parties. While there is a sense of optimism among Nepalis, it is tempered with cautious wariness and a fear that these upheavals might repeat themselves.

47 Amish Raj Mulmi, “A New Generation Takes Power in Nepal”, Carnegie Endowment, 31 March 2026, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/research/2026/03/balen-shah-nepal-election-RSP-gen-z>.

48 Ibid.

The Mechanics of Protest: Leadership, Networks and Mobilisation in a Digital Age

Imagining a ‘New Pakistan’: The PTI and Youth Activism on Social Media

Pakistan is among the youngest countries in the world demographically, with a population of approximately 255-260 million and a median age of around 20-21 years.⁴⁹ Digital connectivity is a defining feature of this demographic, with 116 million internet users and 66.9 million social media users active on platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, TikTok and Instagram.⁵⁰

Since his removal in 2022, Imran Khan has pursued ‘agitational politics’, utilising historical ‘enemy discourse’ to frame rivals as national traitors, thereby driving extreme polarisation.

Imran Khan’s PTI has been particularly effective in mobilising youth support. Through the slogan ‘Naya Pakistan’ (New Pakistan), Imran Khan advanced a populist and anti-dynastic narrative that directly challenged the longstanding political dominance of the Bhutto and Sharif families.⁵¹ His political persona has shifted over time, from an anti-establishment outsider to a more establishment-aligned insider during his tenure in power and, subsequently, back to an outsider position following his imprisonment. Throughout these phases, he has drawn on right-leaning populist and anti-Western rhetoric, often invoking Islamic political symbolism, including references to the ‘Medina Republic’ as a normative model for governance.⁵² Since his removal in 2022, Imran Khan has pursued ‘agitational politics’, utilising historical ‘enemy discourse’ to frame rivals as national traitors, thereby driving extreme polarisation.⁵³

While mainstream media often portray the youth as politically disengaged, they have historically played a central role in anti-authoritarian mobilisation, including against the regimes of Ayub Khan, Imran Khan and Pervez Musharraf.⁵⁴ However, following Zia-ul-Haq’s ban

49 Population Pyramids, “Pakistan’s Population Pyramid”, 2024, <https://www.populationpyramid.net/pakistan/2024/>.

50 Simon Kemp, “Digital 2025: Pakistan (We are social and meltwater, 2025)”, *DataReportal*, 3 March 2025, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-pakistan>.

51 Amna Khurshid, “The Spectacle of Media, Populism and the manufacturing of consent in Pakistan”, *Advanced Social Science Journal*, Vol. 04, No.1 (July-September).

52 Ihsan Yilmaz and Nicholas Morison, “A Systematic Literature Review of Populism, Religion and Emotions”, op. cit.

53 Ibid.

54 Faisal Shahzad Khan and Rana Ejaz Ahmad, “Social Movement Partyism in Authoritarian Regimes: A Case Study of Student Movement against Field Martial Ayub Khan in Pakistan (1968-69)”, *Pakistan Languages and Humanities Review* 6, no. 2 (2022): 1238-1248, <https://ojs.plhr.org.pk/journal/article/view/176>.

on student unions and the subsequent failure to restore them, organised campus politics declined sharply.⁵⁵ In its place, ideological engagement has become increasingly fragmented, diffusing into progressive, Islamist, sectarian and ethnic strands.

Social media plays a central role in shaping public opinion among Pakistan's youth, with digital platforms increasingly serving as a primary source of news amid declining trust in traditional media. During the 2024 election, these networks were used to organise digital rallies and circumvent restrictions on physical campaigning, amplifying hashtags such as #ImportedGovernmentUnacceptable and #ReleaseImranKhan. Despite this online mobilisation, street-level protest activity has remained constrained amid sustained state repression. Legal and regulatory instruments such as the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act and proposed social media regulatory frameworks have expanded the state's capacity to police digital expression, with provisions that can penalise so-called 'anti-state' content with custodial sentences of up to five years.⁵⁶

In its place, ideological engagement has become increasingly fragmented, diffusing into progressive, Islamist, sectarian and ethnic strands.

Youth-led Anti-Corruption Mobilisation in South Asia

The core challenge in South Asia is not merely corruption but the broader black economy, the portion of the economy that evades taxes and is linked to systemic illegality in society. While corruption implies a quid pro quo (bribery), the black economy involves mechanisms such as under-invoicing to evade taxes. Research in political economy suggests that as corruption increases, the scale of the shadow economy tends to expand, though estimates of its size vary significantly by methodology and time period.⁵⁷

The black economy is driven by a triad consisting of corrupt businessmen, corrupt politicians and a corrupt executive (bureaucracy, police and judiciary). Businessmen generate black income and share it with the other two groups to maintain the system.

55 Tooba Syed, "A Case for Student Unions in Pakistan", Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, 2023, <https://pide.org.pk/research/a-case-for-student-unions-in-pakistan/>.

56 "Online Defamation in Pakistan now punishable by 5 years in prison?", Reporters without Borders, 24 February 2022, <https://rsf.org/en/online-defamation-pakistan-now-punishable-five-years-prison>.

57 Kausik Chaudhari, "The size and development of the shadow economy: An empirical investigation from states of India", *Journal of Development Economics*, Vol. 80, Issue 2 (August 2006), 428-443.

True change requires breaking this triad through political accountability. Since the executive and businesses are protected by the political class, the accountability of the latter is paramount. Currently, democratic institutions are hollowed out by legislators with criminal backgrounds and the misuse of state apparatus. Mass-scale bribery in elections, where politicians buy votes with laptops or cash, replaces long-term developmental promises.

Long-term change is only possible through sustained movements that shift societal consciousness away from a political culture where authority goes unchallenged. Previous movements were often short-circuited. Without structural change, Gen Z movements remain ‘amorphous’ and eventually ‘peter out’, as did the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street. Total accountability requires strengthening democracy and fostering leadership with a deep understanding of these social dynamics.

Challenging State Legitimacy on Social Media

Each case study begins with a distinct trigger event for protest and subsequent violence, yet they share a strikingly similar trajectory, moving from initial grievances to mass mobilisation, followed by state repression and ultimately culminating in broader political crisis.

Political uprisings in South Asia since 2022 reveal how social media platforms such as Facebook have become ‘networked public spheres’ where the public debates, challenges and redefines state legitimacy. Each case followed a specific trajectory with initial grievances leading to mass mobilisation. The state responded with repression, resulting in a political crisis and the eventual resignation of the heads of government. The immediate triggers between the three countries varied. In Nepal, a social media ban and a corruption scandal sparked protests while in Bangladesh, the reinstatement of the public sector quota system mobilised students. In Sri Lanka, the immediate trigger was a severe economic crisis with fuel and food shortages. Each case study begins with a distinct trigger event for protest and subsequent violence, yet they share a strikingly similar trajectory, moving from initial grievances to mass mobilisation, followed by state repression and ultimately culminating in broader political crisis.

Despite severe government responses, including curfews and internet shutdowns, repression did not suppress dissent; instead, it amplified online challenges to state legitimacy. The underlying theoretical mechanism suggests that repression and crisis conditions intensify collective grievances which are then translated into sustained legitimacy contestation on social media and other digital platforms. Despite these differing immediate triggers, the underlying structural causes across all

three cases are notably similar, such as corruption, governance failure, inequality and deepening public frustration.

There is ongoing research that uses artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted coding of posts from groups such as Gen Z Nepal, Reform Quota BD and Go Home Gota. The findings indicate a clear ‘backlash effect’: when state repression (including police violence and arrests) increases, challenges to state legitimacy also intensify. A distinct temporal dynamic emerges across cases. In Bangladesh, sharp spikes in repression are followed almost immediately by corresponding increases in discourse questioning the government’s right to rule. In Nepal, repeated but smaller episodes of repression are associated with sustained and cumulative grievance articulation. In Sri Lanka, comparatively high and persistent levels of grievance are linked to more continuous forms of legitimacy contestation over time.

In Nepal, repeated but smaller episodes of repression are associated with sustained and cumulative grievance articulation.

In conclusion, repression does not weaken opposition in these contexts. Instead, it intensifies legitimacy contests online. Social media plays a decisive role in amplifying the narratives of state failure that eventually lead to the overthrow of political authorities. People do not go quiet when force is used but go online to question the government’s right to rule even more strongly. Across all cases, this convergence of grievance and repression produced broadly similar political trajectories and outcomes, particularly in terms of intensified legitimacy crises and the expansion of protest claims.

What Next? Lessons and the Future of Uprisings in South Asia

The Cyclical Nature of Democracy and Protests in Bangladesh

To prescribe a future for South Asia, one must first understand the underlying malady that causes nations like Bangladesh to repeat historical cycles of democratic practice followed by revolutionary outbursts. Despite being one of the most ethnically homogenous nation-states in the region, with a population that is 98 per cent ethnic Bengali, Bangladesh suffers from deep internal divisions.⁵⁸ This ‘schizophrenia’ stems from a complex, hyphenated identity: being Bengali-Muslim. This duality has driven historical conflict since 1947 when the movement for Pakistan was founded on the religious majority of East Bengal. Post-partition Bengalis were treated as second-class citizens, culturally denigrated and economically pillaged, leading to the triumph of Bengali nationalism in 1971. Bangladesh’s political landscape has since been defined by a persistent interplay between competing narratives of ethnic (Bengali) and religious (Muslim) identity. When one narrative dominates and seeks to suppress the other, instability tends to follow.

In recent years, there has been a significant rise in anti-India sentiment among the younger generation.

These competing identities continue to shape political contestation. The religious dimension is institutionally represented by actors such as Jamaat-e-Islami, which has remained a key participant in contesting the state’s ideological direction. At the same time, external historical factors remain salient. India’s support for Bangladesh’s liberation in 1971 and Pakistan’s enduring grievance over the separation continue to influence domestic political alignments. In recent years, there has been a significant rise in anti-India sentiment among the younger generation. Since roughly 2018, Gen Z has increasingly viewed India as responsible for internal political stagnation, largely because the Awami League has relied heavily on New Delhi to consolidate a particular secular identity. While geography dictates that Bangladesh must remain pragmatic, given its border with India on three sides, emotional resentment has reached a boiling point. This was evident in recent shifts, during which perceived

⁵⁸ Minority Rights Group International, “Bangladesh”, 2019, <https://minorityrights.org/country/bangladesh/>.

support for Jamaat-e-Islami had expanded significantly, moving beyond its traditional electoral foothold.⁵⁹

The scale of the BNP's electoral success can be partly explained by tactical voting dynamics. Strategic voting patterns emerged; for example, many former Awami League supporters reportedly voted for the BNP which some observers interpreted as an effort against a full-fledged far-right takeover.⁶⁰ Evidence suggests that segments of the Awami League's traditional 'vote bank' participated in the elections and may have supported the BNP as a strategic measure to counter more radical political forces. Women also played a decisive role, comprising nearly half of the total voter turnout across party and non-party lines, with many reportedly alarmed by restrictive social policies suggested by religious hardliners, such as limiting women's participation in the workforce.⁶¹ This concern contributed not only to voting behaviour but also to internal fractures within emerging movements, with several female founding members of the Gen Z-led initiatives distancing themselves from the alliances.⁶² These dynamics highlight the complexity of electoral behaviour in a constrained political environment.

These dynamics highlight the complexity of electoral behaviour in a constrained political environment.

Fostering national resilience requires rebuilding these domestic factions through processes of dialogue, reconciliation and institutional repair rather than coercion which functions at best as a temporary stabiliser for deeper systemic fractures. Bangladesh's political system is currently characterised by a zero-sum dynamic in which no major actor is willing to concede ground and one group's victory is perceived as another's total loss.

Addressing this underlying 'schizophrenia', therefore, requires a long-term strategy of strengthening national resilience through a calibrated balance of autonomy and interdependence, alongside sustained efforts

59 Tora Agarwala, Ruma Paul, "How an Islamist Party is gaining ground in Bangladesh, worrying moderates", *Reuters*, 21 January 2026, [https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/how-an-islamist-party-is-gaining-ground-bangladesh-worrying-moderates-2026-01-21/#:~:text=DHAKA%2C%20Jan%2021%20\(Reuters\),those%20killed%20in%20the%20uprising..](https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/how-an-islamist-party-is-gaining-ground-bangladesh-worrying-moderates-2026-01-21/#:~:text=DHAKA%2C%20Jan%2021%20(Reuters),those%20killed%20in%20the%20uprising..)

60 "Nearly half of former Awami League voters now lean towards BNP: Survey", *The Daily Star*, 4 February 2026, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/national-election-2026/news/nearly-half-former-awami-league-voters-now-lean-towards-bnp-survey-4097816>.

61 Hannah Ellis Petersen and Redwan Ahmed, "Women's freedoms are at stake: concern at rise of Islamist party before Bangladesh Election", *Guardian*, 11 February 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/feb/11/bangladesh-election-islamist-party-women-freedoms>.

62 "Another NCP Female leader quits", *The Business Standard News*, 3 January 2026, <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/politics/another-ncp-female-leader-quits-1325576>.

to reconcile domestic factions and reduce the likelihood of recurrent cycles of revolutionary rupture over the next 10 to 15 years.

Questions of electoral legitimacy continue to cast a long shadow over Bangladesh's political landscape. Previous Awami League elections held in the absence of the BNP attracted significant domestic and international scrutiny. The current context, in which the Awami League itself was unable to contest, raises comparable concerns about the credibility and inclusiveness of the electoral process. Despite these constraints, the reported voter turnout remains notable and aligns with historical participation trends. This suggests that electoral engagement remains structurally resilient, even under conditions of political contestation.

Due to the two nations being 'distant proximities', political shifts in one inevitably draw reactions from the other.

The resurgence of Islamic identity in Bangladesh is also a reaction to the current nature of majoritarian politics within India. Due to the two nations being 'distant proximities', political shifts in one inevitably draw reactions from the other. To manage this identity crisis, the framework of 'Bangladeshi nationalism' remains a vital bridge. This concept, pioneered by Ziaur Rahman, was designed to capture the identity of Muslim Bengalis who sought a state for self-fulfilment, distinct from that of non-Muslim Bengalis across the border.⁶³

It is essential for the BNP to continue owning its stake in the 1971 revolution, as its early leaders were integral to the state's formation. Current leadership has squarely owned this mantle but consolidation remains difficult due to externally induced economic challenges linked to global conflicts, such as those in the Gulf. Ultimately, the region must move toward a governance model that balances independence with interdependence. The goal is total accountability achieved by strengthening democratic institutions and fostering a leadership class that understands that slogans are never a substitute for the hard work of balancing books and managing the complex fabric of a society.

From Protest to Governance: Lessons from Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew for Sri Lanka

Contemporary youth protest discourse across South Asia is marked by a powerful sense of idealism, often accompanied by the 'romance' of

⁶³ Rumi Ahmed Khan, "Ziaur Rahman: The Man who gave us our identity", *Bangla Outlook*, 28 March 2024, <https://en.banglaoutlook.org/opinion/848>.

revolution. While this energy reflects legitimate frustrations, it also risks generating expectations that may be impossible to meet. When such expectations fail, the resulting disappointment can be profound and may accelerate cycles of unrest. While some suggest the next upheaval is a decade away, external shocks could bring it much sooner. At the same time, a critical yet often underexamined reality is India's role as a dominant regional actor; despite its scale and complexity, India continues to grow and manage its periphery, a dynamic that neighbouring states must increasingly reckon with.

These tensions are rooted in a broader structural 'malady' of inequality. Along with Sri Lanka, India and the wider region, widening gaps between the rich and poor, compounded by global disruptions, have intensified the pressures on the middle class. This environment is a fertile ground for protest movements but also underscores the difficulty of translating discontent into sustainable governance.

Viewed through the lens of Singapore's former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, these developments underscore a fundamental distinction between protest and progress. While societies in the region have demonstrated a remarkable capacity to mobilise and topple governments, they have been far less successful in constructing durable and effective systems. In Sri Lanka, for instance, the call for 'system change' remains ill-defined, lacking a clear vision of the institutional and economic structures that should replace the old order. Meaningful transformation requires dismantling entrenched patronage networks, oligarchies and closed systems whether rooted in religious hierarchies, business monopolies, or caste and class divisions and replacing them with meritocratic frameworks.

Economic performance remains central to political legitimacy. As seen in India's trajectory, sustained growth underpins state authority. However, this growth must be broad-based and translate into tangible opportunities, particularly for younger generations. At the same time, there is a need to guard against the appeal of populism. Short-term, fiscally unsustainable giveaways and campaign promises may provide immediate relief but often sow the seeds for future crises, as recent experiences in Sri Lanka demonstrate.

A critical lesson is the primacy of institution over emotion. While current movements are driven by anger and a desire for justice, passion

Meaningful transformation requires dismantling entrenched patronage networks, oligarchies and closed systems whether rooted in religious hierarchies, business monopolies, or caste and class divisions and replacing them with meritocratic frameworks.

alone cannot govern a nation. Sustainable governance requires the construction of institutions capable of outlasting transient political impulses, including the desire for retribution. In this context, discipline should not be viewed as a constraint on freedom but as a necessary condition for it, ensuring predictable rules and enforcement that protect the most vulnerable. Moreover, competent leadership requires integrity, intellect and the capacity for execution rather than just charisma.

The political systems of South Asia are currently out of sync with advancements in AI, healthcare and education technology.

This is especially true in an era of massive technological disruption. The political systems of South Asia are currently out of sync with advancements in AI, healthcare and education technology. Within the next two or three years, these shifts will turn politics upside down regardless of current alignments. The youth's impatience is often a reaction to an older generation's failure to understand these tools, yet a mature perspective requires a balance between youthful idealism and the experience necessary for the technocratic job of managing a nation's accounts.

Appendix 1

About the Speakers

Dr Navine Murshid is the author of *India's Bangladesh Problem: The Marginalisation of Bengali Muslims in Neoliberal Times* (Cambridge University Press, 2023) and *The Politics of Refugees in South Asia: Identity, Resistance, Manipulation* (Routledge, 2013). Her current research is on Rabin-drik sensibilities among middle-class Bangladeshis. Her research also focuses on the Rohingya refugee population in Bangladesh and the political economy behind regimes of protection and the selective and strategic sympathy that is afforded to refugees. In addition to scholarly publications, she frequently contributes to public scholarship through public talks and newspaper articles in Bangladesh, India and the United States.

Dr Sumathy Sivamohan is a Professor in English at the Department of English, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. Her academic research lies in the areas of gender, dispossession, the displaced and the fraught question of nation, Sri Lankan literatures, translation and performance and film studies. She teaches in the areas of early modern English literature, including Shakespeare, Critical Theory, modern comparative literature and performance and film studies.

Professor Sivamohan is an award-winning film maker, performer and playwright, poet and academic and her creative work emphasises the idiom of conversation and colloquiality while experimenting in form and style. She has performed widely, namely, New Delhi, New York, London, Melbourne, Zurich and nationally in many parts of the country. In 2011, she was awarded the Premchand Fellowship by the Sahitya Akademi of India.

Dr Richard Bownas has taught a range of courses in comparative politics and international relations at Cornell, Swansea University (United Kingdom) and University of Northern Colorado (United States), including Global Issues, Asian Politics and the Politics of Developing States. His research area is primarily South Asia (Nepal and India). His PhD focused on farmers' movements and non-government organisations and the controversy around genetically modified crops in India. Since then, he has focused on India's northern neighbour, Nepal. His work on Nepal has included research on post conflict social change, the politics of post disaster reconstruction, the politics of caste, grassroots experiences of democracy and the international diffusion of religious movements (Christianity and Hindu nationalism) into Nepal. His research has led to numerous peer reviewed publications over the last few years, in journals such as *Contemporary South Asia*, *Globalizations* and *New Political Science*.

In 2023 Dr Bownas was awarded a Fulbright Scholar award for Nepal to continue his research into grassroots social change and democratic process in Nepal, by conducting a series of oral history interviews with senior citizens in Nepal; people who have lived through numerous dramatic changes in political systems and whose testimony will form an important archive of Nepali history.

Dr Nusrat S Chowdhury is a Professor of Anthropology at Amherst College. She is a political anthropologist interested in practices of popular sovereignty and communicative politics. She is currently completing a book on language, infrastructure and populism in Bangladesh through an ethnographic exploration of the country's longest river bridge. She is also the author of *Paradoxes of the Popular: Crowd Politics in Bangladesh*, her first book. At the same time, she has a number of articles on political aesthetics and popular politics.

Dr Jeevan R Sharma is Personal Chair of South Asia and International Development at the University of Edinburgh. He is the author of *Crossing the Border to India: Youth, Migration and Masculinities in Nepal* (Temple University Press, 2018 and 2024) and *Political Economy of Social Change and Development* (Bloomsbury, 2021). He is the General Secretary of the Britain Nepal Academic Council, Editor-at-large of *HIMALAYA* and co-editor of *Routledge Edinburgh South Asian Series*. His views and interviews have appeared in international media, including *BBC World*, *Fox News*, *New York Times*, *ABC News*, *Al Jazeera* and *Financial Times*, amongst others.

Dr Mohammad Waseem is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Lahore University of Management Sciences, Pakistan. He received his PhD from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London. His professional appointments include Wadham College Oxford, SOAS London and Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU), Islamabad. He was Pakistan Chair at St. Antony's College Oxford (1995-1999). He has conducted research on ethnic, constitutional, electoral, federal, religious, sectarian, military and militant politics of Pakistan. His books include *Political Conflict in Pakistan* (Hurst, 2021), *Democratization in Pakistan: A Study of the 2002 Elections* (Oxford University Press, 2006); *Politics and the State in Pakistan* (QAU, 1989); and *The 1993 Elections in Pakistan* (Vanguard, 1994). He has published articles in *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, *Arab Law Quarterly*, *South Asian History and Culture*, *Contemporary South Asia*, *International Journal of Multicultural Societies*, *Diogenes*, *Economic and Political Weekly* and *Asian Survey*, among others.

Professor Waseem has been awarded several fellowships: Sciences Po, Paris 2018; Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, Oxford, 2016; Ford Foundation, Brookings Institution, Washington DC 2010; Delhi University, August 2008; Sciences Po, Paris 2005; Fulbright New Century Scholars Programme (Brookings Institution, Washington DC) 2003; Ford Foundation, Oxford 2001-2; International Programme for Advanced Studies, Maison des Sciences de l'Homme Paris 2004; Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (German Academic Exchange Service), Heidelberg University 1992; Fulbright, Columbia University New York 1991-92; Indian Historical Research Council, New Delhi 1991; British Council, London 1989; and American Political Science Association 1985-86.

Dr Ajay Gudavarthy is currently Associate Professor at the Centre for Political Studies in Jawaharlal Nehru University, India. He is an Associate Member at the Institute for Humanities in Simon Fraser University, Canada. He was earlier Visiting Professor at the Centre for Modern Indian Studies in Gottingen University, Germany (2014); Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Citizenship, Civil Society and Rule of Law in the University of Aberdeen (2012); Visiting Faculty at Goldsmith College in the University of London (2010); and Charles Wallace Visiting Fellow at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London (2008).

Dr Gudavarthy's published work includes *Politics of Post-Civil Society* (Sage, 2013), *Maoism, Democracy and Globalization* (Sage, 2014); *India after Modi: Populism and the Right* (Bloomsbury, 2018); and *Politics, Ethics and Emotions in 'New India'* (Routledge, 2023). His edited books include *Re-Framing Democracy and Agency* (Anthem, London, 2012); *Revolutionary Violence versus Democracy* (Sage, 2017); and *Secular Sectarianism: Limits of Subaltern Politics* (Sage, 2019).

He is a regular contributor to leading news dailies in India that include *The Hindu*, *The Indian Express*, *The Telegraph*, *The Wire* and *Newsclick*. He has appeared on and shared his views with various international print media and news channels, including *Channel News Asia* (Singapore), *Al Jazeera*, *Asia One*, *The Conversation*, *South China Morning Post*, *BBC*, *The Independent*, *The Time Magazine*, *Friday Times*, *Khaleej Times* and *The Dawn*, among others.

Dr Dina M Siddiqi is a cultural anthropologist by training. Her research, grounded in the study of Bangladesh, joins critical development studies, transnational feminist theory and the anthropology of labour and Islam. She has published extensively on the global garment industry and supply chains, non-state gender justice systems and the cultural politics of Islam, feminism and nationalism. She is currently engaged in a project on discourses of national development and the travels of civilisational feminism.

Professor Siddiqi sits on the editorial boards of *Contemporary South Asia*, *Dialectical Anthropology* and *Journal of Bangladesh Studies*. She serves on the Executive Committee of the American Institute of Bangladesh Studies and is on the Editorial Board of Routledge's Women in Asia Publication Series. She is also on the Executive Board of Sakhi for South Asian Women.

Mr Santosh Sharma Poudel is a faculty member in the Central Department of International Relations and Diplomacy in Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu. He is also a co-founder of Nepal Institute for Policy Research where he leads the Center for Strategic Affairs.

Dr Arjuna Parakrama is Professor Emeritus at the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, and an academic-activist who has worked in the United Nations system in Pakistan and Nepal, on both conflict transformation and the human rights-based approach to development. He has been awarded senior fellowships from the Carnegie Council for Ethics & International Affairs and the United States Institute of Peace, among others. He was selected as a Fulbright New Century Scholar in 2007 and is a recipient of a Guggenheim research grant.

Professor Parakrama has published many books and articles on a range of topics and, most recently, authored the *Civil Society Governance Diagnostic Report on Sri Lanka: An Assessment of the Anti-Corruption Landscape* (2023).

Dr Nadeem Malik earned his PhD in Development Studies from the University of Melbourne, Australia, after nearly 20 years in the development sector as a researcher, trainer, artist and theatre activist. His expertise spans Asian development, governance, state-civil society relations, decentralisation, political anthropology, gender and development and the cultural politics of art and music. An established scholar of Asian development and political anthropology, his research focuses on the political economy of governance and the lived experiences of marginalised citizens in Pakistan and South Asia.

He has published monographs with Routledge and Palgrave Macmillan and numerous peer-reviewed journal articles. His work has introduced influential concepts such as ‘the absence of the state within the state’ and ‘coercive decentralisation’, offering original insights into power, corruption, bureaucracy and postcolonial governance.

Mr Kunda Dixit is the former editor and now publisher of the *Nepali Times* newspaper in Kathmandu. He is also a media educator specialising in climate change communication and current chair of the Centre for Investigative Journalism Nepal. Among his books are *Dateline Earth: Journalism as if the Planet Mattered* and a trilogy of books on the Maoist Conflict in Nepal: *A People War, Never Again* and *People After War*.

Dr Asma Faiz is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Lahore University of Management Sciences, Pakistan. She is the author of *In Search of Lost Glory: Sindhi Nationalism in Pakistan* (Hurst Publishers, London & Oxford University Press, New York, 2021). Her research focuses on ethnic nationalism, populism, party and electoral politics and federalism. She is a member of the editorial boards for *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* and *Contemporary South Asia*. She is a recipient of the Campus France Fellowship at Sciences Po (2018), Rangoonwalla Fellowship at the University of Oxford (2023) and Charles Wallace Fellowship at University of Nottingham (2025).

Dr Arun Kumar joined Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), India, in 1984 and retired as the Sukhamoy Chakravarty Chair Professor in the Centre for Economic Studies and Planning, JNU, in 2015. In 2022, he chaired the Commission on Unemployment set up by civil society groups. He was the President of the JNU Teachers' Association in 2014. He has been Vice President and Acting President of the Indian Academy of Social Sciences. He received his PhD in Economics from JNU and a Master's in Physics from both Princeton University, United States (US) and Delhi University. He is a gold medalist of the Delhi Higher Secondary Board and the Delhi University. He has specialised in Development Economics, Public Finance and Public Policy. In the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy (1982-85), he worked on the Report on the Black Economy in India, commissioned by the Central Board of Direct Taxes, Government of India. He has had visiting assignments at Pavia University in Italy and Humboldt and Leipzig Universities in Germany. He has delivered lectures at Yale University, Columbia University and Carnegie Mellon University, US, and Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in Mexico. UNAM awarded him the Ricardo Prize in Economics for his work in Development Economics. His PhD thesis (1982) on 'Inflation and Terms of Trade' gave a new understanding of the role of trade and government in inflation in India.

His book, *The Black Economy in India*, published by Penguin (1999, 2002 and 2017), broke new ground in thinking about the Indian economy. He edited the book, *Challenges Facing Indian Universities* (2004), and has written extensively on issues pertaining to higher education in India. He published *Indian Economy since Independence: Persisting Colonial Disruption* (2013); *Understanding Black Economy and Black Money in India: An Enquiry into Causes, Consequences and Remedies* (February 2017); *Demonetization and the Black Economy* (December 2017), *Ground Scorching Tax*, analysing the Goods and Services Tax (February 2019); and *Indian Economy's Greatest Crisis: Impact of the Coronavirus and the Road Ahead*, (December 2020).

Dr Anurug Chakma holds a PhD in Political Science from the School of Politics and International Relations at the Australian National University (ANU). He also earned an MSc in Governance and Development from the University of Antwerp and both Master's and Bachelor's degrees in Peace and Conflict Studies from the University of Dhaka. He is currently a Research Fellow in the School of Government and International Relations at Griffith University and a Visiting Fellow at the School of Regulation and Global Governance at ANU. He previously served as a Research Fellow at ANU and as a Lecturer and Assistant Professor in the Department of Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Dhaka.

Dr Chakma's research employs qualitative, quantitative and computational methods, including natural language processing and machine learning, to examine conflict, violence, peace processes, Indigenous rights, diaspora humanitarianism and electoral and democratic resilience, among other areas.

Ambassador Tariq Karim is currently Advisor to the Centre for Bay of Bengal Studies and School of Liberal Arts & Social Sciences at the Independent University, Bangladesh. He is concurrently Visiting Distinguished Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore. He is a member of the Advisory Board of the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) of Seattle and Washington DC.

A career diplomat who joined the Foreign Service of erstwhile Pakistan in 1967 Ambassador Karim served, notably, as High Commissioner to India (with the personal rank and status of a Minister of State), Ambassador to the United States, High Commissioner to South Africa and Ambassador to Iran. He is author of book, *The Tortuous Evolution of South Asian Regional Cooperation*, published in 2024 and has numerous publications to his credit at home and abroad.

Ambassador Milinda Moragoda is the Founder of the Pathfinder Foundation, a private strategic affairs think tank whose centres include the Centre for Indo-Lanka Initiatives, the China-Sri Lanka Cooperation Studies Centre and the Hafez Centre for Cultural Understanding. He is the Founder and Chairman of the MMBL-Pathfinder Group, a diversified investment group with interests across financial services, tourism and hospitality, property development, aviation, logistics, agriculture, new technologies and digital media.

His career has spanned business, national politics, diplomacy, public policy, international engagement and media. He most recently served as Sri Lanka's High Commissioner to India (2021-2023), following a decade in parliament (2000-2010), during which he held Cabinet portfolios, including Economic Reform, Science and Technology, Tourism and Justice and Law Reform. During that period, he served on the government negotiating team in the Norwegian-facilitated ceasefire process (2001-2004) and led the E-Sri Lanka initiative which established the Information and Communication Technology Agency. He is currently an Honorary Senior Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore and previously served on the United Nations Commission on the Legal Empowerment of the Poor (2005-2008). In his early career, he was recognised by the World Economic Forum as a Global Leader for Tomorrow and later as a Young Global Leader and was awarded Brazil's Order of Rio Branco for his services as Honorary Consul.

Appendix 2

About the Editors

Dr Rajni Gamage is a Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore. Her research interests are the politics of governance and state transformation and development and inequality in Sri Lanka. She holds a PhD in Political Science and International Relations from the School of Political Science and International Studies, University of Queensland. She was a Visiting Researcher at the Center for South Asian Studies, Gifu Women's University, Japan (April 2025 to March 2026) and she is currently a Non-Resident Research Fellow at the Dacca Institute of Research and Analytics, Bangladesh (January 2026 to January 2027).

Among her other publications are 'Sri Lanka's National People's Power (NPP) government: From System Change to Structural Compliance' (Institut français des relations internationales, 2025); 'Negotiating left politics in Sri Lanka: The NPP in government' (Green Agenda, 2025); 'Reforms in Sri Lanka: Emerging Trends in Elite Politics' (*Economic and Political Weekly*, 2023); and 'Buddhist Nationalism, Authoritarian Populism and the Muslim Other in Sri Lanka' (*Islamophobia Studies Journal*, 2021).

Ms Tanujja Dadlani is a Research Analyst at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) at the National University of Singapore. She has a Master's degree in Film Studies from the University College London and a bachelor's degree in International Relations from the Singapore Institute of Management (awarded by University of London). Her research interests include South Asia, nationalism and colonisation. Her research lies in the convergence of film and politics, where she has conducted research on the socio-political portrayal of race and religion in Indian cinema.

Prior to joining ISAS, Ms Dadlani wrote and directed a film exploring the political identity of the Sindhi people within the framework of Barry Buzan's 'People, States and Fear'. Her work delved into the history of partition, the enduring legacy of colonisation in India and Pakistan and the consequential effects on current affairs and nationalism.

Ms Kanika Kaur is a Research Analyst at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) at the National University of Singapore (NUS). She graduated with a Master's in International Affairs from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at NUS, specialising in International Security. Proficient in qualitative and quantitative analysis using R and Python, she brings a unique perspective to foreign policy and public policy. Her interest lies broadly in Indian foreign policy and more specifically at the intersection of security studies and feminist foreign policy in South Asia.

Prior to her appointment at ISAS, Ms Kaur worked at the Chandler Institute of Governance as an Associate in Strategy and Communications. She collaborated with government practitioners to create new knowledge products; synthesising insights related to governance. She also previously

worked with the Centre on Asia and Globalization on the project 'Partnership or Polarization: Southeast Asian Security between India and China'. Her research work, 'India's Economic Quandary with China', was published in the *China-India Brief*.

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