

Eroding Trust, Emerging Voices: Youth and Democratic Legitimacy in Nepal and Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This paper delves into the trajectory of democracy in Nepal and Sri Lanka which represent two distinct yet converging stories of political transformation in South Asia. While Nepal's journey has been defined by a transition from monarchy to a federal democratic republic, Sri Lanka's post-independence experience reflects a long-standing electoral democracy grappling with majoritarian politics, economic crises, and institutional stress. Despite their differing historical paths, both countries today face a common challenge: the erosion of democratic trust, particularly among younger citizens. Increasing corruption and mismanagement of public funds, the wide age gap between the rising Gen Z and ageing political leaders and the ensuing gap in aspirations, amongst other glaring problems has led to a trust deficit. The paper posits a multi-dimensional approach through civic and democratic engagement with Gen Z in both countries for a synergic renewal.

Keywords: *Democracy, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Gen Z, Digital activism*

Maitighar, the public square in Kathmandu, Nepal, situated in the vicinity of the Parliament Building, Supreme court and the Government Secretariat, has served as a platform for expressions of dissent, discontentment and protest. However, what appeared to be a youth led scattered protest on September 8 last year turned out to be a volcano of frustration accumulated across generations. While youth demonstrated, the public felt represented despite the absence of a recognizable leadership, agenda or structure. 77 people lost their lives in this chaotic uprising resulting in the toppling of K P Sharma Oli government.ⁱ It triggered the March 5 elections, emergence of Mr. Balendra Shah, (former Mayor, Kathmandu) as the undeclared leader of the protests and the participation of a new political group the Rashtriya Swatantrata Party which formed a majority government post a landslide victory. Thus, the movement culminated with the rejection of the old guard and establishment of a decisive alternative, a stable government while the expectations still remain very high.

Similarly, Sri Lanka's Argalaya movement, which means 'The Struggle' in Sinhala took off with a protest camp called 'GotaGoGama' meaning Gotta Go Village, in front of the Presidential Secretariat, a signal to the Gotabaya Rajapaksha Family which had been in power for 15 years. The reasons were Srilankan Debt, long power cuts (12 hours at a stretch), hyperinflation and miles long queues for food and fuel. The President fled the country and in the subsequent elections, National People's Power Party (NPP) led by Anura Kumara Dissanayake came to power, a party that had little ground, a left leaning party which came up as an alternative owing to its anti-establishment reflection.

The trajectory of democracy in Nepal and Sri Lanka represents two distinct yet converging stories of political transformation in South Asia. While Nepal's journey has been defined by a transition from monarchy to a federal democratic republic, Sri Lanka's post-independence experience reflects a long-standing electoral democracy grappling with majoritarian politics, economic crises, and institutional stress. Despite their differing historical paths, both countries today face a common challenge: the erosion of democratic trust, particularly among younger citizens.ⁱⁱ

In Nepal, the modern democratic process began with the People's Movement of 1990 (Jana Andolan I), which curtailed absolute monarchy and introduced

multiparty constitutional governance. However, this transition remained fragile due to political instability and structural inequalities. The Maoist insurgency (1996–2006) further exposed the limits of the democratic framework, culminating in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the eventual abolition of monarchy in 2008. The promulgation of the Constitution in 2015 institutionalized federalism and republicanism, marking a significant milestone in democratic restructuring.

In contrast, Sri Lanka has functioned as an electoral democracy since independence in 1948, but its democratic trajectory has been shaped by ethnic conflict, executive centralization, and periodic authoritarian tendencies. The end of the civil war in 2009 created expectations of democratic deepening, yet governance challenges, corruption, and increasing concentration of power particularly under dynastic political leadership undermined institutional credibility. These tensions came to a head during the economic crisis of 2022, which triggered widespread protests and exposed deep fractures in state legitimacy.

Despite these different trajectories, both Nepal and Sri Lanka share a contemporary reality marked by institutional fragility, governance deficits, and declining public trust.ⁱⁱⁱ The trend in the two countries highlights a broader South Asian characteristic: while democratic forms persist, public confidence in institutions is weakening, particularly among younger, more informed, and digitally connected citizens. Issues such as corruption, economic mismanagement, political centralization, and lack of accountability have time and again jolted public perception of the respective state institutions.^{iv}

Unlike earlier generations, Gen Z has grown up in an era of formal democracy, digital connectivity, and global political awareness. They have survived major global recessions, a global pandemic and an increasingly competitive world economy. They have survived years of isolation marked with an amplified digital exposure. At the same time, in both the countries, they were being governed by leaders of their grandfathers age (Nepal's Oli was 73 while Sri Lanka's Rajapaksha was 74) and they were not able to just connect with them. These differences between their ages, exposure, aspirations and actual lives was too high. In Nepal, this generation has no lived memory of monarchy or armed conflict, while in Sri Lanka, many came of age in the post-war period.

Yet, despite these differences, Gen Z in both countries exhibits a similar pattern of political skepticism, declining trust in institutions, and disillusionment with traditional political actors.

This paradox of growing political awareness alongside declining institutional trust has been widely noted in contemporary public discourse. The youth are not disengaged but rather critically engaged: they question authority, demand accountability, and are less willing to accept institutional failures. However, persistent governance deficits, limited economic opportunities, and perceived elite dominance have contributed to a widening gap between democratic expectations and lived realities.

The problem of declining democratic trust among Gen Z is not merely attitudinal; it has profound implications for democratic sustainability. Political trust underpins the legitimacy of institutions, influences civic participation, and shapes the stability of democratic systems. In both Nepal and Sri Lanka, where democratic consolidation remains incomplete, the erosion of trust among youth raises concerns about long-term institutional resilience. A generation that lacks confidence in democratic structures may either disengage from formal politics or seek alternative, and sometimes disruptive, forms of political expression.^v

The role of the digital environment further complicates this dynamic. Social media platforms have transformed political engagement by providing spaces for expression, mobilization, and critique. In Sri Lanka, digital networks played a crucial role in organizing the 2022 protest movement, while in Nepal, they have become key arenas for political discourse and dissent. At the same time, these platforms amplify negative information, facilitate misinformation, and create echo chambers that reinforce distrust. The digital public sphere often intensifies dissatisfaction without necessarily offering pathways for constructive institutional engagement.

Evolution of Democratic Deficit

Beneath the discrediting of existing party system, physical assaults on senior leaders, destruction of government offices, ministry buildings and police stations, lies a history of revolutions that have rocked Nepal time and again. Traditionally the party based democratic system in Nepal has been closely woven around political ideologies that ranged from social democracy to degrees

of communist leanings.^{vi} Balendra Shah emerged as the new avatar of the democratic spirit through his raps which highlighted issues of concern to the digitally active netizens like political corruption, nepotism and party politics.

Nepal has been a feudal state since 1950, an absolute monarchy and a republic riddled with episodes of civil war. Since 1990's, the government has been replaced almost 30 times with none of the prime ministers completing a full term. The abolition of monarchy in 2008 and the promulgation of the 2015 Constitution marked a transformative phase, institutionalizing federalism, secularism, and inclusion. The creation of a three-tier federal system aimed to decentralize power and address long-standing grievances. Yet, as highlighted in contemporary analyses, the implementation gap rather than the constitutional design itself has emerged as a major constraint on democratic consolidation.

In contrast, Sri Lanka's democratic trajectory has been more continuous but equally fraught. Since independence in 1948, the country has maintained electoral democracy, yet its institutions have been shaped by ethnic conflict, executive centralization, and majoritarian politics. The introduction of the executive presidency in 1978 concentrated power significantly, often at the expense of institutional checks and balances. The end of the civil war in 2009 created expectations of democratic deepening, but these were tempered by increasing centralization and concerns over governance quality. The economic crisis of 2022, exposed the fragility of institutional arrangements, highlighting how fiscal mismanagement and political concentration can undermine democratic legitimacy. Thus, while Nepal's challenge lies in institutional consolidation, Sri Lanka's lies in institutional credibility and resilience under stress.

Despite their differing trajectories, Nepal and Sri Lanka face a set of overlapping challenges that directly shape youth perceptions of democracy. One major issue is weak party accountability. In Nepal, political parties are often characterized by factionalism, centralized leadership, and limited internal democracy. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, political parties have been criticized for elite dominance and lack of transparency, particularly in the context of dynastic leadership. In both cases, electoral competition has not consistently translated into accountable governance, reinforcing public disillusionment. Closely linked is the persistence of patronage politics. In Nepal, access to state resources is frequently mediated

through political networks, undermining meritocratic governance. Sri Lanka exhibits similar patterns, where political loyalty and elite connections shape access to opportunities. Such systems erode institutional trust by privileging personal networks over formal rules.

Another critical challenge is the gap between institutional design and implementation. In Nepal, the slow and uneven implementation of federalism due to administrative constraints, fiscal ambiguities, and political contestation has limited its transformative potential. In Sri Lanka, institutional challenges manifest differently, particularly in the concentration of executive power and the difficulty of sustaining reforms that ensure accountability and transparency.^{vii}

Governance deficits, corruption, bureaucratic red tapism and policy inconsistency, further exacerbate these challenges. Corruption has been a central driver of declining public trust. In Sri Lanka, the 2022 crisis underscored how governance failures can escalate into systemic breakdowns, while in Nepal, persistent inefficiencies continue to undermine confidence in democratic institutions. Thus, frequent political instability manifested in coalition shifts in Nepal and policy volatility in Sri Lanka create an environment of uncertainty. This limits long-term planning and weakens the state's ability to deliver public goods effectively, thereby reinforcing perceptions of institutional inadequacy among younger citizens.^{viii}

The democratic trajectories of Nepal and Sri Lanka reveal both significant achievements and enduring structural constraints. Nepal's transition from monarchy to a federal republic and Sri Lanka's long-standing electoral democracy underscore the resilience of democratic forms in the region. In both contexts, youth have played a pivotal role in shaping political change, from mass movements to contemporary digital activism. However, the gap between democratic ideals and institutional performance remains a defining challenge. Weak accountability, patronage politics, governance deficits, and implementation gaps have constrained the effectiveness of democratic systems. These structural issues are central to understanding the erosion of trust among Generation Z. For contemporary youth in both countries, democracy is not judged solely by its formal existence but by its capacity to deliver accountability, inclusion, and tangible outcomes.

The judiciary occupies an ambivalent position in both contexts. In Nepal,

concerns about judicial independence and delays in justice have tempered public trust. In Sri Lanka, while the judiciary has occasionally acted as a check on executive power, it has not been immune to politicization. The media ecosystem reflects a dual dynamic. Traditional media in both countries is often criticized for political bias or elite influence. Meanwhile, digital platforms have become primary sources of information for youth. However, this shift has also intensified exposure to misinformation, sensationalism, and polarized narratives, further complicating the scenario.

Both Nepal and Sri Lanka show signs of declining enthusiasm for conventional political engagement, such as party membership and long-term political affiliation among youth. While voter turnout may remain episodically high particularly during moments of crisis or change, a sustained commitment to institutional politics appears to be weakening. This suggests a broader reconfiguration of political trust, where Gen Z is not apolitical but selectively disengaged from formal structures.

Rise of ‘Leaderless’ Movements

Protests in both the countries have been leaderless and decentralized, challenging conventional, hierarchical political structures. Youth have been central to democratic transformations in both countries, though their modes of engagement have evolved over time. The erosion of trust among Gen Z in Nepal and Sri Lanka is rooted in a set of overlapping structural and contextual factors. Corruption and governance inefficiencies are central to youth disillusionment in both countries. Economic precarity and unemployment further deepen distrust. Nepal faces chronic challenges related to youth unemployment, underemployment, and labor migration.^{ix} Similarly, Sri Lanka’s economic crisis has disproportionately affected young people, limiting job opportunities and economic security. For Gen Z in both countries, democracy is increasingly evaluated through its ability to deliver economic stability and opportunity; failure to do so directly erodes trust.

A particularly salient factor in both contexts is the persistence of dynastic and elite-driven politics. This continuity of leadership fosters perceptions of exclusion and stagnation among young citizens. Furthermore, the influence of social media and digital environments is another critical driver. In both Nepal and Sri Lanka, Gen Z relies heavily on digital platforms for political information

and expression. These platforms amplify dissatisfaction by circulating content related to corruption, crises, and governance failures. At the same time, echo chambers and algorithm-driven content reinforce negative perceptions, often intensifying distrust. The rapid spread of misinformation further complicates the formation of informed political opinions.

Finally, a shared driver is the lack of visible and effective reform outcomes. In Nepal, despite the transition to federalism and constitutional reforms, many young citizens perceive limited improvements in governance and service delivery. In Sri Lanka, repeated cycles of political promises followed by policy failures have created a credibility gap. The disconnect between expectations and outcomes is particularly acute for Gen Z, contributing to a sense of frustration and democratic fatigue.

In Nepal, students and young activists played a decisive role in both the 1990- and 2006-People's Movements. Their participation not only strengthened mass mobilization but also reflected a generational demand for political freedom, inclusion, and accountability. Youth-led student unions and grassroots networks were instrumental in sustaining protest movements and shaping political outcomes.^x In the post-conflict era, however, youth engagement has undergone a significant transformation. While earlier generations were closely aligned with party politics, contemporary youth particularly Gen Z are increasingly distancing themselves from traditional political structures. Instead, they engage through digital platforms, civil society initiatives, and issue-based activism, reflecting broader global trends.

On the other hand, In Sri Lanka, youth activism has historically been episodic but impactful. The most striking recent example is the Aragalaya in 2022, where young people played a central role in mobilizing protests against economic mismanagement and political elites. The movement's decentralized and leaderless character, facilitated by digital media, marked a shift from traditional forms of political participation to more fluid and networked modes of engagement. Thus, a key paradox is that the youth remain politically conscious and active yet increasingly disconnected from formal institutions. This shift is critical for understanding the changing nature of democratic participation.^{xi}

Digital-First Strategy

Despite declining trust in formal institutions, Generation Z in both Nepal and Sri Lanka remains politically active, albeit through transformed modes of engagement. The political communication shrugged off the ideological rhetoric and focused on everyday lives and issues like employment generation and entrepreneurship opportunities, prospects in local tourism, preservation of local resources, traditions and heritage sites. The movements were primarily organized via apps like Discord, Instagram, TikTok and gaming platforms, allowing rapid mobilization and digital resilience against state surveillance.

In Sri Lanka, the 2022 protest movement was characterized by its reliance on digital platforms for coordination and communication. Similarly, in Nepal, youth engagement is increasingly visible through digital activism, civil society initiatives, and local issue-based campaigns. Social media platforms serve as spaces for political critique, awareness campaigns, and mobilization around issues such as governance, environment, and social justice.

Across both countries, there is a clear shift toward non-traditional and issue-based participation. Youth are more likely to engage in short-term, cause-oriented initiatives rather than long-term affiliation with political parties. Volunteer networks, grassroots movements, and online campaigns provide alternative avenues for political expression and action.^{xii} This contrasts with traditional forms of participation, such as voting and party membership, which are often perceived as less effective or meaningful. While elections remain important, they are no longer the primary or sole mode of engagement for Gen Z. Instead, participation is becoming more networked, flexible, and digitally mediated.

However, this transformation also presents challenges. Digital activism, while impactful in mobilizing attention and dissent, does not always translate into sustained institutional change. The absence of strong linkages between informal activism and formal political processes can limit the long-term impact of youth engagement. At the same time, important differences remain. Sri Lanka's recent experience of acute economic crisis and mass protest has produced a more visible and confrontational form of youth engagement, whereas Nepal's trajectory reflects a more gradual and diffused process of disillusionment within a post-conflict federal framework.

Implications for Democratic Consolidation

The erosion of trust among Gen Z has far-reaching implications, particularly in the context of recent electoral developments and governance priorities. Persistent distrust can weaken governance in several ways like, reduced public compliance with policies, lower civic engagement in institutional processes and increased volatility in electoral behaviour. For a federal system still in the process of consolidation, such trends can create instability and hinder effective policy implementation.^{xiii}

In Nepal, recent elections have shown both continuity and change, while traditional parties continue to dominate, there has been a noticeable rise in support for independent candidates and newer political formations. This indicates that voters especially youth are not abandoning democracy but are questioning the credibility of established actors.

The disconnect between Gen Z and traditional political parties points to a representation deficit. Party structures in Nepal remain hierarchical and elite-driven, offering limited space for youth leadership. As a result, younger citizens often feel excluded from decision-making processes. So, Gen Z is increasingly engaging through digital platforms and online activism, issue-based campaigns (environment, governance, accountability) and support for independent or alternative political actors. This shift has both positive and negative implications. On one hand, it reflects a more critical and participatory citizenship unwilling to accept unaccountable governance. On the other hand, the decline of institutional engagement such as party membership can weaken the organizational foundations of democracy.^{xiv}

Conclusion

While the gen Z Revolution in the two countries has been all encompassing, the phenomenon has largely been urban concentrated. The state has primarily been in charge of the distribution of foreign aid and development initiatives. In the absence of domestic opportunities, deepening dependence on aid and remittances, rising unemployment and inflation fueled youngsters' aspirations as well as frustrations. The new chosen actors have largely been anti-establishment, social media driven and characterized by dramatic gestures rather than any substantial structural reforms. But this is what clicked Gen Z and

these political alternatives, if they are unable to deliver now, will only unleash a fresh wave of disenchantment in a broken economy with fewer resources and a weak state.

Addressing this trust deficit requires a multi-dimensional approach through civic and Democratic engagement which can help bridge the gap between democratic ideals and institutional realities. Secondly, political parties and state institutions must create meaningful avenues for youth participation, including leadership roles, policy consultations, and local governance platforms. Token representation is insufficient and substantive inclusion is essential.

Thirdly, institutional reforms aimed at reducing corruption and enhancing transparency are critical. Mechanisms such as open data initiatives, independent oversight bodies, and timely service delivery are essential to rebuild confidence. Fourthly, addressing youth unemployment and economic insecurity is central to restoring trust. Policies focused on skill development, entrepreneurship, and job creation can align democratic governance with material aspirations. Lastly, given the centrality of digital platforms in Gen Z's political life, governments and institutions must engage constructively through these spaces. Combating misinformation, promoting credible communication, and integrating digital feedback into policymaking can strengthen trust.

Thus, generation Z in both countries is redefining its relationship with democratic systems. The decline in institutional trust reflects not apathy, but a form of critical and evaluative engagement—a demand for accountability, transparency, and substantive representation.^{xv} The youth today are less willing to accept procedural democracy without corresponding governance outcomes. The erosion of trust observed in Nepal and Sri Lanka should be understood not only as a crisis, but also as an opportunity for democratic renewal.^{xvi} It reflects a generational shift toward higher expectations from governance and a refusal to accept institutional stagnation. The central question, therefore, is not whether Generation Z is turning away from democracy, but whether democratic institutions are capable of adapting to the aspirations of a new generation, one that demands not merely democracy in form, but democracy in substance, responsiveness, and everyday practice.

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