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Gen-Z and Nepal's Ongoing Struggle for Change

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With unprecedented speed, violence, and destruction, the Gen-Z uprising in Nepal ended in euphoria with the government forced to resign and the appointment of an interim prime minister of the protestors' choice. Gen-Z's test now lies in choosing between compromise and continued street agitation.

A frequent remark in Nepal today is that it took the alliance of the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal–Unified Marxist-Leninist (UML) nearly three decades to bring about the 1990 revolution. It took the Maoists under Prachanda a decade to achieve the revolution of 2006 (or nearly two decades, if you count the 2015 federal and republican constitution as their greatest accomplishment). In contrast, in 2025, it took the young people of Gen-Z just two days to bring about a huge political earthquake in Nepal.

The deeper background was the combination of corrupt politics at home with huge youth unemployment and the widely felt compulsion to go abroad in search of education, work, and a better life.

On 8 September 2025, a Monday, a huge crowd of Gen-Z youth protesting against corruption, poor governance, and a ban on social media converged on the parliament, where they were fired on, initially with tear gas and rubber bullets, eventually with live bullets, leading to the deaths of 19 protesters. The people of Nepal and its diaspora were outraged and devastated that the state would open fire on its own children. The ultimate death toll would rise to 74.

As a reaction to the previous day's deaths, on 9 September 2025, in scenes reminiscent of Colombo in July 2022 and of Bangladesh in July and August 2024, the streets of Kathmandu were in the hands of the mob. It was clear that an originally peaceful protest had been hijacked by party activists and criminal elements, some of whom had been preparing for this day and were out to settle scores with political opponents.

Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli resigned in the early afternoon. The parliament building, and the main state secretariat buildings (including the prime minister's office) in Singha Durbar, and the supreme court next door were all burned, looted, and left as charred shells. The national archives building, home to numerous priceless and irreplaceable manuscripts, next door to the supreme court, was saved only thanks to its staff and many brave activists staying up two nights to persuade the rioters not to burn it to the ground.

What sparked this mayhem? The immediate trigger was the government shut down of 26 social media platforms on 6 September 2025—including Facebook, Instagram, Messenger, and WhatsApp—after repeated failures to make Meta and others comply with national registration laws. TikTok, Viber, and a few others had registered.

Gen-Z, those born between 1997 and 2012, has never known a world without social media. They were already infuriated by seeing numerous TikTok and Reddit videos of the children of famous politicians, branded as Nepo Kids and Nepo Babies, flaunting their wealth in European ski resorts and other glamorous locations. The deeper background was the combination of corrupt politics at home with huge youth unemployment and the widely felt compulsion to go abroad (to the Gulf, to India, to South Korea, to anywhere) in search of education, work, and a better life.

“Gen-Z”, previously unknown in Nepal and pronounced “Jen-jee”, is often referred to as if it was a unitary body, but we know that it was made up of many groups, some amorphous, others with a clear identity. Some of them marched under the banner of “One-Piece”, the straw-hat pirate, a character from a long-running Japanese anime. The symbol was adopted from street protests in Indonesia.

As this shows, Gen-Z, unlike the older generation, comprises avid consumers of global media. Many of them speak Nepangreji (Nepali heavily mixed with English). Unlike earlier generations who sang revolutionary songs, many Gen-Z youth are into NepHop and use rap battles to express their frustrations with the world they have been born into.

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Prime Minister Oli sought to get the army involved. When they refused, he resigned. According to an unconfirmed but reliable report, [Ashok Raj Sigdel](#), the chief of the army, then went to President [Ram Chandra Poudel](#) and asked him to resign. “We will handle things from here on.” The president, whose public image up to this point was that of a faithful and dull Congress Party apparatchik, replied, heroically—“I’m not resigning. You can kill me and blame it on the rioters. Then you can do what you want.” (That said, there has been criticism of the president for being too slow to act and for not addressing the nation except through press releases.)

The army seems to have drawn back from the brink. When the Gen-Z leaders were first invited to speak to the head of the army, they found businessman [Durga Prasai](#) waiting for them in the meeting room. He was widely seen as a leader of the monarchist faction, and the man behind the anti-government demonstrations in March that left two dead and more than 100 injured. The Gen-Z leaders were told to cooperate with Prasai, as well as with [Rabi Lamichhane](#), the controversial leader of the [Rastriya Swatantra Party](#) (RSP), who is not as clean as he should be, given that his newly formed party stands on a platform of transparency and against corruption.

Lamichhane was already in jail for embezzling money from a cooperative and one of the first acts of his party cadres on the morning of 9 September was to [spring him from Nakkhu Jail, using an allegedly fake letter of release](#). (Lamichhane later returned voluntarily to jail.) The Gen-Z leaders walked out of the meeting when faced with the prospect of having to do a deal with such tainted figures. If the army leaders imagined that widespread disorder would lead to an upsurge of pro-monarchy sentiment, they had badly misjudged both the ideas and the mood of Gen-Z, as well as of the general population.

This is not the first time that Nepal has gone through a revolution involving demonstrators being shot in the street. It happened in 1951 as a part of protests in the aftermath of the fall of the Rana regime; in April 1979 in protests that led to the referendum on whether to continue with the Panchayat system; and again in April 1990 when the Panchayat regime finally fell and a new constitution was introduced. In December 2000, at least five people died in police firing in a riot sparked by anti-Nepal remarks that the Indian film star Hritik Roshan was alleged to have made.

It happened again in April 2006 when King Gyanendra’s attempt to turn the clock back to the Panchayat system failed and the whole of the Ring Road was full of protesters, although by that time the army had made it clear to the king that they were not going to kill ordinary Nepalis on the street. There was considerable violence in the Tarai in 2007-08, during the first Madhesh movements, and again in 2015. More than 17,000 people lost their lives during the 10 years of the Maoist insurgency/civil war. In short, Nepal is no stranger to street protests or to political violence.

There is a cliché about *sundar shanta Nepal* (beautiful, peaceful Nepal). It is something of an article of faith for Nepalis themselves that Nepal is more peaceful than other countries. Echoes of that view appear in the new, [post-2007 national anthem](#). It is true Nepal has not experienced the huge levels of political violence of India in 1947 and after, but it would be quite wrong to think that there has never been violence in Nepal.

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Nor would it be right to ignore everyday violence in Nepal. Talk to Dalits or other minorities and they will tell you about the indignities and structural violence that they face every day ([Gellner and Adhikari 2024](#)). Under the surface there is a lot of suppressed anger. Many Nepalis, not least [women who were raped](#), are still seeking justice as victims of the conflict years (1996–2006). The [problem of impunity](#) is one of the reasons why Nepal continues to suffer and why it has not moved forward as much as it should have.

As in previous revolutions, the violence was by no means confined to Kathmandu. It was reportedly most intense in Kanchanpur, especially in [Mahendranagar](#), in the far southwest of the country. In [Pokhara](#), every government office building was burned down. However, there were some big differences between Nepal’s earlier revolutions and 2025.

The place of the political parties: The earlier revolutions—in 1980, 1990, and 2006—were largely organised by political parties. This is the first street revolution that was directed against the parties. This a moment of great danger, because political parties—love them or

loathe them, and most people loathe them—are necessary for the operation of a democracy. Just as in the UK, where it is common for people to assert that “they are all the same, they all have their snouts in the trough”, there are many hardworking and honest members of parliament (MPs). The kind of extremism that wants to “kill the lot of them”, encouraged by social media, is very dangerous.

The role of social media: Social media were certainly important in 2006, but not at the level of today. In 1990, people still relied on the print media. Today, almost everyone has a smartphone and TikTok and Instagram are crucial means of communication. There has been a lot of fake news around in the last two weeks. It was widely reported that former prime minister Jhala Nath Khanal’s wife was burned alive inside her house by protesters. She suffered burns and survived (though many others were indeed burned alive in other places). Many outlets claimed that Oli had flown to Dubai, though he was simply taken by helicopter to an army camp in Shivapuri.

The role of ethnicity: Although the leadership and organisation behind the movement was multi-ethnic, the 1990 uprising against the Panchayat regime had considerable Newar backing because the old city cores of Kathmandu, Lalitpur-Patan, and Bhaktapur were, and still are, dominated by Newars, the indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley. Before 1990, many Brahmin or Chhetri communist leaders had hidden underground with Newar supporters in the densely packed cities of the Kathmandu Valley (which explains why many of them ended up with Newar wives). The 1990 uprising began in Bhaktapur and spread to Patan when they sent a saree and some bangles with a message—Rise up or put these on.

By 2006, the revolution was much less of a Newar affair and this year, even less so. The Newars are now a minority in their own homeland, though certainly one that can be roused if the occasion warrants it, as shown by the huge protests in 2019 over the proposed Guthi Land Bill, which would have allowed the expropriation of land supporting temples and festivals. Newars saw this as an existential threat to their culture and launched a huge but peaceful demonstration against it. In contrast, among the 21 who died in police firing in front of the parliament building, maybe six were Newars. Kathmandu is now truly an all-Nepal melting pot.

The level of violence: The number of people who have died surpasses previous revolutions. Back in 1990, more than 100 policemen were effectively hostages inside their police station when Patan was declared a liberated zone. But they were allowed to leave when the situation became tense and there was the threat of army intervention. In contrast, journalist Pranaya Rana witnessed a policeman being beaten to death on the Ring Road. Altogether three policemen were killed and 38 people died in the looting and arson—15 of them burned to death inside Bhatbhateni supermarkets or private homes.

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The degree of destruction surpassed anything seen before. Never before have Singha Durbar, the parliament, and the supreme court been burned down (there was a fire in Singha Durbar in 1973). The prime minister’s office had only just been restored after the 2015 earthquake. Never before have the houses of politicians and anyone thought to be close to the regime been targeted for burning and looting. Never before have supermarkets, schools, hotels, and the headquarters of the leading newspaper house been set alight. The total cost of the destruction has been estimated to be 1.5 times Nepal’s gross domestic product (GDP) and will take years to repair.

The role of agents provocateurs: On the morning of 9 September 2025, various spokespeople of Gen-Z groups were quick to announce that the destruction was not led by them and it was not their doing. Once violence had started and it was clear that the police had vanished from the streets, prisoners escaped from prisons, and supermarkets, clothing shops, and food stores were looted.

The speed of the revolution: No one—not the organisers, government, or those who joined the protests—expected the outcome to be so fast. Though discontent was clearly evident on social media, no one expected social media to generate such a wide and diverse response. Nor did anyone expect it to be so violent.

There remain many unanswered questions. How much of a role did India play behind the scenes? (Oli blames India for his downfall.) And was there any influence from the US in the decision of social media giants to not submit to government regulation? Did former king Gyanendra know about the upcoming riots? Was there any connection between the pro-monarchy rioters of March 2025 and those of September 2025? Why did the army not intervene sooner to save Singha Durbar?

Were the groups of men setting fire to government buildings and the private houses of leaders, plus other institutions identified with the rich and the elite, primed and ready with targets? Why did they go ahead and torch important national buildings even after the demand for the resignation of the prime minister had been met? What exactly was the leadership of the army hoping for on 9 and 10

September 2025? Why were the leaders of the political parties kept inside army camps with their mobile phones switched off?

There was euphoria when a [famously incorruptible](#) former chief justice, [Sushila Karki](#), was appointed interim prime minister. Nepal's first female prime minister has a brief to root out corruption and hold new elections on 5 March 2026. Some legal specialists have pointed out that the [2015 constitution specifically forbids](#) former chief justices from assuming political office. Karki faces daunting tasks—holding elections, rebuilding after widespread destruction, and laying the groundwork for a new, less corrupt political order.

One person who has remained behind the scenes over recent weeks is Kathmandu's wildly popular but controversial independent mayor, [Balen Shah](#).

One of Karki's first acts was to dissolve parliament, as the protesters had demanded. The [Nepal Bar Association](#) and the political parties immediately [registered their disagreement](#). The parties seem far from acknowledging their collective culpability for the explosion of rage against the system. The party elders should resign immediately and pass on responsibility to the next generation. The parties need to institutionalise internal democracy, [the lack of which has been their most important weakness](#). If they do not present a new face to the electorate, they may be wiped out in the coming election.

One person who has remained behind the scenes over recent weeks is Kathmandu's wildly popular but controversial independent mayor, [Balen Shah](#). An engineer and a rap artist, he defeated the main party candidates handsomely to become mayor in 2022 on a platform of opposing corruption and managing waste and traffic. He caused controversy when [he threatened to burn down Singha Durbar](#) because, he claimed, the central government was not cooperating in his attempts to develop Kathmandu.

Shah is alleged to be close to Karki, and he came out in immediate support of her as interim prime minister. Shah's former advisor, [Om Prakash Aryal](#), has become the new home minister in Karki's government. If, as the Gen-Z protesters seem to desire, a directly elected executive prime minister is introduced by amending the constitution, it could only happen after the election. Shah would seem to be in pole position to be elected.

What, finally, of the [Gen-Z protesters](#) themselves? They set out to push for reform of the constitution by peaceful means and moral pressure. They are not in favour of getting rid of the constitution and bringing back the monarchy. They were unprepared for such sudden success. They had no formal leadership and had to work it out, [using channels such as the Discord platform](#), which allowed hundreds of activists to discuss together and come to an agreement that Karki was their preferred candidate for interim prime minister.

In the scramble for leadership, 36-year-old [Sudan Gurung](#) of [Hami Nepali](#), a non-governmental organisation, quickly emerged as a prominent, if unpredictable, figure. One day he was pictured [bowing at the feet](#) of the new prime minister; the next, he was outside her residence [demanding her resignation](#) over ministerial choices. The real test now is whether Gen-Z activists can navigate the compromises of everyday politics—or if they will once again take to the streets whenever the government moves in directions they oppose.

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