Gen Z Protests in Nepal

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Gen Z Protests in Nepal 2025:

"This directly hits the fundamental rights of the public. It is not wrong to regulate social media, but we first need the legal infrastructure to enforce it. A sudden closure like this is controlling."

– Bikash Dhungana, Digital Rights Lawyer, 2025.

On 8 September 2025, Kathmandu, the peaceful capital of Nepal, turned into a stage of unrest, gathering thousands of young civilians in the streets, holding their phones in the air – a silent symbol of their digital rights and freedom that were now taken away. A few hours earlier, the Nepalese government approved a ban that targeted 26 digital platforms, including

YouTube, WhatsApp and X, as a measure to protect national stability (Dhunghana, 2025).

What began as a protest against the act of digital censorship by the government quickly evolved into the revelation of a much deeper dilemma embedded within the Nepalese institutions. Ever since, young students and Gen Z protestors have been vehemently criticising a concerning level of corruption, nepotism, favouritism and clientelism. In short, characteristics of a country that rarely gives opportunities to common people and benefits the few. By the end of September 2025, the protests and violent response by state authorities had resulted in the death of at least 75, with 2000 more injured (Suwal, 2025).

After providing a historical overview regarding the institutional developments in Nepal that triggered the current domestic crisis, this brief will analyse the potentials and limits of international and regional actors (notably the United Nations) in the course of the conflict's resolution. In particular, aiming to map out their ability to support states that are being exposed to extensive governance challenges.

Background of the crisis

Nepal's crisis did indeed not come as a surprise. Ever since the end of the monarchy in 2008, the country has experienced consistent governmental instability: no administration has completed a full term, and the shifting of political parties has frequently paralysed policy-making processes. Premises that catalysed the country's development of an unresponsive and fragmented political elite.

Consequently, the government values were damaged due to corruption and patronage networks. Numerous investigations over the past decade have revealed systemic clientelism in public appointments, procurement processes, and political party financing.

An example emerged in 2023, when Nepal's anti-graft body charged nine officials for manipulating procedures in the acquisition of security equipment. Investigators discovered that the group had intentionally raised the costs of a 690 million rupee contract and avoided any competitive bidding. By doing so, handing the project directly to people within their own network instead of following transparent procedures. These practices have disproportionately affected and disadvantaged young Nepalis, who, up to this day, face limited economic opportunities, high rates of unemployment, and increasing social inequality. As a result, frustration has continuously grown among the young people of Nepal.

Keeping Nepal's historically weak governmental structures and respective dissatisfaction among the civil society in mind, it becomes obvious how the government's decision to ban social media platforms was widely seen as more than just a minor regulation: to Nepal's Gen Z it epitomised a bid to consolidate power and silence public dissent. While the authorities argued

the ban was meant to help the country and to regulate misinformation, many civil society groups and analysts strongly criticised it as an interference with digital rights and the breaching of boundaries.

In consequence, the "Gen Z protests" did not emerge suddenly but rather as the culmination of young people's frustrations over these years. Human Rights Watch, the United Nations and other international observers subsequently reported an excessive use of force by security agencies, further highlighting institutional fragility and underscoring concerns regarding the rule of law and accountability. As tensions seemingly escalate, in fact, international and regional actors face growing pressure to support mechanisms for conflict prevention.

Potential and limits of international intervention

International organisations, particularly the United Nations, and specialised agencies such as UNICEF and WHO hold significant potential in their goal to support states undergoing governance crises. Their primary strength lies in their capacity for impartial mediation and the provision of a neutral platform for dialogue between governments and civil societies during moments of deep political tension.

Furthermore, UN agencies have frequently demonstrated their potential by providing medical assistance, humanitarian aid and supplies, aiming to reduce immediate harm during the protests and find agreements with the government.

Alongside these means of a sudden response towards the crisis, the UN and development partners, such as UNDP, possess long-term tools. Ranging from anti-corruption measures, electoral support, and public-administration reforms. These measures prove to be explicitly relevant and supportive in a context where citizens lost trust in state structures and institutions, as the case of Nepal displays.

Nevertheless, the capacities of all external actors towards a domestic crisis remain strongly connected to the approval of the receiving domestic state. The United Nations' organisation requires full respect for state sovereignty, which implies a restriction in the organisation's ability to enforce change unless invited by the Nepali government. If the Nepalese government or its political elite perceives the external response to be an intrusion or breaching of sovereignty, the prospect of ceased conflict and sustainable political reforms deteriorates drastically.

Thus, a key dilemma consists in the concept of accountability: the violent responses UNDP, OHCHR, Amnesty International and other organisations prominently called for investigations and denounced the use of force. However, calling for accountability of a state can pose an intricate matter, as it can easily be framed by the government as an intrusion into the country's jurisdiction. This significantly highlights the dependence of international and regional actors on the approval of a domestic actor, while simultane-

ously and strictly condemning their actions. In addition to this dilemma, the UN are facing further challenges in the course of funding gaps and rather slow Security Council procedures, which are frequently weakening the UN's ability to respond to crises in an immediate fashion.

Nepal's governance crisis is not solely the result of a digital-rights dispute. It reflects a deeper negative reality of institutions, corruption, clientelism, and the exclusion of younger generations from political processes.

It is unlikely that the complex situation can be resolved immediately. Therefore, a carefully calibrated international response appears not only helpful but necessary. The role of the UN and diplomatic partners becomes crucial in a) facilitating structured political dialogue and b) restoring trust by also supporting reforms.

However, as indicated before, these opportunities come with significant challenges and limits. Any meaningful help coming from the UN or regional partners such as SAARC depends on the consent of Nepal's government respecting the principle of state sovereignty, which might frame international support as an interference if interpreted adversely.

Thus, it is fundamental to clarify that international support cannot replace political action or the will of the state to enact long-term institutional reforms and establish its own security. What we learned from Nepal's case is that governance weaknesses and institutional limitations can easily lead to instability, especially when public trust is eroding. In addition, the digital repression is a critical indicator that, in combination with widespread scepticism towards government authorities and institutions, possesses the potential to trigger spillover effects as the population reacts more rapidly to a democratic backsliding. Finally, an international response needs to consider every potential negative characteristic of the country (such as corruption and clientelism) and aim to strengthen the institutions. Hence, it is essential that every eventual weakness be addressed before the situation continues to escalate.

Based on the brief, it is useful to provide a series of policies aiming to effectively support conflict prevention and strengthen operating practices at both national and international levels. Firstly, international actors must be independent. As previously mentioned, these actors are limited in their actions by the governments themselves. However, these organisations should strengthen internal democratic and expert-led decision-making mechanisms independent from the governments. It would be vital to establish bodies composed of political scientists, regional experts and civilians. They would act and decide impartially and acknowledge early triggering signs that states are reluctant to or would not recognise.

Secondly, investments into the monitoring system must follow. UN branches and their partners are already monitoring violations of human rights, corruption and institutional vulnerabilities. However, these mechanisms are not fully developed to detect democratic violations, in this case, such as digital repression. The Nepal case demonstrates that the UN lacked

tools to identify early risks before they escalated to evident violence. It would be useful to invest in a specific UN unit to collect relevant monthly data, allowing these offices to respond much faster. Further potential could be unleashed by expanding partnerships and dialogue between NGOs and local research institutions.

Thirdly, youth inclusion must be promoted. Given that Nepal's protests were driven by the "GEN Z" that feels excluded from public decision-making, international and especially regional actors should prioritise young people to allow them to engage in the political system. The current spillover effects of Gen Z protests to other Asian countries amplify the necessity of a thorough consideration of the youth.

Conclusion

The Nepal crisis not only shows how weak governance structures and procedures can rapidly transform a censor act into political instability, but also how a social-media ban became a national crisis almost overnight.

The international response highlighted both the potential and limits of the engagement in the crisis. While human rights monitoring, mediation and support remain essential tools, they must be coupled with local political commitment and early, preventive action. In the meantime, the call for accountability and the dependence on the approval of a domestic state showcased a recurring dilemma considering the international and regional response towards domestic crises.

For peacekeeping and conflict-prevention organisations, the Nepal case teaches a key lesson: reinforcing institutions and safeguarding democracy must be prioritised in order to prevent suppressed tension escalating into violence.

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