

## FROM HASHTAGS TO STREETS: SOCIAL MEDIA'S ROLE IN NEPAL'S POPULIST UPRISING

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### Abstract

Social media has become the most powerful global weapon, ensuring the freedom of speech and expression, enhancing the way of communication, and providing an influx of data and information. While Populism is a political strategy that connects the emotions and interests of the general public, it often highlights them in opposition to the elites of society or corruption in the system. This study relates populism (a political approach) with the use of social media as a tool to influence and reshape the public perceptions regarding the system's capacity. The September 2025 protests in Nepal highlight the transformative role of social media in shaping contemporary populist movements. The study will investigate the 2025 September protests, triggered by the government's ban on social media. The digitally active youth demand transparency, accountability, and the end of corruption, mobilized nationwide. Besides, Generation Z, who have been protesting for many months about corruption and nepotism, and the ban on social media blew it up to a populist movement. The paper explores the research aim to analyze how social media and digital activism facilitated youth mobilization during the 2025 populist protests in Nepal.

The paper employs a qualitative research method based on a detailed literature review and secondary data analysis. The paper has established a theoretical framework serving as the foundation for identifying the social media contribution to the populist movements.

The findings suggest that although the movement achieved significant outcomes, the resignation of the Prime Minister of Nepal and the reversal of the social media ban, which became not merely a communication tool but a symbol of freedom and accountability in the system. More than 30 million of Nepal's population chose their interim representative by using social media apps.

### INTRODUCTION:

In this digital age, social media has had a profound impact all over the world. It became a more powerful weapon entrusted with human rights by ensuring the freedom of speech and expression (UDHR Charter, Article 19). The media has empowered people worldwide. Whereas, the term Populism in its broader sense is a political strategy adopted by the general public to show their

resentment towards an authoritarian and dysfunctional system of governance. It happens when powerful elites of the state capture the resources and utilize them for their personal gain rather than contributing to the public of the state. In recent years, after the Arab Spring, people from different states highlighted themselves on the digital platforms to acquire democratic rights in authoritarian regimes.

In Nepal, the system shifted from a Monarchy to a democratic Republic in 2007. But delay in the framing of the constitution and elections, capture of government by the elite parties, and inefficient administration fostered the gradual increase of hopelessness in the Nepalese. The spark was generated after the Nepal government imposed a ban on social media apps, and all the hopelessness of the general public and the protesting people for many months, demanding an end to corruption and nepotism, was summed up into a populist movement based on digital activism against the inefficient and corrupt government. In this contemporary populist movement nationwide, the digitally active youth are demanding transparency, accountability, and the end of corruption from the system. The paper examines how social media and digitally active youth facilitated the September 2025 populist movement in Nepal.

## **BACKGROUND:**

The 2015 constitution of Nepal was made by the second constitutional assembly as a result of the failure of the first constitutional assembly to draft the constitution in four years, as 2007 was the year of a transformative political shift from monarchy to democratic republic, so the first constitutional assembly faced hurdles in the way of forming a new constitution. The three major parties: Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist, Nepali Congress, and Maoists emerged after the demise of the monarchy. These parties faced political instability challenges during 2008 and then in the 2012 elections. The system shifted towards federalism, leading to the 2017 local, provincial, and federal elections according to the 2015 constitution of Nepal. The Nepalese hoped for an efficient administration, a stable and inclusive system under a democratic structure. After elections and the distribution of power among central and provincial governments, the parties could not build up a consensus, which led to the emergence of political challenges over time. It gave the vacuum to new political entities to fill this gap for the sake of political power. Following the general elections in Nepal, these parties stepped into the system and became the reason for instability and rampant conflict between the

federal and central government. In recent years of elections, no party could gain a majority of seats in parliament. The Maoist party formed a coalition government with CPN-UML, and the chairman of CPN-UML, Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli, served as the Prime Minister of Nepal. Now, the system delivered the most rigid bureaucratic and financially burdensome setup, highlighting the authoritarian tendencies. Many factors, including arrogant institutional attitudes, high taxes, persistent corruption, and social alienation, paved the way for the people to show resentment towards the system as the system failed to fulfill the 2015 constitutional reforms as promised. The system failed as a one-man government, particularly, Nepal's youth dissatisfaction, unemployment, and frustration caused by the repeated government failures and unpromised reforms became the core reason for the large human drainage of around 6 to 7 million people moving abroad. Nepal's per capita income hovers around \$1400 per year, and with youth unemployment soaring, social media was a lifeline for young people. But lack of opportunities by the government, weak institutional capacity, and inflation made the gap for youth to engage on digital platforms for their survival. Generation Z largely depends on social media platforms, i.e., YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and many other social apps, and the freelancing sectors exporting IT services and working remotely on international apps.

## **THE TRIGGER OF THE UPRISING:**

The Nepali Government, in 2023, banned the TikTok app for provoking dissonance in the community. Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, aligned with the new social media reforms to digitally literate the community, lifted the ban after a year. But the continually increased tensions caused the government to issue multiple notices to other social platforms and companies, but the appeal was ignored. On Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> of September, 2025, Nepal's government imposed a sweeping ban on dozens of popular social media apps and communication platforms. That includes global giants Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, X, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Reddit, and even

messaging apps like Signal and WeChat. Overnight, millions of users were cut off. As the majority of the youth in Nepal depend upon the social media apps for their survival after facing dissatisfaction with the government, the youth and human rights groups considered this ban as a blatant attempt to silence dissent. The ban felt like the first straw cutting off their voices, as they were amplifying these inequalities. Another factor that triggered the movement was the #NepoKids and #NepoBaby campaigns, which were shared around the internet before the ban on the social media apps. The term is used to refer to the children of politicians and government officials, spending money on luxurious lifestyles for their families rather than spending expenditures on the common people. This provoked the frustration against the government officials, as well as corruption and a ban on social media. 'The protesters are demanding the proper investigation of the politicians' property, the reason for corruption, and economic disparity in the country' (Al-Jazeera report). By Sunday, the tensions more escalated. Tens of thousands of Nepalese came to the streets of Kathmandu, Nepal's Capital, chanting slogans 'liberate oppressed people', marching towards the Parliament, and clashing with the Police. What began as anger over blocked apps was converted into a mob youth protest. Within a few hours, the mob had grown to thousands, and the tear gas, water cannons, and rubber bullets were not sufficient to resist them. In this fierce or violent movement, at least 72 protesters were killed by the brutal attack of security forces. Still, these forces failed to de-escalate the violent protest.

Hami Nepal, an NGO registered in 2020, is committed to supporting the communities in times of need and crises. Sudan GuRung, the head of this organization and civic activist, started it after he lost his son in the 2015 earthquake. This organization was part of the Gen Z movement, provided the youth with a debating app. It had not just toppled the government, but also given Nepal's youth a new and distinct way to choose a new interim representative. Hami Nepal and Gen Z became part of the negotiations with the army officials (Nepali Times).

## Literature Review:

Politics should be an expression of the General Will of the people in the system (Mudde, 2004), further defines populism as an ideology that makes society separate from the system when its needs are not fulfilled. Analysts of Indian Times write, 'Gen Z is demanding both democratic freedoms and economic change. A movement that goes far beyond blocked apps.' A civic space integrated by the accumulation of grievances against the corrupted government (Malmi, 2025), NepoKids' trend on the internet pushed the populist movement even more (Karki, 2025). For Nepal's Youth, the social media blackout was just the tipping point. The result of gradual frustration. Reuters sources presented, students and professionals say, 'they are tired of corruption, authoritarianism, and leaders who refuse to be accountable'. Nepalese protesters said, 'We were triggered by the ban, but that's not the only reason we are here. We are protesting against the corruption that has been institutionalized in Nepal' (AFP Interview Report). The youth had long been ignored by the political parties and elite officials (Raj Malmi, 2025). Gen Z, digital activism, and civil society toppled the corrupted government, which boosted the surveillance in the state (Lamsal, Tuladhar, 2025), to restore the freedom of speech. They are fighting against the authoritarian attitude, AFP report. Ronesh Pradhan, one of the volunteers from the protest, interviewed Nepali Times, "The voices of youth matter. We can't keep being ruled by the authoritarian government," Pradhan said. "Our generation is the future, and if there are older leaders in government, they need to be competent and accountable. We are ready to lead this country forward." Politics is everywhere. Gen Z has the most platforms, and we want a revolution (Khadka, 2025). In this protest against elite government corruption, 19 killed on the first day of the protest. There was widespread use of VPNs in an asymmetric information environment throughout the populist protest (Al-Jazeera Times). This populist digital activism protest led by Gen Z in a broad pattern in the history of South Asia fostered the importance of democratic values in

the country and the significant role of social media in contemporary states.

## METHODOLOGY:

The research paper relies on qualitative methods with a detailed literature review and the use of secondary data sources to establish a theoretical framework with fact-based analysis of the following research questions:

1. Did the movement emerge merely as a reaction to the social media ban, or did it signal a deep political shift?
2. How did the social median shape the populist movement in Nepal?
3. To what extent did the protest bring systematic change?

## FINDINGS:

This massive anti-corruption youth rally had been generated as a result of the system's dysfunctionality, on a large scale, and had never been seen in South Asian countries. After the resignation of Prime Minister, youth protesters wanted to appoint a leader based on consensus to govern the country. The online mob organized by Hami Nepal selected a unique manner to choose their representative. Hami Nepal operated a channel on the discussion platform known as Discord, Youth Against Corruption, which drew a huge number of people from the Nepali diaspora, with more than 10,000 people engaging in heated debates about the country's future.

Discord is a United States-based gaming app that allows online gamers or users to message or chat freely. This app became a debating platform for Nepalese protesters. It allows users to communicate through voicemails, texts, video, and audio calls. This app is particularly popular among Gen Z. The Discord Debate was revolutionary in the sense that 30 million online Nepalese participated in the discussions on this platform to choose their country's representative by online voting. Because of the Government's sweeping ban on social media apps, many people could not log in, but livestreams on different channels played an effective role in mobilizing them. Even after the ban, it paved the way for the rise in the use of the Virtual Private Network

(VPN). The online clutter was organized by this organization, with Gen Z at the forefront of the protest, comprising more than 160,000 members. More than 60,000 people who logged out of the app participated in the livestreams on YouTube by using VPNs. Virtual polling was done on the Discord app to nominate their interim leader and ministers, with a large number of participants in discussion on other apps, such as TikTok, Instagram, Reddit, WeChat, etc. As many of the people did not know about this app, some Gen Z participants guided them on these other apps by posting, commenting, livestreaming, chatting, etc. One of them was Regina Basnet, a young protester who wrote, 'people are learning as they want to learn'. It was a radical experience in Nepal's democracy. Young protesters shortlisted some names on the app to choose them for the interim government, including Sagar Dhakal (a politician), Mahabir Pun (a social activist), Sher Bahadur Deuba (an influencer and an advocate), Harka Sampang (mayor of Dharan), Belan Shah (a young mayor of Kathmandu, a rapper, and a civil engineer) and Sushila Karki (former Chief Justice of Nepal). Belan Shah had the support and following of Gen Z and remained an active participant in the discussions on Discord. Hami Nepal presented the view that the youth wanted Belan Shah to become a Prime Minister, but he himself supported Karki's nomination and voted for her. Gen Z followed the Shah's nomination for her, and over 30 million virtual voting polls chose Sushila Karki for an interim government for 6 months. After that, the President of Nepal, Ram Chandra Poudel, appealed to the 'Doctrine of Necessity' to appoint Karki as an interim Prime Minister, with the responsibility to hold the free and fair elections in the country, and resigned from the Presidential office.

Thus, a simple gaming app and other social media apps played a significant role in the political landscape in the history of South Asia. The key findings of the paper focus that social media is not just an informative platform but also raises and reshapes public perceptions across the world. As we can see in the case of Nepal, which has the least GDP and is a poor country in South Asian states, setting the bases of social media in the system led

to a wave to end corruption and nepotism in the country and demanded accountability in the system.

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

### Social Media as a Catalyst for Populist Mobilization

The findings of this study indicate that social media functioned as a catalytic mechanism rather than the root cause of Nepal's September 2025 populist uprising. While the government's ban on digital platforms acted as the immediate trigger, the broader mobilization reflected accumulated grievances related to corruption, nepotism, unemployment, and governance inefficiencies. This observation is consistent with Mudde's (2004) conceptualization of populism as a political response that emerges when the "general will" of the people is perceived to be undermined by elite capture of state institutions. Social media platforms amplified these grievances by enabling rapid dissemination of dissenting narratives and facilitating collective identity formation among digitally connected citizens. Rather than generating discontent, digital platforms intensified political awareness and transformed latent frustrations into coordinated collective action.

The Nepal case reinforces existing scholarship that views social media as a mobilizing infrastructure that lowers barriers to political participation and weakens elite control over political discourse (Galston, 2018). Campaigns such as #NepoKids illustrate how digital narratives can symbolically frame governance failures and reinforce populist binaries between "the people" and "corrupt elites" (Cox, 2018). The viral circulation of such narratives contributed to the normalization of protest and expanded participation beyond traditional activist circles, thereby accelerating the scale and intensity of the uprising.

### Generation Z and the Reconfiguration of Political Participation

A significant analytical insight of this study is the central role of Generation Z in organizing and sustaining the populist movement. Unlike earlier protest waves that relied heavily on political parties or labor organizations, the Nepal uprising was

characterized by decentralized coordination, horizontal leadership, and digitally mediated deliberation. This aligns with Kandpal's (2025) argument that contemporary populist movements in South Asia are increasingly shaped by youth-driven, issue-based mobilization rather than ideological party alignment. Generation Z's familiarity with digital platforms enabled the repurposing of applications such as Discord, livestreaming tools, and encrypted networks into political spaces for debate and decision-making.

The virtual selection of an interim political representative through online deliberation represents a novel form of political participation that challenges conventional democratic procedures. While this model enhanced inclusivity and immediacy, it also raises concerns regarding political legitimacy and representativeness. Mulmi (2025) cautions that digitally mediated participation may privilege technologically connected groups while marginalizing those without access or digital literacy. Nevertheless, in the context of institutional paralysis, such alternative participatory mechanisms can emerge as provisional democratic substitutes rather than threats to democratic order.

### Populism, Governance Failure, and Institutional Legitimacy

The uprising cannot be understood solely through the lens of digital activism; rather, it reflects deeper governance failures and institutional fragility within Nepal's post-constitutional political order. Persistent corruption, weak intergovernmental coordination, and unfulfilled constitutional promises eroded public trust and created conditions conducive to populist mobilization. In line with populist theory, the movement framed political authority as illegitimate due to elite domination and systemic exclusion (Mudde, 2018). The state's attempt to suppress dissent through digital restrictions reinforced perceptions of authoritarianism and further delegitimized government authority.

Johnson (2021) argues that in fragile democracies, state overreach and repression often intensify political polarization rather than restore stability.

The Nepal case confirms this dynamic, as the digital ban escalated protest intensity and broadened participation. The use of coercive force against protesters further undermined institutional legitimacy and strengthened the moral claims of the movement, reinforcing populist narratives of state oppression and elite unaccountability.

### **Civil Society Mediation and the Limits of Digital Governance**

An important finding of this study is the mediating role played by civil society actors, particularly Hami Nepal, in translating digital mobilization into structured political engagement. Rather than descending into sustained disorder, the movement demonstrated organizational capacity and deliberative intent, challenging assumptions that digitally driven populism is inherently destabilizing. This observation aligns with Lamsal and Tuladhar's (2025) analysis of civic intermediaries as critical actors in bridging the gap between digitally mobilized citizens and formal political institutions.

However, the Nepal case also highlights the limitations of digital governance solutions. While online platforms facilitated participation and coordination, they cannot replace long-term institutional reform. Sustainable democratic consolidation requires integrating digital participation into formal governance frameworks rather than relying on episodic mobilization. As Cox (2018) argues, populist movements can generate political renewal only when institutional systems are responsive enough to absorb and reformulate popular demands.

### **Broader Implications for South Asian Democracies**

The Nepal uprising offers broader lessons for South Asian democracies experiencing similar patterns of political disillusionment, youth unemployment, and digital expansion. The findings suggest that attempts to control online expression in contexts of accumulated socio-economic grievances may accelerate rather than suppress populist mobilization. As Kandpal (2025) notes, populism in the region increasingly reflects

structural governance failures rather than transient political dissatisfaction. The Nepal experience underscores the need for states to treat digital platforms as spaces of political negotiation rather than purely as security threats.

Overall, this study contributes to the literature on populism and digital activism by demonstrating that the political impact of social media is contingent upon institutional capacity, inclusivity, and state responsiveness. Digital tools are neither inherently democratizing nor destabilizing; their effects depend on how governments engage with digitally expressed grievances. The Nepal case thus provides a critical empirical lens for understanding the evolving relationship between technology, populism, and democratic governance in South Asia.

### **CONCLUSION:**

The 2025 September uprising in Nepal demonstrates that social media in the contemporary era functions not merely as a communication platform but as a transformative political infrastructure capable of restructuring state-society relations. What began as a reaction to a sweeping ban on digital platforms quickly evolved into a broader populist mobilization rooted in accumulated grievances over corruption, nepotism, youth unemployment, and institutional inefficiency. The findings of this study reveal that digital spaces served as arenas for political deliberation, identity formation, and collective action, allowing Generation Z to bypass traditional party structures and elite-controlled channels of representation. The use of platforms such as Discord, VPN networks, livestreaming, and hashtag campaigns illustrates how digitally literate youth converted informational networks into political power. Rather than treating the movement as a spontaneous reaction to censorship, this research demonstrates that the ban functioned as a catalytic trigger for deeper structural frustrations embedded within Nepal's post-monarchical democratic transition. Social media thus became symbolic of broader democratic values—freedom of expression, transparency, and accountability—while simultaneously enabling horizontal mobilization

that challenged centralized authority. The resignation of the Prime Minister and the unprecedented digital selection of an interim representative highlight a significant shift in participatory politics, where digital activism can materially influence formal political outcomes.

More broadly, this case underscores the dual nature of digital platforms within fragile or transitional democracies: they can both expose governance deficits and reconfigure populist energy into organized civic engagement. The Nepal experience illustrates that populist uprisings in the digital age are rarely isolated technological phenomena; rather, they emerge at the intersection of institutional fragility, economic precarity, generational disillusionment, and communication infrastructures. The study contributes to the literature on populism and digital activism by demonstrating that youth-led movements can convert online dissent into structured political negotiation when supported by civic intermediaries such as Hami Nepal. However, it also raises critical questions regarding digital legitimacy, accountability, and the long-term sustainability of online-mediated governance mechanisms. While the uprising restored digital freedoms and forced political accountability, its deeper implication lies in revealing how state attempts to control digital expression can unintentionally accelerate political mobilization. For South Asian democracies and similarly structured political systems, the Nepal case serves as both a warning and a lesson: digital repression in contexts of accumulated socio-economic grievances may intensify rather than suppress populist energy. Sustainable democratic stability, therefore, requires not the restriction of digital platforms but the strengthening of institutional transparency, youth inclusion, and responsive governance structures capable of channeling digital participation into constructive democratic renewal.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

Drawing on the findings of this study, the following recommendations aim to guide policymakers, civil society actors, and democratic institutions in managing digital participation,

preventing governance breakdowns, and channeling youth-driven digital activism into constructive and sustainable democratic engagement.

- **Safeguard Digital Freedoms:** Governments should avoid sweeping bans on social media platforms and instead adopt transparent, proportionate, and rights-based digital regulation frameworks that protect freedom of expression while addressing misinformation.
- **Strengthen Institutional Transparency:** Establish independent anti-corruption commissions with digital monitoring mechanisms to improve public trust and ensure accountability in governance.
- **Institutionalize Youth Participation:** Create formal consultative platforms at local and national levels to integrate youth voices into policymaking processes, reducing the likelihood of disruptive populist mobilization.
- **Promote Digital Civic Education:** Invest in nationwide digital literacy programs that encourage responsible online engagement, critical thinking, and constructive political participation.
- **Enhance Government Communication Strategies:** Develop open digital communication channels between state institutions and citizens to prevent information vacuums that can intensify public frustration.
- **Regulate Without Repressing:** Implement evidence-based social media governance policies that focus on transparency, algorithmic accountability, and platform cooperation rather than blanket censorship.
- **Strengthen Crisis Response Mechanisms:** Build institutional capacity for rapid and peaceful engagement with protest movements to prevent escalation into violent confrontations.
- **Encourage Civic Intermediaries:** Support civil society organizations that can mediate between digitally mobilized

citizens and state institutions, facilitating structured dialogue.

- **Address Structural Economic Grievances:** Prioritize employment generation, youth entrepreneurship support, and equitable economic reforms to tackle the underlying drivers of populist discontent.
- **Develop Hybrid Participation Models:** Integrate digital platforms into formal democratic processes, such as e-consultations and participatory digital forums, to channel online activism into accountable institutional frameworks.

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