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THE ROLE OF GENERATION Z IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICS OF SOUTH ASIA: AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract
Generation Z has emerged as a significant political force in South Asia, reshaping political participation, public discourse, and democratic engagement through digital technologies and social media platforms. This study examines the role of Generation Z in the contemporary politics of South Asia, focusing on its influence on political mobilization, electoral behavior, issue advocacy, and civic activism. The research argues that Gen Z's political engagement is characterized by digital connectivity, heightened political awareness, and growing demands for accountability, transparency, social justice, and inclusive governance. Across countries such as Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal, young citizens increasingly utilize online platforms to influence policy debates, challenge traditional political structures, and shape public opinion. Despite facing challenges including political polarization, misinformation, unemployment, and institutional constraints, Generation Z continues to transform the region's political landscape. The study highlights the implications of this generational shift for democratic development, governance, and political stability in South Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Generation Z has emerged as an increasingly consequential political constituency in South Asia, challenging conventional assumptions about how young citizens participate in political life. Digital connectivity, expanding political awareness, and widespread access to social-media platforms have enabled young people to move beyond conventional voting and party-based participation toward networked forms of activism, political communication, and collective mobilization. Recent scholarship demonstrates that Gen Z's digital activism can rapidly connect grievances, construct political narratives, and generate collective action across national boundaries (Subedi et al., 2026). This transformation is particularly significant in South Asia, where political participation is increasingly shaped by youth dissatisfaction with corruption, unemployment, inequality, institutional exclusion, and weak political accountability. In Pakistan, social media has become an important arena through which young citizens express political preferences, engage in civic debates, and participate in digitally mediated political activities (Ghayoor, 2026). Thus, Gen Z should not be viewed merely as a demographic category; it represents an emerging political actor capable of influencing electoral narratives, public opinion, and state–society relations.

The political significance of this generation became particularly visible through youth-led mobilizations in Bangladesh and Nepal, where

digitally connected young citizens challenged established political structures and demanded greater accountability and representation. Comparative research suggests that digital nativity, socioeconomic grievances, and changing political identities are important factors explaining the emergence of contemporary youth mobilization in South Asia (Shah & Hashimy, 2026). However, digital mobilization does not automatically produce democratic consolidation; translating protest energy into institutional reform, effective governance, and sustainable political participation remains a major challenge (Koirala et al., 2026).

Statement of the Problem

Generation Z is emerging as a powerful political actor in South Asia, yet its growing influence remains inadequately understood. Digital platforms have transformed youth participation, enabling rapid mobilization, political expression, and challenges to established political structures. However, misinformation, polarization, unemployment, institutional distrust, and restricted civic spaces may limit the democratic potential of this activism. This study therefore examines how Generation Z is reshaping political participation, public discourse, democratic accountability, and state society relations across contemporary South Asia.

Research Objectives

1. To critically examine the role of Generation Z in transforming political participation, digital mobilization, public discourse, and electoral engagement across South Asia.
2. To analyze how Generation Z's political activism influences democratic accountability, governance, political institutions, and state–society relations in contemporary South Asia.

Research Questions

1. How is Generation Z transforming political participation, digital mobilization, electoral engagement, and political discourse in contemporary South Asia?

2. To what extent does Generation Z's political activism influence democratic accountability, governance, political institutions, and state–society relations across South Asia?

Literature Review

Existing scholarship increasingly portrays Generation Z as a politically consequential cohort whose participation extends beyond conventional voting and party membership into digitally mediated activism, protest, and issue-based mobilization. Research on youth political participation in Pakistan has shown that social media can function as an important arena for political expression and engagement, challenging the assumption that declining conventional participation necessarily represents political apathy (Kr, 2016). Recent literature demonstrates that digital activism has become particularly significant in South Asia. Studies of Bangladesh and Nepal indicate that digitally connected youth can transform socioeconomic grievances, political dissatisfaction, and demands for accountability into decentralized collective action. Shah and Hashimy (2026), for example, identify digital nativity, socioeconomic grievances, and changing political identities as major factors shaping Gen Z mobilization in the two countries. Similarly, research on Bangladesh's 2024 youth movement demonstrates how social media facilitated mobilization, coordination, and political communication (Omi et al., 2025).

More recent comparative research suggests that Gen Z activism can influence broader political crises while simultaneously exposing young movements to misinformation, surveillance, repression, and institutional resistance. Subedi et al. (2026), examining youth-led political movements across 20 Asian countries, find recurring patterns of decentralized leadership and hybrid online offline mobilization. Dahal (2026) further argues that Nepal's Gen Z movement reveals an important relationship between digital mobilization, political legitimacy, governance, and state response.

Research Gap

Despite these important contributions, a significant research gap remains. Existing studies largely concentrate on individual countries, specific protests, or the relationship between social media and mobilization, while insufficiently explaining how Generation Z is

transforming political participation, democratic accountability, governance, electoral engagement, and state society relations across South Asia comparatively. This study addresses that gap by developing a broader comparative political analysis of Gen Z as an emerging political force across the region.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Political Process Theory as its central theoretical framework because it provides a strong analytical explanation of how Generation Z converts political grievances and awareness into collective political action. McAdam (1982) argues that mobilization becomes possible when political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and cognitive liberation converge. Applied to contemporary South Asia, the framework suggests that Gen Z's dissatisfaction with unemployment, corruption, inequality, political exclusion, and weak accountability is increasingly transformed through digital platforms into political awareness, collective identity, and coordinated action. Social media functions as a critical mobilizing structure, connecting dispersed young citizens and enabling them to influence political narratives, electoral behavior, protests, and public agendas. At the same time, elections, governmental crises, policy failures, and institutional weaknesses create political opportunities that can intensify youth mobilization. The theoretical model therefore follows: Political Grievances → Digital Political Awareness → Mobilizing Structures → Political Opportunities → Collective Action → Political and Democratic Outcomes. This framework directly connects with the study by explaining how and under what conditions Generation Z becomes a transformative political force capable of reshaping governance, accountability, political participation, and state–society relations across South Asia (McAdam, 1982).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design to critically examine the evolving political role of Generation Z across South Asia. It relies primarily on secondary data, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, policy reports, electoral studies, government documents, and credible digital-media sources. A comparative thematic analysis is employed to identify patterns of Gen Z political participation, digital mobilization, electoral engagement, activism, political discourse, and demands for accountability across selected South Asian countries. Guided by Political Process Theory, the study systematically examines how political grievances, digital mobilizing structures, political opportunities, and collective action interact to produce political and governance outcomes. This approach enables a broader regional interpretation while identifying both country-level variations and common political trends shaping Generation Z's influence on contemporary South Asian politics.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because Generation Z is increasingly becoming a transformative force in South Asian politics. It examines how digital connectivity, political activism, and youth mobilization are reshaping electoral participation, public discourse, accountability, and governance. The study contributes theoretically by applying Political Process Theory to digitally driven youth politics and provides policymakers with insights into effectively engaging a politically conscious generation. Ultimately, it demonstrates that Gen Z is not merely the future of South Asian politics but an increasingly influential force shaping its present and democratic future.

Generation Z and Political Participation

Generation Z has emerged as a distinctive political constituency whose participation increasingly challenges conventional models of political engagement. Unlike earlier generations, Gen Z has matured within an environment of permanent digital connectivity, making political information, debate, identity formation, and mobilization integral parts of everyday social interaction. Political participation among this generation therefore extends beyond voting and party membership to include online campaigning, political discussion, content creation, hashtag activism, petitioning, protest coordination, and digitally mediated civic engagement. Comparative evidence from Pakistan and Indonesia demonstrates that social-media use can strengthen young people's political learning, political efficacy, and

participation, indicating that digital platforms increasingly function as political socialization environments rather than merely communication channels (Ida et al., 2020). The political identity of Gen Z is consequently shaped by a combination of digital fluency, issue-based consciousness, skepticism toward established institutions, and demand for accountability. Social media allows young citizens to bypass traditional gatekeepers and directly participate in political narrative construction. In Pakistan, Facebook and other platforms have been identified as important mechanisms through which young people express political preferences and develop greater interest in politics (Ahmed et al., 2021). This transformation is analytically important because it shifts political participation from a largely institutional model toward a more networked and personalized form of engagement. Gen Z can simultaneously consume political information, produce political content, mobilize peers, and challenge dominant narratives, thereby reducing the distance between citizens and political communication.

However, digital participation should not automatically be equated with meaningful democratic participation. The relationship between online engagement and offline political action remains conditional upon political efficacy, institutional trust, socioeconomic circumstances, and the broader political environment. Research on young Pakistani voters, for example, shows that social media can influence both online and offline participation, but its democratic potential is not uniform across all forms of engagement (Khan et al., 2022). This suggests that Gen Z's political influence should be assessed not simply through the volume of online activity but through its capacity to produce sustained political awareness, collective action, electoral participation, and institutional pressure. Recent scholarship further indicates that Gen Z is increasingly capable of converting digital connectivity into large-scale political mobilization. A 2026 comparative study examining youth-led protests across 20 Asian countries identifies decentralized organization and digitally enabled activism as significant characteristics of contemporary Gen Z movements (Subedi et al., 2026). In South Asia, this development is particularly consequential because young populations confront unemployment, political polarization, governance deficits, inequality, and restricted avenues for conventional participation. Consequently, Gen Z represents not simply a younger demographic group but an emerging political actor capable of reshaping the relationship between technology, political participation, collective action, and democratic governance.

Generation Z in South Asian Politics

Generation Z is emerging as an increasingly consequential political constituency across South Asia, challenging traditional patterns of electoral participation, political organization, and public discourse. Its political engagement is shaped by digital connectivity, economic aspirations, institutional dissatisfaction, and heightened sensitivity to issues of accountability and representation. In Pakistan, research on youth participation demonstrates that social media has become an important instrument for shaping political perceptions and voting behaviour, particularly among educated young voters (Sajid et al., 2024). The electoral significance of Gen Z is reinforced by its ability to combine conventional participation with digitally mediated political engagement. Young voters increasingly encounter candidates, political narratives, campaign messages, and policy debates through platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and X. In India, recent research identifies social media as an increasingly influential arena for youth political awareness, electoral behaviour, and political efficacy (Sanadya, 2026). This transformation reduces the traditional separation between campaigning, political communication, and citizen participation, allowing young voters to simultaneously consume, interpret, and produce political content.

Beyond elections, Gen Z has demonstrated considerable capacity for political mobilization and activism. Bangladesh and Nepal provide particularly important cases because youth-led movements translated digital grievances into large-scale street mobilization, although their political consequences differed substantially. Comparative research shows that digital nativity,

socioeconomic grievances, and changing political identities influenced mobilization in both countries, while regime type, state capacity, and political openness shaped their outcomes differently (Shah & Hashimy, 2026). This comparison demonstrates that Gen Z should not be treated as a homogeneous regional movement; its political effectiveness depends heavily upon institutional and political contexts. Bangladesh illustrates both the transformative potential and limitations of youth mobilization. The Gen Z-led 2024 uprising generated substantial political rupture and placed institutional reform, electoral governance, and constitutional change at the centre of national political debate. Yet subsequent electoral developments demonstrated that successful street mobilization does not automatically translate into electoral power. Established parties retained organizational advantages, illustrating the persistent gap between mobilizational capacity and institutional representation (Ahmed, 2026).

Nepal presents another dimension of Gen Z politics, where youth mobilization has increasingly challenged established political legitimacy and governance arrangements. Scholarship on the 2025 uprising suggests that digitally connected young citizens transformed concerns about corruption, political exclusion, and governance into a broader challenge to existing political structures (Koirala et al., 2026). Similarly, research on Nepal's movement argues that digital activism can disrupt established relationships between citizens, political leadership, and institutions, although translating digital momentum into sustainable governance remains difficult (Dahal, 2026). At the broader Asian level, recent comparative evidence covering 20 countries indicates that Gen Z activism increasingly combines online communication with offline protest and decentralized forms of mobilization (Subedi et al., 2026). For South Asia, this development has major implications for governance and democratic accountability. Gen Z can amplify public grievances, expose institutional failures, influence political agendas, and pressure governments; however, misinformation, polarization, repression, surveillance, and fragmented political organization can constrain these democratic possibilities. Consequently, Generation Z should be understood not simply as a demographic group but as an emerging political actor capable of reshaping electoral competition, collective action, public discourse, and state–society relations across South Asia.

Digital Activism and Democratic Transformation

Digital activism has fundamentally altered the relationship between citizens, political institutions, and democratic processes by transforming social media into arenas of political communication, mobilization, and accountability. For Generation Z, platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and X are not merely communication tools; they function as political spaces where grievances are articulated, collective identities constructed, and political narratives contested**.** Recent scholarship conceptualizes social-media participation as a distinct form of political participation characterized by networked expression and mobilization (Waeterloos, 2025). The democratic potential of digital activism is particularly visible in its capacity to reduce traditional barriers to political participation. Online networks allow young citizens to disseminate information rapidly, organize campaigns, coordinate demonstrations, and pressure political authorities without relying exclusively on established parties or conventional media institutions. Research on protest movements demonstrates that social media facilitates the circulation of information, emotional appeals, collective identity, and organizational resources necessary for mobilization (Jost et al., 2018). In South Asia, these mechanisms have become increasingly important as digitally connected youth challenge political exclusion, corruption, unemployment, and weak institutional accountability.

Digital activism can also strengthen transparency and horizontal accountability by enabling citizens to document government failures, scrutinize political leaders, circulate evidence of misconduct, and demand institutional responses. In Pakistan, empirical research identifies digital media as an increasingly important mechanism for expanding citizens' access to political information and strengthening demands for transparency and accountability (Ahmed et al., 2023). However,

digital democracy is not inherently progressive. A major systematic review of 496 studies found that digital media can increase political participation and information consumption while simultaneously contributing to declining political trust, polarization, and populist tendencies (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023).

The transformative potential of digital activism is therefore dependent on the broader institutional environment. In South Asia, digitally mobilized youth movements demonstrate how online grievances can rapidly become offline protests capable of challenging established political authority. Recent research on Gen Z activism across Asia shows that youth-led movements increasingly combine digital networks with physical protest and decentralized organization (Subedi et al., 2026). Yet translating digital mobilization into durable democratic reform remains difficult because institutional resistance, misinformation, surveillance, polarization, and fragmented political organization can weaken sustained political influence. Thus, digital activism should be understood not simply as online protest but as a powerful mechanism through which Generation Z can reshape political accountability, public discourse, institutional responsiveness, and democratic governance.

Comparative Analysis and Political Implications

Generation Z's political engagement across South Asia reveals a common generational shift from conventional, institution-centred participation toward digitally networked, issue-driven, and increasingly confrontational forms of political action. Yet this transformation is not uniform. Comparative research on Bangladesh and Nepal demonstrates that digital nativity, socioeconomic grievances, and changing political identities generate strong youth mobilization in both countries, while differences in political openness, state capacity, and institutional structures produce substantially different outcomes (Shah & Hashimy, 2026). Thus, Gen Z should not be treated as a homogeneous regional political bloc; rather, its political behaviour is conditioned by the interaction between generational characteristics and national political institutions. Bangladesh and Nepal provide particularly powerful comparative cases. In Bangladesh, youth mobilization contributed to a major political rupture, while in Nepal, Gen Z activism challenged established patterns of political legitimacy and governance. The comparative evidence indicates that similar grievances can generate different political trajectories depending on institutional resilience and state responses. The political consequences therefore extend beyond protest itself: youth mobilization can reshape leadership legitimacy, electoral competition, public expectations, and the relationship between citizens and governing institutions. This demonstrates that the political significance of Gen Z lies not simply in its capacity to mobilize crowds but in its ability to redefine the standards by which governments are judged and political authority is legitimized.

Pakistan and India demonstrate another dimension of this transformation, where digital platforms increasingly connect youth political awareness with electoral participation, political communication, and civic engagement. Research on Pakistan shows that social media can influence both online and offline political participation, although its effects depend upon political orientations and broader social conditions (Khan et al., 2022). Recent developments in India further demonstrate the growing political visibility of youth-led movements around electoral integrity and representation, suggesting that Gen Z can increasingly challenge established political actors and institutional practices.

The implications for state society relations and governance are profound. Digital activism can strengthen horizontal accountability by enabling citizens to expose institutional failures, circulate political information, and place immediate pressure on governments. However, it can simultaneously intensify polarization, misinformation, distrust, and confrontational politics. Nepal's experience demonstrates how digital restrictions, youth grievances, state coercion, and institutional fragility can interact to produce a rapid legitimacy crisis rather than simply a conventional protest movement. Consequently, governments that interpret digitally mobilized youth exclusively as a security challenge risk deepening political alienation; institutions that create meaningful channels for

participation may instead convert youth activism into constructive democratic engagement.

At the regional level, the political implications extend across the eight countries of South Asia—Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Afghanistan and the Maldives. Gen Z's growing digital connectivity and political activism are creating new forms of youth mobilization, political communication, and civic engagement across the region. The central comparative conclusion is therefore that Gen Z is reshaping South Asian politics by weakening the monopoly of traditional political organizations over mobilization, accelerating demands for accountability, and transforming state society relations. However, its long-term democratic impact will depend on whether political institutions can translate youthful mobilization into meaningful representation, policy reform, accountable governance, and sustainable democratic participation

Conclusion

Generation Z has emerged as an increasingly influential political actor in contemporary South Asia, reshaping patterns of political participation, digital mobilization, public discourse, and democratic engagement. Across Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Maldives, and Afghanistan, young citizens are using digital platforms not only to express political preferences but also to organize collective action, challenge established political narratives, demand accountability, and influence state–society relations. The analysis demonstrates that Generation Z's political influence is strongest where grievances converge with digital mobilizing structures, political opportunities, and collective action, consistent with Political Process Theory.

However, Generation Z's political engagement presents both opportunities and challenges for democratic development. Digital activism can strengthen political awareness, transparency, civic participation, and governmental accountability, while misinformation, polarization, digital surveillance, unemployment, institutional distrust, and restricted civic spaces can undermine its democratic potential. The comparative analysis therefore suggests that Gen Z is not simply a future political constituency but an active force shaping present political dynamics in South Asia. Its long-term impact will depend on whether political institutions respond constructively to youth demands and create meaningful channels for representation, participation, policy influence, and democratic inclusion. Ultimately, empowering Generation Z can contribute significantly to more responsive, participatory, and accountable political systems across South Asia.

Findings

1. Generation Z has emerged as a significant political actor reshaping contemporary politics across South Asia.
2. Digital platforms have transformed Generation Z from passive political observers into active agents of political mobilization and collective action.
3. Generation Z is weakening the traditional monopoly of political parties and established organizations over political communication and mobilization.
4. Youth-led digital activism has strengthened demands for political accountability, transparency, and responsive governance.
5. Political grievances become more influential when combined with digital networks, mobilizing structures, and favorable political opportunities.
6. Generation Z's political engagement is increasingly transforming state–society relations by challenging conventional forms of political authority.
7. Despite its mobilizing power, misinformation, polarization, surveillance, unemployment, and institutional distrust constrain the democratic potential of Generation Z.
8. The political influence of Generation Z varies across South Asia according to differences in political institutions, civic freedoms, digital access, and governance conditions.
9. Generation Z is increasingly converting online political engagement into offline protests, electoral participation, and demands for institutional reform.
10. The long-term democratic impact of Generation Z will depend on whether South Asian political institutions can convert youth mobilization into meaningful political representation and policy outcomes.

Recommendations

1. South Asian governments should create institutional mechanisms for meaningful Generation Z participation in policymaking, governance, and democratic decision-making.

2. Political institutions should develop structured digital engagement platforms to connect young citizens with policymakers and strengthen participatory governance.

3. Governments and educational institutions should introduce digital and political literacy programmes to help Generation Z identify misinformation, disinformation, and manipulated political content.

4. Political parties should provide greater opportunities for young people to assume leadership positions rather than limiting youth participation to electoral campaigning.

5. States should protect freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and digital civic participation to ensure that youth activism contributes positively to democratic development.

6. Electoral institutions should encourage Generation Z participation through voter education, accessible registration systems, and youth-focused civic engagement initiatives.

7. Governments should address youth unemployment, economic insecurity, and social exclusion because unresolved socioeconomic grievances can intensify political frustration and instability.

8. Universities should strengthen civic education, political debate, research, and community engagement programmes to develop informed and responsible young citizens.

9. South Asian governments should avoid excessive digital restrictions and surveillance, while establishing transparent mechanisms to address genuine online harms without suppressing legitimate political expression.

10. Regional organizations should promote cross-border youth dialogues and collaborative initiatives to strengthen democratic learning, political inclusion, and peaceful civic engagement among Generation Z.

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