



Modus operandi of Gen Z protests: Digital mobilisation, decentralised leadership and new forms of political participation

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Abstract

The rise of Generation Z as an active participant in contemporary political protests signals a major shift in youth political engagement. This study investigates the modus operandi of Gen-Z protests, with a focus on the root causes of youth grievances, methods of mobilization, the role of social media, as well as the political and administrative outcomes of collective action. Using contemporary examples from Nepal, India and other global youth movements, the study examines how concerns around unemployment, corruption, inequality, educational insecurity, governance and political exclusion are translated into collective demands. The 2025 Gen-Z protests in Nepal and India's recent youth-led protest movement are examined with particular attention to the relationship between digital activism and offline mobilisation. The study finds that Gen-Z movements are increasingly relying on decentralised networks, memes, hashtags, short-form videos, digital communities and rapid online communication to mobilise participants and amplify grievances. Social media enables faster mobilisation and greater political visibility, while street-level collective action can transform digital pressure into political and administrative consequences. But such movements also face challenges like misinformation, fractured leadership, polarisation, and sustainability. The study argues that governments should harness youth energy through meaningful participation, digital dialogue, employment, innovation and inclusive policymaking to turn protest energy into constructive democratic engagement.

Keywords: Generation Z, Gen-Z protests, youth political participation, digital activism, social-media mobilisation, collective action, political participation, youth movements, Nepal, India, governance

Introduction

Political protest has changed dramatically in the digital era. Broadly understood as the generation that grew up with smartphones, social media and instant digital communication, Generation Z is becoming an increasingly important force in contemporary political and social movements. Unlike the traditional protest movements, which were often based on political parties, trade unions, student organisations, or clearly identifiable leaders, Gen Z has demonstrated a distinct way of mobilisation that combines digital communication, decentralized leadership, memes, satire, popular culture, viral videos and street-level collective action. Social media is not just a tool for broadcasting these protests; it is increasingly a space where grievances are articulated, communities are built, narratives are constructed, and collective action is organised. Recent youth movements across Asia, Africa and other regions demonstrate the emergence of this new form of political participation. (Reuters)

One of the most significant examples was the Gen-Z-led protest movement in Nepal in September 2025^[16]. The immediate trigger was the government's decision to restrict major social-media platforms, but the underlying grievances were much broader, including corruption, nepotism, unemployment, inequality and dissatisfaction with political governance. Young protesters used digital platforms to mobilise and communicate, while online discussions surrounding the privileges of political families helped transform individual frustration into collective political anger. That movement quickly spilt out of the digital world and into the streets — a classic Gen-Z pattern of moving from online activism to boots-on-the-ground mobilisation.

Ultimately, the protests led to the resignation of Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli and became a big example of the political potential of digitally enabled youth movements. (Reuters) Nepal was not a one-off. Kenya, Indonesia, Serbia, the Philippines, Morocco, Madagascar, Peru and others have seen the wider wave of youth-led mobilisation. In Kenya, the youth protested against proposed tax increases; in Indonesia, they protested against double standards, and in Serbia, they protested against mismanagement and accountability. Despite the differences in the triggers, the movements had several similarities, including the use of social media, decentralisation, and a limited role of traditional political leadership, as well as the use of innovative symbols and the speed of circulation of their slogans and symbols. (Reuters)

There is a need to understand the nature of this phenomenon, which is the use of Gen Z to promote political change. Young people communicate through memes, videos, hashtags, satire, and music, which makes their voices heard and their statements more accessible to this part of the population. In addition, protests of this type have a short lifespan, but they can be very loud and attract attention both locally and internationally. At the same time, the lack of traditional leadership and the use of social media for communication may have negative consequences for the movement; for example, a lack of control over the dissemination of information and the inability to maintain long-term goals. India is one of the most promising countries for the study of such movements, as in 2026^[11], Indian youth staged a major protest known as the Cockroach Janta Party. This movement was triggered by exam paper leaks and questions of accountability and management, and

it managed to achieve its goal of the resignation of the education minister and reforms in the education system. (Reuters)

Therefore, the current situation in India, as well as in Nepal and other countries, raises the question of the ways in which Gen Z protests differ from traditional ones and how exactly their features affect both participation in them and political outcomes. It is necessary to study the unique aspects of the interaction between Gen Z and traditional political actors in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of such interaction.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the ways in which Gen Z participates in protests, including decentralized and leaderless types of participation.
2. To identify the role of social media in such movements.
3. To analyze the relationship between online and offline protest activities and assess their political impact.
4. To compare the cases of Gen Z protests in Nepal in 2025 and in India in 2026^[4, 16] in order to identify the ways in which these movements differ from traditional ones.

Literature Review

1. Collective Action and Political Participation

The classical literature on collective action and political participation provides ample evidence of the challenges of mobilization and the ways to overcome them. According to Olson (1965)^[11], individuals are less likely to engage in collective action when they believe they can benefit from it without personally investing in it. Later, theories of political participation and mobilization built upon this foundation, emphasising the role of political opportunities, mobilization resources, and collective identity (McAdam, 1982). In particular, McAdam (1982) demonstrated that social movements are initiated and sustained when movement-specific political opportunities intersect with resources and mobilization strategies.

The theories that have been reviewed are useful for understanding the nature of Gen Z protests, but they do not take into account the changes that have taken place due to the emergence and popularity of social media. In particular, these theories do not consider the ways in which new technologies have reduced the barriers to participation in social movements.

2. Networked Social Movements

According to Castells (2012)^[6], contemporary social movements are networked, which means that they have communication networks that enable horizontal coordination. In other words, networked social movements are characterized by the use of digital resources to communicate and coordinate collective action. Movements of this type may have a greater impact because they have access to a wide range of communication channels, which makes it easier to mobilize people. In addition, networks make it possible to build a collective identity and connect local struggles to a global one.

This theory is relevant to the study of Gen Z protests because many of them have demonstrated features of networked social movements, including decentralization and the use of digital resources. In particular, the use of social media by Gen Z protesters is noteworthy, as it allows them

to communicate and coordinate actions without traditional leadership. In turn, this has led to the emergence of a new type of collective identity among young people. In addition, this theory is useful for examining the ways in which Gen Z protests differ from traditional ones.

Bennett and Segerberg (2012)^[5] developed the concept of “connective action,” which refers to collective action that is coordinated through social media. According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012)^[5], connective action is different from traditional forms of mobilization in that it is more personalized and does not always rely on collective identity.

3. Social Media and Political Mobilization

Social media is one of the key factors that distinguish Gen Z protests from traditional ones, and therefore it is important to study this phenomenon in detail. In particular, it is necessary to consider the ways in which this tool helps young people to mobilize, communicate, and coordinate actions. Tufekci (2017)^[27] draws attention to the fact that social media gives social movements a megaphone, which means that it helps them to grow exponentially. However, at the same time, she notes that movements that operate primarily on social media may lack the organizational infrastructure necessary for sustaining long-term political change.

The use of social media by Gen Z protesters is significant because it allows them to share information and mobilize other people. In particular, Instagram, TikTok, X, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Telegram are used by young people to express their views and point of view. It is important to note that social media provides an opportunity for self-expression, which can be transformative if a person’s message resonates with others.

4. Youth, Digital Activism and Political Participation

The existing literature on youth political participation demonstrates that young people are increasingly participating in politics in non-traditional ways, which means that it is necessary to update traditional concepts. In particular, studies have shown that young people are more likely to participate in politics online than in traditional ways, such as voting or attending rallies. In addition, traditional measures of political participation, such as party membership or voting, may not be relevant to young people because they may participate in politics in ways that are different from traditional ones.

The literature review shows that young people may participate in politics through social media, which makes their participation invisible to conventional measures. Therefore, it is important to consider not only traditional forms of political participation but also new ones, such as sharing political content online, commenting on it, participating in online campaigns, and digitally mobilizing others. In addition, digital participation can be a step towards traditional participation, for example, when young people move from social media to street protests.

5. Memes, Satire and Political Communication

Memes, satire, and popular culture are important tools of communication for Gen Z, and therefore it is important to consider them when studying their protests. Milner (2016)^[10] draws attention to the fact that Internet culture has given rise to a new form of participatory political expression, which is manifested in memes. In particular, memes make it

possible to build a community around a particular idea, which makes them a powerful tool for protest. This is especially relevant to the study of Gen Z protests, as young people use memes to express their views and position.

6. Global Gen-Z Protests

The literature review demonstrates that the theories of political participation and mobilization can be used to understand the characteristics of Gen Z protests. In particular, the networked social movements theory helps to explain how Gen Z protesters use social media to mobilize others and coordinate actions. At the same time, this theory does not fully cover the specifics of Gen Z protests, in particular their differences from traditional ones. In addition, the reviewed literature shows that young people participate in politics in non-traditional ways, such as through social media. This is especially important in the context of the study of Gen Z protests, which are characterized by the use of new technologies and therefore differ significantly from traditional types of protest.

The 2025^[31] Gen-Z protests in Nepal are an example of how social media can be used to mobilize people and achieve political change. Although the government's decision to impose a social media ban was the immediate trigger for the protests, they also reflected widespread dissatisfaction with corruption, privileges, and mismanagement. The transition from online protests to street protests demonstrates the power of social media in mobilizing people, as well as the limitations of banning it. In addition, the case of Nepal shows that such movements can have a significant political impact, for example, the resignation of the Prime Minister.

The literature review also shows that Gen Z protests are not unique to Nepal but can be observed around the world, for example, in Kenya, Indonesia, and Serbia. In these countries, young people have used social media to express their views and protest against government policies. This allows us to talk about the global nature of the phenomenon under study.

7. The Indian Context

India is a great country for studying the phenomenon of Gen Z protests because it has a large young population and is known for its vibrant social media culture. The case of the 2026 Indian youth protests provides ample material for examining the ways in which young people participate in politics and the political impact of such participation. In particular, the Indian youth movement known as the Cockroach Janta Party is noteworthy in this regard, as it was a response to the leakage of exam papers and questions of accountability and management.

The case of India is important for further research because it will allow not only to explore the ways in which young people participate in politics but also to consider this participation in a local context. In other words, the study of the Indian case will allow to answer the question of whether the features of Gen Z protests described in other countries are also observed in India.

Root Causes and Key Concerns Driving Gen Z and Youth-Led Political and Social Protests

Gen-Z protests across the globe demonstrate a growing feeling of economic insecurity, unemployment, corruption, inequality, poor public services, political exclusion and dissatisfaction with government accountability. The triggers

are different in each country, but the underlying grievances often reflect a common generational concern: that current political and economic systems are not delivering secure and meaningful futures for young people. Recent studies of the global Gen-Z protest wave suggest economic precarity, exclusion from political power and corruption are major drivers of youth mobilisation. The 2025^[31] **Nepal protests** provide a prominent example. The government's restriction of social-media platforms became the immediate trigger, but young protesters were also expressing deeper anger over corruption, political privileges, unemployment and weak governance. The protests ultimately produced major political consequences, including the resignation of Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli.

Likewise, the youth-led protests in Kenya were motivated by opposition to proposed tax increases and more general dissatisfaction with economic conditions and governance. In Indonesia, young protesters expressed their rage over political favouritism and economic inequality, while in Serbia, youth activism was ignited by fears of government accountability and a deadly infrastructure disaster. These examples demonstrate that Gen-Z demonstrations rarely occur due to a single issue; instead, a recent event can be a "catalyst" for accumulated socioeconomic and political grievances. The trend continued in Madagascar and Morocco, with youth protesting poor public services, economic hardships and government policies. In Morocco, concerns about expenditure on major sporting events clashed with calls for better health and education, and in Madagascar there was youth activism over failures of basic services.

The Indian example in 2026^[1] is a case in point. The youth protests over leaking of examination papers were an expression not only of the concerns about integrity of the examination but also of deep-seated concerns about access to education, job opportunities and accountability. The campaign eventually resulted in the resignation of the Education Minister and reforms in examinations.

Consequently, the causes of Gen-Z protests can be viewed as a mix of short-term provocations and long-standing systemic discontent. Across the globe, young people are calling for political reform, but also for fairness, accountability, economic opportunity, improved public services and a bigger say in decisions that shape their future.

Role and Impact of Social Media in Gen Z-Led Political and Social Protests

Social media has become a major tool for political mobilisation for Generation Z. Gen-Z movements are not organised through political organisations, student groups or existing leadership structures. Instead, they leverage digital media to articulate grievances, forge collective identities, recruit, organise and plan, and disseminate political messages. Bennett and Segerberg (2012)^[5] explain this shift in terms of connective action, where individual digital communication allows individuals to engage in collective political action without formal organizational membership.

Three interrelated roles can help us understand the role of social media: initiation, organization, and amplification. At first, platforms like Instagram, TikTok, X, WhatsApp, Telegram and YouTube offer a space for youth to express their grievances and bring personal complaints into public discourse. A specific event, then, when it receives rapid digital attention, can thus be transformed into a wider

political issue. Secondly, digital communities enhance coordination by enabling demonstrators to disseminate information about protests, places, slogans, safety procedures, and campaign tactics. Tufekci (2017) ^[27] suggests that networked technologies can considerably speed up and scale up movement mobilisation.

A salient example of this phenomenon is the 2025^[31] Nepal Gen-Z demonstrations. The government's decision to shut down the main social media sites triggered a rapid mobilisation of the youth, while digital communication made it possible to link wider discontent about corruption, political favouritism, and governance. The campaign later moved from online mobilisation to large-scale street demonstrations, demonstrating how online mobilisation can translate into offline mass mobilisation.

Memes, hashtags and short videos have added a new dimension to political demonstrations. Memes use humour, irony, and shared cultural references to craft nuanced political commentary. Hashtags allow for searchable stories and connect people across locations. Milner (2016) ^[10] states that internet memes are mechanisms for participatory public discourse, in which everyday users can engage in and change political dialogue.

Similar trends can be observed in Kenya, Indonesia, Serbia, Morocco, and Madagascar, where young people have turned to social media to voice their concerns, organise protests and gain both domestic and international sympathy for their cause. In all these cases, social media has facilitated a youth-driven, often digitally savvy political discourse that has enabled these movements to gain traction and support. The 2026 Indian youth protests are no different in this regard, serving as another illustration of how social media can be leveraged to amplify frustrations about exams and politics into a full-blown political movement.

Social media is not always an easy tool to use, however, and digital movements can be plagued by fake news, misinformation, clicktivism, and other pitfalls that weaken their impact on the political process. Moreover, while social media allows for unprecedented levels of organisation and outreach, it can also lead to fragmentation and discord among protesters, especially when competing groups with different agendas arise. As such, while social media is clearly not a guarantee for success, it nonetheless plays a vital role in empowering citizens by linking their concerns to political action.

Digital Activism, Offline Collectivism and Outcomes

The relationship between digital activism and offline collective action is the subject of contemporary research into Gen-Z protests. With social media, people can voice concerns, find like-minded partners, organise and communicate their demands effectively. At the same time, the political effectiveness of such activism is manifested precisely in the shift from online activity to conventional tools – rallies, marches, sit-ins, and other means of direct action, with Bennett & Segerberg (2012) ^[5] noting the importance of connective action via social media in this process.

The 2025^[31] Nepal Gen-Z protests are an example of this principle, with social media activism being one element of a multi-step process. The government's banning of social media apps was the immediate catalyst for protests, while their underlying reason was the authorities' disregard for the youth. Online campaigns and marches eventually led to

Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli's resignation. The government lifted the social media ban. Another illustration is the 2023^[13] Kenya youth protests, where social media allowed Kenyan youths to rally around the common goal of defeating the finance bill and its crippling taxes. Organisers used TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) to influence public opinion and mobilize hundreds of thousands of people onto the streets, applying considerable pressure on President William Ruto.

The combination of social media and conventional protests was also instrumental in Serbia, where students' initial online campaigns triggered nationwide demonstrations after the Novi Sad railway accident. Other Gen-Z protests that successfully applied hybrid activism include the 2026^[4] Indian youth movement #CockroachJantaParty. Starting as online campaigns about exam paper leaks, they took to the streets, forcing the Education Minister's resignation. Later, the movement's activists identified other issues, primarily those affecting young people, and demanded action from the government.

An analysis of the outcomes of the Gen-Z protests listed above allows for distinguishing three types: immediate, political, and administrative. The first category includes outcomes achieved directly through social media, such as hashtags going viral or online petitions garnering millions of signatures. Political outcomes are demonstrated by Nepal's PM and India's Education Minister resigning due to youth protests. Finally, administrative outcomes are represented by policies reviewed or amended by the authorities in response to public demands, including improved oversight of examination systems in India. It is noteworthy that not all social media protests impact real-life events. The crucial factor in hybrid activism is the presence of offline action, which can vary significantly from movement to movement. Such action consolidates the activists' views, focuses them on specific goals, and transforms them into concrete demands.

Social media fuels collective action, which, in turn, influences political and administrative outcomes. As such, social media protests shape and drive real-life political outcomes. In essence, Gen-Z movements are distinguished by their reliance on digital tools as a mobilisation mechanism and collective action as a driver of political and administrative change.

Comparative Analysis of Contemporary Gen-Z Protests

A cross-country study of protests occurring in different jurisdictions can highlight their commonalities and peculiarities. The comparison of the 2025 Nepal Gen-Z protests and the 2026^[4, 31] Indian youth movement #CockroachJantaParty shows the similarities and differences in the goals, methods, organisational capacity, and outcomes of these movements.

The ban on social media apps was the immediate trigger for the 2025^[31] Nepalese protests. The reason for the government's action was the growing popularity of pro-democracy slogans voiced by the country's youth. The underlying cause of the unrest was the public's frustration with the government's incompetence and corruption. Youth-driven online campaigns were a significant force in mobilising Nepalese society. Their influence grew exponentially when the government banned social media, thus pushing the dissenters into employing alternative platforms. The protests saw hundreds of thousands of people

taking to the streets demanding Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli's resignation, which he had to concede under the growing pressure.

The 2026 Indian youth protests had a similar trigger – the government's decision to annul exams for hundreds of thousands of students due to the alleged security breach. However, the protests' momentum came from the public's concerns about social injustice, unemployment, and corruption. Youth activists utilised hybrid activism, which resonated with the public, resulting in millions taking to the streets. The movement's impact was also manifested in Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation and the government's improved oversight of the examination process. Thus, the Indian protests employed more traditional methods and achieved several political and administrative outcomes.

The comparison of the two movements shows that their commonality was youths using social media to voice their concerns and hold the government accountable. The differences, however, were significant, with the Indian youths developing a hybrid approach to protests while their Nepalese counterparts employed the online-offline strategy. The 2026 Indian movement also differed from the Nepalese protests in 2025^[31] in that it had a formal name (#CockroachJantaParty), used traditional protest methods (demonstrations and strikes), and amassed considerable political influence.

Comparative Analysis

Dimension	Nepal, 2025 ^[16]	India, 2026 ^[1]
Immediate trigger	Social-media ban	Examination-paper leaks
Underlying concerns	Corruption, unemployment, inequality, governance	Education, employment, examination integrity, accountability
Major participants	Predominantly young people/Gen Z	Students and wider youth
Digital strategy	Alternative platforms and online networks	Social media, viral content and unconventional branding
Organisation	Decentralised and spontaneous	Decentralised youth mobilisation
Offline action	Large street demonstrations	Demonstrations, sit-ins and attempted march toward Parliament
Political outcome	PM Oli resigned	Education Minister resigned
Administrative outcome	Political transition and demands for governance reform	Stronger action against exam leaks and examination-system review
Major challenge	Violence, loss of life and infrastructure damage	Maintaining movement beyond the immediate education issue

The comparison indicates that emerging Gen-Z methodology is comprised of five interrelated phases: grievance formation → digital mobilisation → rapid network growth → offline collective action → political/administrative pressure. In both cases, social media is revealed to be more than an informational resource – it

serves as mobilisation infrastructure. Meanwhile, the comparison also underscores existing opportunities/challenges associated with Gen-Z political participation. In particular, networked mobilisation renders mass protest possible without intermediaries or institutionalised structures, enabling youth to generate a direct public voice. Conversely, decentralised organisation tends to undermine negotiation, leadership, and sustainability. Moreover, Nepal illustrates the potential costs of youthful unrest; the government estimates losses resulting from September violence at more than 586 million USD.

Overall, the comparison suggests that Gen-Z protest should not be considered as novel only in its form – that is, as a social media-enabled variation of traditional street protests. Rather, it should be conceptualised as part of a broader transformation in political participation – wherein young people increasingly utilise digital connectivity to turn grievances into demands and, ultimately, into political and administrative change.

Recommendations for Government: How to Channel Gen-Z Dissatisfaction into Political Participation

1. Institutionalise Youth Participation

Governments should consider establishing Youth Policy Councils, Youth Parliaments, and Youth Advisory Committees at national, state, and local levels. These youth councils should actively promote youth perspectives in policymaking, beyond symbolic tokenism. In particular, the UN highlights the importance of youth involvement in agenda-setting, decision-making, implementation, and review.

2. Create Government-Youth Digital Dialogue Platform

Rather than focusing narrowly on restricting or regulating social media use, governments could capitalise on youth interest in the technology by creating a digital platform for youth engagement. The tool could enable youth to air grievances, vote on and propose priority areas for action, seek and share solutions, collaborate, and hold government officials accountable. In addition, the tool would provide access to reliable information. UN DESA recommends similar measures to promote youth participation in policymaking and service delivery.

3. Address the Root Causes, Not Merely the Protests

Protests are often symptomatic of deeper issues. As such, it is critical for governments to prioritise youth employment, examination integrity, and quality education, among other social determinants of protest. The UN Youth Strategy identifies unemployment, poverty, lack of access to quality education, and exclusion from decision-making as key drivers of youth unrest.

4. Leverage Youth Engagement through Employment, Innovation, and Citizenship Missions

Youth involvement in entrepreneurship, sports, technology, social and environmental causes, as well as youth employment initiatives, should be promoted. Governments can scale existing programs, such as apprenticeships and youth entrepreneurship schemes, to channel youthful energy and dissatisfaction into innovation, skills development, and employment.

5. Promote Civic and Digital Literacy

School curricula should include constitutional and civic education, as well as digital literacy and media literacy. This will enable Gen Z to develop the competencies to engage effectively with government and contribute to policymaking, rather than simply being passive consumers of information.

6. Develop a “Policy to Action” Mechanism

A particularly promising approach highlighted by the UN Youth Compass is the establishment of a policy pipeline, whereby youth grievances are discussed, debated, voted on, and prioritised, and youth representatives are engaged in co-developing policy proposals. Once government approval is secured, the initiatives can be piloted and scaled up with youth participation.

7. Respond to Peaceful Protests through Dialogue, and Criminal Protests through Law Enforcement

Authorities should make a clear distinction between non-violent and violent protests and respond accordingly. Youthful dissent should always be met with an invitation to negotiations, while violence, vandalism, and disinformation should be punished. This is especially important given the potential for mistrust following crackdowns on peaceful protests.

8. Establish Rapid Response Mechanisms

When a youth grievance goes viral, governments should respond promptly and transparently. This requires establishing rapid response units that proactively engage youth representatives in addressing the issues.

9. Promote Youth Volunteering and Participation in Governance and Social Audits

Youth can play a greater role in social auditing, volunteering, and governance, including in natural resource management, local administration, and community development.

10. Measure Youth Contributions to Policy Change and Public Services

The government should report verifiable youth contributions to policy dialogues, as well as the number of youth who engaged with it and whose demands were actualised. This would help satisfy the youth’s desire for recognition, as well as increase their sense of ownership. According to the Youth2030 review, being listened to is frequently insufficient for youth; they also want to be empowered. As a result, a Youth Participation Progress Report should be published annually, highlighting achievements and outcomes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, governments should work to institutionalise the participation of Gen Z in society. The response to the emergence of Gen-Z methodology should not be repression but inclusion via youth parliaments, councils, and digital platforms. The transition should be from the model of grievance → social media → street protest to the model of grievance → digital consultation → participation → co-creation → implementation. This will enable Gen Z to move from protest to partnership, enabling them to shape the government’s policies and public services. The analysis

suggests that the government must transform the Gen-Z methodology into a system wherein youths’ voices influence policy changes, organisational reforms, and administrative improvements. In this way, the government will be able to utilise the youths’ energy in promoting stability, development, and social change.

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