

Opinion – The Power and Peril of the Youth Bulge: Nepal’s Gen Z Protests

Written by Alok Shubham

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ALOK SHUBHAM, SEP 21 2025

Nepal, the Himalayan nation is once again in the limelight at the global stage due to the recent massive unrest and violent protests that started on 8 September. The intensity of protest has surprised not only the Nepalese ruling dispensation but also the international observers. The prima facie reason behind the call for protest was of the recent government ban on social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram etc. due to the regular defiance of the compliance code by the tech giants. September 3rd was the deadline for the companies to act upon according to the guidelines of the Supreme Court of Nepal and subsequently, no response from the other side pushed the government for total ban that fuelled up the growing mounting anger among the youths.

As scheduled, the protest erupted all around Kathmandu on 8th September that amounted to 19 casualties during police assault. This brutal effort of suppression by the government ignited the violent protest in many parts of Nepal that led to the mob attack on parliament, supreme court and other govt offices. In a short span of just two days, the government under KP Sharma Oli was compelled to step down. This series of incidents highlights the deeply ingrained discontent among Nepal’s youth that has been fuelled by widespread corruption, nepotism, unemployment, and government dysfunction.

The Youth Bulge phenomenon is a new discourse for social change or movements. All around globe, it can be seen through exemplary historical events. Theoretically, the idea of ‘Youth Bulge’ gained its prominence from the works of scholars such as Gunnar Heinsohn, Gary Fuller, and, Jack A. Goldstone holds that a high proportion of young people (often defined as those aged 15–29) can either propel economic growth or, under conditions of unemployment and perceived disenfranchisement, contribute to social upheaval and violence. Young populations face intense competition for limited jobs and resources, creating frustration, diminishing self-esteem, and occasionally fuelling participation in protests or movements. Countries with significant youth bulges have historically shown a higher propensity for civil unrest, with one major study indicating that between 1970 and 1999, 80% of civil conflicts occurred in nations where over 60% of the population was under thirty.

The youth bulge theory posits that when a country has a disproportionately large youth population relative to other age groups, it may experience heightened social and political unrest, particularly when economic opportunities and avenues for political engagement are limited. The recent massive Gen Z protest in Nepal is a striking embodiment of this theory, wherein grievances about corruption, restricted opportunities, and government censorship have catalysed large-scale youth mobilization.

According to 2021 census of Nepal, about 56% of its population was under 30, with 12.4 million categorized as young people (defined locally as ages 16–40) and over 40% of the population falling into this group. Nearly one quarter of Nepal’s total population is composed of adolescents (ages 10–19), and about one fifth is youth (ages 15–24). The digital nativity of this cohort substantially increases their ability to mobilize quickly and amplify grievances using social media and other digital tools. The most authentic and recent government data indicate that Nepal’s unemployment rate was 12.6% in 2022/23, as reported by the National Statistics Office in the Fourth Nepal

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Living Standards Survey. This survey highlights that youth unemployment is especially high, with a rate of 22.7% among ages 15–24 in the same period. Forecasts and international sources (World Bank, Trading Economics) place the 2024 rate at about 10.7%, with projections for 2025 ranging between 10% and 12%. Nepal’s persistently high unemployment—especially for youth—is central to recent unrest and is a key challenge for policy moving forward.

Several historical movements demonstrate that a youth bulge—a high proportion of young people—has influenced mass protests and social unrest. These examples show how demographic pressure, combined with limited economic and social avenues, can contribute to widespread mobilization.

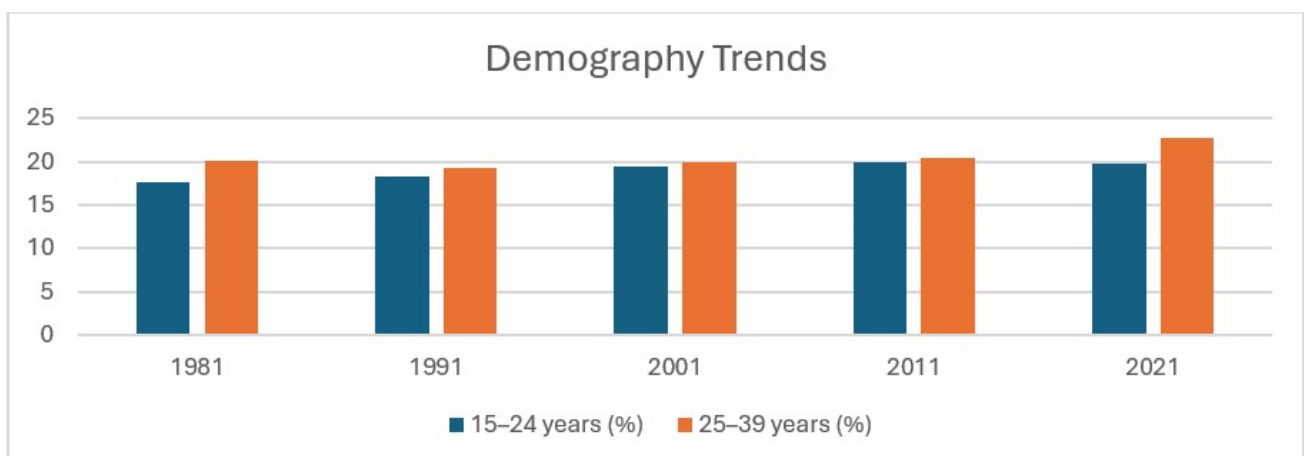
North African and Middle Eastern countries including Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen all witnessed violent upheavals during the Arab Spring, which were mostly led by young people. Due to significant unemployment and a lack of opportunities, more than half of the people in these nations were under 25 at the time, which fuelled the uprisings that overthrew established governments. Similar dynamics were seen in Tunisia and Syria, where youth organized and sustained the Tahrir Square rallies in Egypt in a manner akin to that of a catalyst.

Anger over unemployment, corruption, and high living expenses propelled youth-led protests throughout Sub-Saharan Africa in 2024, including in Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Uganda, and Mozambique. Another notable example from the subcontinent is the nationwide violent riots by students in Bangladesh that overthrew the Hasina Regime in August 2024.

These episodes confirm that simple population pressure is not by itself decisive; unrest emerges when a youth bulge coincides with economic strain, unemployment, and lack of political inclusion. The youth bulge acts as a catalyst, greatly increasing the odds of protest when other stressors are present. Looking forward, Nepal faces both a warning and an invitation. If policymakers grasp the generational urgency and channel this energy into reforms—creating jobs, eradicating corruption, and renewing faith in democratic institutions—the youth bulge could become the country’s greatest asset. If not, the Himalayan nation may serve as only the latest, not the last, reminder that to ignore youth is to gamble with a nation’s future.

Nepal’s Gen Z revolution may have played out in days, but its lessons—and its aftershocks—will be felt across continents and generations.

Notes



Source: UNFPA

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