

From Nepal to Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, a crisis of democracy that has lessons for India

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17.09.2025

<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/nepal-sri-lanka-bangladesh-democracy-uprising-gen-z-10255667/>

The massive street protests in Sri Lanka (2022), Bangladesh (2024) and Nepal (2025) toppled three legitimately elected governments primarily because the demos, common people in Greek, were convinced that the “democratic” structure which was meant to reflect their will did not do so. Surprisingly, Plato was critical of Athenian democracy and considered it to be chaotic, prone to mob rule, which elevates unqualified leaders through oratory, not virtue, and risks tyranny. Aristotle saw democracy as a flawed system often swayed by emotion or demagogues, leading to mob rule.

Despite these forebodings, most nations of the world still fought colonial or hegemonic regimes relentlessly to institute democratic governance. For the present, our concern is more limited: Why did the three functional democracies collapse before the frenzied anger of the young?

The eight-month Sri Lankan aragalaya (struggle) from March to November '22, was directed against President Gotabaya and members of the Rajapaksa family for corruption and mismanagement of the economy. In July '22, protesters occupied the President's palace (forcing him to flee the country) and then ransacked and torched the Prime Minister's private mansion as well. Sri Lankans were also fed up with the all established political parties. For eight tense months, the Lankan aragalaya of restless demos led by the youth made democracy hit the “pause” button, because of the disastrous mismatch between those who the people voted for and who they wanted. This anachronism was only sorted out in the next election in 2024, when Lankans elected, with eyes wide open, a youthful left revolutionary, Anura Kumara Dissanayake as President.

The next popular outburst was in Bangladesh in mid 2024. The angst building up against Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was clear for almost a decade, and not only was she arrogantly rigging elections (the January 2024 one was the fourth in a row), but her autocracy and corruption had both crossed several red lines and records. The July Uprising was led by students and youth (with older age groups following) and lasted 21 days — from July 16, when disaffected millions joined nationwide protests against Hasina and the killing of an unarmed student protester, Abu Sayed. The July Uprising was violent and Hasina's forces reportedly killed somewhere between 834 and 1,581 people, including children, before capitulating on August 5 — when she fled to India. Waves of angry citizens swept all over parliament house, the secretariat and ransacked the PM's residence. The Sri Lankan agitation was more prolonged but less terrible — as only 10 protesters died and some 250 were injured — but in both countries, mobs ensured that “democratically elected” corrupt rulers had to flee. A controversial interim government under Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus — as “chief adviser”, not PM — is mandated to suggest reforms and conduct early elections.

Nepal is the third in the series, with protest targeted at the corruption of the ruling elite (irrespective of parties), driven by massive youth unemployment and the glaring disparity between the lives of the children of the uber-rich political-crony capitalist class (nepo-kids) and the struggling young

population. Generation Z (born between late 1990s and early 2010s) comprises 12 million or 40 per cent of Nepal's 30 million people. This generation of digital natives relies on digital platforms to keep in touch with each other in the hilly country and with millions of migrant relatives elsewhere. They burst out in fury when PM KP Sharma Oli banned their lifeline, the extremely popular big-tech social media platforms, for refusing to comply with regulations. It is then that Sudan Gurung, the 36-year-old founder of Hami Nepal (We are Nepal) and others moved to a messaging and gaming app, ironically called Discord, and to Instagram using VPNs to mobilise gargantuan public demonstrations — not only against the incumbent regime but all previous regimes. As the youth were convinced that parliamentary elections and democracy had not delivered, they decided digitally (on Discord) to “elect” Sushila Karki, former chief justice of Nepal to take over as PM.

It is clear that electoral democracy is not reflecting the real choice of the people in many parts of South Asia. Pakistan's last popularly elected leader languishes in jail indefinitely and in India, the chief opposition parties have openly and collectively expressed “no confidence” in the election commission. It is digging up more and more “evidence” of “vote theft”.

In India, unemployment is a stark reality and glossy official statistics notwithstanding, the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy report of July 2025 estimates that youth unemployment (ages 20-24) is soaring at 35.9 per cent with exploitative underemployment being deadlier. These cannot be wished away, as regimes all around us have discovered — with catastrophic results.

In India, popular disaffection appears to be due to the pervasive corruption of all — yes all — political parties. What distinguishes one from the other are the scale, powers and opportunity. Without huge resources garnered from industry, trade and local goons (obviously on a quid pro quo basis), no party can compete in elections in the post-2014 period — when the bar was suddenly raised sky high. Nor can they hold on to their cadres and ever-demanding support base, throughout the year.

But our central despair is with something more cancerous but less visible. Not a single party practices inner-party democracy and they are, in effect, tightly controlled private limited companies. The political class has had a field day from the Indira Gandhi era and has encroached upon our entire democratic and discursive space — so the phenomenon remains unchecked. It was aided by an obliging bureaucracy for crumbs of office and by a timid, vacillating judiciary, often with some collaborators, whose records ranged from grey to pitch black.

There are warning signals from our neighbours, but one wonders how a political system that does not nurture democracy within its primary constituents can really establish democracy in public life.