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FROM SRI LANKA TO BANGLADESH AND NEPAL: DEMOCRATIC CRISIS AND THE RISE OF POPULAR MOVEMENTS

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Abstract

In recent years, a global decline in democratic governance has become increasingly evident, with the expansion of authoritarian rule particularly visible in Asian politics¹. In South Asia, the weakening of democratic frameworks is rooted in historical, political, and socio-economic factors. Common symptoms of democratic decay in the region include the erosion of democratic institutions, suppression of political opposition, authoritarian governance, declining electoral credibility, restrictions on press freedom, and violations of civil liberties². These problems manifest to varying degrees across South Asian states.

Recent developments in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal illustrate different dimensions of democratic crisis. Sri Lanka experienced a severe economic collapse, Bangladesh drifted toward electoral authoritarianism, and Nepal suffered from institutional fragility and frequent changes of government³. All three countries have recently witnessed transformative popular uprisings, making them critical case studies for understanding the democratic future of the region.

This article argues that contemporary democratic crises are primarily driven by elite power capture, dynastic politics, and the economic failures that result from them. While recent popular movements—largely led by Generation Z and organized through digital networks—have successfully shaken entrenched political systems, their decentralized nature and the deeply embedded power of traditional elites pose serious risks to achieving sustainable institutional



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	democratic gains. Notably, the drivers of instability across these countries are strikingly similar. Widespread public dissatisfaction arising from corruption and failures of governance has bound these movements together, giving rise to a “South Asian Spring” that reflects deep frustration with established leadership ⁴ .
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1. DEEP ROOTS OF POLITICAL DECAY: STRUCTURAL CAUSES OF DISCONTENT

A. Elite Power Capture, Dynastic Politics, and Patronage Systems

Since independence, most South Asian countries have been governed by the same traditional elite classes⁵. This prolonged elite dominance has hollowed out democratic institutions from within. In Sri Lanka, although power once alternated between the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the 2000s marked the emergence of a 15-year period of rule by Mahinda Rajapaksa and his family⁶. Similarly, in Bangladesh, the decades-long rivalry and dominance of Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia—often referred to as the “batling begums”—reflect deeply entrenched patronage politics⁷.

Economic inequality, pervasive corruption, and weak governance have enabled political leaders to centralize power⁸. To entrench their authority, they frequently bypass systems of checks and balances⁹. In Bangladesh, the quota system faced intense criticism because it functioned as a mechanism of political patronage and was used to reinforce Sheikh Hasina’s increasingly authoritarian rule¹⁰.

Nepal, by contrast, exemplifies chronic political instability. Between 2008 and 2025, the country experienced more than a dozen changes of government. Despite being led largely by leftist parties, successive governments failed to ensure sustained development or democratic progress¹¹. To ordinary citizens, communist leaders appeared more focused on internal power struggles than on governance¹².

B. Economic Fragility and the Failure of Governance

Endemic corruption, nepotism, and extreme wealth inequality are long-standing grievances that serve as the primary fuel for mass protests across the region¹³. When economic growth slows or inequality persists, governments lose their capacity to manage public discontent¹⁴.

Sri Lanka’s sovereign debt crisis was fundamentally the result of economic mismanagement. Policies characterized by high imports and weak exports depleted foreign exchange reserves. Global shocks—including the COVID-19 pandemic and rising food and energy prices following the war in Ukraine—accelerated the crisis. By 2021, Sri Lanka’s external debt had reached 101 percent of GDP. The direct consequences included hyperinflation, daily power cuts, and severe shortages of essential goods, giving rise to the *Aragalaya* movement¹⁵.

C. Geopolitical Pressures and Internal Fragmentation

A key factor in Nepal’s democratic fragility is its geopolitical location and the penetration of external influence into domestic politics. Nepal’s internal stability is deeply intertwined with the geopolitical rivalry between India and China¹⁶. Rather than developing a coherent national strategy, Nepal’s



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political leadership often instrumentalists foreign policy to maintain power, leaving the country vulnerable to external manipulation¹⁷.

Following the fall of Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli, China responded cautiously, with state media portraying Nepal's instability as a product of structural weakness and foreign interference¹⁸. China positioned itself as a stabilizing force—often implicitly countering Indian influence. This analysis demonstrates how internal divisions among Nepal's political parties are intensified by regional power competition, turning domestic politics into a complex geopolitical arena¹⁹.

D. Democratic Fatigue and the Appeal of Monarchy

Since the abolition of the monarchy in 2008, Nepal's democratic system has failed to deliver stable governance, largely due to frequent government changes and entrenched corruption²⁰. This failure has produced a sense of “democratic fatigue” among citizens. One alarming symptom is the growing public support for restoring the monarchy²¹. Recent surveys indicate that nearly half of Nepal's population favors replacing secularism with a Hindu state²². This monarchist sentiment is not merely ideological; it represents a reactive response to democratic failure. When democratic institutions fail to provide stability, good governance, and economic opportunity, people may seek refuge in older even authoritarian forms of rule perceived as more orderly²³.

2. CASE STUDY ANALYSIS: TRIGGERS, DYNAMICS, AND IMMEDIATE OUTCOMES

A. Sri Lanka: *Aragalaya* (Struggle) and Economic Collapse (2022)

Sri Lanka's *Aragalaya* movement was a manifestation of public anger over economic mismanagement. Severe shortages of fuel, gas, and essential goods, combined with soaring inflation and daily power outages, drove citizens to the streets. The movement was largely spontaneous and leaderless but gained momentum through trade unions, student federations, and urban middle-class professionals²³. Protesters demanded accountability for corruption and nepotism within the Rajapaksa family²⁴.

Through direct action, the movement spread nationwide and culminated in the occupation of the Presidential House in Colombo. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa fled the country, and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe announced his resignation²⁵. In response, authorities declared a state of emergency, empowered the military to arrest civilians, imposed curfews, and restricted social media. Peaceful protesters faced systematic human rights violations, including the use of live ammunition, tear gas, and water cannons.

Following the protests, the 21st Constitutional Amendment was passed, restoring the Constitutional Council responsible for appointing members to key state institutions such as the Election Commission²⁶. However, it failed to fully curtail presidential power, including the authority to dissolve parliament after two and a half years²⁷.

Sri Lanka's economic recovery has been conditioned on IMF-mandated austerity measures, including VAT increases and cuts to social welfare spending. These policies disproportionately burden the poor and working class, making renewed social unrest likely²⁸. Post-*Aragalaya*



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repression—including crackdowns on activists and proposed restrictive NGO and online safety laws—can be understood as efforts to manage the instability produced by austerity. In highly unequal societies, internationally imposed stabilization often strengthens state repression, undermining democratic gains achieved through mass mobilization²⁹.

B. Bangladesh: The Non-Cooperation Movement and Youth-Led Liberation (2024)

Bangladesh's crisis stems from long-standing electoral authoritarianism. Of the eleven general elections held since independence in 1971, only four are widely considered free and fair³⁰. Amid widespread concerns about electoral credibility under the Awami League, the opposition BNP boycotted both the 2014 and 2024 elections, demanding a non-partisan caretaker government.

The movement began as a protest against the reinstatement of quotas in government jobs for descendants of freedom fighters³¹. It quickly expanded beyond quota reform into demands for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's resignation and accountability for state violence, evolving into a nationwide uprising known as the "Non-Cooperation Movement."

The Awami League government systematically used vague laws such as the Digital Security Act (DSA) and its successor, the Cyber Security Act (CSA), to suppress dissent, criminalizing criticism under charges such as "anti-Liberation War propaganda" or "defamation"³². Extreme violence by law enforcement resulting in hundreds of deaths accelerated the final phase of the uprising³³. The July 2024 revolution culminated in Sheikh Hasina's resignation and departure from the country. Crucially, the military adopted a restrained posture, refraining from seizing power and instead facilitating the formation of a caretaker government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus³⁴.

Historically, Bangladesh's military has played a dominant political role during periods of instability³⁵. In 2024, however, it acted as a neutral facilitator rather than a power-seizing actor. This restraint reflected the depth of public anger against the Awami League and the government's lack of international legitimacy, which made direct military rule politically untenable.

C. Nepal: Republican Fragmentation and the Monarchist Reaction

Nepal's political system remains plagued by instability. Frequent government changes and failure to address economic inequality have deepened public frustration. Nepal's Gen Z activists have used social media to demand transparency and accountability, contributing to the resignation of Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli³⁶. At the same time, democratic failure has fueled movements advocating the restoration of the monarchy and a Hindu state³⁷. Analysts argue that these movements are largely driven by old elites seeking to exploit popular frustration. While young people reject traditional parties, their preferred alternatives are new independent figures—such as Kathmandu Mayor Balen Shah—rather than discredited institutions like the monarchy³⁸.

Nepal's internal instability constitutes a structural vulnerability that invites foreign influence³⁹. When leaders like Oli tilt toward China, India perceives security risks. This rivalry intensifies internal divisions, as external powers may exploit factionalism within Nepal's political class⁴⁰.



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Consequently, Nepal's democratic crisis is magnified by its geography, making internal consensus increasingly elusive.

3. COMPARATIVE SYNTHESIS: NEW FORMS OF POPULAR POWER IN SOUTH ASIA

A. The Gen-Z Factor and Digital Activism

Recent movements in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal have been increasingly led by Gen Z digital natives who use online platforms to bypass state censorship and traditional media control, effectively translating “online outrage into street mobilization”⁴¹. These movements employ flexible and rapid tactics such as flash mobs, viral hashtags, and decentralized coordination, making repression more difficult⁴². Their success also lies in their focus on broad socio-economic grievances corruption, nepotism, and rising living costs, rather than sectarian or identity-based demands, enabling cross-class, cross-ethnic, and cross-religious mobilization⁴³.

B. Leaderlessness, Institutional Deficits, and the Struggle for Reform

The decentralization and leaderless nature of these movements foster flexibility and a sense of equality, but they also suffer from the absence of durable organizational structures required for long-term negotiation and institutional transformation. Historical evidence suggests that while mass movements in the 1980s and 1990s were often successful in achieving their objectives, the capacity of popular mobilizations to secure lasting democratic gains has declined in more recent years (2010–2019). The current wave of uprisings risks merely replacing one “elite circle” with another, in which new governments assume power but fail to reform weakened institutions. In all three countries, these mass uprisings are driven by long-standing and shared grievances—such as wealth inequality, corruption, and domination by powerful and controversial political elites⁴⁴.

Popular movements possess enormous mobilizing power and can overthrow entrenched regimes, as seen in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. However, state power structures, bureaucratic institutions, and infrastructures of digital repression remain far more resource-rich and resilient than these movements⁴⁵. This asymmetry suggests that although digital uprisings are rapid and spontaneous, they often confront authoritarian states without a coherent political wing. Consequently, despite short-term success, defeated regimes retain the capacity to reassert control (as in Sri Lanka's post-protest repression) or to overwhelm reform efforts undertaken by fragile interim governments (as in the challenges facing Bangladesh's caretaker administration). A concise comparative overview of popular movements and their immediate outcomes in South Asia is presented in the table below:

Comparative Analysis of Popular Movements in South Asia (2022–2024)

Name of Country	Type of Movement	Primary Cause/Trigger	Main Demand(s)	Characteristics of the Movement	Immediate Political Outcome
Sri Lanka	Aragalaya (People's)	Sovereign debt default; severe shortages of	Resignation of the Rajapaksa family; end to	Spontaneous, leaderless, multiclassetc	The president fled the



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	Struggle/ Uprising)	fuel, food, and medicine	corruption; structural change	.participation; mass mobilization of unions and students	country; an interim government was formed; attempts at constitutiona l reform (21 st Amendment)
Banglades h	Non-cooperatio n Movement / Student Uprising	Reinstatement of quotas in government jobs for the descendants of freedom fighters	Resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina; accountability for violence; structural reforms	Youth/student- led, digitally coordinated; rapid spread into a mass uprising; high casualty toll	Prime Minister Hasina resigned and left the country; a caretaker government was established
Nepal	Gen Z Reform Movement and Pro- Monarchy Movement	Political instability, frequent changes of government (13 governments in 17 years); corruption	Accountability , transparency, and systemic reform; (counter- demand: restoration of the monarchy)	Highly fragmented; Gen Z demanding accountability; rise of reactionary movements exploiting democratic decline	Resignation of Prime Minister Oli; continued governmenta l instability and the maintenance of geopolitical balance

4. AUTHORITARIAN RESILIENCE AND THE INSTRUMENTS OF REPRESSION

A. The Architecture of Repression: Physical and Legal Coercion

Governments frequently respond to mass protests with repression. In Sri Lanka, authorities systematically violated international human rights law during the *Aragalaya*, using disproportionate force and arbitrary arrests. Legal mechanisms have been weaponized to control civic space. In Bangladesh, the DSA and CSA were used to silence dissent and cultivate fear, while Sri Lanka's post-*Aragalaya* government proposed restrictive NGO and online safety laws⁴⁶. Repression has also expanded into the digital realm through censorship, surveillance, and internet shutdowns designed to raise the cost of activism⁴⁷.

B. The Role of the Military in Democratic Transitions

In Bangladesh, the military's decision in 2024 not to seize power but to support a caretaker government created a critical democratic opening. However, this restraint places immense pressure on the civilian interim government to deliver reforms and maintain legitimacy⁴⁸. The indicators of democratic backsliding and Institutional Decay:-



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Name of Country	Type of erosion	Specific manifestations
Bangladeh	Crisis of electoral legitimacy	Since 1971, only four elections are considered “free and fair”; the 2024 election was boycotted by opposition parties
Bangladeh	Digital repression	Systematic use of the DSA/CSA to suppress dissent, creating a culture of fear
Srilanka	Financial mismanagement	Foreign debt reaching 101% of GDP; sovereign default and the emergence of a severe humanitarian crisis
Srilanka	Repression under austerity	Systematic repression of peaceful Aragalaya protesters; local elections postponed due to “lack of funds”
Nepal	Political instability / elite capture	More than 13 changes of government since 2008; leaders preoccupied with power struggles
Nepal	Geopolitical vulnerability	Exploitation of internal divisions by the political class to retain power; vulnerability amid India–China rivalry

5. CONCLUSION: UNCERTAINTY, INSTABILITY, AND THE FUTURE OF SOUTH ASIAN DEMOCRACY

A. Assessing Outcomes and the Risk of Elite Recycling

Despite their success in overthrowing governments, popular movements in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal have ushered in a period of profound uncertainty⁴⁹. Political vacuums are often filled by unelected actors or fringe ideologies.

In Bangladesh, the success of the 2024 uprising depends on the interim government’s ability to implement institutional reforms particularly in governance, economic management, and security sector reform before elections. Failure risks a return to decades of polarization and patronage politics. Nepal must break its cycle of instability and manage external geopolitical pressures. Otherwise, democratic institutions will be fully discredited, further fueling anti-democratic movements such as monarchism.

B. Implications for Regional Security and Global Powers

These youth-led movements signal a profound generational shift, demonstrating that elites can no longer ignore popular anger rooted in corruption and inequality. South Asia’s democratic future now rests on a fragile balance: this wave of youth activism could either foster democracy and prosperity, or spiral into renewed instability, violence, and democratic erosion



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