



The South Asian Spring: flash Social Movements from Sri Lanka to Nepal

Mahedi Hasan, Sharmila Siddika Mila, Abdulla Al Masud, Md Jubayer Mahmud & Md Abu Bakkar Siddik

To cite this article: Mahedi Hasan, Sharmila Siddika Mila, Abdulla Al Masud, Md Jubayer Mahmud & Md Abu Bakkar Siddik (30 Jan 2026): The South Asian Spring: flash Social Movements from Sri Lanka to Nepal, South Asian Studies, DOI: [10.1080/02666030.2026.2619200](https://doi.org/10.1080/02666030.2026.2619200)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02666030.2026.2619200>



Published online: 30 Jan 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 59



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

The South Asian Spring: flash Social Movements from Sri Lanka to Nepal

Mahedi Hasan ^{a,b}, Sharmila Siddika Mila ^c, Abdulla Al Masud ^d,
Md Jubayer Mahmud ^e and Md Abu Bakkar Siddik ^{b,f,g}

^aCollege of Media and Communication, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX, USA; ^bThe Center for Social Policy and Justice, Dhaka, Bangladesh; ^cDepartment of English, Shahjalal University of Science & Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh; ^dDepartment of Anthropology, Shahjalal University of Science & Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh; ^eDepartment of Communication Studies, Texas State University, TX, USA; ^fSchool of the Environment, Nanjing University, Nanjing, Nanjing, China; ^gDepartment of Development Studies, Daffodil International University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Between 2022 and 2025, South Asia experienced a series of rapid-onset protest movements that successfully toppled established governments within compressed timeframes. This article examines the protest waves in Sri Lanka (2022), Bangladesh (2024), and Nepal (2025) through the lens of Rauf Arif's Flash Social Movement theory while critically extending this framework through comparative institutional analysis. These movements demonstrate both the continued relevance of Arab Spring dynamics in contemporary Asian contexts and reveal new patterns wherein digital mobilization intersects with traditional forms of collective action. The analysis reveals how accumulated grievances, digital connectivity, and generational political consciousness converge to create predictable yet powerful challenges to authoritarian governance, while institutional variables (particularly security force cohesion and elite fragmentation) mediate the effectiveness and timing of regime change. By engaging with connective action theory and networked movement scholarship, this article advances our understanding of how South Asian contexts adapt global protest repertoires to regional political cultures.

Keywords: Flash social movements; digital activism; youth protest; South Asian politics; transnational movements; regime change

Introduction

The wave of protests that swept across South Asia between 2022 and 2025 represents one of the most significant challenges to established political order in the region's recent history. Within the span of three years, mass movements successfully forced regime changes in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal, while similar patterns emerged in Indonesia.¹ These developments cannot be understood as isolated national phenomena but rather as interconnected expressions of what Rauf Arif conceptualized as Flash Social Movements (FSMs), which are rapid onset, digitally coordinated protests that achieve transformative political outcomes despite their brief duration.²

The designation "South Asian Spring" requires careful qualification. Unlike the Arab Spring's tightly clustered timeline (2010–2012) and shared post-colonial state structures, South Asia's protest wave unfolds across three years in contexts ranging from island nations to landlocked states, from presidential to parliamentary systems. What justifies regional framing is not identical causation but

rather three key elements: (1) demonstrable tactical diffusion and mutual awareness among protest movements, (2) shared generational consciousness among digitally-connected youth facing similar exclusions from political power, and (3) parallel tensions between aging political elites and excluded younger populations across the region. This article argues for "South Asian Spring" as a heuristic for understanding linked rather than parallel phenomena. These are movements that emerged from distinct national contexts yet drew inspiration, tactical repertoires, and symbolic power from each other's successes.

This analysis contributes to social movement scholarship by extending Flash Social Movement theory through systematic comparative analysis, revealing how institutional variables mediate FSM effectiveness in ways not fully theorized in Arif's original formulation. By engaging with connective action theory³ and networked movement scholarship,⁴ we demonstrate how South Asian cases represent hybrid forms that incorporate regional traditions of collective mobilization into digitally-enabled repertoires. The article further advances

*Email: mahehasa@ttu.edu

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

understanding of regime vulnerability by analyzing the political economy contexts and institutional responses that determine whether FSM mobilization translates into regime change or accommodation.

Theoretical Framework: Flash Social Movements and Beyond

Flash Social Movement Theory

Rauf Arif (2020) developed the concept of Flash Social Movements to explain the rapid-onset, digitally-coordinated protests that emerged during the Arab Spring.⁵ FSMs are characterized by five key features: (1) compressed timelines between initial mobilization and peak intensity, (2) horizontal organizational structures facilitated through digital platforms, (3) youth leadership without formal hierarchies, (4) symbolic political actions targeting centers of power, and (5) accumulated grievances reaching tipping points through specific trigger events. Arif's framework effectively captures the mechanisms of rapid mobilization. It explains how digital platforms enable coordination, how youth networks bypass traditional political structures, and how symbolic occupations of power centers galvanize movements.⁶

However, the framework offers limited insight into why similar mobilization patterns produce different timelines and outcomes. The compressed timeline in Nepal (7 days) versus Bangladesh (36 days) versus Sri Lanka's extended crisis (months) suggests that institutional variables mediate FSM effectiveness in ways requiring theoretical extension. These variables include the cohesion of security forces, the degree of elite fragmentation, and the constitutional mechanisms for power transfer. Additionally, Arif's emphasis on digital platforms as primary organizational infrastructure may overstate technological determinism while understating how protesters combine digital tools with traditional forms of collective action rooted in regional political cultures.⁷

Connective Action and Networked Movements

Bennett and Segerberg's connective action theory distinguishes between traditional collective action and connective action.⁸ Traditional collective action requires formal organizations, collective identities, and resource mobilization. Connective action, by contrast, enables personalized, individualized participation through digital networks. This framework helps explain how FSMs can mobilize rapidly without pre-existing organizational infrastructure. However, South Asian cases reveal

a hybrid form. While organization remains horizontal and digitally-mediated, protesters consistently invoke strong collective identities such as "students," "youth," and "the people" rather than purely individualized frames. This suggests FSMs may be culturally adaptive, incorporating regional traditions of collective mobilization into digitally-enabled repertoires.

Castells' analysis of networked movements emphasizes how horizontal networks enable rapid scaling but potentially limit post-uprising governance capacity.⁹ This insight proves particularly relevant for understanding post-regime change challenges in all three South Asian cases, where movement success in toppling governments has not automatically translated into effective interim governance or democratic consolidation. The tension between networked horizontal mobilization and hierarchical governance structures represents a persistent challenge across FSM cases globally.

South Asian Student Movement Traditions

To understand what is genuinely novel about the 2022–2025 uprisings, we must situate them within South Asia's long history of student-led political movements. The region has experienced repeated waves of youth mobilization, including the 1969 Bangladeshi (the then East Pakistan) student movement, the 1990 Nepali pro-democracy movement, the 1991 Bangladesh democracy uprising, and numerous campus-based protests throughout the decades.¹⁰ These historical precedents established students as legitimate political actors and created cultural memory of successful youth-led regime challenges.

What distinguishes contemporary FSMs from these earlier movements is not youth leadership per se but rather four key innovations: (1) the scale and speed enabled by digital coordination, (2) the explicitly generational framing that transcends traditional political ideologies, (3) the transnational awareness and tactical borrowing facilitated by social media, and (4) the symbolic emphasis on occupying centers of state power rather than merely mobilizing street protests. Contemporary movements represent an evolution rather than a revolution in South Asian youth activism, combining established repertoires with new technological capacities and generational consciousness.

Analytical Framework for Comparative Analysis

This article extends FSM theory by proposing that successful regime change through flash mobilization requires both necessary and sufficient conditions.

FSM dynamics (digital coordination, youth leadership, accumulated grievances, trigger events) provide necessary conditions for rapid mobilization. However, sufficient conditions for regime change depend on three institutional variables:

- (1) **Security Force Cohesion:** Whether military and police maintain unity in defending the regime or fragment and defect
- (2) **Elite Fragmentation:** The degree to which ruling coalitions splinter under protest pressure versus maintain solidarity
- (3) **Constitutional Pathways:** The availability of legitimate mechanisms for power transfer that allow face-saving resignations

By systematically comparing how these variables operated across Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal, we can better predict when FSM mobilization will achieve regime change versus government accommodation or violent suppression.

Case Studies: Comparative Analysis

Sri Lanka 2022: Economic Collapse and Extended Crisis

Political Economy Context

Sri Lanka's uprising emerged from a profound economic crisis rooted in decades of poor governance and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Rajapaksa government's 2019 tax cuts decimated state revenues, while the 2021 ban on chemical fertilizers (intended to promote organic agriculture) devastated agricultural production and exports.¹¹ Foreign exchange reserves collapsed, rendering the country unable to import essential goods including fuel, medicine, and food. By early 2022, daily power cuts extended to 13 hours, fuel queues stretched for kilometers, and inflation reached 54.6%.¹²

The crisis represented not merely policy failures but systemic corruption, with the Rajapaksa family having dominated Sri Lankan politics for decades through patronage networks and ethno-nationalist mobilization. Youth unemployment had remained persistently high, while economic opportunities concentrated among politically connected elites. The pandemic's impact on tourism (a major foreign exchange earner) accelerated the economic collapse, creating universal suffering across class lines.¹³

Mobilization Dynamics

The Sri Lankan uprising began in March 2022 as scattered protests against fuel shortages and power cuts rapidly escalated into a nationwide movement demanding President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's resignation.¹⁴ The hashtag #GoHomeGota became the rallying cry that unified protesters across the island, demonstrating how digital platforms could transform localized grievances into coordinated national resistance. However, the movement's organization transcended purely digital coordination. Protesters established the Gota Go Gama (Gota Go Village) occupation site at Galle Face Green in Colombo, creating a physical space for deliberation, cultural performance, and sustained mobilization.¹⁵

Young professionals, students, and activists emerged as the driving force, but the movement succeeded in mobilizing across class, ethnic, and religious lines (a remarkable achievement in Sri Lanka's historically divided society).¹⁶ The universal impact of economic crisis created rare cross-cutting solidarity, with Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim citizens united in demanding accountability. The occupation of Galle Face Green lasted over 100 days, serving both as protest site and alternative political space where citizens enacted democratic practices excluded from formal politics.

Institutional Responses and Outcomes

The movement's symbolic power reached its peak on 9 July 2022, when demonstrators occupied the Presidential Palace, forcing Rajapaksa to flee the country and ultimately resign.¹⁷ This occupation represented more than tactical success; it constituted a symbolic reclaiming of democratic space from authoritarian control. Critically, the Sri Lankan military declined to use lethal force to defend Rajapaksa, reflecting institutional calculations that preserving military professionalism and avoiding civil war repetition outweighed regime loyalty.¹⁸

However, the movement's success in achieving regime change did not translate into transformative political reform. Ranil Wickremesinghe, an establishment politician with six previous terms as Prime Minister, succeeded Rajapaksa and subsequently cracked down on protest sites. The interim government prioritized negotiating with the IMF and restoring economic stability over addressing systemic corruption or implementing constitutional reforms demanded by protesters. This outcome reveals the gap between FSM capacity for regime change and the institutional power required for democratic transformation.

Bangladesh 2024: State Violence and Revolutionary Escalation

Political Economy Context

Bangladesh's July 2024 revolution occurred against a backdrop of fifteen years of increasingly authoritarian rule under Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government.¹⁹ While Bangladesh achieved impressive economic growth (particularly in the garment export sector), this prosperity was unequally distributed and increasingly dependent on patronage networks. The government job quota system reserved 30% of civil service positions for descendants of 1971 liberation war veterans, effectively functioning as hereditary privilege in a context where government employment represented rare secure opportunity.²⁰

Youth unemployment and underemployment persisted despite economic growth, with educated young people finding degrees insufficient for securing quality employment. The quota system symbolized broader patterns of political cronyism, where access to opportunities depended on partisan connections rather than merit. Hasina's government had systematically suppressed opposition through extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, and electoral manipulation, while controlling media and civil society through legal harassment and violence.²¹

The 2019 murder of student activist Abrar Fahad by Awami League student cadres for criticizing government policy demonstrated the regime's willingness to use violence against youth dissent. This event became a mobilizing memory, establishing students as martyrs to authoritarian repression and creating accumulated grievances that would explode in 2024.

Mobilization Dynamics

The immediate catalyst came in July 2024 when security forces killed student protesters demanding reform of the quota system.²² However, these killings occurred against accumulated grievances, transforming what began as single-issue reform demands into revolutionary rejection of Hasina's entire regime. The movement demonstrated sophisticated use of multiple digital platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Telegram), creating redundant communication networks that proved resilient against government shutdown attempts.²³

Generation Z emerged as the movement's primary demographic, with university students taking leadership roles without formal organizational structures. The decentralized nature made it difficult for authorities to target specific leaders, while the movement's rapid broadening across social classes prevented dismissal as elite-driven agitation.²⁴ International solidarity emerged through

hashtags like #StudentsUnderAttack, #StepDownHasina and #SaveBangladeshiStudents, generating global media attention and diplomatic pressure on the Hasina government.²⁵

The movement explicitly referenced Sri Lanka's success, with protesters and social media posts citing #GoHomeGota as inspiration and adapting its tactics to the Bangladeshi context.²⁶ This direct tactical borrowing demonstrates transnational learning within the regional protest wave, though organizational structures remained nationally bounded.

Institutional Responses and Outcomes

The Hasina government initially responded with extreme violence, deploying security forces that killed an estimated 1,400 protesters.²⁷ This violent repression, however, backfired by radicalizing protesters and generating international condemnation. After 36 days of sustained protest, demonstrators achieved their ultimate goal when they occupied the Prime Minister's residence in Dhaka on 5 August 2024, forcing Hasina to resign and flee to India.

The prolonged timeline compared to Nepal's subsequent uprising reflects two factors. First, security force cohesion was initially maintained through the Bangladesh Police, Bangladesh Border Guard and Rapid Action Battalion's loyalty to Hasina. Second, the military's ultimate decision to refuse orders to fire on protesters came only after calculating that continued violence risked international intervention and threatened military institutional interests. The security forces' eventual defection proved decisive, demonstrating how institutional variables mediate FSM effectiveness.

The interim government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus has faced significant challenges in transitioning from protest movement to governance, with tensions between revolutionary demands for systemic change and pragmatic needs for stability and economic recovery.²⁸ This post-uprising struggle illustrates Castells' insight about the governance limitations of horizontally networked movements.²⁹

Nepal 2025: Digital Censorship and Rapid Mobilization

Political Economy Context

Nepal's 2025 Gen Z protest emerged from longstanding frustrations with political corruption, elite capture of post-earthquake reconstruction resources, and generational exclusion from decision-making.³⁰ Despite Nepal's 2006 transition from monarchy to republic,

power remained concentrated among aging political elites from traditional parties (the Nepali Congress, Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), and Maoist Centre) who rotated leadership through unstable coalition governments.

Youth unemployment remained high, with educated young people finding limited opportunities in Nepal's remittance-dependent economy. Approximately 1,500 Nepali youth leave the country daily for foreign employment, primarily in Gulf states and Malaysia, reflecting the failure of domestic political economy to provide opportunity.³¹ The political class was widely perceived as corrupt and self-serving, enriching themselves through control of state resources while ordinary citizens (especially youth) struggled.

The post-2015 earthquake reconstruction became a symbol of elite corruption, with billions in international aid flowing through channels controlled by political party networks while affected communities saw limited rebuilding. This visible discrepancy between elite enrichment and popular suffering created accumulated grievances among a generation that had come of age after the 2006 democratic transition yet saw little improvement in governance quality.³²

Mobilization Dynamics

The immediate trigger came on 4 September 2025, when Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's government banned 26 online platforms including TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, ostensibly for "security reasons" but widely understood as censorship targeting youth political expression.³³ This heavy-handed attempt to control digital space backfired spectacularly, providing a clear focal point for accumulated frustrations with political corruption and generational exclusion.

The response was swift and decisive. Within 24 hours, protests had erupted across Kathmandu, Pokhara, and other major cities, organized through remaining digital channels and coordinated through hashtags like #OpenOurVoice and #GenZForFreedom.³⁴ The movement explicitly referenced both Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, with protesters posting images of those uprisings and adopting similar tactics of occupying symbolic sites of elite power. Social media posts circulated with captions like "If Bangladesh can do it in 36 days, we can do it in 7" and "First Sri Lanka, then Bangladesh, now Nepal," providing direct evidence of transnational learning and inspiration.

Institutional Responses and Outcomes

Despite facing curfews and lethal force from security services that killed an estimated 40 protesters, the

movement maintained momentum.³⁵ Protesters targeted not only government buildings but also luxury hotels and properties associated with political elites, explicitly framing their movement as generational warfare against a corrupt class of political insiders.³⁶ This targeting of elite economic spaces alongside political institutions represented a tactical evolution from previous South Asian FSMs.

On 13 September 2025 (just nine days after the initial platform ban), Oli announced his resignation. The speed of this political transformation demonstrated how FSM dynamics had become increasingly efficient across successive regional iterations. Three factors explain Nepal's compressed timeline compared to Bangladesh. First, Oli's coalition government was already fragile, with partners calculating that abandoning him would preserve their own political futures. Second, the Nepali military (remembering the 2006 people's movement that ended the monarchy) quickly signaled unwillingness to use sustained lethal force against protesters. Third, the narrow trigger (digital censorship) allowed for a face-saving resolution where Oli could resign while blaming coalition partners rather than admitting defeat to street protesters.

The interim government faces similar challenges to Sri Lanka and Bangladesh in translating protest energy into institutional reform, with traditional party elites already maneuvering to preserve their power while making minimal concessions to youth demands for systemic change.

Comparative Analysis: Patterns and Divergences

Shared Mechanisms and Tactical Diffusion

All three movements demonstrate core FSM characteristics: compressed mobilization timelines (relative to traditional social movements), digital coordination enabling rapid scaling, youth leadership without formal hierarchies, and symbolic occupations of centers of state power. However, the comparison reveals (See [Table 1](#)) instructive variations in how these mechanisms operated across different institutional contexts.

Divergent Pathways Within Shared Patterns

Despite surface similarities, these movements reveal instructive differences that extend FSM theory. Sri Lanka's uprising mobilized across class lines due to universal economic suffering, creating the broadest coalition but also the most diffuse demands. This universality enabled successful regime change but limited transformative potential, as diverse

Table 1. Comparative overview of South Asian flash social movements.

| Dimension | Sri Lanka 2022 | Bangladesh 2024 | Nepal 2025 |
|--------------------------|---|---|--|
| Primary Trigger | Economic collapse, fuel shortages | State killing of student protesters | Digital platform ban |
| Underlying Grievances | Rajapaksa family corruption, economic mismanagement | 15 years authoritarian rule, quota system patronage | Elite corruption, youth exclusion, post-earthquake aid theft |
| Duration | ~4 months (March-July) | 36 days | 7 days |
| Social Base | Cross-class coalition | Student-led, later broadened | Youth-focused, cross-class support |
| Institutional Target | Presidential system | Parliamentary PM | Parliamentary PM |
| Security Force Response | Refused lethal force against palace occupation | Initial violent repression, later defection | Limited lethal force, quick signaling of non-intervention |
| Elite Cohesion | Rajapaksa isolated as crisis deepened | Awami League cadres loyal until military defection | Coalition fragmentation enabled rapid abandonment |
| Estimated Deaths | ~2 (comparatively low) | ~1,400 | ~40 |
| Outcome | Establishment politician (Wickremesinghe) succeeds | Interim government under Yunus | Interim government, traditional parties maneuvering |
| Transnational References | Arab Spring inspiration | Explicit #GoHomeGota references | Direct Bangladesh and Sri Lanka references |

constituencies held competing visions for post-Rajapaksa governance.

Bangladesh's movement began within specific student networks before broadening, maintaining sharper focus on authoritarian governance as the core issue. The government's violent response paradoxically strengthened protest coherence by creating clear martyrs and consolidating opposition. The 36-day duration (longer than Nepal but shorter than Sri Lanka) reflects the time required for security force defection in a context where initial cohesion was strong.

Nepal's rapid success stemmed from coalition fragmentation and institutional memory of the 2006 people's movement. The Nepali military's quick decision to signal non-intervention reflected calculations shaped by both recent history and assessment that the protest had cross-party elite support. The narrow trigger (digital censorship) allowed for face-saving resolution that broader economic or systemic grievances might not permit.

These variations suggest that while FSM dynamics provide necessary conditions for rapid mobilization, sufficient conditions for regime change depend on three key factors: (1) security force willingness to defect or remain neutral, shaped by institutional memory and calculations about preservation of organizational interests; (2) elite fragmentation that isolates the targeted leader, making resignation politically feasible for coalition partners or party members; (3) availability of constitutional mechanisms for power transfer that allow face-saving exits.

Digital Mobilization: Hybrid Forms

All three movements demonstrated sophisticated digital coordination, yet their relationship to technology

reveals a hybrid form not fully captured by either Arif's FSM framework or Bennett and Segerberg's connective action theory. Protesters combined digital platforms with physical occupations, creating both virtual and material spaces for mobilization.³⁷ The movements invoked strong collective identities ("students," "youth," "the people") rather than the individualized participation frames emphasized in connective action theory.

This hybridization reflects South Asian political culture, where collective mobilization has deep historical roots in anti-colonial struggles, socialist movements, and previous waves of student activism. Digital platforms enable rapid coordination and transnational awareness, but protesters ground their actions in culturally resonant repertoires of collective action. The symbolic occupations of presidential palaces and prime ministerial residences echo tactics from the 1990 Nepali movement, the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war, and earlier South Asian popular mobilizations.

The transnational dimension deserves careful qualification. While protesters in Bangladesh explicitly referenced Sri Lanka and Nepali protesters cited both previous cases, this represents tactical learning and inspiration rather than coordinated organization. There is limited evidence of cross-border funding networks, shared leadership, or pre-planned coordination. The linkages appear more "relational" than "organizational." Protesters in each context adapted globally-circulating repertoires to local conditions while drawing moral authority and tactical confidence from regional precedents.

Social media facilitated this relational transnationalism by making protest tactics immediately visible across borders and enabling rapid assessment of what worked. When Nepali protesters saw Bangladesh succeed in 36 days, they

incorporated this timeline into their own expectations and rhetoric. When Bangladeshi students saw Sri Lankan protesters occupy the presidential palace, they adapted this tactic to targeting Hasina's residence.³⁸ This represents what Gerbaudo calls "protest waves" where temporal clustering produces mutual awareness and tactical diffusion without requiring direct coordination.

Political Economy and Institutional Mediation

The political economy contexts differed significantly across cases, yet all shared structural patterns of youth exclusion, elite corruption, and patronage-based governance. Sri Lanka's crisis was primarily economic, Bangladesh's primarily political (with economic dimensions), and Nepal's primarily generational and corruption-focused.³⁹ These different emphases produced different coalition compositions: broader in Sri Lanka, student-centered in Bangladesh, youth-focused in Nepal.

Institutional variables proved crucial in mediating FSM effectiveness. Security force behavior depended on institutional memory (Nepal's 2006 experience, Sri Lanka's civil war legacy), calculations about organizational preservation, and assessment of international responses. In all three cases, military leadership ultimately concluded that defending authoritarian leaders risked institutional damage, though they reached this conclusion at different speeds.

Elite fragmentation operated differently across institutional contexts. Sri Lanka's presidential system concentrated power in Rajapaksa individually, making his isolation more complete but also his replacement straightforward. Bangladesh's parliamentary system required Hasina's party to maintain cohesion, which they did until security force defection made her position untenable. Nepal's fragile coalition enabled quick abandonment once protests demonstrated Oli's political liability.

Constitutional mechanisms for power transfer existed in all three cases, providing face-saving resignation pathways that violent suppression might foreclose. This institutional feature distinguishes these cases from contexts like Myanmar, where military coup foreclosed constitutional pathways, or from Syria during the Arab Spring, where Assad's minority sectarian base made resignation equivalent to regime extinction.⁴⁰

Indonesia 2025: Accommodation Rather Than Regime Change

Indonesia's protests merit separate analysis because they demonstrate FSM mobilization without regime change, revealing the limits of protest effectiveness

when governments respond adaptively. Beginning in August 2025, Indonesian students mobilized against parliamentary attempts to reverse Constitutional Court decisions and increase parliamentary allowances, using familiar tactics including digital coordination, hashtag campaigns (#IndonesiaGelap or Dark Indonesia), and occupation of parliament buildings.⁴¹

The Indonesian case shares key FSM characteristics with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal: rapid digital mobilization, youth leadership, symbolic targeting of elite spaces. However, the outcome differed significantly. President Prabowo Subianto and parliamentary leadership responded by acknowledging protester demands, postponing controversial legislation, and announcing disciplinary measures against officials who proposed salary increases. The protests achieved policy concessions without regime change.

This divergent outcome reveals critical variables that mediate FSM effectiveness. First, Indonesia's more robust democratic institutions (including an independent Constitutional Court and competitive elections) provided legitimate channels for protest demands beyond regime change. Second, government responsiveness (acknowledging protester grievances rather than dismissing or violently suppressing them) defused revolutionary escalation. Third, accumulated grievances against Subianto personally were less severe than against Rajapaksa, Hasina, or Oli, making policy accommodation politically feasible.

The Indonesian case thus demonstrates that FSM mobilization constitutes a necessary but insufficient condition for regime change. When governments maintain democratic legitimacy, respond to protests rather than suppress them, and can offer meaningful concessions short of resignation, FSM dynamics produce reform rather than revolution. This finding extends Arif's framework by specifying the conditions under which flash mobilization achieves different outcomes.

Indonesia's inclusion also complicates simple "South Asian Spring" framing, suggesting these dynamics operate across Southeast Asia and potentially throughout the Global South. The regional scope may be broader than South Asia alone, reflecting global patterns of youth political exclusion, digital connectivity, and authoritarian governance rather than region-specific dynamics.

Discussion: Extending Flash Social Movement Theory

This comparative analysis extends FSM theory in three key directions. First, it demonstrates that institutional variables (security force cohesion, elite fragmentation, constitutional pathways) mediate the translation of protest mobilization into regime change. FSM dynamics

explain how movements emerge and scale rapidly,⁴² but institutional analysis explains why some succeed while others produce accommodation or suppression.

Second, the South Asian cases reveal hybrid forms that combine digital coordination with traditional collective action repertoires, challenging both technological determinism in FSM theory and individualism in connective action frameworks. South Asian protesters use digital platforms to enable collective mobilization rather than to replace it, suggesting cultural adaptation of global protest technologies to regional political traditions.

Third, the analysis reveals how transnational learning operates through relational rather than organizational linkages. Protesters gain tactical knowledge, moral inspiration, and strategic confidence from observing regional precedents, yet maintain nationally-bounded organizational structures. This pattern suggests we should understand contemporary protest waves not as coordinated transnational movements but as parallel mobilizations that learn from each other through digital observation while responding to distinct national contexts.

These extensions have implications for predicting future protest dynamics. Governments facing youth exclusion, economic crisis, or authoritarian consolidation should anticipate FSM mobilization when trigger events occur. However, regime vulnerability depends on institutional factors governments can potentially address: maintaining security force professionalism and institutional interests, preserving elite coalition cohesion, demonstrating responsiveness to legitimate grievances before they accumulate to crisis levels. Indonesia's case suggests that democratic responsiveness can channel FSM mobilization toward reform rather than revolution.

Conclusion: Democracy's Changing Nature in South Asia

These uprisings reveal three fundamental tensions in South Asian democracy. First, the gap between formal democratic institutions and meaningful youth political participation has widened, with aging political elites monopolizing power while excluding generational cohorts educated in digital-era expectations of transparency and accountability. Second, the contradiction between economic liberalization and political entrenchment has created frustrated aspirations, where educated youth lack opportunities despite economic growth captured by politically-connected elites. Third, digital connectivity poses profound challenges to traditional clientelist politics, enabling horizontal mobilization

that bypasses party structures while making protest tactics immediately visible across borders.

The "South Asian Spring" framing proves useful not for claiming identical causation but for highlighting how regional position shapes democratic possibilities. Small countries (Sri Lanka, Nepal) proved more vulnerable to rapid regime change than larger ones, reflecting limited capacity for violent suppression and fewer buffer resources to weather economic crisis. The absence of major powers like India from this protest wave warrants attention. India's size, federal structure, and established democratic institutions may buffer against FSM dynamics, while Pakistan's military dominance forecloses the constitutional pathways that enabled resignations in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal.

Post-uprising governance challenges across all cases reveal a persistent tension between networked horizontal mobilization and hierarchical institutional governance. Movements that successfully topple governments through decentralized coordination struggle to translate this organizational form into effective governance structures. Traditional political elites have proven adept at reasserting control during transitions, making minimal concessions while preserving systemic features protesters sought to transform. This pattern suggests that FSMs excel at regime change but require supplementation with institutional strategies for democratic consolidation.

Future research should examine several dimensions this article could not fully address. First, longitudinal analysis of post-uprising governance will reveal whether these movements produce democratic consolidation or merely elite circulation. Second, comparative analysis with Southeast Asian cases beyond Indonesia would test whether these dynamics operate at larger Asian or Global South scales. Third, investigation of diaspora and international actor roles would illuminate external influences on domestic protest dynamics. Finally, attention to gender dimensions of these youth-led movements would provide important nuance currently missing from FSM literature.

The South Asian experience from 2022 to 2025 represents more than a regional political phenomenon. These movements demonstrate how Arab Spring dynamics have evolved and adapted to new contexts while maintaining core characteristics of digital coordination, youth leadership, and symbolic political action. As similar patterns continue emerging across different national contexts, Flash Social Movement theory (extended through attention to institutional mediation, hybrid organizational forms, and transnational learning) provides essential analytical tools for understanding contemporary democratic struggles in an increasingly connected yet

nationally-bounded world. The challenge for both scholars and practitioners lies in understanding how these movements can transcend regime change to achieve the democratic transformation their participants envision.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Mahedi Hasan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3263-4636>

Sharmila Siddika Mila  <http://orcid.org/0009-0001-3491-026X>

Abdulla Al Masud  <http://orcid.org/0009-0008-8269-3176>

Md Jubayer Mahmud  <http://orcid.org/0009-0001-6343-7002>

Md Abu Bakkar Siddik  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7752-1953>

NOTES

1. Chad de Guzman, 'What to Know About Nepal's Deadly "Gen Z" Protests', *Time*, 2025. Available at: <https://time.com/7315492/nepal-gen-z-protests-social-media-nepo-kids-corruption-explainer/> [accessed 14 September 2025]; Hannah Livingstone, 'Indonesia Protests Explained: Why Did They Start and How Has the Government Responded?', *The Guardian*, 2025. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/sep/02/indonesia-protests-explained-start-how-has-the-government-responded> [accessed 14 September 2025]; Md Sayeed Al-Zaman, Zahedur Rahman Arman, Hasan Mahmud Faisal, and Rubaiya Zannat, 'Digital Protest and Transnational Mediation: Exploring Key Mediators and Narratives in the #StepDownHasina Hashtivism in Social Media', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 20 July 2025. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19331681.2025.2533923> [accessed 14 September 2025]; and Sanya Mansoor, 'Why Sri Lanka Protests Will Continue Under New President', *Time*, 2022. Available at: <https://time.com/6198951/sri-lanka-ranil-wickeremesinghe-president-protests/> [accessed 14 September 2025].
2. Rauf Arif, *Movements for Change: How Individuals, Social Media and Al Jazeera Are Changing Pakistan, Egypt and Tunisia* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2020).
3. W. Lance Bennett, and Alexandra Segerberg, 'The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics', *Information, Communication & Society*, 15.5 (2012), 739–768.
4. Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015).
5. Rauf Arif, *Movements for Change: How Individuals, Social Media and Al Jazeera Are Changing Pakistan, Egypt and Tunisia* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2020).
6. Rauf Arif, *Movements for Change: How Individuals, Social Media and Al Jazeera Are Changing Pakistan, Egypt and Tunisia* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2020).
7. Rauf Arif, *Movements for Change: How Individuals, Social Media and Al Jazeera Are Changing Pakistan, Egypt and Tunisia* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2020).
8. W. Lance Bennett, and Alexandra Segerberg, 'The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics', *Information, Communication & Society*, 15.5 (2012), 739–768.
9. Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015).
10. Michael Howlett, and Jale Tosun, *Policy Styles and Policy-Making: Exploring the Linkages* (London: Routledge, 2018).
11. Uditha Jayasinghe, 'How Sri Lanka Protests Unfolded', *Reuters*, 2022. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/how-sri-lankan-protests-unfolded-2022-07-09/> [accessed 14 September 2025].
12. *Al Jazeera*, 'Timeline: Sri Lanka's Worst Economic, Political Crisis in Decades', 13 July 2022. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/13/timeline-sri-lankas-worst-economic-political-crisis-in-decades> [accessed 14 September 2025].
13. Abdul Razak Mohamed Imtiyaz, 'Why Did They Rebel? Remarks on Sri Lanka's Aragalaya in 2022 and Bangladesh's 2024 Student/Youth Struggle', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 2025, 00219096251341583.
14. Amrit Dhillon, 'Sri Lanka: 50 Injured as Protesters Try to Storm President's House amid Economic Crisis', *The Guardian*, 2022. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/01/sri-lanka-protesters-try-to-storm-presidents-house-as-economic-crisis-deepens> [accessed 14 September 2025].
15. Hannah Ellis-Peterson, 'Sri Lanka Security Forces Raid Protest Camp as Ranil

- Wickremesinghe Flexes Muscles', *The Guardian*, 2022. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/22/sri-lanka-security-forces-raid-protest-camp-as-ranil-wickremesinghe-flexes-muscles> [accessed 14 September 2025].
16. Rathindra Kuruwita, 'Sri Lanka Crisis: How Did We Get Here and What Comes Next?', *Al Jazeera*, 2022. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/10/sri-lanka-protests-how-did-we-get-here-and-what-comes-next> [accessed 14 September 2025].
 17. *Al Jazeera*, 'Timeline: Sri Lanka's Worst Economic, Political Crisis in Decades', 13 July 2022. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/13/timeline-sri-lankas-worst-economic-political-crisis-in-decades> [accessed 14 September 2025].
 18. Uditha Jayasinghe, 'How Sri Lankan Protests Unfolded', *Reuters*, 2022. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/how-sri-lankan-protests-unfolded-2022-07-09/> [accessed 14 September 2025].
 19. Ayman Anika, 'Bangladesh July Movement Social Media Uprising Explained: How Social Media Fueled Bangladesh July Protests', *The Daily Star*, 2025. Available at: <https://www.thedailystar.net/life-living/news/how-social-media-became-the-frontline-the-july-uprising-3934006> [accessed 14 September 2025]; Md Towhidul Islam, 'The July Revolution: Student Politics in Bangladesh Violated Right to Life', *Cambridge International Law Journal*, 2025. Available at: <https://cilj.co.uk/2025/07/10/the-july-revolution-student-politics-in-bangladesh-violating-right-to-life/> [accessed 26 August 2025]; Ariful Hasan Shuvo, 'How Abrar Fahad's Murder Laid the Seeds of the July Uprising', *The Business Standard*, 8 October 2024. Available at: <https://www.tbsnews.net/features/panorama/how-abrar-fahads-murder-laid-seeds-july-uprising-959776> [accessed 27 August 2025].
 20. *CNN Video*, 'What's Happening in Bangladesh? A Reporter Explains', *CNN*, 2024. Available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2024/08/05/tv/video/bangladesh-sheikh-hasina-resigns-mujib-mashal> [accessed 2 September 2024]; Masood Farivar, 'Deadly Mob Violence Underscores Bangladesh's Security Breakdown', *Voice of America*, 2024. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/deadly-mob-violence-underscores-bangladesh-s-security-breakdown/7793384.html> [accessed 3 October 2024].
 21. Ariful Hasan Shuvo, 'How Abrar Fahad's Murder Laid the Seeds of the July Uprising', *The Business Standard*, 8 October 2024. Available at: <https://www.tbsnews.net/features/panorama/how-abrar-fahads-murder-laid-seeds-july-uprising-959776> [accessed 27 August 2025].
 22. Md Abu Bakkar Siddik, 'Bangladesh Protests: Law Enforcement and Public Health Crisis', *The Lancet*, 3 September 2024. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(24\)01603-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(24)01603-9).
 23. Parma Sigurdson, and Ravi Iyer, 'A Double-Edged Sword: The Role of Social Media in the 2024 Political Uprising in Bangladesh', *Tech Policy Press*, 2024. Available at: <https://www.techpolicy.press/a-double-edged-sword-the-role-of-social-media-in-the-2024-political-uprising-in-bangladesh/> [accessed 14 September 2025]; Imran Ahmed, 'From Protest to Revolution: A New Era for Bangladesh?', *NUS Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS)*, 7 August 2024. Available at: <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/from-protest-to-revolution-a-new-era-for-bangladesh/> [accessed 11 October 2025]; and Yashraj Sharma, 'Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka: Is South Asia Fertile for Gen Z Revolutions?', *Al Jazeera*, 2025. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2025/9/16/sri-lanka-bangladesh-nepal-is-south-asia-fertile-for-gen-z-revolutions> [accessed 13 October 2025].
 24. Shamsuddoza Sajen, '31 July 2024: Crackdown on March for Justice', *The Daily Star*, 31 July 2025. Available at: <https://www.thedailystar.net/the-july-rocked-bangladesh/news/july-31-2024-crackdown-march-justice-3951871> [accessed 14 September 2025].
 25. Md Sayeed Al-Zaman, Zahedur Rahman Arman, Hasan Mahmud Faisal, and Rubaiya Zannat, 'Digital Protest and Transnational Mediation: Exploring Key Mediators and Narratives in the #StepDownHasina Hashtivism in Social Media', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 20 July 2025. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19331681.2025.2533923> [accessed 14 September 2025]; Harindrini Corea, and Nazia Erum, 'What Happened at the Quota-Reform Protests in Bangladesh?', *Amnesty International*, 29 July 2024. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/what-is-happening-at-the-quota-reform-protests-in-bangladesh/> [accessed 3 September 2024]; Nadia Murshid, 'How Bangladeshi Students Toppled a Government', *Current History*, 124.861 (2025), 123–128; and Zahedur Rahman Arman, Md Mahbbat Ali, Jamal Uddin, Didarul Islam Manik, Umar Hyder, and Tariquil Islam, 'Manufacturing Legitimacy: Media Ownership and the Framing of the July 2024 Uprising in Bangladesh', *Journalism*

- and Media*, 6.3 (9 September 2025), 148. Available at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2673-5172/6/3/148> [accessed 14 September 2025].
26. Yashraj Sharma, 'Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka: Is South Asia Fertile for Gen Z Revolutions?', *Al Jazeera*, 2025. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2025/9/16/sri-lanka-bangladesh-nepal-is-south-asia-fertile-for-gen-z-revolutions> [accessed 13 October 2025].
 27. Associated Press (AP), 'UN Rights Office Estimates up to 1,400 Killed in Crackdown on Protests in Bangladesh', *CNN*, 12 February 2025. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/02/12/asia/un-rights-office-bangladesh-protests-crackdown-intl-latam> [accessed 14 September 2025]; and Md Shamsul Hossen, Md Saiduzzaman, and Pabon Shaha, 'Social Media Sentiments Analysis on the July Revolution in Bangladesh: A Hybrid Transformer-Based Machine Learning Approach', in *Proceedings of the 17th International Conference on Electronics, Computers and Artificial Intelligence (ECAI)* (IEEE, 2025), pp. 1–8.
 28. Md Shamsul Hossen, Md Saiduzzaman, and Pabon Shaha, 'Social Media Sentiments Analysis on the July Revolution in Bangladesh: A Hybrid Transformer-Based Machine Learning Approach', in *Proceedings of the 17th International Conference on Electronics, Computers and Artificial Intelligence (ECAI)* (IEEE, 2025), pp. 1–8.
 29. Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015).
 30. Chad de Guzman, 'What to Know About Nepal's Deadly "Gen Z" Protests', *Time*, 2025. Available at: <https://time.com/7315492/nepal-gen-z-protests-social-media-nepo-kids-corruption-explainer/> [accessed 14 September 2025]; and Jyoti Koirala, 'Gen Z Protests and Role of Social Media in Nepal (8–10 September 2025)', 2025.
 31. Abid Hussain, 'Why Does Nepal's Crisis Matter to South Asia – and the World?', *Al Jazeera*, 2025. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/9/11/why-does-nepals-crisis-matter-to-south-asia-and-the-world> [accessed 14 September 2025].
 32. Anil Bhandari, 'Nepal Gen Z Protests: Comprehensive Socio-Economic Analysis and Recovery Framework', *SSRN*, 2025; and Madhu K. C., 'The South Asian Crisis: Youth, Ruptured Realities, and the Quest for Ontological Security', 11 September 2025.
 33. Binaj Gurubacharya, 'Curfew Is Lifted in Nepal as Calm Returns after Deadly Mass Protests', *AP News*, 13 September 2025. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/nepal-protests-curfew-sushila-karki-9b315d03aa5adb18cba1f28b11da4dc5> [accessed 14 September 2025]; and Sahil Shrestha, and Shukra Raj Paudel, 'Nepal's Youth Uprising: Gen-Z's Historic Stand for Accountability, Unity, and Sustainable Change', *International Journal of Environmental Studies*, 2025, 1–5.
 34. Abid Hussain, 'Why Does Nepal's Crisis Matter to South Asia – and the World?', *Al Jazeera*, 2025. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/9/11/why-does-nepals-crisis-matter-to-south-asia-and-the-world> [accessed 14 September 2025].
 35. Emily Schmall, 'From Parliament to Luxury Hotels, Nepal's Protest Movement Targeted the Elite', *Reuters*, 2025. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/parliament-luxury-hotels-nepals-protest-movement-targeted-elite-2025-09-11/> [accessed 14 September 2025].
 36. Emily Schmall, 'From Parliament to Luxury Hotels, Nepal's Protest Movement Targeted the Elite', *Reuters*, 2025. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/parliament-luxury-hotels-nepals-protest-movement-targeted-elite-2025-09-11/> [accessed 14 September 2025].
 37. Rauf Arif, *Movements for Change: How Individuals, Social Media and Al Jazeera Are Changing Pakistan, Egypt and Tunisia* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2020).
 38. Chad de Guzman, 'What to Know About Nepal's Deadly "Gen Z" Protests', *Time*, 2025. Available at: <https://time.com/7315492/nepal-gen-z-protests-social-media-nepo-kids-corruption-explainer/> [accessed 14 September 2025]; Md Sayeed Al-Zaman, Zahedur Rahman Arman, Hasan Mahmud Faisal, and Rubaiya Zannat, 'Digital Protest and Transnational Mediation: Exploring Key Mediators and Narratives in the #StepDownHasina Hashtivism in Social Media', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 20 July 2025. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/19331681.2025.2533923> [accessed 14 September 2025]; and Uditha Jayasinghe, 'How Sri Lankan Protests Unfolded', *Reuters*, 2022. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/how-sri-lankan-protests-unfolded-2022-07-09/> [accessed 14 September 2025].
 39. Chad de Guzman, 'What to Know About Nepal's Deadly "Gen Z" Protests', *Time*, 2025. Available at: <https://time.com/7315492/nepal-gen-z-protests-social-media-nepo-kids-corruption-explainer/> [accessed 14 September 2025].
 40. Michael Howlett, and Jale Tosun, *Policy Styles and Policy-Making: Exploring the Linkages*

(London: Routledge, 2018); and Nouredine Miladi, 'Satellite TV News and the Arab Diaspora in Britain: Comparing Al-Jazeera, the BBC and CNN', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32.6 (2006), 947–960.

41. Al Jazeera, 'Indonesian Police Clash with Students Protesting Lawmakers' Salaries', *Al Jazeera*, 2025. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/8/26/indonesian-police-clash-with-students-protesting-lawmakers-salaries> [accessed 14 September 2025]; and Niniek Karmini, and Achmad Ibrahim, 'Riot Police Clash with Students Protesting Lawmakers' Allowances in Indonesia', *AP News*, 2025. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/indonesia-student-protest-parliament-49e31c7074aab8375aec06143f6b2edc> [accessed 14 September 2025].
42. Rauf Arif, *Movements for Change: How Individuals, Social Media and Al Jazeera Are Changing Pakistan, Egypt and Tunisia* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2020).