

Gadchiroli who could never make it to a rally in the capital still said they felt heard because the protest's grievances were being aired constantly, visibly and shareably online. Millions of followers translated into hundreds of thousands of petition signatures, and petition signatures translated into a political cost the government eventually could not ignore. Whatever else this movement was, it was a case study in how quickly a meme can become a mandate.

Pralhad Joshi now holds the education portfolio, inheriting a system whose credibility Indian students, north and south, have publicly and loudly said they no longer trust. The north's demand for a clean, computer-based, leak-proof NEET remains the more moderate task on the table and reports suggest the ministry is looking at shifting the exam to a computer-based format by 2027 alongside new anti-paper-leak legislation. Tamil Nadu's demand to abolish the exam altogether has not gone anywhere and shows no sign of doing so.

Foreign policy analysts who spent July drawing comparisons to the uprisings that toppled governments in Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have mostly walked those comparisons back. The Council on Foreign Relations,

among others, has argued that a more useful precedent is India's own protest wave of the mid-1970s, which shook Indira Gandhi's government without unseating it outright. The reasons this movement stopped short of that kind of rupture are not flattering to India's youth, but they are honest ones: the Cockroach Janta Party's demands stayed narrowly focused on education policy rather than broadening into a full-throated challenge to the government itself and the numbers on the street, while historic for this kind of single-issue protest, never approached the scale of India's 2011 anti-corruption movement or the 2012 protests against sexual violence. There is also a harder political truth sitting underneath all of it: even young Indians who forced a Cabinet minister out of office have nowhere obvious to direct that energy come election time because India currently lacks an opposition strong enough to convert street anger into a governing alternative. Power was there. It just did not, in the end, find a full outlet.

India was not the only country in the region living through this in 2026. While the Cockroach Janta Party was still camped in New Delhi in mid-July, Bangladesh was going through an eerily similar



Police personnel hit activists and supporters of the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) with batons to disperse them during a protest in New Delhi, India, on July 20, 2026.
● ARUN SANKAR/AFP

reckoning of its own. Hundreds of Higher Secondary Certificate examinees blocked intersections across Dhaka and more than a dozen other districts, demanding the resignation of Education Minister A.N.M. Ehsanul Hoque Milon after his ministry refused to postpone exam papers despite severe flooding that left some students wading through water

or travelling by boat to reach test centres. Anger boiled over further when an audio clip surfaced of Milon dismissing anxious parents by comparing their children to "farm chickens" who catch cold in a little rain, a remark that quickly became the protest's rallying cry, with students chanting back that they were "not farm chickens" but the country's future. One HSC candidate, invoking the uprising that toppled Sheikh Hasina's government in 2024, warned the minister he was about to find out exactly what "broiler chickens" could do.

The two movements were not, strictly speaking, a case of one

directly inspiring the other; they unfolded almost in parallel, only weeks apart and Bangladesh's protesters were drawing more on their own country's 2024 uprising than on events in India. But regional commentators, in Dhaka and elsewhere, were quick to read both as symptoms of the same underlying condition: a generation across South Asia, in India, Bangladesh and Nepal alike, that no longer trusts its examination systems, its job markets, or the adults running either and that has shown it can turn a single administrative failure into a national reckoning almost overnight. Bangladesh's students eventually traded their demand for the minister's resignation for a six-point reform charter once the government announced relief measures, but the message both governments received was the same: this generation is watching each other, organising fast, and no longer inclined to stay quiet.

What India's summer of 2026 did find, in the end, was a name, a face and a slogan that a Chief Justice never intended to hand a generation: cockroaches don't get employment, they don't get a place in the profession, and, as it turns out, they don't quietly go away either.

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South Asia's Gen Z revolutions now face difficult realities



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OPINION

Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka find themselves at a turning point. Their relatively new governments, brought to power in the wake of youth-led protest movements, retain popular mandates. But they must now grapple with governance challenges exacerbated by the Iran war and complicated relations with India.

Similarities and differences

In 2022, the government of Sri Lanka's President Gotabaya Rajapaksa was overthrown in a mass protest movement known as the Aragalaya (meaning: Struggle). Bangladesh's "Monsoon Revolution" followed in 2024, with long-serving prime minister Sheikh Hasina removed from power, before the so-called "Gen Z revolution" in Nepal toppled prime minister KP Sharma Oli's government in 2025. These movements were all fuelled by a combination of economic distress (all three countries are undergoing IMF bailouts), demographic pressures and political dysfunction, with growing resentment against ruling elites due to a culture of corruption, nepotism and increasingly autocratic tendencies. Social media also played an important role and allowed anti-establishment narratives to flourish. There are undoubtedly some country-specific differences. In

Sri Lanka, the Aragalaya was triggered by a sovereign debt crisis, hyperinflation and commodity shortages. In Bangladesh, the issue of public sector job quotas for families of war veterans became a lightning rod for anti-government unrest. In Nepal, the catalyst was a social media ban.

The elections that followed also took different trajectories. While Nepal chose radical change — electing a former rapper, Balendra Shah, as its new prime minister in March — Bangladesh opted for a degree of continuity in electing Tarique Rehman, the son of a former prime minister and president, from the established Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). And while Nepal rejected established left-leaning political parties, Sri Lanka's President Anura Kumara Disasanayake heads a coalition led by a Marxist-Leninist party, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

After the revolutions

During a recent visit to the region, it was clear that despite optimism, all three countries now face similar internal and external challenges.

A climate of hope and belief in a fresh start persists. The new governments all came to power with large electoral mandates, creating a sense of opportunity. Even in Bangladesh, where there has been a degree of continuity, the proposed political reforms of the July National Charter have fuelled a sense of democratic renewal. However, initial euphoria is also giving way to a feeling that gov-

ernments are squandering their goodwill through their inability or unwillingness to implement necessary reforms. These doubts are not helped by missteps stemming from the new governments' inexperience.

In Nepal, despite Shah campaigning on an anti-corruption platform, two ministers in the new government departed within its first month after facing scandals. In Sri Lanka, growing frustration over austerity measures was exacerbated by the government response to Cyclone Ditwah last year, which some consider inadequate. Earlier in the year, the ruling party's vote share dropped in local elections.

In Bangladesh, violent crime is a growing concern as the army returns to the barracks after the February election. There are also concerns that the BNP government may only implement parts of the proposed July Charter political reforms to avoid changes that could erode its power. The party will face its first test when Bangladesh holds local government elections later this year.

Stability not guaranteed

Strong mandates therefore do not guarantee stability. This is particularly true if broader societal challenges are not addressed. All three countries have a history of prolonged periods of violence and instability. Nepal, which was plagued by a decade-long Maoist insurgency, has various social divides, including along caste, generational, regional and ideolog-

ical lines. A constitution passed in 2015 sought to address these cleavages. However, there are fears that social cohesion could be undermined by the new government's focus on appeasing its younger urban voter base, which could risk overlooking other constituencies.

In Sri Lanka, the government has sought to separate itself from ethnic-based politics. But following the decades-long civil war, ethnic Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism remains entrenched in Sri Lankan society. This holds implications for lasting reconciliation with the country's minority Hindu and Muslim Tamil community.

Meanwhile, in Bangladesh, the main divide is between the country's two long-established dynastic political parties — the BNP and Awami League — with efforts to forge a credible youth-led "third front" failing to bear fruit in the election. For now, this rivalry has been deferred by the ban on the Awami League. However, this situation is unsustainable; it will eventually be necessary to rehabilitate the party in some form to break the cycle of revenge politics that has historically plagued the country.

Iran war and India relations

These pressures are exacerbated by the war in Iran. All three countries have been severely impacted by the war with inflationary pressures, fuel rationing and limited fiscal space to withstand the

People wade through a flooded road after heavy rainfall in Wellampitiya on the outskirts of Colombo, Sri Lanka, on November 29, 2025.
● ISHARA S. KODIKARA/AFP

economic shocks of the conflict. They are also all heavily dependent on foreign remittances from Persian Gulf states. These economic strains have cut short any post-election honeymoon period. Relations with India present another challenge. Governments in all three countries are seeking a reset in relations with New Delhi, which had been strained under their predecessors.

India is a crucial source of humanitarian aid, development assistance and infrastructure investment to all three countries. The Iran war has also created space for greater alignment, given that New Delhi has stepped up energy exports to its neighbours as they face shortages.

However, India's prominence in the region also breeds mistrust from its neighbours, who face challenges in managing relations with their larger neighbour. Against this backdrop, South Asia's newly elected governments face the shared risks of unfulfilled promises, external shocks and difficult regional relations. If they are unable to rise to these challenges, they themselves may come under pressure from renewed protests in the future.

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