

Mobilizing Change: Political Movements, Activism, and Pathways to Democratic Justice

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Abstract:

In an era of prolonged global autocratization—marked by the V-Dem Democracy Report 2025 noting 25 years of democratic decline, with autocracies outnumbering democracies (91 vs. 88) for the first time in over two decades—youth-led political movements have emerged as critical agents of potential renewal. This paper examines the mechanisms and outcomes of recent Gen Z activism in forging pathways to democratic justice, focusing on three cases: Bangladesh’s 2024 student uprising (leading to regime change and interim reforms under Muhammad Yunus), Nepal’s 2025 protests against corruption and social media restrictions (resulting in government resignation and transitional leadership), and Kenya’s 2024–2025 mobilizations against fiscal policies and repression (facing sustained crackdowns). Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study combines qualitative process-tracing of mobilizing structures, framing, and political opportunities with quantitative analysis of Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem v15) indicators, including the Civil Society Participation Index (v2x_cspart), Electoral Democracy Index (v2x_polyarchy), and Liberal Democracy Index. Results reveal divergent impacts: substantial rebounds in participatory and liberal indicators in Bangladesh and moderate gains in Nepal, where activism exploited transitional opportunities and overcame repression; stagnation or slight declines in Kenya amid state violence and limited institutional change. These findings align with contentious politics theory and comparative literature on civil resistance (e.g., Pinckney, 2018; 2024) and pro-democratic mobilization (Bernhard et al., 2023), emphasizing that nonviolent, bottom-up activism enhances inclusive democracy in hybrid regimes when repression is mitigated and civil society spaces reopen. The study highlights activism’s contingent democratizing potential amid autocratization trends, offering implications for prioritizing non-repressive responses and inclusive transitions to sustain gains. Future research should track long-term post-2025 outcomes.

Keywords:

Youth activism, democratic justice, political movements, civil society participation.