

Youth, Representation and Political Participation

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Abstract

This article explores the transformative impact of youth leadership on Nepal's political landscape, highlighting how young leaders have challenged traditional power structures dominated by elder elites. It explains the increasing political participation of youth as candidates and voters, driven by a collective desire for transparency, accountability and innovative governance. Despite significant barriers posed by senior politicians reluctant to cede power, youth-led movements and independent candidates have energized public discourse and reshaped perceptions of politics from a corrupt domain to a platform for service and integrity. As Nepal approaches the 2027 elections, the article underscores the critical need for political parties to embrace generational change and provide space for young, visionary leaders to address contemporary challenges and advance social justice. Ultimately, youth engagement is framed as essential for democratic renewal and sustainable development in Nepal. The article highlights the reality of youth political engagement: on one hand, an empowered, hopeful segment working for transformation; on the other, a disillusioned majority frustrated by corruption, political stagnation, and exclusion from decision-making. In addressing the ongoing challenges, it also explores how digital activism, youth-led movements like "No, Not Again," and the growing appetite for issue-based politics are redefining Nepal's democratic norms and public expectations.

Introduction

For any country, youth are the best assets it can have. They are not just the future of a nation but also a collective form of an energized group of people who carry vision, fresh perspectives, and innovative ideas. Young people possess competitive minds, eager to learn and contribute to the progress of their nation. Youth are the group of people who carry sense of responsibility in their mind and integrity at their hearts.

According to Kehily, Youth is "a stage of life between childhood and adulthood" or the period when a person gains independence from dependency (Kehily, 2007). Another approach suggests to defining youth as a cultural marker meaning "a distinct social status with specific roles, rituals, and relationships" (USAID, 2005). According to the Armenian State Youth Policy Concept, young people represent the 16-30 age group of the population. Definitions of youth by age groups vary across various international and local institutions, but the basic notion remains the same: they are a group of young minds driven by the motivation of identity exploration, instability, and self-focus before settling into adult roles. The representation of youth in nation-building allows for diverse viewpoints, ensuring that policies and decisions reflect the needs of all generations. Society as a whole is a system of power relations like political, social, economic, religious, moral, cultural and others. Politics, specifically is a major driving force of societal transformation as it deals with the distribution of power and resources which eventually leads to society's progress in an equitable

manner. Therefore, the participation of youth in politics is crucial for a dynamic and progressive society.

For a healthy democracy, meaningful participation of youth in political, social and economic life is crucial. Youth participation not just ensures that governance reflects the needs and aspiration of the maximum segment of the population but also contributes in holding the stakeholders accountable. Politics shapes the future of a country. Youth bring creativity, adaptability and a critical-thinking approach that is essential for solving modern challenges. Their involvement brings fresh ideas, wide and broad perspectives and technological awareness. Engagement of youth also aids in building civil responsibility and combatting social justice. Pavels (2021) finds proactive youth civic engagement is a potential for country's development, which ensures the development of civic society, strengthens democratic values, unite society for overcoming common challenges, influences political processes and is invaluable investment in solving different social problems.

Role of youth in political development of Nepal

In a short period, Nepal's political development has been through major significant changes. Be it the abolishment of Rana regime, Monarchy or establishment of a federal democratic structure, the country has witnessed major transformations and youth have played a pivotal role in these historical movements. Zharkevich (2019) describes how the promise of development and the reality of political instability motivate young people to become politically active. Veteran leaders like B.P Koirala who began their political activism in their youth were among the revolutionaries to overthrow the autocratic Rana Regime. Similarly, student unions like Nepal Students Union, ANNFSU, who organized massive demonstrations, strikes, discourses, led to shift Nepal from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy. Besides this, the active participation of youth in historical People's Movement I and II laid the foundation for social transformation and inclusive legal reforms that significantly impacted Nepal's political landscape highlighting the importance of youth in political reforms. According to Acharya (2024), Youth movements in Nepal have played a significant role in shaping political policies and governance, particularly in recent decades. These movements driven by the vibrant and politically active youth population of the country have led to substantial political changes and reforms.

In recent years, youth active participation in politics has taken significant momentum globally and locally. From the climate strikes of Greta Thunberg to the glorious victory of Balen Shah in the local level elections, youth people have taken over to the streets, social medias, political platforms demanding for change.

These movements highlight that the youth today no longer limit themselves to being passive observers but are emerging as catalysts in political transformation.

These movements showcase how youth can bring change by utilizing their energy, digital fluency, and moral clarity to mobilize large-scale public support. Their ability to globalize local concerns

and influence international policies and discourse shows that youth are not just demanding the change but actively leading to it. These examples prove that youth are not only aware of socio-political issues but are also capable of leading impactful change, challenging outdated systems, and reimagining governance for the better.

Youth representation in politics is highly essential for a nation's progress. In Nepal, where political stigmatization and corruption have caused deep frustration among young people, their active participation can reform the system. By breaking the stigma around politics, promoting ethical leadership and demanding accountability, the youth can reclaim power from corrupt leaders and divert the country towards a brighter future. The energy, vision and determination of young people must be mobilized to build an inclusive and prosperous Nepal. It is now time for the youth to take over the driving seat and lead the country to a better tomorrow. Shakya (2022) explains, a youthful population is regarded as a force of change and a source of innovation, and in Nepal, the youth has catalyzed critical movements, systems and opportunities.

Challenges

On one hand, we see an inspiring rise in youth involvement in politics. Many young individuals are stepping forward, initiating change and becoming active participants in shaping society. However, on the other hand, a significant portion of the youth population still remains disillusioned and disconnected from political processes. This disassociation often comes from a deep sense of political frustration, cultivated by years of witnessing corrupt practices, broken promises and power-hungry behavior from some politicians,

For a big section of youth, politics has become synonymous with manipulation, dishonesty and self-interest, rather than a means of public service. They are not just critical of certain politicians but they have developed a generalized hatred for the entire political system. As a result, many choose to withdraw entirely from civic engagement, believing that involvement will either make no difference or compromise their values. O'Neill (2020) explains, despite the widespread influence of political parties on the lives of young Nepalis, there is growing anti-political or counter political sentiment that reflects a deepening distrust with formal political institutions.

Also, it is important to understand that the group of youth in Nepal are not uniformly and smoothly accessed to opportunities. Youth political participation is hindered by the context of each individual. Such micro factors like upbringing, access to education and opportunities, financial situation, family situation etc should also be analyzed. Not everyone grows up with same amount of privilege and opportunity. These factors are proportional to the amount of engagement youth show eventually. While youth of urban area who has had the access to education and social capital may find it easy to engage in socio-political activities, youth from remote areas, dalit community, indigenous communities, minorities who might lack digital access or local support network often face deeper exclusion. This not just makes their political engagement challenging for them but also aids in increasing their political detachment. So, in order to understand the standing of youth in political participation and representation, it is necessary to understand whether the youth of a nation are all in an equal standing or not with balanced access to opportunities and information.

This widespread apathy and mistrust are dangerous if increased, because not only they weaken democratic participation but also ignore the transformative potential of politics when driven by integrity and vision.

To reduce this political frustration, more engagement of youth is required with practical examples that when young people determine and come forward, they make the change possible. A ray of hope has been observed through recent elections where it was observed that increasing number of youths were coming out and running in the elections. This wave was first brought in the 2017 Local level election where a 21-year old candidate Ranju Darshana stepped into the political spotlight by announcing her candidacy for mayor of Kathmandu Metropolitan City. In a country long dominated by traditional political parties and older leadership, the emergence of Ranju Darshana marked a bold and refreshing chapter in Nepal's political landscape. At just 21 years old, her campaign symbolized not just a personal ambition, but a larger movement calling for integrity, accountability, and the active participation of young people in governance.

Ranju Darshana's candidacy was significant because it directly challenged the notion that politics is reserved for the elite, the powerful or the experienced which motivated hundreds of youth with no dynastic background or political lineage to come forward.

Ranju's bold move served as an inspiration for many other young people across Nepal. Her campaign sparked discussions in schools, universities, and communities about youth leadership, political accountability, and alternative governance. She challenged the stereotype of politics being "dirty" and unfit for the educated youth. Following her footsteps, other youth-led initiatives began to gain momentum.

The emergence of independent candidates like Balen Shah and Harka Sampang in later elections, who succeeded in securing top positions without traditional party support, can be traced back to the wave of confidence and political consciousness Ranju helped initiate.

This shift has become even more visible with the rise of youth leaders like Balen Shah, Toshima Karki, Sumana Shrestha, and Sagar Dhakal. Balen Shah's victory as the independent mayor of Kathmandu shattered the monopoly of traditional parties and proved that credibility and vision can defeat political machinery. Toshima Karki, a doctor turned politician, stood firm against party politics and demonstrated that professionals with clean images can bring ethical leadership into the system. Sumana Shrestha who is known for her policy-driven approach and conceptual clarity in parliamentary debates, has emerged as a role model for young women and aspiring lawmakers. Likewise, Sagar Dhakal, who contested against powerful leaders like Sher Bahadur Deuba, showed that youth can fearlessly challenge even the most influential political figures. Their rise to public office without any propaganda or political backing from major parties has encouraged a new generation to believe in the power of civic engagement, independent thinking and the possibility of reshaping Nepal's political landscape from the ground up.

These leaders collectively changed the perception that politics is a "dirty game." Their rise has helped people realize that it is not politics itself that is corrupt, but the actors within it who misuse power for personal gain. This growing awareness has ignited a positive sense of political hope among the public. Many now believe that if the youth dare to dream of a better system and step forward to lead, change is not only possible but achievable.

Jyoti Lamichhane, the Deputy Mayor of Beni Nagarpalika, Myagdi, is a shining example of youth leadership rooted in purpose and service. Entering politics with a heartfelt vision to raise the voices of the unheard, she has dedicated herself tirelessly to improving lives at the grassroots level. Her focus on enhancing education and strengthening public service delivery has made a significant impact on her community, despite often working away from the spotlight. In a system often dominated by loud rhetoric and political stunts, she chooses to lead through action: calmly, consistently, and compassionately. Her journey stands as a hope for many young people in the region, proving that leadership doesn't require privilege, but persistence, integrity, and a sense of duty.

Across Nepal, there are countless young leaders like Ms. Lamichhane, serving their communities with dedication, compassion and a deep sense of responsibility. Though they may not all be in the limelight, their contributions are vital threads in the fabric of national progress. Their stories remind us that youth-led politics is not a future dream, but a present reality empowering change from the ground level.

When young leaders emerge with clean images and a genuine desire to serve, they inspire others to believe in the system again. Social media and digital platforms have also provided youth with tools to mobilize, educate, and influence political narratives without relying on traditional, corrupt structures.

Today, this new wave of leadership continues to inspire thousands of young Nepalis to engage in activism, policymaking, social service and governance. The 2022 federal and provincial level elections too saw an increase in youth participation with 31% of the total candidates falling in the youth category, (Election Commission (2017)). These statistics have shown that the youth have the potential to drive change and bring new ideas to the table. There is a renewed belief that politics can be a platform for honesty, innovation, and service when in the hands of visionary youth. It has restored a sense of ownership and optimism among citizens, proving that real transformation begins when people stop waiting for change and start becoming the change.

As the country actively awaits the next elections happening in 2027, there is a growing public desire to see young, dynamic and capable candidates stepping into leadership roles. Citizens across the country are eager for fresh perspectives and innovative solutions to long-standing issues where almost everyone is hoping to see young, fresh and competitive candidates but an unwillingness of political leaders to hand over leadership and management roles to the younger ones has also been observed as a critical challenge. However, a major challenge resides in the reluctance of

established political leaders to delegate power and provide space for the younger generation. Despite the rising call for generational change, as of now, Nepal is being ruled by leaders who are in their 60s and 70s. It's been decades that we're seeing repetitive incompetent faces sitting in the decision-making positions, rotating their turns in and out, risking our future and right to a better quality of life. This political pattern has not only limited innovation but also eroded public trust in traditional parties. The continuous recycling of the same faces who have become incompetent or out of touch has left a large section of the population, especially the youth, feeling alienated and frustrated. The younger generation is increasingly aware of how these repetitive leadership patterns are compromising their future and denying them the right to a better quality of life.

It's high time the political parties realize the sense of frustration developed in the citizens seeing the same old, repetitive faces and begin actively seeking out and empowering young, qualified and forward-thinking individuals within their parties. If the traditional parties continue to ignore these signals and once again distribute election tickets to the same old, predictable candidates in 2027, they may face a stronger wave of youth resistance. Unlike in the past, today's youth are more informed, organized and unwilling to remain passive spectators. The demand is not just for participation but also for transformation. The political elite must either embrace this change or be prepared to be left behind by a generation that is ready to lead.

A powerful glimpse of this frustration was already visible during the 2019 elections with the rise of the "No, Not Again" movement. What began as a simple Facebook page calling on citizens not to vote for six former prime ministers quickly turned into a viral campaign, resonating with thousands who were tired of the same power-hungry figures dominating the political scene. This grassroots initiative sent a clear message that people are no longer willing to accept recycled, underperforming leadership.

The only way to remove corrupt leaders from power is by replacing them with competent, ethical and visionary young leaders. Youth participation in election both as voters and candidates can shift the balance of power. When young people vote in large numbers, they can hold politicians accountable and demand better governance. Moreover, when educated and passionate youth enter politics, they bring fresh energy and innovative solutions to long standing problems. Nepal's youth, who make up a 42.5% of the country's population, are approaching the 2027 elections with a mix of hope, determination and critical awareness. After years of observing repeated patterns of political paralysis, corruption and lack of accountability, the younger generation is no longer content with being passive participants in democracy. Instead, they are envisioning the upcoming elections as an opportunity to reshape the political landscape that is more inclusive, innovative and responsive to the needs of ordinary citizens. The youth want leaders who are not only young in age but progressive in mindset, capable of addressing contemporary issues such as climate change, digital transformation, unemployment, and mental health.

The 2027 elections are also seen as a platform for greater political accountability. Young voters increasingly demand transparency in campaign financing, candidate backgrounds and party policies and visions. They are more informed than ever, using digital platforms to fact-check, organize and compare. Movements like “No, Not Again”, “Enough is Enough” have proven that young people are ready to challenge the status quo and promote issue-based voting over party loyalty.

Moreover, Nepal’s youth envision an election where independent candidates and youth-led parties are given a fair chance to compete. Inspired by leaders like Balen Shah, Toshima Karki, and Sumana Shrestha, they believe politics can be clean, efficient and driven by real public needs rather than out of the world and impractical hope. Youth believe that young women and marginalized voices must be given more space in decision-making roles. A society is considered just when it is equitable, when every group gets proper representation and opportunity. So, to create a just and fair society, equity and social justice are highly important.

However, when young people are excluded from decision-making processes, policies often fail to address diverse concerns which leads to minority groups being backwarded. In Nepal, where political instability and corruption have hindered development, young people have grown increasingly frustrated with traditional politics. Many like me feel that their voices are ignored and their potential is wasted. This disillusionment has resulted in either complete disengagement from politics or migration in search of better opportunities abroad. However, if the youth actively participate in politics, they can challenge the status quo, demand accountability, transparency and bring transformative changes.

This stigma has discouraged many young and passionate individuals from entering the political arena. To change this, youth must redefine politics by promoting transparency, integrity and accountability.

Conclusion

The significant role in societal transformation is played by youth of that nation. Youth who carry the mentality that if you have courage and resilience change is possible can actually bring out positive change. Youth whose blood is mixed with strength carry the skills and capacity to divert the country towards a new age of education and technology. They carry diverse methodologies to solve problems.

Despite high expectations, youth merely remain symbolic representatives without real decision making power. It won’t be wrong to say, Youth political participation in Nepal suffers from tokenism, where young people are showcased but merely empowered. We get to see large group of youth getting regularly mobilized during election, rallies, protests by the political parties but

those voices are rarely included in core policy decisions. Although young people are invited to voice their opinions but they're viewed through the lens of their symbolic presence rather than genuine engagement in policy development.

Beyond mere attendance, representation in meaningful and genuine decision making power structures like parliamentary committees, executive branches should consist adequate youth participation. One of the essential points in the fight against tokenism is the awareness among young people of their own values, strengths, and knowledge that they bring to the table. To successfully counteract tokenism, youth must recognize the power of their voice and the importance of their perspectives.

It is vital to create and promote platforms that empower young people to take a more active role in political decision-making. Through collaboration with organizations, institutions, and other youth, strategies can be developed that promote genuine participation, empowering young individuals to become key actors in shaping their future. Its high time, Nepal must move forward from just symbolic gestures to accountable commitments for youth participation. The Election Commission should also consider lowering the age barrier for electoral candidacy which will help in intergenerational representation and acknowledge the political maturity and readiness of today's youth, especially with growing access to education and information.

Similarly, statutory bodies like National Youth Council should aggressively coordinate among various stakeholders to mainstream youth issues into national development and runs programs on entrepreneurship, leadership training, youth mobilization and meaningful youth participation. Besides, policies like National Youth Policy, 2072 which are promulgated with the vision of promoting youths' allegiance to the nation should be effectively implemented and timely updated to ensure inclusivity and representation of marginalized youth and enhance active youth participation in national development.

Our society is dynamic, so should be we. Our policies should be updated and upgraded in accordance with time. In modern context, the decisions made by old generation may not cover every aspect of the society. As a result, sometimes such policies and regulations may be damageable to the society's progress. Even though the system makes it hard for them, young people in Nepal are stepping up to lead and shape the country's future. More young voters and candidates are getting involved, showing they want a government that is honest, modern, and ready to tackle issues like climate change and technology. As Nepal moves toward the 2077 elections, political parties must give young people real opportunities to lead. If they don't, they risk ignoring almost half the population and weakening democracy.

Youth-driven change isn't just good, it's necessary for Nepal's growth and fairness. When young leaders act with honesty and vision, they don't just run for the sake of running, they bring new life to democracy and build a better future for everyone. Youth representation in politics is highly essential for a nation's progress. In a country like Nepal, where political stigmatization and corruption have caused deep frustration among young people, their active participation can reform the system. By breaking the stigma around politics, promoting ethical leadership and demanding

accountability, the youth can reclaim power from corrupt leaders and divert the country towards a brighter future. The energy, vision and determination of young people must be mobilized to build an inclusive and prosperous Nepal. Therefore, it is now time for the youth to take over the driving seat and lead the country to a better tomorrow.

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