



Buddha's Eyes

Nishi Rungta

21, 51, and now 74. The death toll has been rising through the week. 17, 29, 19, 21, 38. The majority who were killed since 8 September were Nepal's young and hopefuls. Not all names have arrived since not all bodies have been identified. Some families still wait. Beneath this grief lies deep seated anger. Each of these names belongs to a young life cut short in their prime. Shriyam Chaulagain, 18, a Grade 12 student at Global College, was shot in Baneswor while returning home from class, still in his college uniform. Subash Bohara, 23, from Bajhang, dreamt of becoming a

judge. A bullet tore through his neck outside parliament; his mother Kaili, travelled four days to see him one last time. She never had the chance to go to school but taught herself just enough to write her name. With that very signature, she authorised the autopsy of her son. Rashik Khatiwada, 23, was shot twice in the chest. His uncle found out about his death after seeing clips on social media. Rashik's mother clung to her son in their final moments together at Pashupatinath - a farewell no mother should have to face. Abhishek Shrestha, 23, was supposed to fly to Saudi Arabia on 13 September. Instead his father landed in Kathmandu from Dubai that very day to perform his last rites. Abhishek was shot dead in

Itahari just on the way back from collecting his final paycheck from his workplace that morning. Nikita Gautam, 19, a recent high school graduate was watching protesters from her terrace on 9 September set fire to a neighbourhood police station. Police were firing back, one bullet hit Nikita in the chest. She died on the way to hospital. Sulabh Raj Shrestha, 25, was a civil engineering student and a district-level cricket player in Banke. On 8 September, Sulabh was shot by security forces guarding Parliament. He was rushed to the the National Trauma Center, where he died. Each of these names carries great weight. Each life is a story. Each death an indictment. These young lives carried hope, promise, and the belief that Nepal could change for the better. Their martyrdom must not be in vain. This is not the first time Nepal has lost its youth to the state's bullets. Civil war atrocities still fester without justice. The 74 of the GenZ protesters

who were killed received a Guard of Honour and were declared martyrs as their bodies were taken to the pyre following a tribute rally through the city. It rained, as if the skies were weeping. This new government in which Nepal's youth have placed so much faith must now rise to this moment. Accountability cannot be deferred. Justice must not be delayed. And the rule of law must apply equally for violence committed by the state as well as all other forces. To betray these innocent lives and their families, would be to betray all of Nepal's future.



Two sides of the same coin

Politicians were targeted, but what of bureaucrats who worked hand-in-glove with them to plunder the state?

Sonia Awale

The videos are everywhere. K P Oli is lifted to safety by an Army helicopter as protesters amass at the gates of Baluwatar. The Deuba couple is bloodied by an angry crowd. Stashed with cash, homes of party leaders were ransacked and set ablaze.

Nepal went from an Oli-garchy to a youth-led caretaker government in two days. The idealistic anti-corruption GenZ campaign was penetrated by an array of forces intent on inflicting maximum damage on state institutions.

Whatever their motivation, these disparate groups were all enraged by the kleptocracy. The state had looted the people for so long, many felt it was ok to loot the looters.

Prime Minister Sushila Karki has vowed to go after the corrupt, confiscate their ill-gotten wealth and confiscate property. As a former Chief Justice, Karki is known for her no-nonsense attitude and zero tolerance for corruption. The three ministers appointed so far also have impeccable records for delivery and performance.

Young turks like Gagan Thapa of the Nepali Congress and Yogesh Bhattarai of the UML have pledged to clean up their own

parties with generational change in leadership. There are similar, but more subdued, voices within the Maoists and even the RSP.

For a spectacularly successful movement against corruption and for good governance, there could not have been a better outcome — even though in the public perception the GenZ revolt has been tainted somewhat by the infiltration and wanton destruction of government installations. Still, there is hope this catharsis will shake up the system and clean it up.

PARTNERS IN CRIME

Nepal's development was systematically hollowed out by malfeasance for the past decades. But it was not just politicians and senior party leaders who were corrupt, usually they were hand-in-glove with the civil service. Bureaucrats largely escaped the wrath of the people last week although many were partners in crime.

The debate in Nepal for many years has always been, who is more corrupt: politicians or bureaucrats? Or, who corrupted who? Padmini Pradhananga, who headed Transparency International Nepal, says the two complement each other.



contributed to the cost of doing business which was passed down to consumers in terms of higher prices.

Diksha Kandel, a corporate lawyer, has seen it all. "Government offices created unnecessary hurdles every step of the way in everything from getting FDI approval to industry registration. Everything has a rate," she says.

She adds: "The level of corruption at all levels of bureaucracy was frankly terrifying. At least with local political representatives, they are accountable to the people and get things done, even if it is to get re-elected."

There is no shortcut to ending corruption, it has become a way of life. It was the main factor fuelling youth rage, and added to the increasing outmigration of Nepalis.

Pradhananga says impunity was institutionalised as the guilty never got punished because of corruption in the judiciary: "Judges were also political appointees. If they were to honestly prosecute criminals, corruption would go down by 75%."

Pradhananga thinks if corruption is under control, it will only take two years to kick start development, for Nepal's international image to improve, and foreign investment to start flowing in. "But for that we need to be run by efficient managers, not career politicians who have mistaken politics for a profession instead of a public service."

Political interference has defanged the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA). The Special Court that presides over corruption and money laundering arising from public procurement cases also needs to be overhauled.

Revolutions often start with an agenda to eradicate corruption, only for it to be further entrenched with regime change, eroding public trust in democracy. The outcome of Nepal's GenZ protest, especially after the March election, should reward candidates with demonstrable efficiency and integrity.

Letters

NEW MINISTERS

The interim government's priority is to arrange new elections, creating real change is up to the new elected government ('Nepal interim government faces first hiccups', Sonia Awale, nepalitimes.com). It is time for the GenZ movement to establish a transparent and non-corruption based alternative for voters to select. To the youth of Nepal: register so you can vote. Not voting is saying no to change for the better.

Ben-Erik Ness

I'm remembering the days of 1990, when they toppled the partyless panchayat system. Today a partyless collective toppled a multi-party government.

Bhupendra Prasad Giri

Give the interim government a chance, change and reform need

time and dedication. The whole middle segment of the administration will have to be reformed. Will they follow the example of the new crew? I very much hope so.

Renate Schwarz

Nothing will change straight away, it will take a long time to fix this country after years of corruption.

Claudia Quiroga

Those who are now in power must be aware that the timeframe presents enough of fertile ground for forces opposed to this to formulate plans, strategise and resurface stronger and better prepared to take over. It seems infiltration and sabotage plans have already begun. Only time will tell whether it is the new Nepal or just a new game with old players.

Gyanendra Banks

SUPREME COURT

Justice hasn't died, justice never dies. The Supreme Court building was set on fire, it can be rebuilt. Files were burnt, which can be retrieved ('The day justice died', Mamata Shrestha, page 8).

Santosh Shah

Justice had always been dead in this country. Let us not pretend there aren't many controversial cases still waiting for so-called justice for over half a decade and beyond. The Supreme Court and the leeches inside it existed to favour the parties, not people. Whatever happened to this building was an attempt to erase evidence.

Sujan Shrestha

The Supreme Court collapsed when the judges handed over the tools of social media ban to a corrupt government. They made the same mistake as Bangladesh's judges, and the outcome in both cases is identical. Judges, do not go against the will

of the people, and do not side with corrupt politicians.

Hossain Siddiqui

Is it really possible in this day and age that all court documents are still only on paper? I have my doubts, but if that really is the case it might be a good time for the Supreme Court to upgrade.

Gary Wornell

What a shame about the Supreme Court. This is the downside of protests and mob psychology.

Anita Anand

VIPASSANA

As a fellow Vipassana meditator, I deeply resonate with this ('Vipassana during a revolution', Alisha Sijapati, page 3). The fear of the world collapsing while we're inside is very real.

But I can only imagine the emotions you and other meditators went through when it actually

happened. In times of crisis, turning inward with awareness and sending loving, kindness and compassion outward for lives lost, families grieving, and everyone affected is far more important than spreading panic and fear. This too shall pass.

Rolina Dhital

Reading this was like a walk down memory lane, a lesson in life and what we have all lived in the last few days.

Tulsi Khemka

Beautifully crafted experience. I had been wondering how the meditators must have felt as they got back to the outside world after Vipassana.

Shital Shakya

TOURISM

Maybe the guys who stay at Hilton will not be coming back soon but all the other Nepal-lovers will return as soon as things calm down and it is safe for them to return ('Nepal turmoil will hit

tourism', Vishad Raj Onta, #1278). No need to worry much about it.

Varvára H.

I would prefer not to have skyscrapers in the centre of the city. It was a bit of an eyesore. Not only this, but all the other highrises that have erupted in the centre of Kathmandu are visually unappealing and also a symbol of how they were built illegally.

Nidhi Shah

ECONOMY

I wonder who pays to rebuild everything ('Relocate, reallocate, recover', Shristi Karki, page 6-7). What if it causes more harm in the economy than the government as a consequence?

Steve Norton

There was a concealed agenda by vested groups that were not GenZ ('Questions that won't leave me', Ishika Panta, nepalitimes.com).

Stewie McLean

Quotes



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Negative impact of recent protests is undeniable. Visuals of burning Hilton Hotel have been a powerful deterrent, not just for tourism but also foreign investors willing to set up in a country already infamous for corruption and poor investment climate.



Hypocrite Nepali @HypocriteNepali

This should also be a lesson to the private sector about how little trust people have on them. Despite repeated claims by owners of not having politicians investment, the public didn't seem to buy it. Why?



Nepali Times @NepaliTimes

Sushila Karki has been sworn in as the new Prime Minister and is tasked with forming an interim government to hold elections for the new leadership of the country. #NepalProtests Read about the life and career of Nepal's first female prime minister:



Asmita Pradhan @apsster

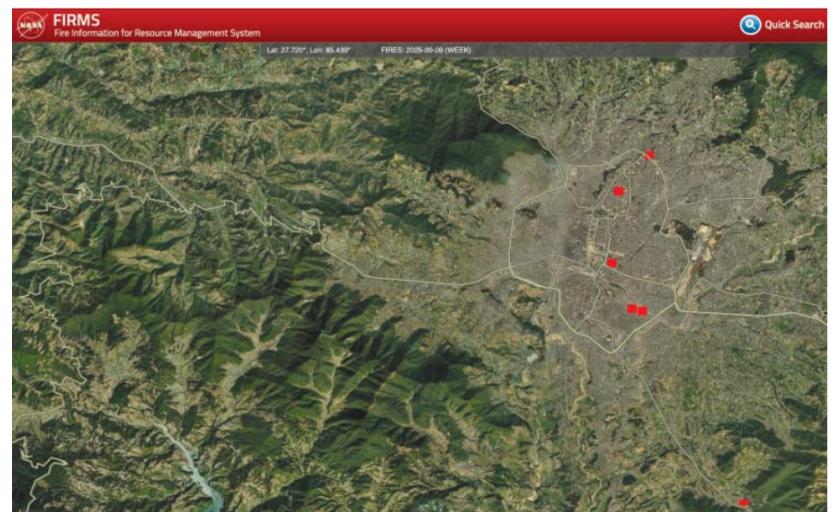
Nepal's historic appointment of its first female Prime Minister is a bittersweet victory, fueled by the GenZ movement. (P.S. This whole conversation started on Discord, and of course viral TikTok, which is peak GenZ, honestly.) A revolution can begin with a 30-sec video.

Online Package



As Nepal mourns the 74 killed during last week's protests, the names of some them are projected on walls across Kathmandu Valley. The majority who were killed since 8 September were Nepal's youth with dreams for the future. The election government in which Nepalis place so much faith must now rise to the moment. Accountability cannot be deferred. Justice must not be delayed. Watch video, and subscribe to the Nepali Times YouTube channel.

1,000 Words



GENZ PROTEST VISIBLE FROM SPACE: This satellite image of Kathmandu Valley on 9 September from the NASA Fire Information for Resource Management System (FIRMS) site shows red dots where buildings were burning. Infra-red sensors show some of the major fires in the Singha Darbar area, the UML headquarters, Hilton hotel and Godavari Convention Centre.

Times

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Editor: Sonia Awale | Special Correspondent: Shristi Karki

Reporters: Sudiksha Tuladhar, Vishad Raj Onta | Layout: Kiran Maharjan

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editors@nepalitimes.com | www.nepalitimes.com | www.himalmedia.com | Tel: +977 1 5005601-08 Fax: +977 1 5005518



Vipassana during a revolution

Inside, we focused on our breath. Outside, the nation held its. This is what we found when we finally exhaled.

Alisha Sijapati

One Friday night last month, we were swapping stories about Vipassana, a rigorous meditation technique of silent observation, over dinner. We spoke of its ten days of noble silence, of respiration, observation, and sensation.

I told them about my first retreat in Lumbini last year when my mind kept getting distracted: 'What is happening in the outside world? Is K P Oli still prime minister? When I emerged ten days later, he was still PM.

During my second Vipassana in February this year, I reassured my mind that nothing dramatic could unfold in ten days. Still, my gut knew this country was always one headline away from revolution. By my third retreat, I was confident, even cocky.

"What could possibly change? If Oli survived my first two meditation retreats, the world can hold steady for a third," I joked.

On 1 September, I was back at Shivapuri for the second time, my third retreat, hoping that ten days of noble silence would peel yet another layer from my mind.

Vipassana is a paradox: brutally difficult, yet infinitely generous. It is the tool needed to tame and know your unconscious mind, and to know yourself even a little through it is a profound achievement.

My room at Z House had the best view of the Kathmandu Valley. I developed a ritual: press my hands against my cheeks and stare down at the city. The city below looks chaotic, but somehow beautiful in its stubbornness, where pollution and pride coexist. From up there, it looked like no one was free, trapped in their egos, pettiness and misery.

Then, softer thoughts of Metta and compassion would emerge. If only every single person could sit in silence and know their breath, just once. Blessed with ten days of Dhamma teachings on universal law, I imagined our 334 patriarchal parliamentarians and the Oli, Deuba, Prachanda trinity.

On the seventh and the eighth days of Vipassana (8-9 September) there was black smoke rising from the Valley below. Why were people burning all that garbage? There



BLACK SKY: Kathmandu Valley shrouded in smoke on the morning of 9 September as angry protestors set fire to public buildings and office after 19 youth were killed in an anti-corruption protest the day before.

KUNDA DIXIT

was no traffic on the straight road down from Budanilkantha. There were gunshots, and I assumed locals were shooting at marauding monkeys. I mistook the sound of helicopters at night for flights circling after takeoff.

On the ninth day and during the morning of the tenth, it rained heavily. I tried to spot Dharara like I did every day, but the city was shrouded in a blanket of thick black smog. Even after two days of heavy rain, the smoke had not been washed down. This did not make sense, but my mind had returned to the safe harbour of my meditation.

On the morning of 9/9, the tenth day, as we emerged from silence, the hall outside filled with chatter. We joked about our hardships and dreamt of delicious food, feeling a wave of accomplishment after a film about how Vipassana had transformed Tihar Jail in Delhi.

The hall radiated with inspiration and hope. Then, as the film ended an assistant teacher made an announcement: "There are serious protests going on. K P Oli has resigned as prime minister. There are no cabinet ministers. The military has taken over, and a curfew has been imposed."

The news hit like a lightning bolt. Mental tranquility gave way to gasps of "What the f**k?" In the main Dhamma Hall, some women

erupted in applause. We had spent ten days cultivating Metta, only to step out and realise the world had erupted into chaos.

UNSEEN CHAOS

We huddled, trying to piece together fragments of what was happening. The Valley was still covered in black smoke, the main road was still quiet. A neighbour turned up the radio, reporting deaths, destruction and curfew.

A first-time meditator, Shivani Karn, overheard a neighbour from across the wall telling his son that people had been shot and that he should not go to school any more.

Stranded foreigners from Argentina to China were bewildered and terrified. Volunteers debriefed us: buildings burning, ministers' houses ransacked, Oli fleeing, Deuba and his wife beaten up. The leaders were all in the Shivapuri barracks up the mountain. Over 15,000 inmates had broken out of prison.

Driving down from Shivapuri on the morning of 12 September, my heart sank. The smog I had seen was smoke from still smouldering buildings. It was not garbage burning, but the rage of the people. Those were not people scaring away monkeys, but guns that killed innocent lives. The sound of aircraft were actually helicopters

rescuing politicians.

We drove past Singha Darbar, a charred ruin. Another Vipassana meditator, Anjali Baidya, shared a chilling memory. She recalled being 12 years old in 1973, watching from her home in Makhhan Tole as Singha Darbar first caught fire. History had repeated itself 52 years later.

One Bhatbhateni supermarket after another were scorched, police stations, government offices, once symbols of everyday life. There were soldiers everywhere, not police. Amidst the devastation, a deeper truth settled in. This, too, was Anicca — impermanence.

Anicca teaches us that all things are constantly changing: our thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations. Political systems, power structures, national crises are all transitory. This understanding is crucial for healing. When we cling to the idea that a leader, political system or ourselves are permanent, we set ourselves up for disappointment and anger when it inevitably changes.

The Dhamma teaches that responsibility is shared. The anger and fear on the streets are similar to feelings many carry inside. We Nepalis have intergenerational trauma. What I saw was not an abstraction: the gunshots and chaos echoed the terrifying nights of 1 February 2005 in Panauti, a grim

replay of the fear I knew as a child at Malpi school, huddling with friends for safety.

Our national history is a series of ruptures that become personal landmarks. I was nine years old at my aunt's birthday party on 1 June 2001, when the celebration was abruptly called off and we were sent home into the silent shock of a royal massacre.

The path to national healing must begin with individual healing. We can learn from the story of Angulimala, a violent figure who was transformed by the Buddha's compassion. The Buddha walked steadily toward him and said, "I have stopped, Angulimala. You must stop too." Angulimala realised the truth, renounced violence, and was enlightened.

Nepal's long-term well-being depends on our ability to approach the Dhamma as a pragmatic tool. Inner calm can help us process collective trauma. By cultivating forgiveness and compassion, we can create a stability that begins within. True healing begins when we stop externalising our pain or intellectualising our emotions, and start nurturing inner peace.

As the dust settles, the true noise begins: the roar within. We are left with a stark choice: remain trapped in this endless loop of rage, or we can choose to stop. The Dhamma is not some philosophy for a meditation centre; it is the raw truth of our applied wisdom.

Sushila Karki, Nepal's first female prime minister, may have emerged as a new 'messiah' but we must begin to take responsibility and accountability.

The path forward is not through the streets, but inward — into the ruins of our own self-righteousness. The disparity and deep-seated grudges are the quiet kindling that have brought this new revolution. The rage on the streets is about suppressed dignity, and a burning hunger for justice.

It is time to check the recesses of our minds and hearts, sit down, breathe, and to ask: "When do we stop running, and when do we start healing?"



Alisha Sijapati is a writer specialising in cultural heritage, and a former Nepali Times correspondent.



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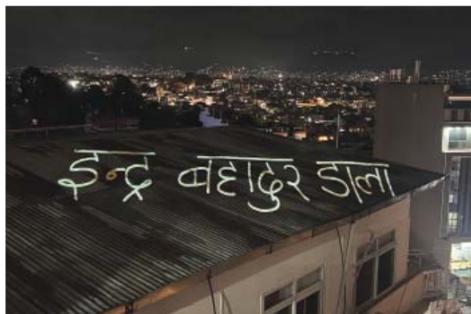
REMEMBER THEIR





NAMES

The names of some of the 74 killed in the GenZ protests were projected across Kathmandu Valley as Nepal marked a day of national mourning. The tribute was organised by an artists' collective.



Relocate, reallocate, recover

Nepal starts picking up the pieces after last week's destruction to build back a stronger economy

Shristi Karki

Nepal's public and private sector are clearing the ash and rubble from destroyed institutions to take stock after last week's nationwide protests that cost at least 74 lives and caused widespread destruction.

The most visible destruction was of buildings housing the legislature, executive, and judiciary and hundreds of other government agencies. At least 1,000 vehicles were torched, offices looted.

The private sector is also reeling—the Hotel Association of Nepal (HAN) says two dozen hotels mainly in Kathmandu and Pokhara sustained losses worth Rs25 billion in last week's arson and vandalism. The Hilton Hotel alone is said to have suffered Rs8 billion in damages, while the Hyatt, Varnabas and others were damaged. The jobs of 2,000 hospitality workers have been directly affected.

Chaudhary Group and Ncell were also among prominent corporate entities targeted by agitators, as were automobile showrooms in various cities.

"The protests last week were a reflection of the loss of trust of citizens towards the Nepali nation-state," explains economist Pushkar Bajracharya, formerly of the National Planning Commission. "The destruction of institutions and infrastructure has set Nepal back at least 10 years."

Nepal's newly-appointed Finance Minister Rameshore Khanal said after his swearing in on Monday that his first order of business was to make an inventory of the scale of destruction. Economists have estimated losses amounting to trillions, and experts have said the damage is greater than the 2015 earthquake.

The majority of Nepal's public institutions, including the Singha Durbar and the Supreme Court, parts of which were burnt to the ground, were not insured despite Nepal's history of conflict and natural disasters. "The events of last week should be a lesson about the need for our public sector to be insured," says economist Kalpana Khanal of the Policy Research Institute (PRI). "We have to now



BARE-BONES: Charred cars and other vehicles in the parking area of the Department of Roads in Kathmandu.

AMIT MACHAMASI

decentralise risk and institutionalise risk diversification not just for the recovery and reconstruction, but for all future infrastructure projects."

The private sector is also taking stock of damage to begin the process of insurance claims, and Nepal's insurance sector needs to calculate how much insurance and reinsurance can sustain rebuilding efforts. The damage will also reverberate across real estate sector, and has already affected the stock market.

The Nepal Stock Exchange (NEPSE) is set to resume this week after the share market plummeted last week before trading was suspended. Experts predict further market uncertainty as a more accurate account of the loss and damage is calculated. Insurance claims will then go up, leading to a further slide in share value of these companies.

Nepal's budget will also have to be redistributed to address the most immediate reconstruction needs. Finance Minister Rameshore Khanal will now have to implement what he has long recommended: to allocate budgetary items by priority rather than number of projects.

"In order for our rebuilding efforts to be effective, we need to

ensure that the budgetary process is redirected in a way that does not fragment the budget towards many projects as has been happening so far, but prioritises important projects," says Kalpana Khanal.

After being sworn in, the Minister vowed to do away with fragmented projects, directing Ministry officials to reprioritise spending and has formed a three-member task force to identify low-priority projects to redirect spending towards the reconstruction of public institutions.

"Economic reallocation, rehabilitation, and recovery through the correct mobilisation of domestic revenue, international resources and the private sector is the way through this crisis," says Bajracharya.

Protestors last week zeroed in on Land Revenue offices, Departments of Survey, and tax offices and this will affect revenue collection across the country. Additionally, Nepal will also have to rebuild many of its institutions from the ground up during a time of decreasing bilateral aid.

DEBT BURDEN

Nepal is set to achieve LDC graduation in 2026, which means that multilateral aid, grants and

loans for reconstruction might not be forthcoming. The additional loans and grants will carry higher interest rates, adding to Nepal's significant debt burden.

"Nepal was not ready to graduate from LDC status even before this unrest, and in light of the recent upheaval, it is advisable to push it back," says Bajracharya. "We can mobilise international resources if we can convince partners that we will utilise them properly—Nepal still has significant goodwill among donors."

Nepal's foreign investment climate was already not friendly due to corruption and red tape, and now it has taken a big hit because of the international media coverage of the attacks on multinationals. This will hurt any government effort at job creation.

Adds Bajracharya: "Investors need stability, which we lack. There also has to be assurance about the nation's security apparatus, which showed problems last week."

Others agree that while Nepal's investment climate has been badly dented, the nation can turn this opportunity to build better business confidence. "Foreign

investors will look at our resilience during the rebuilding process, and our investment environment will be determined not necessarily by this unrest, but by how we respond to the challenges ahead," says Khanal.

The drop in investment confidence is also expected to add to the push factors driving youth out of the country in search of more stable opportunities. Latest figures from Nepal Rastra Bank show that Nepal recorded a hard currency inflow of \$1.27 billion in the first month of this fiscal year—a 25% increase. Nepal's foreign current reserves are now at \$20 billion. But all that money has to be invested in productive sectors to be meaningful in creating jobs.

There are silver linings. Rameshore Khanal was the former finance secretary and a principled, no-nonsense economist. Experts as well as the public hope for a new beginning for economic reform.

"Infrastructure building and development has always been vote-driven in Nepal," notes Kalpana Khanal. "Cabinet members now need to be directed by evidence and real experts rather than politics for optimal decision-making."

Corruption in Nepal has increased the cost of development, and the focus of the GenZ revolt was on transparency. The regime change this week could force the interim government to curb graft and spur development.

Although most of the focus was on corrupt politicians, there was less prominence given to the kleptocrats in the bureaucracy. Bribery and graft had become standard operating procedure in the civil service, and one of the factors for rising youth disillusionment.

The hope is that this youth revolt will reduce systemic corruption in government and make governance more efficient. A well oiled economy would then yield adequate domestic revenue to pay for rebuilding.

Pushkar Bajracharya is optimistic: "Recent events have instilled a sense within Nepal's government and bureaucracy that there will now be retaliation if they stray off course. This should make them responsible and accountable so we can recoup infrastructural, institutional, and economic losses more rapidly." 🇳🇵

Nepal's meme revolution

GenZ movement was an uprising on fast forward thanks to social media

Vishad Raj Onta

Last week's GenZ protest in Nepal was one of the shortest violent movements to topple a government in modern times. Social media played a crucial and unprecedented role in it.

It was the digital space that documented, fuelled, rallied and magnified the protests on 8-9 September, as well as the negotiations to form an interim government afterwards.

Even a week after, netizens are posting memes, real and AI-generated videos and jokes. This has been a powerful display of the power of ridicule and free speech



that also reflects the resilience of the Nepali people and their ability to bounce back.

Last week, as the Nepal Army held negotiations with wannabe leaders, the joke going around was about people being worried

to venture out into the streets because they might be caught and made interim prime minister of the country.

Another video showed protesters making pretend calls on landline phones outside the



burning Parliament.

Public disillusionment with the corrupt political parties was at an all time high, and the ban on 26 social media platforms on 5 September was the last straw. This did not just infringe on freedom of expression, but was important for business and trade, and it cut off the GenZ's vital communication channels.

Everybody perceived the ban which apparently was not popular within

K P Oli's CPN-UML as the prime minister's authoritarian ways. The government failed to understand that social media was also distracting the public with entertainment, and it was an effective way to let off steam.

Bhat-Bhateni burning

Why is Nepal's biggest supermarket chain a target in just about every political upheaval in the country?

Sangya Lamsal

A security guard with Bhat-Bhateni Supermarket pleads with attackers not to destroy the store. In the widely-shared YouTube video, the mob can be seen surging ahead to ransack and set fire to the store anyway.

Twenty-one of the 28 Bhat-Bhateni outlets nationwide were vandalised and looted, 12 of them were completely gutted. The one at Boudha was smouldering for three days till 12 September.

The Koteswor branch was also looted in the royalist protest in March. This time, the destruction was much more complete and widespread.

What began as a youth-led protest against corrupt leaders escalated into widespread looting and arson last week, and Bhat-Bhateni's prominent blue highrise stores became prime targets.

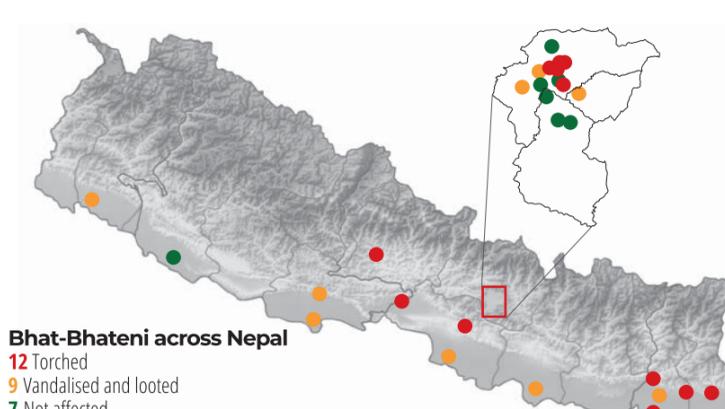
Min Bahadur Gurung (pictured) toured the ruins of his stores over the weekend, and said: "Watching the buildings burn felt painful to the core of my heart. But we will rebuild, we will rise again."

Born in Khotang, Gurung came to Kathmandu in the 1980s to open a small grocery store. Gifted with a strong business sense, he expanded this into Nepal's biggest retail empire, employing 20,000 people which became essential for consumer goods all over Nepal.

A homegrown businessman who has invested in Nepal, creating jobs so people do not have to migrate, Gurung has also donated generously to many charities. He built a 72-bed emergency ward at the Teaching Hospital, funded scholarships for students from remote areas, and recently pledged Rs410 million to Bhagwan Koirala's project to establish the Kathmandu Institute of Child Health.

But in Nepal, high profile success breeds envy, attracts threats and demands of extortion. To his loyal supporters, he's a self-made visionary, but protesters last week did not see it that way.

By the evening of 9 September, Bhat-Bhateni stores were in flames in Kathmandu and cities across the country. Whatever Gurung's faults, it



is his 20,000 employees, customers, and small vendors who paid the price. At least six bodies charred beyond recognition have been pulled out of the Boudha outlet and three in Dharan. Some are said to be employees, others could have been looters trapped in the upper floors.

But why does Bhat-Bhateni always end up being in the crosshairs? Some in online discourses say it is a symbol of elite privilege and unchecked corporate power. Others say the arson and looting spree was propelled by envy

and greed.

No matter the motive, the fallout is real: cashiers, stock handlers, managers, delivery staff have lost their income. Suppliers, transporters and small vendors lost sales, the national economy is dragged down, and the attacks could also drive more Nepalis to migrate for work.

On-site, many Bhat-Bhateni staff cleaning up the debris and ash were reluctant to speak to us. It has been too much of a shock. But online, workers have been pouring out their distress.

WIDE CONDEMNATION

From Biratnagar, store employee Smritee Joshi shared a haunting video of the outlet still burning the morning after, writing: "This was just a supermarket for some of you, but it was more than home for every employee out there. It sears me to see tears on our team members."

In Pokhara, employee Ansu Aana posted a tearful video saying, "Bhat-Bhateni gives so many young people jobs. Min Bahadur Gurung gave us a chance to earn for our studies and expenses. I don't

believe GenZ did this – just before, many were urging not to vandalise. So how could the same people set it on fire?"

In another video, she warned looters that CCTV and online evidence were being collected. A TikTok page called 'BhatBhateni Chor' has nearly 400 followers, which has since exposed those who misused the protests to rob stores.

Ironically, some protestors chanting against corruption just hours before were also caught stealing, a hypocrisy viewers and fellow demonstrators have sharply condemned online.

Meanwhile, noted conservationist Shailendra Thakali recalled the supermarket's humble beginnings, posting: "Nearly 30 years ago, when my family lived in Naxal, we shopped at a small kirana pasal near the Bhatbhateni temple. None of us imagined that modest shop would one day become Nepal's largest retail chain."

He adds: "Many of us still see the story, the struggle, and the incredible success behind it all. And we believe it deserves respect."

The Gurung community has rallied around Bhatbhateni. The Tamu (Gurung) Bouddha Sewa Samit stated: "Even after repeated attacks, the supermarket has continued its services uninterrupted. We strongly urge an immediate investigation."

Likewise, Ekaa Kombucha, Nepal's first GMP-certified Kombucha brand, declared support: "For countless small and medium businesses like ours, Bhat-Bhateni has been a vital platform, offering space, visibility, and the chance to reach millions across Nepal."

"Amid rising unemployment and capital flight, Bhat-Bhateni has been providing employment to 22,000 youths, not only employment generation, it also significantly continues to contribute to the local economy," the Tamu (Gurung) Educational and Career Advancement Network (TECANET) wrote in a statement this week.

Newly appointed Finance Minister Rameshore Khanal visited the heavily damaged Koteswor Bhat-Bhateni on Tuesday, with Min Bahadur Gurung seen walking him through the destruction. ■

When apps like Instagram, Messenger, YouTube, X, and Reddit were blocked, youth banded together calling for an anti-corruption rally via TikTok which was functioning.

TikTok exploded with users sharing #NepoBaby clips of the children of politicians showing off their extravagant lifestyles funded by corruption. It was there for ordinary Nepalis to see: the vacations, fancy restaurants, designer bags, and opulent villas.

Put to Nepali music, these clips were edited to be juxtaposed with the lives of impoverished Nepalis, enraging many.

In response, one Instagram handle called genz.nepal was set up. Its bio says: 'Fu*k this system!! Let's slay and stay woke!!' and made its first post on 6 September. It was an AI generated poster featuring a raised fist calling for a national protest two days later under the banner 'Youth Against Corruption.'

Despite the ban on social media, they were still semi-functional with workarounds such as VPNs. News of the time and venue of the protest spread rapidly through cybersphere.

'Let it be clear, our fight is not against one party or another, it is against the system itself,' said one of the posts. 'We mean the government, the opposition, the bureaucracy, the judiciary, and every structure that has betrayed the people.' Other posts called on all to keep the protests peaceful, with no party flags or symbols, no leader, and no vandalism.

While noble, the decentralised nature of the protest also made infiltration possible, and violence inevitable. Loot and arson followed. With no clear leader, no one person could be held accountable.

The 8 September protests had started peacefully, with organisers urging participants not to indulge in violence. Outside Parliament, the commando unit of the APF were seen in wide-shared videos kneeling down to take aim at protesters with automatic weapons. With the social media ban lifted, online posts showing the dead with live round bullet wounds on heads and chests, some in college uniform, were shared widely especially through Instagram stories.

Anger was boiling over at police brutality and many posts showed PM Oli with blood on his hands. All of this exemplified the brutality of the state against innocent students, and added fuel to the anger against the state. It was only a question when anger turned to revenge, and that came the next day with the targetted arson and looting.

Social media took away any possibility of the government denying or censoring the truth as might have happened in the past at Tiananmen Square and other pre-Internet protests. Nepalis saw it all live on their phones, and the reaction was immediate.

On 9 September, the shocking visuals kept playing on loop. By mid-morning all three

branches of the government were burning. Politicians chased and beaten, their houses set ablaze — and all this was also streamed in real-time.

Social media was also where relatives and friends mourned the dead, came to terms with the reality, and shared their opinions about the days ahead.

Nepal now has an interim government with Sushila Karki as the Prime Minister but in the days up to the announcement and even now, social media is rife with conspiracies from India's involvement to military-royalist collusion, as well as a potential coup.

DISCORD

To the surprise of everyone, including the GenZ, the next prime minister of Nepal was being decided on Discord, a social media platform popular among gamers during Covid for its ability to host large groups with stable voice communication.

Amidst much chaos, people memed, reacted, and spoke in the server which quickly grew to almost 150,000.

Social media, for better or worse, is now a way of life with far reaching implications. Kathmandu Mayor Balen Shah, RSP chair Rabi Lamichanne and others appealed to their voter base using social media in the last election, but the same platform was shown to also build and destroy

political careers.

False narratives that are intelligently crafted using deep fake go viral in no time, and can be more damaging than other forms of communication.

With high-stake early elections announced for March next year, the campaigning will be more on the digital platforms than door-to-door. There is a strong possibility for it to be used to disinformation and hate speech to incite voters, but equally it can be an interactive medium where citizens can raise their voices.

Some candidates with digital-savvy backrooms designing memes and AI-generated visual content will be trying to set false narratives to fan populism. Because of global connectivity, the diaspora will have an unprecedented influence on how folks back home vote.

So far, populist candidates have managed to ride on widespread public anger against the main parties and gather protest votes. This time, they may find that you cannot fool all the people all the time.

Candidates can no longer hoodwink an unaware, docile populace anymore. People may not be able to read, but they have smartphones. And that gives them a say, an opinion and there must be space for them all as we build back stronger. ■



The day justice died

A government attorney recounts the fateful day thousands of case files were reduced to ashes

Mamata Shrestha

While protesters were torching the Special Government Attorney Office at Mandala on Tuesday, they shouted slogans denouncing government corruption.

They did not seem to know that the Government Attorney's office was carrying out active investigations and prosecuting multiple cases of government corruption. These case files have now been reduced to ashes.

While attackers ransacked the building room by room and burnt it down, they said they were protesting the government's inability to catch the person who raped and murdered 13-year-old Nirmala Panta in Kanchanpur seven years ago.

In reality, the District Government Attorney's Office has been directing and carrying out investigations into rapists and abusers whose victims were even younger than Nirmala.

Before joining the Government Attorney's Office, I had read about the Nirmala rape case in the media. But once I was behind the desk as a Government Attorney myself, not a day went by without at least one new rape investigation. This was a serial horror on a national scale. The rapists were not all faceless strangers: many were fathers, brothers, stepfathers, teachers,



drivers who knew the survivors well.

I found all age groups from all parts of Nepal on those charge sheets. And every file I carried to the courtroom was in the hope of someone who wanted the crime against them recognised, and the perpetrator punished. Now all those files are gone.

The news from Singha Darbar that the government's data centre survived the fire was a relief. But we lost all our records. The evidence was never digitised, there were no backup files. They lived

only on paper, in ink, in fragile white file folders with green strings.

When the building burned, so did the only records of those crimes and the identity of the criminals.

Imagine entire basements filled with such files: each representing a victim, a face, a life. More than 10,000 such cases are now smouldering heaps of ash.

The smoke that filled Kathmandu's sky on Tuesday carried away with it the hopes of justice of thousands of victims, mostly young women.

Singha Durbar can be rebuilt

brick by brick, just as it was after the earthquake. Who is going to restore these case files?

Our duty as Government Attorneys is to direct criminal investigations, prosecute criminal cases, plead in courtrooms, make appeals. On a normal busy day we prosecute at least five criminal cases involving survivors and perpetrators.

THAT DAY
On 8 September, when the GenZ protesters were

gathering at the Mandala outside, we were at the Police Club, attending the first ever Women Government Attorneys' Conference. We celebrated our success as government attorneys who had led the prosecution of the highest number of cases involving violence against women.

But by 4PM the program was halted after protesters were shot outside Parliament. The Attorney General directed us to go home immediately. As the hall emptied, a small group of us young women officers and one senior female advocate walked together through

Bhadrakali towards our office.

There was an angry mob approaching us. The moment they saw us in our official dress, they turned on us with verbal abuses — words so horrendous that it would have been enough to prosecute a slander suit. Heads and eyes lowered, we walked on. They started spitting on us. Obviously, they were pouring out their anger against the government on us civil servants. But they had no idea that the senior female advocate on whose coat they spat had pioneered the law granting Nepali women equal property rights.

We ran to save ourselves from their wrath and reached our Special Government Attorney Office. The mob stayed outside. We waited two hours in silence until the street was calm enough for us to slip away and find our ways home.

The next day, 9 September, was much worse. The protesters had already torched Parliament, Singha Durbar and the nearby Supreme Court. Then they came to set the Government Attorney Office alight.

As a Nepali, I can understand their anger. But as a Government Attorney, I carry a deep scar. There is an immense void and sorrow.

This is not about the loss of a building, or being spat at. It is about the silent victims whose stories were stored in all those thousands of files.

We are government employees never affiliated with any political party, doing our work honestly and independently. In the name of demanding justice, they destroyed the very place that delivered it. 🇳🇵



Mamata Shrestha is an Assistant District Government Attorney.

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