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# Uniformed Protest, Unruly Dissent: Roses, Discord, and Tear Gas in Indonesia, Nepal, and Serbia

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**Abstract**
*The phenomenon of secondary school students' involvement in political protests in Indonesia, Nepal, and Serbia during August–September 2025 emerged almost simultaneously, yet exhibited divergent patterns of mobilization. At the same time, scholarship on social movements has remained dominated by studies of university students, while secondary students are often relegated to the margins, with virtually no cross-national comparative analyses available. This study aims to compare forms of solidarity, agency, and institutional support surrounding students in the three cases by integrating the perspectives of Political Opportunity Structure (POS) and structuralism. Methodologically, the research employs a comparative study based on scholarly literature, media reports, and relevant academic documents. The findings reveal that Nepal demonstrates generational solidarity that fosters transformative agency; Serbia illustrates institutional solidarity that generates moral agency; whereas Indonesia operates within a structural vacuum, producing only a fragile form of pseudo-agency. These variations are further shaped by historical trajectories, economic inequalities, educational institutions, political culture, and geographic conditions. The study underscores that student agency is relational, constituted through the interplay between external political opportunities and the availability of internal structural supports. Normatively, the findings suggest that when students receive institutional backing or inclusive spaces for participation, they can function as moral and political agents reinforcing state accountability. Conversely, state repression does not produce uniform outcomes: in Serbia, repression strengthened moral consolidation through symbolic peaceful acts; in Nepal, state pressure fueled coordinated radical escalation; while in Indonesia, repression accelerated fragmentation, rendering student protests fragile, anarchic, and vulnerable to manipulation.*



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, research on youth politics has paid close attention to the involvement of young people in collective action, particularly university students and young adults, both offline and online (Boulianne, 2018; Oser et al., 2022; Waeterloos et al., 2021; Wahyuningroem et al., 2024; Weidmann & Rulis, 2025). Much of this work highlights the role of digital media, higher education institutions, and the pressures of state repression as central drivers of mobilization. Still, most studies continue to treat "youth" as equivalent to university students, leaving secondary school students aged 15–18 almost invisible in the discussion. Yet evidence suggests that this group has begun to play an important role in contemporary movements, from the school strike for climate in Europe to

anti-authoritarian protests in Asia. The gap points to the need for a perspective that does not view university students alone as the center of youth politics, but also considers secondary school students as potential political actors.

In today's context, the presence of secondary school students in waves of global protest has become more visible. Their actions often emerge when formal channels of political participation are seen as closed, while digital media provides an alternative space for rapid mobilization, generational identity, and cross-community solidarity (Kim et al., 2017; Kligler-Vilenchik & Literat, 2020). Unlike university students, who are usually linked to campus organizations or established social movements, high school students tend to move through informal networks, popular cultural symbols, and fluid digital practices (Cortés-Ramos et al., 2021; Sainz & Hanna, 2023). This produces a distinctive pattern of mobilization: spontaneous, generational, and symbolic, yet vulnerable to repression because of the lack of institutional protection (Acharya, 2024). Such a phenomenon became visible in 2025, when large protests broke out in different parts of the world, including Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Eastern Europe.

The relevance of this trend became clear in August–September 2025, when three major waves of protest showed the direct involvement of secondary school students. In Indonesia, a proposal to increase housing allowances for members of parliament sparked public anger and drew thousands of high school and vocational school students into demonstrations alongside university students and workers. Mobilization unfolded spontaneously through instant messaging, TikTok, and Instagram, with some teenagers even standing on the front lines of clashes with police on 28 August 2025 (Lubis, 2025; TRT Indonesia, 2025).

In Nepal, the government's decision to block 26 social media platforms instead triggered a generational consolidation of "Gen Z," who turned to Discord and VPNs as alternative channels (Gurubacharya, 2025b; Shrestha, 2025). The actions quickly escalated into massive riots that left dozens dead and ultimately brought down Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli on 9 September 2025 (Khan, 2025). Meanwhile, in Serbia, the first anniversary of the Novi Sad station collapse, which killed 16 people, gave rise to a silent march on 1 September 2025. Thousands of high school students and university peers walked in silence, carrying white flowers and observing 16 minutes of stillness, demanding government accountability and early elections (Reuters, 2025a).

These three cases suggest that secondary school students are no longer merely followers; they can emerge as political actors with a certain degree of autonomy. Their modes of mobilization also show variation: digital and spontaneous in Indonesia, generational consolidation in Nepal, and symbolic–moral in Serbia. While these patterns still require further examination, they are enough to illustrate the diverse ways young generations respond to political crises in their own contexts.

Previous studies have already offered important insights into how young people shape their political engagement. In Indonesia, for instance, research by Wahyuningroem (2024) and Suwana (2020) shows that digital media is not only a tool of communication but also a space for constructing political identity, one that facilitates the transition from online movements to street action. These findings resonate with international literature emphasizing how digital natives merge online and offline repertoires, whether around environmental issues or questions of democracy (Boulianne, 2018; Waeterloos et al., 2021). Even so, political context continues to shape how mobilization unfolds.

Weidmann (2025) highlights the university as a breeding ground for protest under authoritarian regimes, while Acharya (2024) hows how digital repression in Nepal instead accelerated regime delegitimization and strengthened student mobilization. Comparative studies in post-socialist countries also stress how differences in access to information and institutional networks shape movement patterns (Elerian et al., 2025). The literature on

Serbia adds yet another symbolic dimension: student protests there shifted from commemorative acts of tragedy to broader political demands, with implications for the revitalization of direct democratic practice (Aiello, 2025; Strahinja Subotić, 2025; Szpala, 2025).

Although offering valuable contributions, the existing literature still leaves several limitations. First, most studies use the term youth loosely, often referring to university students or young adults, which means that secondary school students rarely appear as an independent unit of analysis. As a result, their distinctive dynamics—such as meme-driven spontaneous mobilization, reliance on informal networks, or symbolic actions aimed at shaping public opinion—tend to escape scholarly attention. Second, cross-case comparative research remains centered on Western Europe and North America, while the Global South and Eastern Europe remain relatively sidelined. This makes our understanding of the diversity of student movements still partial. Third, in theoretical terms, the Political Opportunity Structure (POS) framework has been widely used to explain openings and repression in protest, but it is rarely combined with a structuralist perspective that emphasizes intergenerational relations, institutions, and social networks. Yet such a combination is important to grasp why secondary school students—structurally weak in terms of institutional protection—are nonetheless able to mobilize themselves and even lead movements on a national scale.

The Political Opportunity Structure (POS) framework has long served as a major reference in social movement studies to explain why collective action emerges at particular moments and in specific contexts. Tarrow (1998) defines political opportunities as the configuration of institutions and state policies that either open or close the space for protest. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2003) emphasize that shifts in elite alliances, the repressive capacity of the state, and access to political institutions determine the chances for collective mobilization. In the context of student protests, this theory helps explain how state policies—such as the social media block in Nepal or the housing allowance policy in Indonesia—can trigger the involvement of young people when they perceive formal channels of participation to be narrowing.

Meanwhile, the structuralist approach in political science points to how social structures, institutions, and power relations shape the collective choices of actors. As Althusser (2024), reminds us, individuals do not act in an empty space but are influenced by the state's ideological apparatus that shapes consciousness. In a more contemporary frame, Bourdieu (1991) develops the notions of habitus and field to show how young people internalize socio-economic conditions while also building their own symbolic capital. This approach is useful for understanding secondary school students who, despite being institutionally weak, are still able to mobilize themselves through informal networks, generational symbols, and flexible digital practices.

On this basis, the article formulates three questions: (1) What triggered the involvement of secondary school students in protests in Indonesia, Nepal, and Serbia (August–September 2025)? (2) How did social media, networks, and generational identity mediate their participation? (3) Why did mobilization patterns differ—chaotic in Indonesia, generational-solid in Nepal, and symbolic–moral in Serbia? These questions are intended to position secondary school students as autonomous political actors rather than as mere complements to university movements.

The contribution of this article is threefold. Empirically, it presents recent data on student involvement in three political contexts in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Eastern Europe. Theoretically, it extends Political Opportunity Structure by pairing it with structuralism to analyze the intersections of political opportunities, repression, networks, and generational identity. Normatively, it reflects on the implications of student

participation for democracy, state legitimacy, and the risks of youth radicalization when formal channels of political participation are closed.

## 2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative–comparative approach with a cross-national case study design. Its primary focus is to analyze the involvement of secondary school students in three political protest waves that unfolded almost simultaneously in August–September 2025 in Indonesia, Nepal, and Serbia. The cases were selected purposively, as each demonstrates distinct patterns of mobilization within different political contexts: Indonesia as an electoral democracy with chaotic, meme-driven forms of action; Nepal as a fragile democracy where digital repression ironically spurred generational consolidation; and Serbia as a post-socialist state in Eastern Europe marked by symbolic–moral mobilization.

Research data were drawn from multiple secondary sources. International and national media reports were used to reconstruct the chronology of events, while reports from civil society organizations and independent research institutes served to validate information regarding actors, demands, and state responses. Academic literature on youth politics and digital mobilization provided the conceptual grounding as well as a comparative reference. Data collection involved searching, compiling, and classifying relevant documents, applying triangulation principles to ensure validity. Each finding was confirmed by cross-checking narratives from mainstream media, NGO reports, and academic studies. Data analysis was conducted thematically and comparatively, emphasizing three dimensions: protest triggers, forms of mobilization, and the role of digital media.

From this process, patterns of student mobilization were identified in three categories: chaotic–spontaneous, generational-solid, and symbolic–moral. These were then linked to the theoretical framework of Political Opportunity Structure and the structuralist approach to capture the interplay between political opportunities, state repression, social networks, and generational identity. The limitation of this research lies in its reliance solely on secondary data, which makes it impossible to capture students' subjective experiences directly. Even so, this approach enables a rich cross-case comparison and offers an important contribution to expanding discussions on youth politics by including secondary school students as political actors who are too often overlooked.

## 3. RESULTS

### *Unruly Dissent Indonesian High School Students Against Parliament (August 2025)*

By the end of August 2025, Indonesia saw a nationwide wave of protests sparked by public anger over a proposal to grant members of parliament a new housing allowance of Rp50 million per month (Lamb & Agencies, 2025). The plan, announced amid a cost-of-living crisis and deepening inequality, stirred widespread outrage. The first demonstrations, held in Jakarta between 25 and 28 August, were led by labor unions and university students, but what drew particular attention was the significant number of high school and vocational students who joined (Karmini & Ibrahim, 2025). On 28 August, thousands of demonstrators clashed with police around the parliament complex. Several reports suggested that some high school students were mobilized through rapidly circulating messages on social media, especially TikTok and WhatsApp, though the exact origins of these calls remained unclear (Lutfan, 2025).

The protests escalated sharply on 28 August when police fired tear gas and used water cannons to disperse the crowd after several protesters attempted to scale the parliament gates (Nugroho, 2025). Violence peaked later that evening with a tragic incident that went viral: a police armored vehicle drove into the crowd, striking and killing a 21-year-old ride-hailing driver named Affan Kurniawan (Rahmawati, 2025). Footage of the

incident spread quickly online, fueling anger and sympathy that brought more people, including students, into the streets. In Jakarta, reports noted that some high school students were seen participating, a few throwing stones or engaging in direct confrontations with the police (Aswara, 2025). Similar protests and clashes were also reported in several cities outside Jakarta, though not all accounts provided specific details about student involvement.

The late August unrest drew a harsh state response: security forces deployed tear gas, water cannons, and carried out mass arrests. At the same time, more than 600 demonstrators were detained (Aswara, 2025). Hundreds of students were arrested nationwide during these protests. In Jakarta alone on 28 August, police detained 276 teenagers attempting to join the demonstrations. Among those intercepted, nine students were found carrying improvised weapons—bows and arrows—in their bags (Yandwiputra, 2025) evidence that a small portion of the student ranks had taken on an "anarchistic" element. Separately, in Sukabumi (West Java), 13 teenagers arrested during the 1 September riots were all high school students, and 11 of them tested positive for drug use (Fatimah, 2025), a fact publicized by the police to cast doubt on the protesters' motives. These reports fed into the government's narrative that provocateurs had manipulated teenagers into taking violent roles. Indeed, Indonesian authorities later arrested several individuals—including social media influencers and NGO-linked activists—on charges of orchestrating student involvement through online incitement. Police identified at least "three social media channels… as provocateurs" that allegedly encouraged students to protest and even circulated instructions for vandalism and Molotov cocktails (Sutrisna & Prabowo, 2025)

Despite the chaos, Indonesian high school students appeared to lack any central authority or formal organization in these actions. Unlike university students, teenagers acted more spontaneously. Several reports noted that schools and provincial governments were instructed to tighten supervision to prevent students from joining demonstrations (Sari, 2025). There were also claims that some students were required to pay Rp10,000 to take part in demonstrations in Jakarta, though such details remain unverified in open sources (Astyawan & Purba, 2025). What emerges instead is the effect of improvised networks, where viral posts and message chains drew students into the streets. BBC Indonesia (2025) reported that those detained included humanitarian activists, university students, employees of international organizations, and several TikTok influencers. According to the police, these accounts spread provocative calls, from digital flyers and livestreams to Molotov cocktail tutorials.

This wave of moral indignation online resonated strongly with teenagers, often more than dry economic facts. Yet the geographic scope of student participation was uneven: most of the so-called "high school protests" were concentrated in major cities, especially Jakarta, and there was no nationwide school strike. Local schools generally condemned or prohibited student involvement; the Ministry of Education even instructed schools to tighten supervision in order to prevent students from joining demonstrations (Belarminus, 2025).

After a week of unrest (25–31 August), some protest demands began to be met. Under mounting public pressure, parliament officially suspended the housing allowance for its members on 31 August 2025 (CNN, 2025). Across Indonesia, the demonstrations left around ten people dead, including a 16-year-old vocational student from Tigaraksa, Tangerang, named Andika Lutfi Falah, who died from injuries sustained during the riots (Antara, 2025; Setiawanty, 2025). Total arrests were estimated at more than 3,000 people in 20 cities (MPN, 2025) —many of them minors later released to their parents after signing good-behavior statements. The Indonesian case therefore shows how high school students

emerged as an unexpected force in a spontaneous social movement: digitally mobilized, leaderless, often unruly, and driven more by viral moments of moral anger—over perceived injustice and state violence—than by any structured political agenda.

***Gen Z Nepal Against the Social Media Ban (September 2025)***

In Nepal, secondary school students became a driving force in what the media dubbed the "Gen Z Protests" in early September 2025. The unrest was sparked by one deeply provocative government decision: on 8 September, Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli's administration banned 26 popular social media platforms—including Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, and X (Twitter)—under the pretext of limiting criticism and "maintaining order" (Gurubacharya, 2025a). The ban ignited anger among young people already frustrated by social injustice, high unemployment, and political corruption, especially as the trend of "Nepo Kids"—children of political elites flaunting lavish lifestyles online—gained attention (Baskar, 2025; Das, 2025; Guzman, 2025).

The protests quickly spilled into the streets, leading to clashes between demonstrators and security forces. Tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannons were deployed, leaving at least 19 people dead and hundreds injured. Within days, the government lifted the social media ban and announced an investigation into police violence, marking one of the largest protests the country had seen in decades (Teekah, 2025).

Without access to the major social media platforms, many young Nepalis turned to alternative spaces for coordination. For instance, youth groups such as Hami Nepal organized digital discussions on Discord in channels like Youth Against Corruption, drawing thousands of participants from inside the country and the diaspora to debate political demands and the nation's future (Kharel, 2025). One of the symbols of youthful courage was Abiskar Raut, the 16-year-old Head Boy of Holy Bell School, whose speech went viral—not as a formal leader of the movement but as a moral face that inspired many. His fiery call, *"Youth, rise. We are the torchbearers of change… We are the fire that will burn away the darkness, we are the storm that will sweep away injustice,"* spread widely on Instagram and TikTok after the ban was lifted, as well as through offline circulation (Singh, 2025).

The Nepali government's response to the Gen Z protests was severe. Security forces used tear gas, rubber bullets, and in some confrontations reportedly live ammunition. On 8 September, at least 19 protesters were killed in clashes across several cities, including the capital, as police cracked down on demonstrations against the social media ban and corruption (Ellis-Petersen, 2025). The toll continued to climb: health ministry reports noted 72 dead and more than 2,100 injured as protests escalated and government buildings—including parliament, the Supreme Court, and the homes of officials—were set on fire (G. Sharma, 2025a, 2025b). The demonstrations involved many young people, most of them minors or university students, while the burning of officials' residences and public institutions became a symbol of rage against injustice. Even after the government imposed a curfew and other crackdowns, the Gen Z protests persisted, showing that mobilization had moved beyond the state's immediate control (S. Sharma & Sharma, 2025).

Facing enormous public pressure, Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli resigned on 9 September 2025, after anti-corruption protests and the failed attempt to suppress unrest through the social media ban (Scarr et al., 2025). The government then formed an interim administration. On 12 September, the President of Nepal appointed former Chief Justice Sushila Karki, aged 73, as interim Prime Minister, following informal public discussions among Gen Z activists on Discord, including groups such as Hami Nepal, who identified her as a figure deemed fit to lead the transition (Sankaran, 2025). The event was seen as historic: youth protests not only toppled a government but also influenced the selection of

an interim leader, even if outside the channels of immediate elections or formal institutional processes.

This highlighted the depth of secondary school students' involvement in Nepalese politics within just a few days. Their role was not merely that of a supporting crowd; they helped shape the narratives and demands of the protests. The social media ban, meant to silence dissent, became the spark that united young people—high school and university students alike—who came to see themselves as part of a "Generation Z" standing against corruption and fighting for digital freedom. The protests showed that structural generational grievances—economic despair, anger at elite corruption, and restrictions on digital freedoms—were powerful enough to mobilize even the very young. Much of the movement operated through online channels for discussion and coordination, though not all reports indicate the presence of formal structures or official voting processes through platforms like Discord.

***The Novi Sad Tragedy and the White Rose Resistance of Serbian Students (September 2025)***

In Serbia, secondary school students played a prominent role in the anti-corruption protests against President Aleksandar Vučić's government following the collapse of the Novi Sad railway station roof in November 2024, which killed about 15–16 people (some senior sources reported 16) (M. Stojanovic, 2025). What began as a call for accountability over the incident grew into a national movement supported by a wide spectrum of society, including university students, high school students, city residents, and professional civic groups (France 24, 2025) Public actions by high school students included silent protests in the capital, school and street blockades, and the recruitment of peers into solidarity activities in other cities such as Novi Sad and Kragujevac (Maksimovic & Popovic, 2025). The movement emphasized demands for transparency in infrastructure projects, justice for the victims, and accountability for political corruption widely associated with Vučić's administration (Booth, 2025).

On 1 September 2025, ten months after the Novi Sad station tragedy, tens of thousands marched silently in Belgrade and in several other Serbian cities to honor the victims and renew calls for accountability (Reuters, 2025a). he silent march was initiated by high school students. In Belgrade, protesters gathered around 7 p.m. at the old railway station after being invited by secondary school pupils. Sixteen students, each representing one victim, carried white roses while the names of the dead were read aloud as a tribute. These symbolic acts, with teenagers carrying white roses as signs of innocence and remembrance, gave the protest a powerful sense of moral clarity. Their involvement was joined by university students and civil society groups, who repeated demands for early elections, greater transparency, and action against corruption—issues at the heart of long-standing criticism of Vučić's government (D. Stojanovic, 2025a).

The march, largely peaceful at first, turned confrontational on 5 September 2025 in Novi Sad when university students staged a protest on campus and riot police used tear gas and stun grenades to disperse the crowd (Sekularac, 2025). Thousands gathered in front of the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Novi Sad, and clashes broke out both around the campus and in the city center (RFERL, 2025). Several protesters were injured, but reports did not confirm specific details on how many secondary school students were arrested or beaten. President Vučić responded harshly, calling the protests a foreign-driven activity and an act of political "terrorism" (Reuters, 2025b). The government also dismissed more than 100 university professors accused of supporting the student protests and tightened its control over educational institutions (Al Jazeera, 2025). Such a response appeared to strengthen solidarity among students and young people, who continued to

demand early elections, accountability for the Novi Sad station disaster, and broader government reforms (RFERL, 2025).

High school students and university peers in Serbia adopted innovative tactics of nonviolent resistance. They blocked major intersections, organized silent marches, and honored the victims with symbols such as white roses and public readings of the victims' names (Borger, 2025; Emric, 2025). While not all reports confirmed that high school students were beaten or detained, many were visibly present on the front lines of symbolic acts and public demonstrations demanding transparency and accountability. The government's heavy-handed approach seemed only to harden the movement's resolve, and each new restriction was often followed by a rise in the number of citizens—both young and old—taking to the streets in solidarity.

By mid-September 2025, the Serbian protests had become the greatest challenge to Vučić's decade-long rule. High school and university students remained at the center, both symbolically and strategically. The structural factors drawing young Serbs into the movement were similar to those elsewhere: anger over economic hardship and corruption, along with frustration at authoritarian tendencies. Yet unlike the Indonesian case, Serbian student activism in 2025 was relatively organized and consciously nonviolent, except when provoked by police. High school students acted in coordination with civil society groups; anti-corruption NGOs and opposition leaders often worked alongside student representatives. The memory of the Novi Sad victims provided a unifying moral narrative that legitimized even the youngest protesters as defenders of justice. When students carried roses and read out the victims' names, it became difficult for the authorities to dismiss them entirely, for they were seen as standing for basic moral values rather than pursuing a narrow political agenda (Maksimovic & Popovic, 2025).

This broad public sympathy helps explain why teachers and parents in Serbia largely supported students' right to protest, in sharp contrast with Indonesia where officials warned students to stay away from demonstrations. Many teachers and professors in Serbia were directly involved in supporting student protests: some staged classroom strikes as acts of solidarity, others allowed or even encouraged students to join the demonstrations, while public voices expressed support for demands of accountability after the Novi Sad station tragedy (Baletic & Stojanovic, 2025; Velkov, 2025). At the same time, these educators faced administrative pressure and threats of disciplinary action from the authorities for their involvement (OHCHR, 2025).

By the end of September 2025, President Vučić had not granted demands for snap elections. Protests continued in multiple forms, and the government's stance remained defiant (D. Stojanovic, 2025b). Yet the sustained involvement of young people clearly altered the political landscape. Observers noted that what began as a "small student-led campaign" had grown into the largest wave of protests Serbia had witnessed since the 1990s, precisely because students managed to connect their specific grievances such as unsafe infrastructure and corruption with the wider public's demand for honest governance (APNEWS, 2025).

In short, Serbian high school students in 2025 embodied a youth movement rooted in structure. It drew strength from the national trauma of the Novi Sad collapse, was organized with support from institutions such as schools and families, and aimed at systemic change through anti-corruption and free elections. Their use of silent marches, symbolic gestures like white roses, and persistent weekly actions showed a strategic maturity even though they were still teenagers. The case demonstrates that under certain conditions secondary school students can emerge as disciplined collective actors in politics. They are not only spontaneous rioters but also conscious agents of change working alongside broader social forces.

## DISCUSSION

Why did the 2025 protest waves "spill over" into the level of secondary schools in Indonesia, Nepal, and Serbia rather than remain confined to university students or older activists? Several shared structural factors appear across the three cases, even though each country's context differed. Broadly speaking, the convergence between deep social grievances and the wide reach of social media created an environment where even teenagers felt both the motivation and the means to mobilize politically. Yet the nature of student participation—whether chaotic or organized, purely spontaneous or shaped by mentors—varied according to the structural conditions of each country.

**Table 1**. Comparative Dimensions of Student Protests in Indonesia, Nepal, and Serbia

| Dimension | Indonesia | Nepal | Serbia |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Structural Trigger** | Economic grievances, with the housing allowance for parliament members seen as a symbol of distributive injustice. | Attack on digital freedom, with the ban on social media in the midst of economic crisis and corruption. | Collective trauma, with the Novi Sad tragedy becoming a symbol of state corruption. |
| **Form of Mobilization** | Digital and chaotic, leaderless, ad hoc, mediated by memes and viral content. | Generational consolidation, with Gen Z as a collective political identity coordinated through Discord and VPNs. | Symbolic and moral repertoire, including silent marches and the white rose as a source of public legitimacy. |
| **Repertoire of Action** | Physical clashes and anarchic behavior at the margins. | Radical escalation, including the burning of institutions and attacks on parliament. | Symbolic nonviolence, except when provoked by security forces. |
| **State Response** | Routine repression through tear gas and criminalization of students. | Extreme repression with live fire, hundreds of casualties, and delegitimization of the regime. | Selective repression through terrorism framing and university crackdowns, but constrained by public sympathy. |
| **Political Outcome** | Concessions without transformation, as parliament revoked the housing allowance but repression remained high. | Regime change, with the fall of Prime Minister Oli and Gen Z involvement in the transition. | Prolonged contention, as the Vučić regime was shaken but snap elections had not yet been granted. |

**Source:** Compiled from various sources.

The involvement of secondary school students in political protests in Indonesia, Nepal, and Serbia shows that the phenomenon cannot be explained solely by Political Opportunity Structure (POS) or only by structuralist perspectives. The two approaches in fact complement one another: POS highlights why and when political opportunities open, while structuralism helps explain how those opportunities are used or, in some cases, left unexploited. The three cases illustrate that political openings emerge in moments of elite legitimacy crisis, whether through the housing allowance controversy in Indonesia, the

social media ban in Nepal, or the Novi Sad station collapse in Serbia. Yet student responses varied considerably. This indicates that external opportunities served only as sparks, while the direction of the movement was shaped by internal capacities, especially the forms of solidarity that sustained students and the agency that arose from such support. These findings also underline the limits of classical POS theory, which often emphasizes external structures alone (McAdam, 1996; Meyer, 2004; Tarrow, 1998).

A structuralist lens adds an essential complement by revealing the internal mechanisms that guide mobilization, going beyond the simple presence of political openings. Tilly (2004) stresses that organization and institutionalization are necessary for collective action to endure, while della Porta and Diani (2009) emphasize the role of mobilizing structures as bridges linking individual grievances with concrete collective action. Within this framework, cross-case variation demonstrates that internal mobilizing capacity not only determines the effectiveness of the movement but also the quality of student agency itself—whether they can act as empowered collective subjects or remain reduced to sporadic crowds vulnerable to manipulation.

Nepal presents a case where generational solidarity became the main basis of mobilization. Youth organizations such as Hami Nepal and peer figures like Abiskar Raut acted as political brokers *(McAdam et al., 2003)*, bridging digital anger over the social media ban with collective action in the streets. Their role extended beyond technical coordination through Discord or VPNs, as they also helped build a strong generational identity. This identity produced what McAdam (1996) calls cognitive liberation, a collective belief that political change was not only possible but also legitimate to pursue. From this generational solidarity emerged a form of agency that can be described as transformative agency. Nepalese students were not merely an auxiliary crowd; they appeared as political actors able to articulate demands, negotiate agendas, and even take part in shaping leadership during the post-Oli transition. The transformation from digital outrage to organized collective action demonstrates how structural support, even when based on generation rather than formal institutions, could strengthen student agency. With such a structure, Nepalese students were not simply followers but autonomous subjects of political change.

If Nepal highlights generational solidarity, Serbia illustrates the strength of institutional solidarity. After the Novi Sad tragedy that claimed more than a dozen lives, secondary school students joined symbolic actions alongside university students, teachers, and professors. This cross-generational support provided moral legitimacy that was difficult for the authorities to dismiss. Excessive repression against students accompanied by teachers or professors would impose high political costs on the Vučić regime, enabling students to maintain their presence in public space for longer. In structuralist terms, the support of teachers and academics functioned as movement allies (Dyke & McCammon, 2010).

They offered not only symbolic protection but also compensated for the organizational limitations of secondary students. The presence of these institutional allies turned Serbian students into credible moral actors, rather than emotional youth crowds. They became public symbols fighting for integrity, justice, and the rule of law. Out of this institutional solidarity emerged a form of agency that can be described as moral agency. Although students did not articulate political agendas as comprehensively as university peers, they succeeded in carrying a moral message that made it harder for the regime to discredit the movement. Symbolic acts such as silent marches and the carrying of white roses reinforced their image as a generation demanding accountability from the state. In this way, Serbian students' agency was rooted in moral legitimacy granted by cross-

generational solidarity, which positioned them as important actors in the political landscape despite their subordinate status.

Indonesia offers a sharp contrast. The increase in parliamentary housing allowances opened a significant political opportunity, yet secondary school students moved within what can be described as a structural vacuum. There was no support from teachers or educational institutions; on the contrary, local governments and schools actively discouraged student involvement. As a result, mobilization was shaped more by the spontaneity of digital virality—memes, hashtags, and provocative uploads—than by any clear structure of coordination. In this setting, the agency of students visible in the streets is better described as pseudo-agency. They appeared active, marching, confronting security forces, and even becoming visual icons of the demonstrations, but their role was highly vulnerable to manipulation. The absence of brokers or movement allies left them open to infiltration by provocateurs or direction from external actors ranging from anarchist groups to political elites seeking advantage. The state quickly exploited this weakness through negative framing, labeling students as "troublemakers" or "security threats," which weakened their moral legitimacy compared to their peers in Nepal or Serbia. The lack of credible structural backing made such framing effective, and the political outcome remained limited. The allowance was revoked, yet the post-riot climate turned more repressive, with heightened military alert and an expansion of police authority.

Across the three cases, it becomes clear that the form of solidarity sustaining students directly shaped the quality of their agency. Nepal demonstrated generational solidarity that produced transformative agency. Serbia displayed institutional solidarity that generated moral agency. Indonesia, in contrast, revealed a structural vacuum that led only to pseudo-agency. This comparison underscores that student agency is not universal but relational, formed, reinforced, or undermined by the structural conditions surrounding it. Such a framework also cautions against romanticizing youth as natural agents of change (Sukarieh & Tannock, 2014). In certain contexts, they can indeed become pioneers of political transformation, but in others they function as pawns easily manipulated. Theories of agency and structure (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Giddens, 1984) help situate this phenomenon in a more realistic perspective: student agency is always negotiated in relation to political opportunities, social networks, and institutional allies.

The following table summarizes the cross-case differences:

**Table 2**. Dimensions of Solidarity, Agency, and Vulnerability in Student Protests

| **Dimension** | **Nepal** *Generational Solidarity* | **Serbia** *Institutional Solidarity* | **Indonesia** *Structural Vacuum* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Form of Agency | Transformative Agency | Moral Agency | Pseudo-Agency |
| Main Characteristics | Youth organizations and peer figures as political brokers; strong generational identity; cognitive liberation | Support from teachers, professors, and educational institutions; public moral legitimacy; movement allies strengthening resilience | Absence of institutional support; sporadic mobilization; easily infiltrated by provocateurs; vulnerable to state delegitimization |
| Implications | Digital energy converted into | Students appear as moral actors difficult | Students appear active, yet their |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| organized political power | for the regime to discredit | agency is fragile and easily manipulated |

**Source:** Compiled from various sources.

Theoretically, integrating POS and structuralism broadens our understanding of student movements. POS explains why opportunities arise, whether through crises of legitimacy, elite conflict, or public tragedy (McAdam, 1996; Tarrow, 1998). Yet only by adding a structuralist perspective can we understand whether those opportunities are used effectively or not (Porta & Diani, 2009; Tilly, 2004). In other words, political opportunities matter only when supported by sufficient solidarity. Without structure, opportunities can turn into vulnerabilities, as Indonesia illustrates. Normatively, these findings carry important implications for democracy and public policy. Nepal and Serbia show that when students are given space, supported, or at least not brutally repressed, they can contribute as moral and political agents who strengthen state accountability. In contrast, a repressive approach like that in Indonesia proves counterproductive, since it not only weakens students' legitimacy but also narrows the democratic sphere as a whole.

The educational, historical, economic, cultural, and geographic contexts also help explain why support for students in protest movements differs across Nepal, Serbia, and Indonesia. In the context of student activism, it is important to recognize that support for or resistance to student participation is shaped not only by structural factors but also by shifts in ideology formed through political education and schooling experiences (Bolqiah, 2025). As noted earlier, the education system and teacher–student relationships influence the degree of support. In Nepal, youth organizations such as Hami Nepal functioned as political brokers, bridging students with the political arena without relying heavily on formal schools. Teachers were not the main barrier, since mobilization took place largely through digital communities. Serbia displayed a different pattern: support came directly from educational institutions. Teachers and professors were not passive but active as movement allies, providing moral legitimacy and symbolic protection. The Serbian educational context emphasized civic responsibility, so student participation in protest was seen as part of civic learning. Indonesia, by contrast, has a strict educational bureaucracy emphasizing discipline, obedience, and the prohibition of practical politics in schools. Teachers who supported student activism risked administrative sanctions, which turned schools into barriers rather than allies.

From a historical dimension, Nepal and Serbia both have long traditions of youth involvement in political protest, which sets them apart from Indonesia. Nepal experienced democratic transitions driven by young people, beginning with the anti-monarchy movement in 2006 and continuing with anti-corruption campaigns in the following decade (Khadka, 1994; Thapa, 2023). This history created a cultural legacy in which young people, including secondary school students, are recognized as legitimate pioneers of change. Serbia also carries a strong collective memory of youth in the overthrow of Milošević in 2000 through the Otpor! movement.

That legacy was passed on to later generations, including high school students, so when the Novi Sad tragedy occurred (Naumov & Demin, 2022; Nikolayenko, 2009; Popovic et al., 2024), support from universities and teachers emerged as a logical continuation of civic engagement traditions. Indonesia, by contrast, has historically placed university students at the center of protest politics, with 1998 as the defining peak, while high school students were more often seen as peripheral actors or as part of the crowd (Kammen, 1995; Lee, 2011). This collective memory shaped social perceptions that secondary school students were not yet meant to enter politics, which explains why support from teachers or educational institutions tended to be minimal.

From an economic perspective, the context behind protest movements also shaped the forms of solidarity that sustained students. In Nepal, widespread nepotism, exposed through the phrase "Nepo Kids," deepened young people's frustration with unequal access to economic opportunities (Nepal, 2023; Thapa, 2023). In this climate, student anger drew sympathy from parents and the wider public who shared similar frustrations with the political elite. Serbia faced a similar dynamic, where the Novi Sad tragedy was understood as the direct result of corruption in public infrastructure projects (Čamprag, 2024). This positioned students as representatives of the victims of state failure, making public and teacher support appear natural. Indonesia, however, while also facing economic inequality and with the parliamentary allowance scandal becoming a symbolic issue of distributive injustice, did not generate the same legitimacy for student protests. This was partly due to the government's rapid and effective framing of student actions as anarchic or politically manipulated (Febriani et al., 2022; Zubaidah et al., 2023), which turned potential economic and political energy into stigma.

The geographic dimension also matters. Nepal and Serbia are relatively homogeneous demographically, with protest centers concentrated in their capitals, Kathmandu and Belgrade. This concentration made coordination easier and amplified the symbolic effect of student actions. Indonesia, by contrast, is an archipelago with a vast and dispersed population, which complicates consolidation. Student protests in Jakarta could draw large crowds, but it was far more difficult to spread them simultaneously with the same strength to other regions. This geographic fragmentation meant that protests quickly became localized, easier to contain, and struggled to build sustained national resonance.

Geography thus plays an important role in shaping how student participation differed across Nepal, Serbia, and Indonesia. Both Nepal and Serbia are smaller in territory and more demographically uniform, so mobilization tended to center on the capital cities—Kathmandu and Belgrade—which function not only as seats of government but also as symbolic sites of national identity. Concentration in the capital made it easier for students to articulate demands collectively, while also magnifying the symbolic weight of their presence. When students filled the streets of Kathmandu or Belgrade, their actions gained immediate national resonance because of the spatial proximity between protest sites, political institutions, and mainstream media. This dynamic echoes Tarrow's (1998) notion of the "modularity of protest," in which actions staged at the political center are more readily replicated or amplified into national visibility.

By contrast, Indonesia faced structural barriers stemming from its geography as an archipelagic state with more than 17,000 islands and a vast, dispersed population. Jakarta functions as the political center, yet protests in the capital did not automatically reverberate across other regions with equal force. Mobilization of high school students in other cities was often fragmented, constrained by distance, uneven communication infrastructure, and the absence of interregional networks. This fragmentation produced a dual effect. On the one hand, protests were easily localized, enabling security forces to manage them separately. On the other hand, it proved difficult to generate sustained national momentum because local actions failed to resonate simultaneously across the country. Within a structuralist lens, these dynamics can be understood as spatial constraints: geographic limitations that weaken the collective capacity to consolidate power across regions (Porta & Diani, 2009).

Geographic factors also interacted with the use of communication technology. Nepal and Serbia, being spatially smaller, allowed digital coordination through platforms like Discord, WhatsApp, or other social media to connect more directly with physical demonstrations in the capital. Indonesia, by contrast, relied heavily on social media for viral triggers, but logistical challenges and the high costs of interregional travel impeded

physical consolidation. As a result, Indonesian student protests tended to culminate in flash mobilizations at specific sites without broader spatial continuity, in contrast to Nepal and Serbia, where concentrated actions in the capital sustained nationwide resonance.

The involvement of secondary school students in political protests across these three countries illustrates that political opportunities serve merely as initial triggers, while the success or failure of mobilization is ultimately shaped by the structural capacities sustaining participation. In Nepal, generational solidarity produced a transformative agency that turned digital outrage into political change. Serbia displayed a moral agency rooted in cross-generational institutional support. Indonesia, by contrast, revealed fragility: the absence of structural backing left students vulnerable to manipulation and easy delegitimation. These cross-case differences underscore that student agency cannot be understood as universal; it is always contingent upon the interplay between external opportunities, structural support, and the surrounding social context.

## 4. CONCLUSION

A comparative study of secondary school involvement in political protests in Indonesia, Nepal, and Serbia shows that a fuller understanding can only be achieved by integrating Political Opportunity Structure (POS) with a structuralist perspective. POS highlights the external conditions that open the door for students to enter politics—moments of elite crisis or controversial state policies—while structuralism explains the internal mechanisms that determine whether such opportunities are used effectively. In short, external shocks provide the spark, but the direction, endurance, and outcomes of protest are defined by the structures that support or fail to support student mobilization.

The cross-case comparison reveals striking differences. In Nepal, generational solidarity created a form of transformative agency, with students not only joining the streets but also shaping demands and influencing the direction of political transition. Serbia shows how institutional solidarity produced moral agency, where teachers and schools gave students symbolic legitimacy in the struggle against corruption and state failure. Indonesia, by contrast, illustrates what a structural vacuum looks like: a pseudo-agency in which students appeared active in public space but remained fragile, easily manipulated, and swiftly delegitimized by the state.

These findings carry two main implications. Theoretically, they expand the study of social movements by showing that student agency is relational: it emerges through the interplay of political opportunities, structural support, and wider social, economic, and cultural contexts. Normatively, they suggest that a repressive stance toward student protest is counterproductive. Nepal and Serbia demonstrate that when students are given space or even minimal support, they can act as moral and political agents who strengthen state accountability. Indonesia's case, however, shows that negative labeling and repression shrink democratic space and weaken the potential of young people to become engines of change.

The study has limits. The analysis relies heavily on secondary sources, media reports, and prior scholarship, which means the local or personal experiences of students remain only partially captured. The focus on three countries also excludes many contextual factors—such as local variation in Indonesia or subnational dynamics in Nepal—that deserve closer attention. The temporal scope is another limit: the study captures specific moments of protest, while student activism itself is fluid and long-term.

Future research could extend this agenda in several ways. Ethnographic work or in-depth interviews with students, teachers, and allies would provide richer insight into how agency forms at the micro level. Comparative studies across a wider set of cases could test whether patterns of generational solidarity, institutional solidarity, and structural vacuum

appear elsewhere, for instance in Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, or Latin America. Digital repertoires such as memes, humor, and short-form platforms like TikTok also deserve closer attention to understand how youth articulate their political identity. Finally, future inquiry could explore how student movements intersect with transnational causes—climate change, digital rights, feminism—issues that increasingly shape the political horizons of younger generations.

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