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A Generation in Revolt: A Comparative Study of Youth-Led Protests, Institutional Trust, Global Governance and the Role of International Law

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In this research paper, youth-led protests and their significance in the modern-day world are studied. This phenomenon is understood through the lens of Generation Z and other younger people getting involved in political action and protest against existing systems of governance at national and international levels. Through the socio-legal approach, the study focuses on the factors that motivate people to join such movements in various parts of the world, including India, Nepal, Kenya, Serbia, the United Kingdom, Australia, and solidarity protests around the world for the sake of Palestine. The main aim of this study is to understand why and how young people get into such movements when they think that there is a failure in the governance system to provide an adequate response. The research paper also explores the ways in which international law comes into play in ensuring accountability. The research results show that although economic instability and corruption are the key causes of such phenomena in the country, the characteristic of being 'digital natives' of today's youth makes it possible for them to mobilise in a way that is difficult for traditional political institutions to cope with. It has been found that, in order to survive, institutions should adjust their governance mechanisms to accommodate the youth.

Keywords: *generation z, youth protest, institutional trust, global governance, international law.*

INTRODUCTION: A GENERATION IN REVOLT

Background of the Study: Today's international politics is characterised by the growing prominence of youth activism groups. Youth are no longer mere spectators to the process of politics but are active participants in public movements around the world.[1] The growing trend of participative protests among youths can be explained by an intricate combination of economic instability, poor education, unemployment, and corruption.[2] In many places, youth have become the face of opposition due to political exclusion and dissatisfaction with governance.[3]

Digital platforms have been game-changing, enabling swift and decentralised organisation without going through institutional intermediaries.[4] From student protests in India and Nepal[5] to the Gen Z-driven protests against economic policy in Kenya[6] and political accountability in Serbia,[7] these movements are manifestations of a worldwide phenomenon of youth rebellion. In addition, global Palestine solidarity movements show how youth mobilisations can go beyond borders and tackle international legal and accountability concerns.

The extent and rapidity of such movements have led to the question of whether these reactions represent isolated responses to individual grievances or reflect an underlying structural problem. Survey data across different contexts reveals that the level of trust in institutions is patchy and brittle, especially when citizens do not feel heard by their

[1] Alcinda Manuel Honwana, 'Youth Struggles: From the Arab Spring to Black Lives Matter & Beyond' (2019) 62(1) African Studies Review <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26671022> accessed 08 September 2026
[2] Angelos Loukakis and Martín Portos, 'Brick in the Wall? Young People, Protest and Nonprotest Claims Making in Nine European Countries' (2019) 64(5) American Behavioral Scientist <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764219885435> accessed 08 September 2026
[3] Cato Waeterloos et al., 'Social media as an exit strategy? the role of attitudes of discontent in explaining non-electoral political participation among belgian young adults' (2023) 11(1) Acta Politica <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41269-023-00297-4> accessed 08 September 2026
[4] John Maina Karanja and Macrina Mbaika Musili, 'The Dawn of Generative AI-Enabled Political Activism: How Kenyan Gen Z Used ChatGPT and Protest GPTs to Mobilize' (2026) Social Science Computer Review <https://doi.org/10.1177/08944393261416781> accessed 08 September 2026
[5] 'Nepal: Police Fire on 'Gen Z' Protest' *Human Rights Watch* (09 September 2025) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/09/09/nepal-police-fire-on-gen-z-protest> accessed 08 September 2026
[6] Emmanuel Igunza, 'Kenya's president has withdrawn the controversial tax bill after deadly protests' *OPB* (27 June 2024) <https://www.opb.org/article/2024/06/26/kenya-s-president-has-withdrawn-the-controversial-tax-bill-after-deadly-protests/> accessed 08 September 2026
[7] Nicole D'Souza, 'UN experts call on Serbia authorities to end crackdown on student demonstrations *Jurist News* (05 August 2025) <https://www.jurist.org/news/2025/08/un-experts-call-on-serbia-authorities-to-end-crackdown-on-student-demonstrations/> accessed 08 September 2026

government.[8] In this context, youth protest may be understood more as a sign that the established avenues of engagement are not providing enough of a response to the demands of the younger generation.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The core issue being addressed in this study is why more and more young individuals are resorting to protests because they consider the institutions not adequately responding to their demands. The fact that the institutions have been found dissatisfying multiple times is indicative of the fact that there has been a major shift in the way the youth relate to governance and laws.

The question is analytically important because it is located at the interface between two different scholarly traditions that seldom talk to each other. In political sociology, protest is understood as grievance and opportunity; however, in legal scholarship, it is interpreted as the assertion of rights that can be restricted only for narrow reasons. For this reason, the research on youth protest should take into account not just the motivations behind it, but also the legal definition of what youth do. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights provides the analytical framework for the understanding of the problem because it guarantees freedom of expression, assembly and association but allows restricting these rights only if it is done legally and is necessary.[9]

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the reasons behind the involvement of youths in protests?
2. To what extent are such protests an expression of mistrust of the institutions?
3. What is the response of domestic laws to youth protests?
4. What is the response of international law when youths are involved in protests relating to international disputes?
5. Is there any indication that today's youth protests represent a paradigm shift in the relationship between youths, institutions, and law?

[8] *OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions – 2024 Results* (OECD, 2024)
[9] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966

6. Under what conditions can persistent protests result in institutional reform, further unrest, or political revolution?

OBJECTIVES

- Discuss the main socio-economic and political factors that have led to youth protests.
- Evaluate the level of institutional trust amongst young protesters.
- Discuss the legal framework that protects the right to protest both domestically and internationally.
- Evaluate the government's response to the mobilisation of the youth, from accommodation to repression.
- Discuss the international law aspects involved in global youth movements.
- Compare various protest movements and note the similarities and differences among them.
- Evaluate the impact of the protests on governance and the rule of law.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

This research uses a comparative legal research approach, which is complemented by a socio-legal analysis of relevant contemporary cases. The research uses both primary and secondary sources of law, where primary sources include international conventions and national constitutions.[10] The methodology has distinguished between movements driven by Generation Z, students and young people in general, emphasising that current protests are not one single global movement, but that certain common elements drive these.

There are two limitations of the paper. The case studies chosen were not randomly selected; instead, the objective was to demonstrate different political systems, and some of the movements analysed are relatively new; thus, there may be a need for revision of factual information in the future.

[10] Human Rights Commission, *General Comment No. 37 (2020) on the Right of Peaceful Assembly (Article 21)* (UN Doc CCPR/C/GC/37, 2020)

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Defining the Digital Generation: 'Gen Z' is commonly described as the generation of digital natives whose political activism arises from their early exposure to international networked communications. The interaction between this generation and institutions is frequently described as a 'trust deficit' because the processes of political representation appear inefficient or ineffective.[11]

Concept of Youth-Led Protest: Youth-led protests are when youth groups play an active role in initiating and communicating demands in the process of protest movements.[12] Although they involve members of Generation Z, these movements are not limited to them, but they are unique in their use of the energy and know-how of youth to re-examine and transform the existing paradigm.

Institutional Trust and Responsiveness: Trust in institutions means that the citizenry trusts the institutions of governance, courts, policing, and intergovernmental bodies. Responsiveness indicates how well these organisations respond to the concerns of the people. The 'gap between expectations and responses' happens when the way the institutions react and respond does not match the requirements of the digitally aware youth population.

Governance and International Law: Accountability, transparency, and the rule of law form part of the elements of governance. International governance entails the involvement of international institutions like the United Nations, the International Court of Justice, and the International Criminal Court.[13] It is important to note that many times youth movements tend to bring out the 'enforcement gap' problem with regard to international laws. In other words, despite having laws, there are no enforcement measures in place.[14]

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[11] I Putu Hendy Jayadi Putra et al., 'Institutional Trust Deficit and Generation Z's Digital Political Culture' (The 7th International Conference on Law, Social Sciences and Education, Bali, Indonesia, 2025)
[12] Hank Johnston, 'The Elephant in the Room: Youth, Cognition, and Student Groups in Mass Social Movements' (2019) 9(3) Societies <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc9030055> accessed 08 September 2026
[13] Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court 1998
[14] Yvonne Dutton, 'Commitment to International Human Rights Treaties: The Role of Enforcement Mechanisms' (2012) 34(1) University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Law <https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2187400> accessed 08 September 2026

Theoretical Framework –

Institutional Trust Theory: This theory accounts for the reasons behind the loss of trust in institutions.

Relative Deprivation Theory: According to this theory, discontent is caused by the disparity between expectations and reality in terms of socio-economic status.[15]

Political Opportunity Theory: Studies how the openness or closure of political systems influences the chances of mobilisation.

Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics by Sidney Tarrow (Third Edition, 2011)]

Digital Mobilisation Theory: Examines how digital platforms help coordinate protests quickly and easily.[16]

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the literature review, a 'global wave' of activism is seen wherein youth use first-digitised networks to make parliaments accountable. According to Honwana (2019), while socio-economic factors such as unemployment and corruption continue to be an ever-present cause of grievances, the nature of mobilisation has changed as it now demands 'real democracy.' As Gen Z in Europe and Asia is protesting to challenge systemic inequality as well as 'Nepo-Economy,' there is an observation of intergenerational injustices. Research has shown that one of the factors used against oppression and authoritarianism by the young generation is digital technology. Yet, the repression of such movements is usually characterised by 'structural and personal violence.'[17]

This is exemplified in the case of Kenya, where the scholarly analysis of Kenya's engagement with the International Criminal Court helps to demonstrate how law interacts with this body

[15] Ted Robert Gurr, *WHY MEN REBEL* (Paradigm Pub 2011)
[16] Paolo Gerbaudo, *TWEETS AND THE STREETS: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* (Pluto Pr 2012)
[17] Sarah Pickard, 'Excessive force, coercive police surveillance, and the criminalization of dissent. Repressing youth protests in 21st-century Britain' (2019) 77(4) International Journal of Sociology <https://doi.org/10.3989/ris.2019.77.4.19.002> accessed 08 September 2026

of literature,[18] while contemporary research shows how Kenyan youths have harnessed the power of generative artificial intelligence technology to plan and disseminate protests. All in all, this points to the fact that the legal and technological aspects of youth protests cannot be analysed separately.

RESEARCH GAP

While much has been written about individual protest movements, what has been lacking in the academic field of law is a comparative analysis of law that attempts to connect the domestic public order laws and the international human rights system within the realm of mobilisation of Generation Z. The extant literature largely examines either the sociology of youth or how the internet facilitates mobilisation of youth, but not both in conjunction with a study of the international legal responsibility framework.

It is especially apparent in the discussions surrounding the intersection of the rights of peacetime and the obligations of wartime. Any movement organising itself in the context of armed conflict will need to reference human rights law and international humanitarian law, but how these two legal frameworks interact continues to be disputed within the academic literature. It is clear that any comparison of youth protest must account for both legal systems.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The Legal Framework Governing Youth Protest: Protest rights are underpinned legally by the right to freedom of speech, assembly and association. This is provided for in international human rights law such as the UDHR[19] and ICCPR.[20] In contrast, governments use 'reasonable restrictions' in the interest of maintaining public order; yet, such measures can become oppressive if used disproportionately.[21]

[18] Susanne D Mueller, 'Kenya and the International Criminal Court (ICC): politics, the election and the law' (2014) 8(1) Journal of Eastern African Studies <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2013.874142> accessed 08 September 2026
[19] Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948
[20] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966
[21] General Comment No. 37 (2020) on the Right of Peaceful Assembly (Article 21) (n 11)

The international community has laws that govern accountability during conflicts, which include International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Criminal Law (ICL).[22] The Rome Treaty[23] and the International Criminal Court (ICC) represent institutions for holding individuals accountable for international crimes, even if their enforcement is politically limited.

International norms are incorporated into and at times restricted by national laws. The Indian Constitution provides for the right of peaceful assembly, without arms, but restricts such a right in the interest of public order and sovereignty.[24] In India, the Supreme Court has ruled that speech on the Internet has constitutional protection, and any order suspending Internet access needs to be proportionate and justifiable.[25] The Constitution of Kenya clearly protects freedoms of assembly, demonstration, picketing, and petitioning of public authorities.[26]

According to the Public Order Act 1986 in the United Kingdom, the police can impose conditions on processions and assemblies,[27] powers extended further under the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022[28] and the Public Order Act 2023,[29] although the Supreme Court has maintained that there must be a proportionality analysis of criminal responsibility for disruptive protests.[30] There is no bill of rights that applies at the federal level in Australia, although there is an implied freedom of political communication[31] and the High Court has declared invalid protest laws that unfairly restricted that right.[32]

The Global Rise of Youth-Led Protests: Digital nativity is what marks present-day mobilisations. Movements such as #EndSARS (in Nigeria) and #RejectFinanceBill2024 (in

[22] Oona A Hathaway et al., 'Which Law Governs During Armed Conflict? The Relationship Between International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law' (2012) 96(3) Minnesota Law Review <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290763817_Which_Law_Governs_During_Armed_Conflict_The_Relationship_Between_International_Humanitarian_Law_and_Human_Rights_Law> accessed 08 September 2026
[23] Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court 1998
[24] The Constitution of India 1950
[25] *Anuradha Bhasin v Union of India* (2020) 3 SCC 637
[26] The Constitution of Kenya 2010
[27] Public Order Act 1986
[28] Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022
[29] Public Order Act 2023
[30] *Director of Public Prosecutions v Ziegler & Ors* [2021] UKSC 23
[31] *Lange v Australian Broadcasting Corporation* (1997) 189 CLR 520
[32] *Brown v Tasmania* (2017) 261 CLR 328

Kenya), among others, have utilised digital platforms in the Global South to resist algorithmic biases and government surveillance.

This sequence generally begins with a chain: Structural Grievance → Relative Deprivation → Institutional Distrust → Online Mobilisation → Demonstration

Country Case Studies: Domestic Governance and Protest –

India: Mobilisation frequently revolves around issues of education and job dissatisfaction. The legal response finds an equilibrium between fundamental rights and strict public order laws.[33]

Nepal: The youth-driven online activism has proven very effective in combating corrupt practices and weak political leadership, resulting in political change.[34]

Kenya: The protests in 2024 against taxes and economic policies showed how powerful Gen Z is when they use social media and AI to engage politically without using representative politics.

Serbia: Student movements have increasingly become an integral part of making the government accountable.

Country examples indicate convergence as well as divergence. In each case, there was a specific issue, whether education/employment disputes in India, social media limitations in Nepal, taxes in Kenya, or an infrastructure collapse in Serbia that intersected with growing scepticism toward political elites.[35] Nepalese police brutality and excessive use of force have been reported in connection with the September 2025 protests, and U.N. officials have also appealed to Serbian authorities to stop their alleged suppression of student protests. This all

[33] Pranesh Prakash, 'Internet blocking and shutdowns in India and international human rights law' (2024) 5(3) IPPR <https://doi.org/10.55763/ippr.2024.05.03.002> accessed 08 September 2026

[34] 'Nepal: Unlawful Use of Force During 'Gen Z' Protest' *Human Rights Watch* (19 November 2025) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/11/19/nepal-unlawful-use-of-force-during-gen-z-protest.> accessed 08 September 2026

[35] Jovana Gec, 'Student Protests Continue to Challenge Serbia's Populist Government After a Deadly Canopy Collapse' *News4Jax* (20 December 2024) <https://www.news4jax.com/news/world/2024/12/20/student-protests-continue-to-challenge-serbias-populist-government-after-a-deadly-canopy-collapse/> accessed 08 September 2026

points to the fact that the issue is not just about whether protest is legally allowed or not; the way the state reacts to protest is also an important consideration.

Immigration and Economic Security: UK and Australia: In the United Kingdom and Australia, demonstrations concerning immigration and asylum have a diverse demographic makeup. Nevertheless, there is considerable involvement by the youth when these problems become intertwined with poor housing and declining public services. In this context, the legal response is often found in laws related to public order that regulate the time, place, and manner of protest.[36]

In both places, public order laws confer wide discretion to the executive and police authorities regarding the time, place, and manner of assembly, leaving the courts with the job of policing the interface between proper regulation and undue encroachment.[37] The scholarship on police reactions to youth protests in Britain has stated that the approach has sometimes moved from being facilitative to coercive and criminalising.

Global Movements: Palestine and International Law: Palestinian solidarity protests constitute a distinct convergence between youth activism and international law.[38] Students have organised protests on campuses calling for divestment and justice based on the Genocide Convention[39], along with the decisions by the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

The difference between international law and the implementation of that law creates the conditions for continuing global activism.[40]

The following three international law events have influenced the development of the language of this mobilisation. First, in January 2024, the International Court of Justice expressed provisional measures in the proceedings launched by South Africa in relation to the Genocide Convention. Second, in July 2024, the Court delivered its advisory opinion concerning the legal consequences of Israeli policies and practices in the Occupied

[36] Public Order Act 1986
[37] *Brown v Tasmania* (2017) 261 CLR 328
[38] Tor Krever, 'Palestine and the limits of international law' (2025) (137) Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais <https://journals.openedition.org/rccs/17585?lang=en> accessed 08 September 2026
[39] Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide 1948
[40] 'Situation in the State of Palestine: ICC Pre-Trial Chamber I rejects the State of Israel's challenges to jurisdiction and issues warrants of arrest for Benjamin Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant' (*International Criminal Court*, 21 November 2024) <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-state-palestine-icc-pre-trial-chamber-i-rejects-state-israels-challenges> accessed 08 September 2026

Palestinian Territory.[41] In November 2024, Pre-Trial Chamber I of the International Criminal Court released an arrest warrant in the Situation in the State of Palestine. In each instance, students had a clear-cut legal precedent, but at the same time, each incident revealed the reliance of international jurisprudence on the cooperation of states.

Government Responses and Institutional Trust: From accommodation to negotiation, criminalisation and repression, the answers lie. Excessive violence and indiscriminate detention tend to bring about more mobilisation and further weakening of trust in institutions. The international standards provide a point of comparison for evaluating these responses. As the Human Rights Committee has stressed, any use of force in assemblies must be necessary and proportional, and any restrictions imposed must be demonstrably necessary to the specific situation.

Comparative Analysis Table:

Case	Main Grievance	Primary Institution	Nature of Participation	Response
India	Education / Jobs	Government	Student / Youth	Regulation / Judicial Review
Nepal	Corruption	Political Elite	Gen Z-led / Digital	Concessions / Transformation
Kenya	Taxation	Parliament	Youth-led / Gen Z	Suppression / Engagement
Serbia	Accountability	State Institutions	Student-led	Institutional Resistance

[41] 'Legal Consequences Arising from the Policies and Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Including East Jerusalem' *ICJ* (19 July 2024) <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/186/186-20240719-pre-01-00-en.pdf> accessed 08 September 2026

UK / Aus	Immigration / Economics	Home Office	Mixed / Youth	Public Order Policing
Global	War / Accountability	ICJ / ICC / UN	Transnational Youth	Enforcement Gap / Solidarity

FINDINGS

Economic Precarity is Universal: Youth activism around the world is inherently related to economic uncertainty and state failure to offer the young generation a promising future**.**

Digital Tools are a Blessing and a Curse at Once: They help the young people organise themselves, but digital spaces have become the arenas for the surveillance of the state.

Expectation-Response Gap: There is an underlying issue of 'expectation-response gap' when institutions cannot provide quick solutions.

International Law as a Moral Compass: In struggles such as that for Palestine, international law gives a legal language of protest, even though enforcement mechanisms of international law are rather limited.

Paper Law vs Real Law: There is a huge gap between the protection of protest through the constitution and police power used to suppress protest.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Legal: States should amend their laws on public order to ensure that the laws satisfy the test of necessity and proportionality.

Governance: Establish youth advisory councils with the ability to make decisions to address the representation issue.

Digital: Preserve digital public forums by banning arbitrary shutdown of the internet and ensuring transparency in content moderation.[42]

International: Enhance the power of the ICJ and ICC to make sure that international laws do not remain mere symbols for the youth movements of the world.

CONCLUSION

The 'Generation in Revolt' represents a paradigm shift in political action. Modern youth-led protests go beyond being acts of rage to become strategically organised efforts aimed at accountability and change. Although both domestic and international laws offer legal backing for these rights, the real motivations behind protests are 'the enforcement gap and institutional trust deficit.' The fate of whether protests result in reform or instability lies in how well institutions adapt to the new realities of a digital and aware generation.

Three major implications arise from this. States need to understand that stable governments do not stem from control over protests but from creating channels of influence that are credible once again. Courts must realise the significance of proper proportionality tests of protest-related restrictions, including internet cutoffs. The international community needs to recognise the price paid for leaving legal standards unenforced.

[42] Hum. Rts. Comm., *General Comment No. 34: Article 19: Freedoms of Opinion and Expression*, U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/GC/34 (Sept. 12, 2011)