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Editorial:

The Gen Z Moment

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The Gen Z Moment

The Gen Z is breaking the monotony of status quo in the South Asian region today. And add to them the millennials, you have a recipe for change. Born and raised in the hyper-communication age, they belong to the instant-gratification generation, restless and care less about stability and order. They are both the producers and consumers of unbridled audio-visual content that crowds the webspace and threatens to rip apart the constipated morality of the preceding generations.

A rough estimate would suggest the total population of the Gen Z (approx.566 million) plus Millennials (approx.470 million) has touched 1 billion in 2026. South Asia has a younger age structure than the world as a whole. In 2026, the region's population is about 2.05 billion, with roughly 179 million aged 15–19, 175 million aged 20–24 and 169 million aged 25–29. Together with the Gen Alpha their population will be close to 1.4 billion by 2040. This is significant because the region will not simply have a "youth bulge". It will have a huge cohort moving through the entire spectrum of population, productive and politically influential. In all, in 2026, Gen Z and Millennials together constitute nearly half of the world's population—around 3.9 billion people, or 47 percent. In South Asia, their combined share is even larger, at roughly half of the population—about 1.05 billion people, or 51 percent. South Asia is, therefore, a disproportionately Millennial-and-Gen-Z dominated society.

The political instincts of the Gen Z (and the succeeding Gen Alpha) have been shaped less by institutions than by networks: less by the sermon, the instructions from the party office, or the official broadcaster of the state or state-controlled media than by the cell-phone, called the 'idiot-toy', in their hands. They create as rapidly as they consume, and the culture they disseminate is fluid, irreverent, and difficult to discipline. The result is an impatient citizenry (or netizenry?)—sceptical of hierarchy, suspicious of censorship, and increasingly unwilling to confuse stability with justice.

In South Asia, this does not look like a mere social shift, but a political unwiring. The anti-regime upheavals in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and to some extent, in India, point to demand for a change, the ruling elites appear grossly underprepared to handle. The region stands on the edge of a long uneasy transition where there is no deference for authority and there is a clamour for accountability. The old principle of 'order for the sake of order' has lost its appeal. For managers of state and security, the lesson is clear: legitimacy can no longer rest on respect for tradition and hierarchy, nor can unity and control be sustained by nostalgia for discipline or a golden age in a mythical past, without consent. Power will have to learn new grammars of trust, transparency, responsiveness, and restraint.

For South Asia's ruling elites, this represents more than a generational challenge. Governments that once relied on reverence for the state, the uniform, the patriarch, or the majority community now confront citizens who question authority in real time. The old political vocabulary—order, tradition, security, national unity and honour—no longer commands automatic assent. It must compete with demands for dignity, opportunity, accountability, and freedom.

The implications for state and security managers are profound. Coercion may suppress dissent temporarily; hyper-propaganda may sway public opinion temporarily; but it cannot manufacture eternal consent. Surveillance may monitor discontent, but it cannot resolve the grievances that produce it. Nor can appeals to religious chauvinism or mono-cultural nationalism (because most South Asian societies are pluri-cultural) conceal failures of governance indefinitely. A population connected across borders and communities will not remain permanently enclosed within the narrow xenophobic identities imposed upon it by political entrepreneurs.

Nevertheless, this generational transition could go either way. It can open the way to a more liberal, plural, and secular South Asian public sphere—provided secularism is understood not as hostility to faith, but as equal citizenship beyond religious privilege. Young people who reject sectarian mobilisation are not necessarily indifferent to belief; they are often demanding that belief cease to be used as an instrument of exclusion, electoral mobilisation and political control.

It can also degenerate into chaos and frenzy if it is not handled with care; if there is an effort by the state, dominated by the baby boomers and Gen X, given to idealism and cynicism, to intimidate it to silence.

Thus, the transition may not be peaceful in every sense. As the “old order changeth yielding place to new”, it might produce resistance. The coming years may bring sharper polarisation, institutional breakdown, online vigilantism, and varying degrees of political anarchy. Irreverence can liberate, but it can also become nihilistic. Digital abundance can democratise speech, but it can equally accelerate rumour, outrage, and manipulation. The decline of traditional authority does not automatically guarantee the rise of enlightened citizenship.

South Asia is entering an unsettled interval in which the future will be negotiated between impatient citizens and anxious establishments. The old order will not disappear simply because it has become obsolete, nor will the new order arrive fully formed. Between them lies a period of transition in which authority must learn humility and freedom must learn responsibility.

The decisive question is whether the region's elites will adapt before they are compelled to do so. If they continue to defend privilege through chauvinism, censorship, and coercion, the generational revolt will become more destructive. If they accept pluralism, reform, and accountable government and accommodate the spirit of Gen Z, the same revolt could become the foundation of a future, everyone can be proud of.

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