FAKE NEWS WATCHDOG

Truth Matters, We Verify

WHITE PAPER 2025

Democracy's Fight for Survival in the 21st Century

A Global Reality Check

Published on:
Sunday, September 14, 2025

Fake News Watchdog
Email: info@fakenewswatchdog.org | **Web:** www.fakenewswatchdog.org

About Us

Fake News Watchdog (FNW) is a global initiative dedicated to identifying, analyzing, and countering the spread of misinformation and disinformation in today's digital world. We stand at the forefront of the fight for truth, empowering individuals, media professionals, academic institutions, and civil society to navigate the increasingly complex information landscape with confidence and clarity.

Our Mission

Our mission is to detect and debunk false narratives, monitor disinformation trends, and strengthen public resilience through media literacy. Leveraging artificial intelligence, advanced fact-checking tools, and rigorous research methodologies, we work to uphold the principles of transparency, credibility, and informed public discourse.

Our Vision

We envision a world where access to accurate, verified information is a fundamental right, and where communities are equipped to question, verify, and challenge misleading content. A well-informed society is the cornerstone of democracy, and we are committed to fostering a culture where truth triumphs over manipulation.

What We Do

- **Fact-Checking Services**: Verifying claims circulating in media, politics, and public discourse.
- **Reputation Management**: Monitoring digital platforms for false or misleading content about our clients and delivering timely, evidence-based rebuttals to protect their public image and credibility.
- **Research & Trends Analysis**: Studying patterns in disinformation to inform public policy and education.
- **Educational Outreach**: Promoting media literacy through training, resources, and awareness campaigns.
- **Global Collaboration**: Partnering with international organizations, journalists, researchers, and digital rights advocates to build a united front against fake news.

A Message from Our Team

At Fake News Watchdog, our mission is rooted in the belief that truth is not just a principle but a cornerstone of a thriving society. In an age where disinformation spreads faster than ever, the responsibility to uphold integrity in information is one we share collectively.

This report serves as both a reflection of the challenges we face and a call to action. It dives deep into the anatomy of disinformation, examining its sources, impact, and the societal vulnerabilities it exploits. By bringing these incidents to light, we aim to empower individuals, institutions, and policymakers with the insights necessary to recognize, combat, and prevent the spread of falsehoods.

Our work is not possible without the contributions of vigilant fact-checkers, dedicated researchers, and the trust of those who believe in a better-informed world. Together, we can build an ecosystem where truth has the power to outpace lies, fostering trust and accountability in every corner of society.

We hope this report inspires meaningful dialogue and decisive action. Thank you for standing with us in this crucial fight against misinformation.

– The Fake News Watchdog Team

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Disclaimer

This report relies on publicly available international sources, including the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, Freedom House, Economist Intelligence Unit, World Justice Project, Transparency International, Reporters Without Borders, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Bertelsmann Stiftung (BTI). It also draws on reports and analyses from the International Crisis Group, Committee to Protect Journalists, TIME magazine, The National WWII Museum, as well as recognized academic works and established media outlets (e.g., Dawn, Oxford University Press, Routledge, Harvard University Press). The report does not represent the personal views of the authors or the publisher.

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Executive Summary

Global democracy is under sustained pressure: autocratization has moved beyond coups and legalism into a digital, information-control phase, “Digital Autocratization”, where states weaponize technology, surveillance, and disinformation to hollow out democratic norms. Democracies are increasingly judged not by the existence of elections but by the health of institutions that constrain power. The report therefore narrows its assessment to three core pillars, Rule of Law, Human Rights, and Freedom of Expression, which together determine whether elections are meaningful or merely ritual.

Reversing democratic decline requires simultaneous restoration of impartial justice, tangible human-rights protections, and an open information environment, because gains in one pillar are fragile if the others remain eroded.

Global Context

Democracy worldwide has entered a period of stress. According to major indices such as Freedom House, the V-Dem Institute (Varieties of Democracy), the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), Bertelsmann Stiftung, International Crisis Group, Human Rights Watch, the World Justice Project, and the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and UNDP. The reports also leverage data on media freedom from Reporters Without Borders and insights on corruption from Transparency International. The findings are further enriched by information from both domestic and international media organizations. Global levels of democracy have declined to levels not seen in decades. The rise of digital authoritarianism, characterized by misinformation, surveillance, and

restrictions on online freedoms, has added a new layer of complexity. These global pressures provide an important backdrop to the regional case studies in this report

Key Findings

Bangladesh: Once promising, now sliding toward electoral autocracy. Weak judicial independence, pervasive use of digital-security laws to silence dissent, and aggressive policing of opposition and media have turned elections into managed events rather than genuine contests. Press freedom and anti-corruption indicators rank poorly, signalling systemic institutional capture.

Egypt: Deeply authoritarian in practice. The state governs through “rule by law,” extensive security-sector control, mass detentions, and near-total suppression of independent media leaving virtually no space for civic contestation. International indices place Egypt among the worst performers on rule of law and press freedom.

India: A large democracy experiencing pronounced backsliding via “autocratic legalism.” Institutional weakening (judiciary, oversight bodies), targeting of journalists and civil society, and digital repression have produced an environment of constrained pluralism elections persist, but substantive liberties erode.

Nepal: Competitive elections but rising executive overreach, contested rule-of-law performance, and recent social media bans and protest crackdowns indicate vulnerability to rapid democratic erosion especially where youth mobilization meets heavy-handed state response.

Pakistan: Persistent institutional weaknesses, politicized security actors, and an increasingly constrained media environment undermine the checks that would translate ballots into accountable governance. Rankings and reports record declining freedoms and growing impunity.

Why Democracy

The simple answer is that democracy matters because democratic governments respect their own people and respect their neighbors. This brings harmony within a country and peace across the region. As Alex Tan acknowledges, democracy remains the most resilient and effective form of governance. Democracies tend to be wealthier, less corrupt, and uphold higher levels of human development, happiness, and human rights.

British politician Rory Stewart once noted that democracy should be valued for its principles, equality, liberty, and human dignity. Yet he also cautioned that democracy often disappoints, not only in Britain but also in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Jamaica, where systems designed to deliver peace and prosperity have too often fostered corruption instead.

Democracy matters, not simply because it is people-powered, but because it fundamentally enhances lives, stabilizes societies, safeguards freedom, expresses the will of the people, and grants legitimacy to govern.

As Nobel laureate Narges Mohammadi has cautioned, democratic institutions are fragile and must be actively defended. Freedoms we take for granted can vanish if citizens do not remain vigilant and engaged (Mohammadi, 2023, as cited in TIME).

A Century of Autocratization

The message is clear: democracy is not advancing—it is collapsing. The world is now entering what may be called a fourth wave of autocratization, or “digital autocratization,” which differs fundamentally from previous periods of democratic decline.

The first wave used brute force and ideology; the second wave relied on military coups; the third wave employed legal manipulation. The fourth wave, however, is defined by technological control and information warfare. Unlike visible coups or legal reforms, digital autocratization involves silent and pervasive forms of control. States manipulate the very infrastructure of the internet, own telecommunications networks, filter data at the national level, and deploy deepfake technologies to manipulate public opinion and discredit opponents.

This new form of authoritarianism is global in nature. Regimes share best practices, surveillance technologies, and disinformation tactics, creating a network of mutual support that makes it harder for democracies to respond.

The waves of autocratization are best understood as long-term global trends, not isolated events (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). The first wave of the 1920s and 1930s saw the rise of fascist regimes in Europe, most notably Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany, amid post–World War I instability and the Great Depression (The National WWII Museum, 2025). The second wave in the 1960s and 1970s spread military dictatorships across Latin America, Africa, and Asia during decolonization (Boese & Hellmeier, 2020). The third wave, beginning in the 1990s, was carried out in the name of democracy itself—through ballot boxes, pliant courts, and captured media (Lührmann et al., 2025).

According to the V-Dem 2025 Democracy Report, 45 countries are now autocratizing while only 19 are democratizing. By country averages, democracy has regressed to levels last seen in the 1990s; by population averages, to the 1980s; and by GDP-weighted averages, to the 1970s (Lührmann et al., 2025).

These numbers carry severe consequences. In autocratizing states, civil liberties decline first—freedom of the press, civic space, and the safety of dissenters. Executives then expand their powers while criminalizing opposition. Most alarming, V-Dem finds that 67% of countries that begin autocratizing collapse fully into autocracy, and over longer periods, the likelihood rises to 80% (Lührmann et al., 2025).

Recent years highlight these risks. Hungary, Nicaragua, and India are among the top autocratizers, while China and Russia openly offer alternative governance models, emboldening leaders elsewhere to dismiss democratic standards as “Western” or “foreign.”

External watchdogs echo the concern. Freedom House (2024) reports that global freedom has declined for 18 consecutive years, with only 20% of the world’s population living in “Free” countries. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU, 2025) downgraded Pakistan to an “Authoritarian Regime” and continues to classify India as an “Electoral Autocracy.” Reporters Without Borders (2024) ranked India and Pakistan among the bottom third of countries worldwide for press freedom.

Autocratization, in all its forms, is not simply a statistical trend. It represents shrinking liberties, weakened institutions, and silenced voices. In the 21st century, democracy’s survival requires recognizing these patterns and resisting the silent, digital tools of authoritarian control.

Whose Democracy?

Democracy is often presented as a universal aspiration, but its meaning and practice differ across contexts. While international indices such as Freedom House, V-Dem, and the Economist Intelligence Unit provide benchmarks, these frameworks sometimes reflect Western-centric assumptions that may not capture the realities of local traditions and political cultures.

For example, in South Asia and parts of Africa, community-based decision-making or traditional councils coexist with electoral institutions, producing hybrid systems that defy easy categorization. These forms of governance may not score highly in global indices but retain legitimacy in the eyes of local populations.

At the same time, authoritarian regimes increasingly invoke “national” or “cultural” democracy to justify restrictions on rights. Claims that democracy can take unique forms often mask efforts to centralize power and silence dissent. Such practices raise a critical question: are there minimum universal standards—free and fair elections, rule of law, human rights, and freedom of expression—without which a system cannot credibly be called democratic?

This report adopts a comparative approach: it acknowledges contextual variation while evaluating states against widely recognized international standards. The purpose is not to impose uniformity, but to highlight how erosion of core principles undermines democratic legitimacy regardless of geography.

Methodology

This report employs a comparative case study approach, focusing on Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Nepal, and Pakistan. These cases were chosen for their diversity in political systems and regional relevance, as well as their varying degrees of democratic backsliding.

Sources of Data

- International democracy indices: V-Dem, Freedom House, EIU Democracy Index, World Justice Project, Bertelsmann Stiftung, Transparency International. The World Justice Project, and the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and UNDP.
- Reports from human rights organizations: Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Reporters Without Borders, International Crisis Group, International Federation of Journalists.
- Academic research and historical analyses for context.
- Media reports, both domestic and international, for current developments.

Analytical Framework

The analysis focuses on three central pillars of democracy:

1. **Rule of Law** – independence of judiciary, accountability, and corruption control.
2. **Human Rights** – protection of minorities, civil liberties, and political participation.
3. **Freedom of Expression** – press freedom, digital rights, and civic space.

Each case study applies this framework to ensure comparability..

Limitations

While international indices offer valuable cross-country data, they may overlook local nuances. To address this, the report triangulates data from multiple sources and emphasizes discrepancies where relevant. Nevertheless, some bias remains unavoidable given the contested nature of democracy itself.

Case Studies: Democracy Under Pressure

To better understand the global struggle for democracy in the 21st century, this report examines five countries—Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Nepal, and Pakistan. Each represents a different political trajectory, but all share a common thread of democratic fragility. Some, like Egypt and Bangladesh, have shifted decisively into entrenched authoritarianism. Others, like India and Pakistan, continue to hold regular elections but increasingly exhibit authoritarian practices behind a democratic façade. Nepal, meanwhile, remains a fragile but functioning democracy, still wrestling with the legacies of conflict and incomplete reforms.

These case studies are not intended as exhaustive country reports. Instead, they illustrate broader patterns of democratic backsliding: the erosion of rule of law, the restriction of human rights, and the shrinking of free expression. At the same time, they reveal that the demand for democracy persists. Civil society organizations, journalists, youth movements, and ordinary citizens continue to resist repression and press for accountability.

By examining these five diverse contexts, the report highlights both the resilience and vulnerability of democracy across regions. Together, they serve as a mirror for global trends, demonstrating how the promise of democracy is celebrated in constitutions and elections but too often denied in practice.

Bangladesh in 2024: From Hybrid to Autocracy

Bangladesh began the year 2024 with expectations of national elections. Instead of democratic renewal, the country drifted further into authoritarianism. According to the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, Bangladesh is now classified as an Electoral Autocracy (V-Dem, 2025). While elections take place, they are neither free nor fair, and the government operates with almost no effective checks on its power.

The ruling Awami League, under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, consolidated its grip by targeting political opponents, arresting activists, and manipulating election procedures. Newly introduced digital laws were weaponized against critics, further shrinking civic space.

Bangladesh now ranks in the bottom 10–20 percent globally on the Liberal Democracy Index (Lührmann et al., 2025). It holds the 149th position on the Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2024), reflecting systemic abuse of power. In press freedom, Reporters Without Borders places Bangladesh at 165th worldwide, where journalists risk imprisonment for criticizing government policies (RSF, 2024).

Once considered a promising democracy, Bangladesh today resembles a family-run autocracy in which one party dominates institutions and silences dissent.

Rule of Law: A Legal System Without Justice

While elections continue, the legal system in Bangladesh struggles to uphold justice. The World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index ranks Bangladesh 127th of 142 countries, with a score of 0.39/1.00. This low score reflects weak legal protections, selective enforcement, and widespread impunity.

Fundamental rights scored just 0.30, indicating denial of freedoms like peaceful protest and free expression. Constraints on government powers stand at 0.36, meaning there are minimal limits on executive authority. Civil justice scored 0.36, while criminal justice fell to 0.31, both pointing to inefficiency, delays, and bias favoring elites.

Corruption remains deeply entrenched, with a low 0.33 score. Although the score for order and security is higher at 0.63, this largely reflects authoritarian policing. Human Rights Watch (2024) reports that improved security often comes at the expense of civil liberties, with security forces accused of widespread abuses.

Human Rights: Voting Without Protection

Although Bangladesh holds elections, human rights remain under siege. The Awami League maintained power through repression, particularly visible during the 2024 election period.

Opposition rallies were routinely dispersed with violence, and hundreds of activists were arrested. Human Rights Watch(2024) documented mass detentions and heavy-handed police crackdowns, creating a pervasive climate of fear.

The Digital Security Act (DSA) has emerged as a central tool of repression. Citizens have been imprisoned for critical Facebook posts or tweets. Amnesty International (2024) recorded hundreds of such cases, showing systematic silencing of dissent.

Security forces, particularly the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), stand accused of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. Despite global criticism, accountability remains absent. Labor rights are also neglected, with garment workers, the backbone of Bangladesh's economy, often facing unsafe conditions and suppression of union activity.

In effect, while elections exist on paper, the absence of human rights renders them meaningless.

Freedom of Expression: Silenced Voices

Freedom of speech, a democratic cornerstone, faces unprecedented restrictions. The Digital Security Act is used to arrest journalists, artists, and ordinary citizens for critical views. Amnesty International (2024) confirms hundreds prosecuted under the DSA for online posts.

Ahead of the 2024 elections, journalists covering opposition rallies or electoral violence faced harassment, arrest, or physical assault. Human Rights Watch (2024) reported systematic surveillance and raids targeting members of the opposition, particularly the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami, the latter of which was later banned.

Bangladesh now stands 165th of 180 countries in press freedom rankings (RSF, 2024). Once home to vibrant journalism, the media landscape is now stifled under government control.

Without access to free expression and independent media, voters are denied the information needed to make informed choices. Democracy, therefore, exists only in appearance.

Future of Democracy

Bangladesh today stands at a crossroads. The structures of democracy exist, but they function without real substance. Elections are held, but they are manipulated; opposition parties exist, but they are suppressed; courts and institutions remain, but they operate under political influence.

The country's future democratic trajectory will depend on whether it can break out of this cycle of authoritarian consolidation. Key steps include restoring the independence of the judiciary, ensuring credible elections, repealing repressive laws such as the Digital Security Act, and allowing genuine opposition participation in politics.

Civil society, youth movements, and labor groups still hold the potential to push for democratic reforms. Bangladesh has a vibrant population with a history of mobilization, as seen in the independence movement of 1971 and the democratic struggles of the 1990s. These traditions remain embedded in the political culture and could be revived if space for expression and organization is reopened.

For now, however, Bangladesh remains closer to entrenched autocracy than to functioning democracy. Its institutions are subordinated to one-party rule, and citizens' rights are curtailed. Unless meaningful reforms are introduced, the gap between democratic ideals and political reality will only grow wider, leaving Bangladesh as a democracy in name but not in practice.

Egypt in 2024: Authoritarianism Entrenched

Egypt in 2024 stands as a stark reminder of how democratic structures can be hollowed out while authoritarian control becomes deeply entrenched. President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's regime has ensured that elections, courts, and legislatures exist in form, but not in function. Political opposition has been dismantled, civil society curtailed, and dissent systematically silenced.

Rule of Law

Egypt's judiciary and legal system remain heavily influenced by the executive. Courts serve as tools to legitimize political repression rather than provide independent justice. The World Justice Project Rule of Law Index (2024) ranked Egypt 136th out of 142 countries, with an overall score of 0.34. Constraints on government powers were among the lowest in the world, reflecting the executive's dominance.

Corruption is widespread and accountability minimal. The Corruption Perceptions Index (2024) ranked Egypt 130th globally with a score of 33/100. Laws exist on paper, but enforcement is selective, shielding the ruling elite and punishing opponents.

Human Rights

The human rights situation in Egypt remains grim. Freedom House (2024) gave Egypt a score of 18/100, categorizing it as "Not Free." Political opponents are routinely detained, and civil society organizations operate under strict surveillance and funding restrictions. Amnesty International (2024) documented numerous cases of torture, enforced disappearances, and arbitrary arrests.

Mass trials of dissidents continue, often lacking due process. Women and minority groups face persistent discrimination, and legal protections remain inadequate. Security forces, particularly under the Ministry of Interior, act with near-total impunity.

Freedom of Expression

Egypt's media landscape is one of the most repressed in the region. Independent outlets have been closed, and journalists risk imprisonment for critical reporting. Reporters Without Borders (2024) ranked Egypt 168th out of 180 countries in its World Press Freedom Index.

The government's cybercrime and anti-terrorism laws are frequently used to silence online voices. Social media posts criticizing the regime can result in detention, with bloggers and digital activists particularly targeted. This digital repression complements the already strict censorship of print and broadcast media.

Future of Democracy in Egypt

Egypt's democratic future appears bleak under the current trajectory. While elections are held, they serve as little more than political theatre to legitimize authoritarian rule. Civil society remains tightly controlled, and avenues for peaceful dissent are virtually closed.

Unless there are systemic reforms, including judicial independence, genuine electoral competition, and protection of human rights, Egypt will remain trapped in authoritarian stability. For now, democracy exists only as a façade, masking the reality of centralized power and institutionalized repression.

India in 2024:

World's Largest Democracy in Name Only

India proudly claims the title of the "world's largest democracy," but in 2024 that title increasingly rings hollow. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India has witnessed a decade-long erosion of democratic norms, growing authoritarianism, and the steady undermining of institutions that once provided checks and balances.

International indices confirm this democratic decline. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute (2025)downgraded India to the category of Electoral Autocracy, pointing to shrinking space for civil liberties and weakened electoral competition. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU, 2025) ranked India 41st with a score of 6.65/10, classifying it as a Flawed Democracy. Freedom House (2024) scored India 66/100, designating it "Partly Free." Together, these figures show that while elections continue, the substantive elements of democracy are being hollowed out.

Rule of Law

India's judiciary, historically a guardian of constitutional rights, faces growing accusations of politicization. Appointments and verdicts in high-profile cases often appear aligned with ruling party interests. The World Justice Project (2024)ranked India 79th out of 142 countries, with an overall score of 0.53, reflecting weaknesses in judicial independence and access to justice.

Constraints on government powers have weakened. Civil liberties and protections against abuse of power are under pressure, particularly through the use of draconian laws such as the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA). Critics argue that these legal tools are selectively applied to silence dissent and shield allies of the ruling party.

Corruption also remains a challenge. Although India ranked relatively better than some regional peers on the Corruption Perceptions Index (2024), at 93rd place with a score of 39/100, enforcement is uneven and politicized.

Human Rights

The human rights situation in India has deteriorated over the last decade. Amnesty International (2024) and Human Rights Watch (2024) have both documented widespread violations, including restrictions on protests, persecution of religious minorities, and harassment of activists.

Muslim communities face increasing discrimination, fueled by Hindu nationalist rhetoric. Citizenship laws, such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), have been criticized for undermining secular principles by favoring non-Muslim refugees. Religious violence and hate crimes have risen, often with impunity for perpetrators linked to ruling party networks.

Civil society organizations have come under heavy pressure, with restrictions on foreign funding and intimidation of NGOs. Activists are routinely charged under anti-terror or sedition laws, creating a climate of fear.

Freedom of Expression

India's once-vibrant media landscape has shrunk under state and corporate pressure. Independent journalists face harassment, lawsuits, and arbitrary arrests. Reporters Without Borders (2024) ranked India 159th out of 180 countries, citing declining press freedom, increasing violence against reporters, and the use of state institutions to control narratives.

Digital censorship is also growing. Internet shutdowns are routinely imposed, particularly in sensitive regions such as Jammu and Kashmir. Social media platforms face government pressure to remove content critical of the authorities. The combination of surveillance, censorship, and harassment has stifled open debate, leaving little space for dissenting voices.

Future of Democracy in India

India remains the world's largest electoral exercise, but the democratic spirit that once animated its institutions is eroding. Elections are still competitive, yet increasingly tilted through state control of resources, media influence, and intimidation of opposition parties.

Unless India restores judicial independence, strengthens protections for minorities, and reopens space for free expression, it risks sliding further into majoritarian authoritarianism. The international community continues to recognize India as a democracy, but domestically the reality is clear: India's democracy today is more a matter of form than substance.

Nepal in 2024:

Fragile Democracy in Transition

Nepal in 2024 remains a young democracy, still grappling with instability and the unfinished business of its political transition. Since the end of monarchy in 2008 and the adoption of the federal democratic constitution in 2015, the country has struggled to consolidate democratic institutions. Political instability, fragile coalitions, and weak governance continue to define its democratic trajectory.

Despite these challenges, Nepal retains important democratic features: regular elections, vibrant political competition, and an active civil society. Yet persistent corruption, judicial weakness, and poor service delivery undermine public trust.

International indices reflect this fragile state of democracy. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute (2025)classified Nepal as an Electoral Democracy, though at the lower end of the scale. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU, 2025) gave Nepal a score of 4.98/10, ranking it as a Hybrid Regime. Freedom House (2024) rated Nepal 55/100, placing it in the category of “Partly Free.” These scores suggest that Nepal’s democracy is neither collapsing nor consolidating, but remains caught in transition.

Rule of Law

Nepal’s legal system is plagued by inefficiency, corruption, and politicization. The World Justice Project (2024) ranked Nepal 108th out of 142 countries, with an overall score of 0.44. Civil justice scored 0.41, and criminal justice 0.40, reflecting slow and inaccessible processes.

Judicial independence is often compromised, with appointments and decisions influenced by party politics. Corruption within the bureaucracy and political patronage further weaken accountability. Transparency International (2024) ranked Nepal 108th on its Corruption Perceptions Index, with a score of 35/100, showing that graft continues to undermine governance.

Human Rights

Nepal's human rights record shows mixed progress. Amnesty International (2024) noted improvements in legal protections for marginalized groups, including Dalits and women, but reported persistent discrimination and weak enforcement.

The country struggles with transitional justice, particularly in addressing crimes committed during the decade-long civil war (1996–2006). Efforts to hold perpetrators accountable have been slow and inconsistent, leaving victims without closure.

Labor rights remain weak, with migrant workers facing exploitation abroad and insufficient protection from the state. Minority groups continue to demand greater inclusion and equitable representation within federal structures.

Freedom of Expression

Nepal's media environment is relatively free compared to its regional neighbors, but pressures remain. Reporters Without Borders (2024) ranked Nepal 95th globally, indicating a moderately free press. Journalists face occasional harassment and threats, particularly when reporting on corruption or criticizing powerful actors.

Internet freedom is generally respected, though the government has considered new regulations that civil society fears could restrict online speech. Civil society organizations remain active, but they face bureaucratic hurdles and financial constraints.

Debunking Foreign Hands in Nepal's Unrest

Speculation about foreign hands is the most popular trend in social media as well as in political debate across the world. Television channels in India, Thailand, Bangladesh, Singapore widely cover this whole episode, in Pakistan too it was covered but not as much as our channels cover Bangladesh uprising. According to the claims and analysis here are six major "Foreign Suspects" interfering and supporting the Nepal Gen Z protest.

Suspect 1. India:

India shares a long, open border with Nepal and considers it a vital buffer state. A primary interest for India would be to prevent a pro-China government from taking a dominant position.

Claim, that New Delhi might be motivated to support political factions or popular movements that are more aligned with its strategic interests, ensuring that Nepal remains a friendly neighbor rather than a strategic liability. The other reasons can be the Indian agenda to counter Chinese business and political influence by securing a favorable government.

Disclaim, India and Nepal share a complex relationship marked by historical ties and geopolitical rivalry, particularly with China. India has a long history of cultivating relationships with Nepali political parties and leaders. It is plausible that certain

Indian-aligned factions may have encouraged the unrest to destabilize the current government, which is seen by some as being too close to Beijing. The possibility of India influencing the situation is high.

Suspect 2. China:

As a key partner in China's BRI, Nepal is a crucial link in its infrastructure network. From Beijing's perspective, instability could be viewed as a threat to its investments and a way to pressure a government that may not be fully committed to Chinese projects.

Claim, that China has an interest in limiting the influence of rival powers, such as the United States, which has been pushing the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) agreement and Indian counter investments in Nepal.

Disclaim, China's primary interest is stability in Nepal to protect its economic investments, particularly those related to the Belt and Road Initiative. Unrest and political turmoil directly threaten its projects and strategic goals. It is far more likely that Beijing would work to prop up the existing government and counter anti-Chinese sentiment. The chances of China instigating the unrest is very low.

Suspect 3. United States:

The United States sees Nepal as a strategic partner in its broader Indo-Pacific strategy, which aims to counter China's growing regional influence.

Claim, that Washington’s interest could be to support popular movements that it views as promoting democratic values and human rights, unrest could be seen as an opportunity to push for reforms that align with U.S. interests.

Disclaim, the U.S. provides funding to a range of NGOs and civil society groups in Nepal, critics of the U.S. often argue that this funding can inadvertently or intentionally stoke anti-government sentiment. There is no credible evidence to suggest that Washington directly orchestrated the protests. The possibility of U.S. influence is moderate but indirect.

Suspect 4. European Union:

Many Western nations and organizations provide development aid to Nepal. Their interest often lies in ensuring that this aid is used effectively and that the country maintains a stable, liberal democratic system.

Claim, The EU funding, motivated and support protests that highlight issues of corruption and human rights abuses, as these are often conditions tied to EU financial assistance.

Disclaim, EU and other Western powers typically operate through soft power, using development aid and diplomatic pressure to encourage human rights and good governance, these efforts may align with the goals of protesters, they are unlikely to be a cause of the unrest. The chances of EU direct instigation is very low.

Suspect 5. Hindutva Groups:

Hindu nationalist groups, particularly from India, have a significant interest in Nepal. These groups have a long-standing desire to see Nepal return to its status as a Hindu state, a position it held before becoming a secular republic in 2008.

Claim, many Hindu religious groups constantly got financial support from Indian Hindu groups, some of them linked to the Indian government and Hindu American Foundation.

India's RSS affiliated groups, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh have amplified the unrest via funding for monarchist parties like the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), which demands a Hindu monarchy restoration. Posters of Indian leaders like Yogi Adityanath appeared in the crowd.

Disclaim, some fringe or nationalist groups, particularly those from India, have a vested interest in seeing Nepal return to a Hindu state. These groups have the potential to mobilize and fund local actors who share their ideological goals. Their influence is difficult to quantify. The possibility of these groups being a key factor is moderate.

Suspect 6. Multinational Companies:

Multinational national companies, especially telecommunications companies and social media platforms feel threatened by recent government actions, particularly in a global climate of increasing regulation. It's a worldwide trend that governments are asserting more control over the digital space.

Claim, Multinational companies, Monetary Funds and Social Media platforms are now big enough to dictate countries policies by using their muscles and algorithms.

Disclaim, these companies do not instigate unrest; rather, their platforms serve as the digital battleground where domestic movements organize and public opinion is shaped. These companies are the beneficiaries but not the instigators The chance of these companies being instigators is effectively zero.

Latest Insights On The Roots of Nepal's Unrest

The recent unrest in Nepal, a series of youth-led demonstrations that erupted in early September 2025, has captured the attention of scholars across the globe. These scholars, who specialize in South Asian politics, democratic transitions, and digital rights, frame the events not as a singular protest but as a symptom of deeper, structural issues that have been building for years. The youth-driven movement has been dubbed the "Gen Z protests," reflecting its digitally native character and a focus on issues of accountability and opportunity.

The initial spark for the protests was a government directive to ban social media platforms, a move that scholars from Human Rights Watch's Asia division argue was a "disproportionate use of force." Eyewitness accounts and graphic footage circulating online highlight how the violent crackdown by authorities which killed 51 and injured over 1,000 catalyzed the protests, transforming them from a reaction to censorship into a broader movement. Human Rights Watch scholars tie this to a larger pattern of democratic backsliding in Nepal, citing the nation's failure to uphold obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. They interpret the protests as a "generational reckoning" against deep-seated nepotism and corruption.

This view is echoed by other analyses, which focus on the economic and social dimensions of the unrest. According to Peoples Dispatch and CounterPunch, the uprising is fundamentally about "jobs, dignity, and a broken development model," highlighting the profound frustration among young Nepalis over a lack of economic opportunities and a pervasive culture of elite corruption. Amnesty Nepal’s analysis, meanwhile, situates the

government's social media ban within a broader, regional trend of digital control. A Cambridge platform on management and social sciences examines social media's dual role in these events, noting its power to enable rapid mobilization through hashtags like #NepoBaby and #NepoKids, while also exposing activists to state repression. This complex dynamic, scholars argue, positions the unrest as a crucial test for free speech and digital democracy across Asia.

Future of Democracy in Nepal

Nepal’s democracy remains fragile, but not doomed. The country has maintained electoral competition and basic freedoms, yet continues to struggle with corruption, weak institutions, and unfinished transitional justice.

Its future depends on strengthening the rule of law, empowering independent institutions, and delivering tangible benefits to citizens through better governance. If political elites prioritize short-term gains over structural reforms, Nepal risks prolonged instability. But if civil society, youth movements, and democratic actors push for accountability and inclusion, the country could still consolidate its democracy and serve as a positive example in the region.

Pakistan in 2024:

Democracy Hijacked: The Nexus of Power in Pakistan

In theory, Pakistan is a democracy where sovereignty belongs to the people. Citizens cast their votes, parties form governments, and elected representatives are meant to legislate and govern on behalf of the masses. In practice, however, the reality is far more complex and far more disappointing. For decades, the ordinary citizen's role has ended at the ballot box. Beyond that symbolic exercise, real power has consistently remained in the grip of a tightly knit nexus: the military establishment, political dynasties, bureaucratic elites, jagirdars, wadiras, pirs, and business cartels.

This power structure is not a coincidence of interests; it is an entrenched system in which each actor plays a specific role, and together they ensure that Pakistan's politics, economy, and policies remain tilted in their favor. They all enjoy each other's company and take a piece of the pie proportionate to their size (حصہ بقدر جسہ).

The Military Establishment: The Silent Arbiter

No discussion of Pakistan's decision-making is possible without recognizing the dominance of the military establishment. From direct martial law regimes to invisible hybrid systems, the establishment has historically acted as the ultimate arbiter of power. Civilian governments may come and go, but no government can survive without its tacit approval.

Beyond security and defense, the establishment also wields decisive influence in foreign policy, media narratives, legislation, and key bureaucratic, managerial, and political

appointments, extending even to economic decisions. Whether it was alignment with the United States during the Cold War, the Afghan jihad of the 1980s, the War on Terror in the 2000s, or managing ties with China under CPEC, the establishment has maintained a central role. Civilian leaders often serve as sandbags and the public face of power; the real calculations take place behind closed doors in the corridors of power.

Political Dynasties: Legitimacy Providers

Politicians, especially those from dynastic families, are not powerless victims of this arrangement; they are willing participants. The Bhuttos, the Sharifs, and other entrenched families have traded popular legitimacy for survival within the system. Their task is to mobilize the masses, contest elections, and provide the democratic façade Pakistan must display to the world.

Yet these dynasties rarely challenge the deeper structure of power. In opposition, they may speak of civilian supremacy; in government, they often align with the establishment and cut deals that ensure their own longevity in politics. This transactional relationship has hollowed out political parties, turning them from vehicles of ideology into family enterprises.

Political corruption cases were wiped clean through elite bargains, allowing exiled leaders to return. The deal was framed as a step toward democracy, but in reality it was a power sharing arrangement brokered with the blessing of external actors. Ordinary citizens had no say, yet they bore the consequences of policies shaped by this compromise.

The Bureaucracy: The Permanent, Then Defanged

While politicians and governments change, the bureaucracy remains constant. As the permanent machinery of the state, before Z. A. Bhutto, bureaucrats historically acted as kingmakers, policy framers, and facilitators for both the establishment and political elites. Bhutto crushed the power of bureaucracy so that it would serve the government, not the people or the state.

Now the bureaucrats are paper tigers who can slow down any reform, align policy with their own interests, and create red tape that shields decision making from transparency. In return, they enjoy immense privileges, lucrative postings, and post retirement benefits in public corporations and diplomatic assignments.

Business Elites: The Beneficiaries

The final piece of this puzzle is the business elite. From real estate tycoons to industrial barons, these groups thrive under the protection of political and military patrons. In return, they provide the financial muscle, funding election campaigns, sustaining media houses, and lobbying for favorable policies.

Pakistan's economic history is full of scandals, particularly in the 1990s and 2000s, when state assets were sold at throwaway prices to politically connected businesses. Real estate empires were built through housing schemes and land allotments. Land meant for public use was converted into gated communities for the wealthy, displacing thousands of low income families and benefiting both retired officers and politically linked developers.

For the average Pakistani, the outcome has been the same: high inflation, stagnant

wages, lack of healthcare, and limited educational opportunities, while elites continue to expand their fortunes.

Time and again, sugar and wheat cartels formed by politically connected businessmen manipulated prices, created artificial shortages, and pocketed billions while consumers suffered. Governments, regardless of party, rarely moved against them because many of the beneficiaries sat in the same assemblies or had direct ties with ruling coalitions.

The Cost to Democracy

The greatest casualty of this arrangement is the promise of democracy itself. For the ordinary citizen, democracy begins and ends with casting a vote. The policies that determine the price of flour, oil, and electricity, and the state of hospitals, roads, and infrastructure, are made elsewhere, where elite establishments sit together.

This has created a democracy of rituals, not of substance. Parliamentary debates are theatrical, elections are expensive spectacles, and slogans such as roti, kapra, makaan or Naya Pakistan echo through the years, but the daily reality of the common man remains unchanged.

Breaking the Cycle

For Pakistan to move toward genuine democracy, this nexus must be confronted. Power must be de-linked from family dynasties, accountability must apply equally to all institutions, the bureaucracy must be made answerable to citizens, and business elites must be prevented from capturing policy. Without this structural shift, every World Democracy Day will remain a hollow ritual, where democracy is celebrated in speeches but denied in practice.

Ballot Boxes under Shadows

Pakistan has long claimed the mantle of democracy, but the 2024 elections confirmed what many citizens already knew: the system is neither free nor fair. According to V Dem (2025), Pakistan is now firmly classified as an Electoral Autocracy.

The year was marked by the incarceration of opposition leader Imran Khan, mass arrests of his supporters, and tight control of the media landscape. The military establishment directly shaped the outcome of the election, ensuring that political parties aligned with its interests carried the day. This was less a democratic contest and more a carefully scripted play, where the ballot box served as a prop rather than a decision making tool (Lührmann et al., 2025).

Civil liberties continued to shrink. Journalists were abducted or silenced, social media platforms were restricted, and dissenters were branded anti state or traitors. The space for civil society has become suffocating. Human Rights Watch (2024) documented widespread violations including torture of detainees, censorship of coverage on protests, and harassment of women activists.

Pakistan's Democracy Index remains among the lowest in the world (Lührmann et al., 2025). The EIU (2025) scored Pakistan at 2.84 out of 10, downgrading it to an Authoritarian Regime and placing it among the ten worst countries globally. Transparency International (2024) ranked it 135th out of 180 in the Corruption Perceptions Index.

While Pakistan celebrates elections as proof of democracy, real power rests in Rawalpindi, which controls the state machinery. The citizen's role ends at the ballot box;

decisions about IMF bailouts, CPEC contracts, and media narratives are made elsewhere.

Caught Between Power and Uncertainty

Pakistan ranked 129th out of 142 countries with an overall score of 0.38. The numbers reflect what every citizen feels: those in power often avoid being held responsible for their actions. Constraints on Government Powers scored just 0.45, showing weak parliamentary and judicial checks on executive authority. Absence of Corruption at 0.32 highlights entrenched graft across the executive, judiciary, and police. Order and Security registered one of the lowest scores globally at 0.37, illustrating Pakistan's struggle with militancy, political violence, and sectarian conflict.

Civil justice at 0.39 and criminal justice at 0.36 remain inaccessible and slow, plagued by backlogs and corruption. Despite rare flashes of judicial activism, Pakistan's courts have largely failed to insulate themselves from political pressures (International Crisis Group, 2024).

Pakistan's case is a tragic paradox: democratic aspirations exist, but they are suffocated by institutional fragility, elite capture, and the militarization of governance.

A Democracy Strangled by Restrictions

Systemic failures to protect human rights have hollowed out democratic institutions in Pakistan. According to Amnesty International (2024), Pakistan saw a year of intensified repression, where protests were crushed, political leaders jailed, and journalists silenced. Independent media houses face censorship, while journalists are harassed, abducted, or

prosecuted under vague laws like the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA). Protests by political opposition groups were met with mass arrests, often without due process. Human Rights Watch reported that hundreds of civilians, including women, were tried in military courts following May 2023 protests (HRW, 2024).

The levels and numbers of attacks on minorities in Pakistan have declined, but they remain at significant risk. Incidents of mob lynching have decreased manyfold thanks to the government's protective efforts and mechanisms. The media has also played a positive role in defusing tense situations. However, Amnesty International's previous reports still classified Pakistan as a high risk country for human rights violations.

Militarization of Politics

Pakistan's democratic system is significantly undermined by persistent interference in the political process and the deliberate misuse of legal mechanisms, eroding institutional integrity and public trust. Despite being a democracy, the frequent interference of the military in governance and the abuse of laws to suppress dissent undermine the protection of citizens' rights. As a result, Pakistan's democracy remains fragile, relying on coercion rather than the genuine consent of the people.

March to April 2022 (DAWN): Facing a no confidence vote, Prime Minister Imran Khan wrote to President Arif Alvi seeking the army chief's public declaration of neutrality in the crisis. When the military refrained from intervening directly, Khan lost the vote and was ousted on 10 April 2022 (DAWN).

1999: Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, amid tensions with the military leadership, attempted to dismiss General Pervez Musharraf as Chief of Army Staff and appoint a loyalist. The army responded with a coup on 12 October 1999, ousting the government. Musharraf assumed power, later declaring himself President and suspending the constitution and parliament, illustrating how attempts to manipulate military appointments can provoke intervention (Shah, 2017).

2017 (Panama Papers): During investigations into offshore wealth, Nawaz Sharif initially sought military support to counter judicial probes. When the military distanced itself and the Supreme Court disqualified Sharif in July 2017, civil military tensions deepened; an example of using military alliances as a shield against accountability, only for it to backfire (Shah, 2017).

Late 1980s to 1990s: Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto (1988 to 1990) courted the military to bolster her rule against Nawaz Sharif. When relations soured amid corruption allegations, President Ghulam Ishaq Khan, with military backing, dismissed her government in August 1990 under Article 58(2)(b). Bhutto was dismissed again in 1996. These cycles repeatedly invoked military support, turning the army into a de facto arbiter of civilian power (Aziz, 2008).

1976 to 1979: Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto appointed General Muhammad Zia ul Haq as COAS, promoting him over seniors amid rising opposition to disputed 1977 elections. Zia launched Operation Fair Play, a coup on 5 July 1977, arrested Bhutto, and imposed martial law; Bhutto was executed in 1979, showing how civilian favoritism in military appointments can invite intervention (Wolpert, 1993).

1971-1973 General Yahya Khan handed over the power to Z. A. Bhutto after a highly controversial election, and power struggle between majority leader Sheikh Mujeeb Ur Rehman and Bhutto. Bhutto became the first civilian Martial Law Administrator and president on December 20, 1971.

1969: Facing mass protests and demands for reforms, President Ayub Khan resigned on 25 March 1969, handing power to General Yahya Khan, who imposed martial law and ruled until 1971, deepening the military's grip on governance (Rizvi, 2000).

1958: Amid instability and corruption scandals, President Iskander Mirza declared martial law and invited General Ayub Khan to serve as Chief Martial Law Administrator. Two weeks later, Ayub ousted Mirza in a bloodless coup, Pakistan's first formal military intervention and a lasting precedent (Jalal, 1990).

A Democracy Silenced by Fear

Pakistan's democratic framework, though constitutionally enshrined, is crippled by systemic suppression of freedom of expression. The right to free speech, fundamental to any functioning democracy, is routinely undermined by state mechanisms. Laws like the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) of 2016 and its subsequent amendments are weaponized to silence journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens who criticize the government or the powerful military establishment. Coupled with a history of violence, censorship, and judicial overreach, Pakistan's democratic credentials are increasingly fragile, operating in a suffocating environment where dissent is equated with disloyalty.

The Legal Stranglehold on Free Speech

PECA has emerged as a primary tool for stifling expression. Intended to combat cybercrime, PECA's vague provisions on defamation and anti state content are frequently misused to target journalists and social media users. In 2022, amendments expanded penalties, allowing up to five years in prison for online criticism of state institutions, particularly the military. This legal weaponization creates a chilling effect that forces individuals to self censor to avoid prosecution or harassment.

Beyond PECA, colonial era sedition provisions under Section 124 A of the Pakistan Penal Code are revived to charge critics with disaffection against the state. In 2023, Amnesty International reported that dissenting voices, including those protesting the ousting of former Prime Minister Imran Khan, faced arrests and trials in military courts, a practice condemned globally for its lack of transparency and fairness (Amnesty International, 2024). These measures expose a democracy that prioritizes control over open dialogue.

A Violent History of Press Repression

Pakistan's struggle with press freedom dates back to its early years, with military and civilian regimes alike curbing media independence. The 1958 martial law under Iskander Mirza, which abolished press freedoms, and modern laws like PECA, show a continuity of repression that undermines democratic aspirations.

Ayub Khan's Military Regime (1958 to 1969): The Press and Publications Ordinance of 1960 required newspapers to obtain government approval for publication, effectively banning critical reporting. Editors faced arrests, and in 1963 the government nationalized Progressive Papers Limited (PPL), publisher of Pakistan Times and Imroze, to curb

editorial independence after criticism of authoritarian policies (Rizvi, 2000). This takeover silenced key voices and set a precedent for state control over media.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Civilian Rule (1971 to 1977): Despite initial promises, his government used the 1973 Constitution to assert control over the press, particularly targeting outlets critical of his populist policies. In 1974, the Urdu daily Nawa-i-Waqt was banned for editorials questioning government corruption, and its editor Hameed Nizami faced harassment (Niazi, 1986). The state used newsprint paper and government advertising as financial levers, and it ceased declarations of many national and regional dailies, weeklies, and books. Bhutto also established the Press Council of Pakistan, ostensibly to regulate media ethics but in practice used to pressure newspapers into compliance. By 1977, as protests against alleged election rigging grew, Bhutto leaned on state controlled media to shape narratives, paving the way for General Zia ul Haq's 1977 coup, which further crushed press freedoms.

Zia ul Haq's Martial Law (1977 to 1988): Pre publication censorship was enforced, and journalists faced brutal punishments. In 1978, four journalists from Pakistan Times were publicly flogged for publishing anti regime editorials, a chilling message to the media (Niazi, 1986). Newspapers were shut down and dissenters jailed, embedding a culture of fear that lingers.

The return to civilian rule in the 1990s did little to loosen the grip on press freedom. During Nawaz Sharif's second term, 1997 to 1999, the government cracked down on the Jang Group, Pakistan's largest media house, freezing its accounts and arresting editors after it exposed government corruption. The 1999 coup led by General Pervez Musharraf

further tightened control, with the introduction of the Press Council Ordinance in 2002, which gave the state powers to regulate media content.

New Frontier of Repression

The rise of social media has offered a platform for dissent but also a new battleground for repression. Activists and citizens voicing criticism online face coordinated harassment campaigns and arrests under PECA. Hundreds of social media users were detained for posting anti regime content, with many facing charges in military courts (Amnesty International, 2024). Women activists in particular endure vicious online trolling and threats that aim to intimidate them into silence. The state's ability to control digital spaces is bolstered by internet shutdowns and surveillance. Pakistan temporarily blocked access to platforms such as X and WhatsApp during political unrest, citing national security. Such actions, combined with the Federal Investigation Agency's cybercrime wing monitoring online activity, shrink the space for free expression.

Media Self Censorship

Media houses, once vibrant, now operate under intense pressure. Newsrooms self-censor to avoid government backlash, military warnings, or financial strangulation through withheld advertising revenue, a tactic used effectively in the 1990s and revived in recent years. Outlets lacking resources are even more vulnerable, often folding under pressure. Off the record guidelines have given way to direct dictates on what to report and who to invite on air. Journalists and media groups who defy these boundaries may face consequences.

Pakistan's press freedom crisis is reflected in its global rankings. In the 2024 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders, Pakistan ranked 150 out of 180 countries, down from 145 in 2022, signaling a near collapse of media independence. Similarly, the V Dem Democracy Index in 2024 classified Pakistan as an electoral autocracy, noting that while elections occur, freedoms of expression and association are heavily curtailed.

These rankings expose a democracy that functions in name only, sustained by coercion rather than consent.

In the Line of Duty

Those who dare to think, speak, and write the truth are in serious crisis. Journalists, once guardians of public discourse, now face a triple threat: economic devastation, professional compromise, and mortal danger. Thousands of media workers are unemployed, and those still employed toil in fear driven environments. Across cities, journalists are pushed to the brink by government policies; some have even contemplated suicide amid this economic devastation. Worse still, the duty of journalism to expose truth and hold power accountable is being eroded as reporters are coerced into spreading propaganda they do not believe in. Pakistan's democracy, already fragile, bleeds with every silenced voice, as the deaths of 15 to 20 journalists from 2020 to mid 2025 reveal a nation where truth is a deadly pursuit (Reporters Without Borders, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024).

The media industry is in freefall. Budget cuts, withheld government advertising, off the books payments, and closures of smaller outlets have left thousands jobless. In 2023, major networks such as Geo News and ARY slashed staff, citing financial pressures

exacerbated by state policies that punish critical reporting. Those still employed face delayed salaries, lack of editorial autonomy, and constant threats from authorities or militant groups. In Karachi and Lahore, stories abound of veteran reporters reduced to menial jobs, their families struggling to survive. This economic murder is not accidental; it is crafted.

Journalism, once a defense against propaganda, is now often complicit in it. Reporters who vowed to expose corruption and establishment overreach are coerced into promoting narratives they privately reject. In 2024, state backed campaigns compelled media outlets to amplify government talking points on political protests, often under threat of suspensions or abductions. This betrayal of journalistic ethics stems from fear: the fear of losing jobs, facing legal charges, or worse. Narrative building that frames dissent as anti state consistently fails because journalists, compelled to lie, lack conviction.

Journalistic organizations and press clubs, meant to defend media workers, have largely failed their constituents. Their response to this economic and physical onslaught is little more than زبانی جمع خرچ, empty talk. Instead of advocating for the unemployed or protecting the persecuted, these bodies have become photo op clubs, issuing token statements while aligning with powerful interests. The Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists and different press clubs faced criticism for their muted response to the arrests and detention of journalists, vloggers, writers, and scholars. This silence suggests complicity, possibly driven by political pressures or fear of backlash. The absence of collective action leaves journalists isolated, their sacrifices ignored by those claiming to represent them.

Pakistan is among the world's deadliest countries for journalists. From 2020 to mid 2025, at least 15 to 20 journalists were killed in the line of duty, with seven in 2024 alone, according to RSF and Amnesty International. Beyond the killings, countless journalists face abductions, torture, and humiliation. In 2024, RSF reported a shocking surge in attacks, with journalists ambushed during protests or targeted for covering sensitive issues. Women journalists endure vicious online trolling and threats, amplifying the gendered cost of dissent.

A Path Forward

For Pakistan to strengthen its democracy, protecting freedom of expression is non-negotiable. Repealing or amending draconian laws such as PECA, ensuring judicial independence, and curbing military influence in politics are critical steps.

On World Democracy Day, Pakistan stands at a crossroads. Its democratic framework, battered by decades of repression, can only survive if freedom of expression is reclaimed. Without it, the voices of journalists, activists, and citizens will remain silenced, and Pakistan's democracy will continue to exist at the mercy of state tolerance.

Conclusion

The analysis of Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Nepal, and Pakistan demonstrates that democracy in these countries remains both resilient and vulnerable. While elections, constitutions, and legislatures provide the outward framework of democracy, the substance of democratic governance—rule of law, protection of human rights, and freedom of expression—remains under severe strain.

Across all five cases, elite dominance and institutional fragility have hollowed out democratic practices. In Egypt and Bangladesh, opposition is suppressed almost entirely, leaving behind authoritarian systems that maintain the façade of electoral processes. In India and Pakistan, elections continue but are marred by restrictions on dissent, politicization of institutions, and rising intolerance toward minorities. Nepal, though relatively more open, continues to struggle with corruption, instability, and incomplete reforms that prevent democratic consolidation.

The comparative lessons from these countries highlight that democracy cannot be sustained by electoral rituals alone. Without independent judiciaries, free media, and respect for human rights, elections become instruments of control rather than expressions of popular sovereignty. Similarly, without addressing entrenched corruption and elite capture, citizens lose faith in the ability of democracy to deliver justice, accountability, and equitable development.

Yet, democracy is not absent. Civil society organizations, youth movements, journalists, and marginalized communities across these countries continue to push back against

repression. Their efforts demonstrate that the demand for democracy remains alive, even where institutions are weak.

The future of democracy in the region will depend on whether governments and institutions can create space for inclusive participation, strengthen the rule of law, and protect fundamental freedoms. For now, democracy across these five states remains contested—celebrated in speeches, enshrined in constitutions, but too often denied in practice.

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