



# NEPAL AT A DEMOCRATIC CROSSROADS:

A Human Rights Assessment  
following the September 2025 Unrest



South Asians for Human Rights

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South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR)  
345/18 Kuruppu Road  
Colombo 08, Sri Lanka.

Telephone: +94 112 695910  
Email: [sahr@southasianrights.org](mailto:sahr@southasianrights.org)  
Website: [www.southasianrights.org](http://www.southasianrights.org)

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## Introduction

Nepal has been a federal multiparty democracy since 2008, when the reigning monarchy was officially abolished by the First Constituent Assembly on the back of popular demand. On 8–9 September 2025, youth-led protests, which began as peaceful demonstrations in the capital Kathmandu, descended into violence, leaving over 70 people dead—primarily as a result of the use of lethal force by the state—and over 2,000 properties hit by countrywide looting and arson.

South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR), a regional network of human rights defenders, visited the country in October 2025 to document the movement's formation, escalation, information ecosystems, institutional impact and concerns related to democratic legitimacy, transitional accountability and election delivery. The mission consulted a broad cross-section of stakeholders, including representatives of three political parties, youth leaders active on digital mobilization platforms, constitutional lawyers, journalists and editors from national press institutions, protest eyewitnesses, women's rights activists, Dalit youth networks, and public institutions working on democratic development and rights protection, among others.

SAHR's terms of reference focused on (i) structural drivers of unrest, particularly allegations of nepotism, corruption, and governance failure; (ii) patterns of protest manipulation and infiltration by non-youth or opportunistic actors; (iii) impacts on public institutions and private property, including arson and looting; (iv) adherence to lawful use-of-force standards by internal security deployments under Nepal armed police protocols; (v) constitutional sequencing and contestations affecting democratic legitimacy; and (vi) the operational feasibility and public credibility of national elections. SAHR made repeated attempts to interview the interim civilian administration and formally reached out to the relevant authorities through letters and institutional channels. Despite this sustained outreach, the team was unable to secure meetings with the interim government.

### **The genesis and democratic orientation of the Gen Z movement**

The September 2025 protests—subsequently known as the 'Gen Z movement'—were initially framed in public discourse as a response to a social media shutdown. Participant testimonies, however, consistently indicate that the underlying drivers were more structural, centring on corruption, disillusionment with repeated electoral cycles,



Workers clearing burnt debris at the destroyed Supreme Court Complex

and perceptions of entrenched political elites failing to translate constitutional reform into improved governance. Protest participants across districts emphasized that digital platforms had served not merely as mobilization tools, but as an alternative civic arena for public expression in a context where traditional civil society was seen by many as hierarchical or exclusionary.

The movement's early formation occurred through a migration of online spaces. Initial protest discussions reportedly began on Reddit forums, later moving into organized chats on Discord servers and ideological discussion clusters. Initial participation was modest, with participants recalling approximately 100–200 early entrants across two or three servers on 4 September. By 6 September, a shared commitment to peaceful protest was reached collectively via intra-server polls and consultations, even as multiple affinity groups expressed differing secondary priorities. The protest was explicitly articulated as a movement seeking democratic strengthening rather than systemic overthrow.

Campaign messaging used social media formats optimized for short communication cycles, with anti-corruption remaining the primary unifying theme. Participants highlighted the reach of TikTok, which they argued had exposed governance failure

narratives through trends such as ‘Nepobaby’ content lines and anti-party framings. However, young respondents noted that platform access was highly stratified: elite youth were more likely to shape dominant digital narratives, while those who ultimately suffered casualties were disproportionately from working-class communities. Protestors themselves described symbolic pledges to avoid environmental or cultural harm (including trees, public squares, and festival sites) as a defining early norm.

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Respondents identified at least four ideological currents emerging over time in the Gen Z movement: (a) segments sympathetic to monarchy; (b) advocates calling for direct elections for the presidency and premiership; (c) supporters of the existing parliamentary model; and (d) a large undecided cohort considered highly impressionable online. Protest leaders framed the final cohort—numerically the largest, socially cross-sectional, but ideologically unanchored—as the most volatile due to its influence on digital narrative formation without strong institutional literacy.



## Protest timeline and key incidents

### 8 September 2025: From peaceful assembly to infiltration and use of force

Testimonies from respondents across sectors depict 8 September as a day that began with largely peaceful, student-led demonstrations and ended in lethal state violence and institutional breakdown. Protesters were reported to have obtained formal permission from district authorities to gather near the Parliament precinct ‘for two hours—from 9 to 11 AM,’ with the understanding that the assembly would remain outside restricted state compounds.

Multiple witnesses—journalists, human rights monitors and civil society members—described the first hours, from 9 AM to about 12 noon, as calm, with young protesters ‘singing and dancing’ and remaining within the area for which permission had been granted. Several respondents noted that ‘everything remained peaceful for nearly three hours,’ and that ‘no one came forward to intervene’ during this period, highlighting both the non-violent character of the early protests and the absence of visible protective presence.

According to several accounts, the agreed perimeter became a flashpoint around late morning, after the hitherto peaceful demonstration was allegedly infiltrated by criminal and opportunistic political elements (including, reportedly, pro-royalist factions), with many such people arriving on motorcycles from three different directions and converging on the Parliament building. Respondents reported that only ‘thin’ or ‘lax’ police barricades separated protesters from Parliament and other key institutions. Once the crowd reached the barricades, witnesses recalled someone declaring that the protest had ‘succeeded,’ after which larger groups ‘forced their way into the compound.’ Civil society and media respondents consistently identified a ‘security vacuum around Parliament,’ noting that police appeared unprepared for the size and determination of the crowd, which had been underestimated at around 6,000–7,000 people.

Respondents also indicated extensive signal interference. Protesters at the front lines stated they were unaware of curfews or de-escalation orders due to suspected signal jamming and intentional communications disruption. Between 3 and 4 PM, the use of rubber crowd-control munitions reportedly commenced post-breach. Tear gas, ambulance movements and firing occurred nearly simultaneously in some protest

corridors, with eyewitnesses describing emergency responses overwhelmed by volumes rather than directed by organized political agents.

#### ***Hospital response to mass casualties during the protests***

*A hospital representative interviewed by SAHR said that at approximately 12:30 PM on 8 September, the facility received advance requests from the national police command to prepare for incoming casualties. In response, the hospital activated its state emergency command structure and temporarily closed operating theatres, outpatient services, and the emergency receiving unit to prioritize critical trauma care. This decision marked a shift from routine emergency operations to a crisis-mode concentration of surgical and intensive care capacity.*

*Within two hours of initial alerts, between 70 and 80 victims arrived with life-threatening injuries, several unconscious or clinically unstable. The hospital reported that eight fatalities occurred on 8 September: three victims were declared dead on arrival, and five died despite resuscitation and surgical intervention. During that period, the facility performed five emergency surgeries and 24 major trauma operations, with 70–80% of cases presenting as severe rather than minor injuries. The hospital representative noted this trend had inverted usual protest-era injury patterns, where severe trauma cases typically account for no more than 10% of total admissions. In contrast, the majority of 8 September patients required advanced surgical, vascular or spinal intervention and prolonged monitoring.*

*Clinical assessments revealed a predominance of gunshot injuries, which carried elevated risks of infection. Trauma registries indicated metallic foreign body fragmentation and multidirectional entry and exit wound paths. Patients presented with below-knee amputations, spinal injuries consistent with paraplegia, and vascular trauma requiring reconstruction and stabilization. Several patients required extended intensive care, lasting up to two weeks in the hospital's ICU unit, and antibiotic protocols to mitigate infection risks at scale.*

*The hospital had initially prepared for 50–60 casualties based on field patterns, but nearly 200 patients were ultimately admitted. A total of 192 patients required monitored admission, with 10 individuals remaining hospitalized with complex trauma at the time of reporting. While most victims were male, trauma cases also included women sustaining similar patterns of injury. The representative confirmed the most common*

*age range for casualties was between 17 and 35 years, reflecting a primarily youth demographic.*

*Non-clinical support was also coordinated by several civil groups. The hospital provided food free of charge, while multiple organizations, including humanitarian networks and civic volunteer groups, supplemented logistical needs, shock counselling, and interim welfare support for victims' families. The hospital also reported it had been collecting bullets retrieved from victims' bodies under clinical chain-of-custody protocols, anticipating that these artefacts would support future forensic investigations into the nature, directionality, and class of ammunition used. The representative noted that while incidents of injury were significantly lower on the protests' second day, the sheer scale and severity of injuries sustained on 8 September underlined the need for stronger non-lethal crowd-management safeguards, protected ambulance corridors, and protest-era emergency coordination protocols to mitigate risks to clinical capacity and civilian life.*

### **9 September 2025: Coordinated violence, jailbreaks and institutional breaches**

Testimonies indicate that violence on 9 September was qualitatively different from the first day. Respondents across the board described Day 2 as 'extremely violent,' 'unpredictable' and 'long-lasting,' with several estimating that unrest continued for around ten hours. Government offices, courts, police stations and local administrations were attacked and set on fire. Supermarkets, private residences and schools—some targeted on the basis of rumours about their ownership—were also looted or burnt.

A particularly striking point of consensus concerns the scale and speed of jail breaches. Multiple respondents reported that 'major jails were breached within an hour,' with figures ranging from 'around 700 prisoners' released or escaped after 3 PM to '4,000+ criminals' freed overall. Several testimonies state that escapees later joined crowds attacking district offices, courts and police stations, resulting in the destruction of 'official evidence,' particularly criminal records. One women's rights activist further noted that among those released were convicted rapists, who subsequently issued threats against safe houses and survivors.

There was also broad agreement that critical state institutions—including Parliament, the Supreme Court, the Office of the Attorney General and the prime minister's residence—were targeted in a systematic pattern of arson and vandalism. Legal practitioners described courts 'across the country' being set on fire 'simultaneously,' suggesting

‘pre-planned and systematic’ attacks rather than spontaneous rage. Editors and judges recounted that their own buildings were stormed and burnt, with only one courtroom still operating and very few lawyers present when violence reached the Supreme Court. Several respondents noted that journalists, camera crews and presenting staff were injured while attempting to escape.

Testimonies diverged on who was responsible for this phase of violence. Many civil society actors, youth leaders and journalists insisted that by Day 2 ‘Gen Z was not involved in the vandalism,’ arguing that older individuals ‘outside the age category of Gen Z,’ party youth wings, royalists, RSS-linked groups and ‘hardcore criminals’ had already ‘hijacked’ the protests. Some explicitly identified supporters of newer parties and Maoist cadres as central to the attacks on courts and Parliament. Others, including some human rights respondents, reported that Gen Z members themselves rejected the hijack narrative and framed the second day’s escalation as ‘public rage after students were killed,’ with government buildings seen as ‘symbols of oppression.’

Despite these differing attributions, almost all interlocutors stressed that the ‘identity of the arsonists and looters remains unclear’ in an evidentiary sense, and that this ambiguity has ‘deepened public mistrust of institutions.’

### **Coordination, infiltration and use of digital tools**

Respondents from civil society, the media and international organizations identified signs of substantial organization behind the second day of violence. Several interviewees described ‘methodical, wave-style attacks’ on targeted houses and institutions, noting the use of walkie-talkies and ‘steel rods of uniform length’ as indicators of coordinated tactics. Others referred to petrol bombs, motorcycles carrying fuel and the apparent use of online tools such as Google Maps and dedicated apps that ‘tagged houses,’ arguing that such patterns ‘cannot be explained as spontaneous public anger.’

Testimonies about infiltration and movement capture were nuanced and sometimes conflicting. Youth figures and civil society members described ‘a blurred field between genuine Gen Z activists’ and ‘older, experienced actors’ who sought to steer or exploit the mobilization, including party youth wings, royalist networks and individuals with previous combat or policing experience who ‘knew how to handle firearms.’ At least one respondent characterized the crisis as ultimately ‘captured by a triad of forces: the army, the RSS and pro-monarchy groups,’ while others were more cautious, pointing instead to multiple, overlapping interests—former Maoist combatants, royalists, new parties and criminal elements—acting in parallel.

There was, however, significant agreement that planning and infiltration intensified after the first day. Organizers and observers noted that initial protests had been conceived as ‘perimeter protests, not institutional breaches,’ and that once violence began, some Gen Z leaders ‘called off the strike and retreated,’ while others ‘kept a low profile for a week, shocked by the scale of the violence.’ Youth and civil society respondents described the movement as ‘leaderless,’ with ‘opportunists trying to hijack it every few days’ and competing narratives circulating online about whether to push for the government’s resignation, constitutional suspension or a more limited anti-corruption mandate.

#### ***Eyewitness account of 8 September protest and ensuing violence***

*SAHR interviewed a young political science student from a district bordering Kathmandu, who was part of the protest on 8 September. He recounted his experience as follows: ‘On 8 September, the policing deployment visibly appeared split into two formations—one along the outer cordon and one positioned closer to Parliament. Having observed past protests, I sensed the atmosphere shifting as crowds moved toward the restricted administrative zone.*

*‘The breach of the Parliament perimeter was not centrally orchestrated. It escalated gradually: groups acted independently, then the crowd itself started climbing the outer walls. Attempts were made by several of us to calm younger protest participants, including schoolchildren, while police units pushed the advancing march back toward the barricades. Around this time, curfews were reportedly declared, but signal interference was severe. Those of us near the front heard no formal public curfew announcement and had little phone connectivity due to suspected signal jamming, leaving the majority unaware of new restrictions in real time.*

*‘Between 3 PM and 4 PM, firing began. The response was indiscriminate and intense. First came rubber bullets, deployed only after the physical barriers had already been broken. Moments later, tear gas round deployment and live fire occurred almost simultaneously. The chaos was amplified by overlapping sounds—the percussion of gunfire blended with ambulance sirens as emergency vehicles attempted to enter the cordon. In some ambulances carrying injured protestors, 6 to 7 people were crowded into a single vehicle, reflecting how rapidly medical response capacity was overwhelmed.*



*'The firing pattern shifted once the crowd crossed the outer gates into the restricted area. Officers positioned inside the perimeter reportedly began shooting at chest and head height. People fell instantly when struck by metallic bullets. One protestor near me was hit in the neck as we attempted evacuation. Another was shot while placing an injured student into an ambulance—an incident captured in a circulating TikTok video. Multiple participants claimed that shots originated from within emergency vehicles, including from at least one ambulance already transporting injured youth. Rumours spread rapidly that officers had been positioned inside ambulances, though visibility and communications breakdowns made confirmation difficult at the time.*

*'The scene inside the perimeter was devastating. Those behind the front ranks were not protected from fire. I saw individuals shot while attempting to carry the injured toward the main gate. Even one protestor who had thrown stones—despite repeated warnings not to engage violently—was fired upon after already being told to stop. Far from deterring the march, this drove some injured participants to return into the cordon to continue protesting out of anger and shock.*

*'Many of us switched rapidly between protest sites and evacuation routes. I helped stabilize a young protestor shot in the eye and neck, applying sustained pressure to his neck wound while moving him toward medical aid. Throughout the next hours, I accompanied nearly 20 injured individuals to hospitals using ambulances and wheelchairs to expedite transport. Several of us also manually carried those too injured to be moved otherwise. My efforts to bring injured students to safety were repeatedly obstructed. I was struck by police personnel while carrying people toward the hospital corridor.*

*'Medical sites were not immune from violence. Roads leading through and past hospitals also became zones of shooting, leaving rescue routes insecure. For five days after the incident, many of us struggled with trauma symptoms: persistent insomnia, intrusive memories, and acute anxiety. The scale of violence, casualties, and the suspected use of rifles, pistols, and SLR-type weapons far exceeded anything we had anticipated in the early peaceful planning phase of the movement.'*

## State security, institutional roles and alleged excesses

Respondents from civil society, the media and the legal community described the conduct of state security institutions during the September protests as a combination of operational collapse, political interference and serious human rights violations. While their assessments differ on questions of intent—particularly regarding the Nepal Army—there is broad consensus that the state failed in its duty to protect life, uphold the law and act transparently.

Despite repeated formal requests and sustained outreach, SAHR was unable to secure interviews with police, armed police or army representatives, and the testimonies collected for this report therefore reflect exclusively the accounts of civil society respondents and political party representatives.

### **Police conduct: Between paralysis and repression?**

Across testimonies, the police are portrayed as both over-politicized and operationally weak. Several respondents described a ‘crowd control breakdown’ and an ‘absence of protective presence at key institutions’ in the crucial early hours of 8 September. Police reportedly assumed that protests would disperse within the two-hour window for which permission had been granted, maintained only ‘thin barricades,’ and deployed with ‘minimal riot gear’ and ‘barely functioning water cannons.’

Witnesses consistently emphasized that standard crowd-control procedures were not followed. Lawyers and journalists noted that, under Nepal’s own rules, police are required to issue clear warnings, fire into the air, and use non-lethal measures before resorting to live ammunition. Respondents stated that these steps ‘were not followed’ on 8 and 9 September: water cannons and rubber or non-lethal bullets were used inconsistently, and live rounds were fired directly into crowds of largely unarmed protesters. Bullet injuries to at least three journalists and the continued firing even as people were helping the wounded into ambulances were cited as evidence that lethal force continued ‘for several hours’ after control might have been re-established.

At the same time, the police were repeatedly described as ‘demoralized and politicized—a ‘football’ between competing interests.’ Testimonies highlighted politicized postings ‘based on loyalty rather than merit,’ with the police ‘divided along political lines’ and caught between competing party and factional pressures.



Remains of a burnt building covered in scaffolding

### **The Nepal Army: Restraint, delay and growing centrality**

By contrast, the role of the Nepal Army is the subject of sharper disagreement. There is broad agreement on the basic sequence: the prime minister reportedly resigned around 2 PM on 9 September; army deployment in force was only announced at approximately 10 PM. Respondents across the spectrum noted that this gap ‘essentially gave arsonists eight hours to destroy Parliament,’ and that in the meantime, multiple jails were breached, government offices and courts were attacked, and critical records and evidence were lost.

Some respondents reasoned that the delay may have been a case of ‘strategic restraint to avoid mass casualties.’ According to this narrative, earlier deployment may have required troops to open fire on protesters—risking a far higher death toll—and commanders therefore chose to tolerate property destruction rather than escalate to lethal military force. Although several respondents credited the army with preventing even greater bloodshed and ultimately facilitating a civilian handover, they also stressed that any overt power grab would have jeopardized Nepal’s role as one of the largest contributors to UN peacekeeping missions, and thus significant institutional income and international standing.

Other respondents were more critical. Some civil society actors and lawyers characterized the army's conduct as 'deeply questionable,' arguing that it had 'allowed the country to burn for nearly 12 hours.' They pointed out that around 3,000 army personnel were already stationed to protect key institutions such as Parliament and the Supreme Court, yet these forces 'remained spectators' as crowds breached compounds and set buildings alight. For these respondents, the explanation of restraint did not fully answer why non-lethal measures, visible deterrent presence or earlier perimeter action were not used.

A number of legal practitioners raised constitutional concerns. They argued that a recommendation from the National Security Council (NSC) is required before the army can be deployed for internal disturbances and questioned whether such authorization was properly obtained or whether the army 'mobilized at 10 PM without NSC approval,' which some described as 'almost a coup.' Others countered that the crisis required rapid action and that the legal framework was not designed for a scenario in which the executive itself was effectively paralysed.

Beneath these immediate events, several respondents observed that the army has, over the last decade, positioned itself as the most 'efficient' arm of the state—managing earthquake response, the 2015/16 blockade imposed by India, and Covid-19 burials—and has become 'one of Nepal's biggest economic actors.' Some warned that public perception of the army as the only functioning institution is 'alarming' for democratic balance, even if no overt seizure of power has occurred.

### **Executive authorities and the security vacuum**

Respondents were also sharply critical of the executive's performance. Many emphasized that neither the Home Minister nor the Chief District Officer (CDO) took clear responsibility for authorizing lethal force. The Home Minister was described as 'unconcerned' and still attending a parliamentary committee meeting when the first bullets were fired, and while several ministers resigned quickly, the former prime minister did not immediately take 'moral responsibility' for deaths on 8 September. A number of interviewees argued that had he resigned promptly and communicated clearly with the public, the 'next day's mayhem may have been averted.'

Several testimonies described a prolonged information vacuum: 'No official statement was issued for nearly 5–6 hours,' and there was 'no security presence in many locations,' fuelling panic, rumours and disinformation. Intelligence services were said to have

shared warnings about the risks of large-scale unrest, but these were not acted on or were dismissed as over-estimates.

Decisions taken after the violence also eroded confidence. Respondents noted that approximately 200 individuals arrested on the basis of footage and other evidence were later released by order of the Home Ministry, which police officers themselves reportedly viewed as a betrayal of their efforts. This contributed to a perception within the security forces that they were being used instrumentally and then undermined, and among civil society that the government was not serious about prosecuting those responsible for arson and vandalism.

More broadly, legal experts pointed to a complex and sometimes ambiguous security architecture. Central and district security committees, headed by the CDO, are responsible for layered deployment of police, armed police and, if needed, the army. In practice, respondents said, this devolved approval structure contributed to delays and confusion at precisely the moment when clear, rights-respecting command was most needed.

### **Oversight institutions and politicized protection**

Several respondents linked failures by the security forces and executive to the condition of oversight bodies. Human rights monitors reported that their vehicle was vandalized and set on fire and that, after the first day, it became too dangerous to remain in the field. Few human rights defenders were visibly present during critical hours, leaving protests and the subsequent crackdown largely unmonitored in real time.

The judiciary, too, was severely affected: courts were attacked, case files and records destroyed, and servers rendered inoperable. Although some judges emphasized that the judiciary remained ‘united, open and committed to constitutionalism,’ the immediate effect was a significant loss of capacity to process cases—including those that might have provided remedies for protest-related abuses.

#### ***Judicial record destruction***

*Testimonies from the Supreme Court administration indicate that while work had resumed and staff members had returned to the premises, the main problems were that of space (in view of the buildings that had been gutted and rendered unusable) and the scale of lost and damaged documents. Approximately 75 to 80 percent of court records had been destroyed, he said, resulting in the loss of 35,000 to 40,000 documents.*



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The remains of burnt filing cupboards inside the destroyed Supreme Court building

*Only around 3,000 documents remained. Overall, across the country, 23 court buildings had been damaged or destroyed.*

*The process of obtaining duplicates from lawyers had not yet started, he added. The court had resumed accepting writ petitions from 14 October 2025 and established five temporary benches (against originally ten benches). Habeas corpus petitions were being prioritized.*

*Taken together, these developments reinforced a sense of institutional fragmentation. Respondents across sectors indicated that the public, the courts, the media and even political leaders increasingly look to the army as the ultimate guarantor of security, while simultaneously fearing the implications of its growing centrality.*

## Accountability for arson and violence

Civil society actors and media interlocutors described Nepal's post-protest environment as a period marked less by institutional rupture than by institutional distrust—specifically the erosion of confidence in the Nepalese judiciary's ability to serve as an impartial arbiter and enabler of democratic redress.

Both the interim administration and civil society organizations acknowledged the necessity of a formal investigative mechanism following the 8–9 September protests, even as they diagnosed deep structural deficits that pre-dated them. There was broad recognition that the interim government's primary responsibility was not constitutional reform but the restoration of stability through elections and the enablement of credible investigations. However, respondents split on whether the appointed Judicial Inquiry Commission could meet its objectives within its current composition and mandate.

The Commission, established under the statutory framework governing commissions in Nepal, was constituted on 21 September 2025 pursuant to the Commissions of Inquiry Act 1969 to investigate protest-related violence, including arson, vandalism, institutional breaches, and the use of force by internal security deployments. The Commission is chaired by former justice Gauri Bahadur Karki, with former AIG Bigyanraj Sharma and constitutional law expert Bishweshwar Prasad Bhandari serving as members.<sup>1</sup>

Civil society respondents and lawyers observed that the Commission was constituted with a minimal panel, which some interpreted as pragmatic and procedurally sound given the lack of time. Others saw this as a structural vulnerability for legitimacy. Members of women's organizations and Dalit youth formations, however, stressed that the Commission lacked adequate demographic and ethnic representation relative to the populations most affected by the protests.

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<sup>1</sup> At the time this report was published, the Commission reported that it had almost completed its three-month mandate. An initial month-long delay in cooperation occurred at the end of the Nepal Police, from whom chain-of-command documents were eventually provided on 8 November. Approximately 300 personal complaints were filed before drafting commenced, and evidence collection—including video footage, photos and institutional damage assessments—was reported to be more than 60 per cent complete. The report was to be drafted only once all final testimonies had been received (Kathmandu Post, 23 November 2025).

## The National Human Rights Commission's perspective on the protests and aftermath

In its testimony, the National Human Rights Commission of Nepal (NHRC) affirmed that the public grievances leading to the protests had been present for several years and were primarily rooted in inequality, corruption, and institutional dysfunction, with the temporary social media suspension serving as an immediate trigger rather than an underlying cause.

A senior NHRC representative reported that on 8 September 2025, their teams were among the few independent observers present during the initial hours after other human rights defenders had largely been absent. NHRC field logs indicated that protests remained broadly peaceful for approximately three hours, after which fatalities began to occur at approximately 1 PM. The Nepal police deployment did not remain uniform across strategic protest zones, while institutional security was notably lacking in several sensitive areas, including zones adjacent to parliamentary premises. NHRC monitors attempting to document the situation were forced to retreat when demonstrators set an NHRC vehicle on fire—a safety breach the Commission cited as evidence of deteriorating crowd predictability and operational risk to neutral monitoring presence.

On 9 September 2025, the NHRC assessed that the unrest had worsened rapidly, captured by opportunistic actors and unpredictable crowd shifts. A surge of masked participants, some reportedly using unnumbered vehicles and helmets, was noted as complicating attribution and accountability assessments. By 3 PM, the NHRC estimated, approximately 700 prisoners had either released or escaped custody, after which some joined looting crowds that proceeded to attack district administration offices, courts, and evidence repositories. The Commission assessed that critical official evidence stores sustained damage or were destroyed during this period. This breakdown in evidence protection, the NHRC concluded, undermined its own mandate to monitor rights violations while also illustrating how governance priorities had been displaced by competing executive pressures and disaster response mobilization.

Following the protests, the NHRC had created a high-level independent inquiry panel chaired by a former Supreme Court of Nepal justice, supported by the NHRC Secretary and a sitting Commission member. The inquiry's scope includes assessing the





SAHR delegates with Mr Murai Prasad Kharel, Secretary to the National Human Rights Commission of Nepal (third from left)

proportionality of state force, establishing whether protests were peaceful in conduct, and evaluating evidence of excessive or lethal force deployment tied to live rounds. The NHRC also confirmed that criminal investigations were being undertaken by law enforcement bodies independently and not by this Commission inquiry panel. The NHRC reiterated that evidence details would not be published until the inquiry report had been completed.

The NHRC concluded that unless elections proceed on time and investigative accountability is sustained across institutions, this would risk destabilising governance, heightening the dispute over the interim government's political legitimacy, and risk reversing the fragile progress in gaining public trust.

## Constitutional and governance implications

Respondents consistently described the September protests as a constitutional stress test for Nepal's post-2015 order. Their testimonies point to deep uncertainty about the legality and legitimacy of the interim administration, divergent visions for reform, and unresolved tensions between street mandates and constitutional procedures.

### Legitimacy of the interim government

Many legal experts and civil society actors questioned the constitutional basis of the present government led by former chief justice Sushila Karki. They argued that the constitution requires the head of government to be a sitting member of parliament with a demonstrable majority, and that 'there is no constitutional framework for an interim government in this scenario.' In this view, both the dissolution of the House and the appointment of a non-parliamentarian prime minister fall outside the text and spirit of the constitution. One senior lawyer described the constitution as being 'in a coma,' asserting that the current arrangement is extra-constitutional and never envisaged by the framers.

Others offered a more pragmatic assessment. Some political observers and civil society participants acknowledged that the appointment of Ms Karki had 'no clear constitutional basis,' but nevertheless saw it as a 'practical crisis-resolution mechanism' devised by President Ram Chandra Poudel to 'minimize constitutional damage' and 'save procedures' in the face of an immediate breakdown of law and order.

### Parliament, the courts and the question of restoration

Across interviews, there was strong agreement that meaningful constitutional change is impossible without a functioning legislature. Respondents repeatedly stressed that 'constitutional amendments require a sitting Parliament' and that 'constitutional change is impossible without a functioning Parliament.' Many noted that protest groups demanding wholesale redesign of the system 'had not thought that far ahead' in institutional terms.

Some legal experts maintained that 'a functioning Parliament cannot be dissolved,' arguing that there is a strong legal case that the House's dissolution was unconstitutional. They pointed out that previous political transitions relied on caretaker arrangements but did not create an interim order of this kind. Some also rejected claims that key



constitutional provisions had been eclipsed, noting that the doctrine of eclipse did not apply in this scenario and that most of the constitution remains in force.

At the time of interviews, more than ten petitions challenging the dissolution and appointment process had reportedly been filed. Judges and lawyers described the procedure: petitions would be referred to a constitutional bench assigned by lottery, likely comprising more than three judges; opponents would generally have 15 days to respond; and a full review could take at least two months from the first hearing. Several cautioned that the Supreme Court might ‘sit on a petition rather than rule against public sentiment’ if elections appeared feasible, balancing legal scrutiny against fears of further instability.

### Competing constitutional projects

The protests have also reopened fundamental debates about how political power should be structured. Some Gen Z respondents and youth organizers described strong support within their constituencies for the ‘direct election of the prime minister or president,’ which they see as a way to curb backroom deal-making and reduce corruption. Some argued that direct elections would tighten the link between leaders and voters and prevent the ‘same faces’ from rotating through coalitions.

Other respondents were sharply critical of these proposals. Feminist activists, minority advocates and some journalists warned that a centralized presidential model ‘would marginalize women, Dalits, Madhesi and other minorities’ and risk dismantling the inclusive elements of the current dispensation—federalism, secularism and proportional representation.

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A destroyed corridor in the burnt Supreme Court complex

## Political parties' perspectives

### Civil society perspectives on political parties and representation vacuums

Civil society and media respondents highlighted an important distinction between parties and the politicians currently leading them. The current episode, they argued, has 'discredited the political class,' but 'parties themselves are organic political processes and distinct social interests.' Several cautioned against 'throwing out the baby with the bathwater' by delegitimizing parties as such. Major forces such as the Nepali Congress and the UML were credited with having 'roots' and with having 'written the constitution,' even as their ageing leaderships are seen as obstacles to renewal.

However, youth activists, particularly from historically marginalized regions, argued that young people remain severely under-represented in decision-making, despite constituting a large share of the population. They linked demands for direct elections and new parties to the perceived refusal of senior leaders to step aside. At the same time, UN and civil society interlocutors noted that there has not yet been a 'second or third generation' of human rights defenders and civic leaders strong enough to anchor a new political consensus, leaving a vacuum between party elites and street-based movements.

### RSP position on the September protests, inclusion and electoral prospects

The Rashtriya Swatantra Party (RSP) attributed the protest-day escalation to institutional fragility: dismissal of intelligence warnings, underestimation of mass-harm risk, nonexistence of civilian-led intelligence oversight, and protocol breaches in policing. While affirming the state's right to use proportionate force, it stressed that the ensuing fatalities reflected failures in prevention rather than justification.

The party asserted that the electoral systems administered by the Election Commission remain operational despite damaged infrastructure but emphasized that the legitimacy of the elections would depend on political consensus and civic trust, not logistics alone. With 52 constitutional posts expected to fall vacant within a quarter, the RSP underlined the need for transparent, constitutional compliance in interim appointments. It also advocated for international election observers to safeguard public confidence and mediate elite contestation risks. Positioning itself as structurally inclusive, it underscored benchmarks exceeding older party norms: over 40% women's participation in internal structures and quotas for the diaspora and historically marginalized groups in senior leadership.



### **UML observations on protest dynamics, institutional damage and electoral outlook**

The Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (UML), a legacy political force and principal contributor to Nepal’s constitutional drafting, assessed the 8–9 September 2025 protests as historically unparalleled in scale and institutional harm. The party maintained that even the Maoist insurgency did not generate comparable levels of synchronized destruction of state and civic infrastructure.

Interviews with UML representatives indicated that digital technologies had shaped both initial protest mobilization and later opportunistic violence. Online platforms and message boards were reportedly used to map, sequence, and geo-locate attacks. UML representatives also drew attention to a widely circulated

post on an online board invoking the insult ‘Neta Khor’ (‘cattle’ for leaders’ homes), including one message querying possible escalation toward the residence of a major industrialist. The party also underlined the alleged use of industrial chemicals and fire accelerants to increase ignition speed and spread, enabling rapid movement to secondary targets post-ignition.

*UML observers stated that the presence of the Nepal Army could have deterred escalation had intervention been authorized earlier. Some party advisors had reportedly suggested that the immediate resignation of former Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli on 8 September, coupled with a public pledge for investigation, could have reduced fatalities and property damage.*

The UML acknowledged that rubber bullets and live fire had been discharged after large processions breached high-security barriers near the restricted parliamentary perimeter. At the time of breach, senior ministers and police leadership had reportedly been inside internal meetings, leaving the barricades unsupported. Party representatives contended that curfew was not enforced in the morning despite on-ground deployment, contributing to what the party described as a deliberate ‘trap’ that had enabled mass assembly, masked riders on motorbikes, and simultaneous chaos across ten cities within a five-hour window.

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pluralistic consultations—not restricted youth panels—must precede electoral delivery to protect legitimacy.

On elections, UML representatives felt that while logistics under the Election Commission remained manageable, deeper risks arise from stolen arms, destroyed police infrastructure and civic distrust. They agreed that leadership restructuring should respond to generational pressure but noted that leadership processes must comply strictly with elected democratic process.

### **Nepali Congress perspective on the September protests and electoral outlook**

A Nepali Congress respondent characterized the September 2025 protests as a primarily political crisis born of systemic governance fatigue, institutional complacency and widening socioeconomic disparities. He observed that public frustration with the state's performance extended beyond class and occupational boundaries, noting that even households with members employed by the Nepal police or Nepal army or working abroad were questioning the tangible returns of democracy.

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The Congress representative also criticized the former home minister's operational choices, arguing that his attendance at a committee meeting during peak unrest had redirected executive focus away from crisis protest management.

On elections, the Congress representative asserted that polls would move forward, with assessments indicating feasibility of logistics under the Election Commission of Nepal despite compounded risks such as destroyed police stations and stolen arms. He said that Nepal's leadership demanded political experience during interim constitutional sequencing, particularly as 52 constitutional posts had fallen vacant. While recognizing the reform potential of the Gen Z movement, he expressed concern that emerging leaders lacked the institutional depth required for governance reforms. He reiterated the party's commitment to constitutional compliance, elected democratic processes, leadership accountability, and multiparty consensus-building ahead of the polls.



## The interim government and electoral commitments

Respondents from civil society, the media and the international community broadly agreed that the interim administration was installed as a stopgap arrangement in the wake of the September protests, but they diverged on its legitimacy, its capacity to deliver elections and the broader implications for Nepal's democratic trajectory.

### Mandate and formation of the interim government

Across interviews, respondents reiterated that the interim government was appointed with a narrowly defined mandate: to create conditions for inclusive, free and fair elections and to shepherd the country through a volatile transition. The administration announced elections for 5 March 2026, and this date is widely cited as the formal benchmark against which its performance will be judged.

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Legal experts and political observers, however, stressed that the government 'cannot continue forever' and 'cannot exceed its limited constitutional mandate.' Several respondents emphasized that the cabinet was never designed to be a long-term political executive and that its primary task is to facilitate elections and then step aside.

Views on the government's origins and legitimacy were mixed. As described earlier, some respondents argued that this leadership 'seems to derive its mandate more from the streets than from institutions,' and therefore suffers from a democratic deficit. Others described the administration as a 'practical crisis-resolution mechanism'—constitutionally imperfect, but necessary to prevent further bloodshed and create space for political negotiation.

### Electoral commitments and timelines

Respondents agreed that holding elections was the central test of the interim government. Yet there was widespread scepticism over whether this could be done on schedule. Civil society actors, journalists and legal experts repeatedly warned that elections were 'unlikely to occur on the announced date' and may be delayed by two to three months, or potentially up to the constitutional ceiling of six months. They cited (a) security challenges, including circulating weapons, escaped prisoners and the risk



The vandalised Parliamentary building seen from a distance

of renewed unrest; (b) administrative bottlenecks, such as damaged records, under-resourced institutions and a partially staffed Election Commission (reported as three members out of five); and (c) limited political consensus, with major parties ambivalent about entering elections in the current climate and some exploring alternative bargains. Several interlocutors highlighted the scale of the Gen Z electorate as a specific operational hurdle. They questioned whether voter registration and logistical arrangements for a large, mobile youth population could be completed within six months, particularly after institutional disruptions and record losses during the violence.

At the same time, respondents recognized that indefinite delay would itself be destabilising. Many warned that if elections are pushed too far beyond the announced schedule, the interim government's authority would become increasingly contested; new forces—some armed, some populist—might seek confrontation; and pressure for more assertive army involvement could grow, making military influence harder to dislodge.

### Conditions for credible elections

Beyond timing, respondents stressed that the credibility of any upcoming polls depends on addressing the consequences of the September events. Human rights defenders, women's rights activists and civil society organizations argued that investigations into killings, arson, looting, and record destruction must be pursued transparently before elections can be considered legitimate. They pointed to the establishment of a commission of inquiry but questioned its composition, mandate and independence. Several emphasized that commission reports must be published in full and linked to concrete accountability measures; otherwise, the perception of impunity would persist and poll outcomes could be rejected by key constituencies.

Others focused on the need for broad political consensus. Multiple respondents stressed that the interim government must convene all major parties—including those sceptical of early elections—to negotiate minimum commitments on electoral timing, security arrangements and acceptance of results. Some noted that 'neither side seems eager for elections,' suggesting that a trade-off might be possible, but warned that a purely elite bargain without youth participation would risk further alienating Gen Z activists.

Several interlocutors argued that preconditions for credible polls included: (a) clarification of the legal status of the interim government and the dissolution of parliament through ongoing court petitions; (b) clear rules around the role of the security forces during the electoral period; and (c) assurance that institutions such as the Election Commission, NHRC and judiciary can operate without political interference.

At the time this report was published, the Election Commission had registered around 130 political parties to contest the 2026 elections, including newly formed groups led by younger politicians and prominent public figures.<sup>2</sup> Although the CPN-UML has challenged the interim government in court, demanding that the dissolved Parliament be reinstated, it has also registered to contest the elections. The interim government has also said it will deploy the army earlier than usual to support security arrangements, with both the army, police and armed police guarding polling stations and transporting ballots and sensitive materials months ahead of election day.

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<sup>2</sup> B. Sharma. (2025, December 17). Uncertainty and concerns: Is Nepal headed to elections? Anadolu Agency. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/uncertainty-and-concerns-is-nepal-headed-to-elections/3773777>

## Diaspora and youth inclusion

A recurring theme in testimonies concerned the inclusion of diaspora and young voters. Respondents noted that the Prime Minister and some officials had recommended diaspora voting, and there were references to possible pilot schemes (including among the Nepali community in South Africa). However, they emphasized serious logistical and diplomatic constraints, including verification of residency, coordination with host states, and the risk of selectively enfranchising certain expatriate groups over others. UN interlocutors also raised concerns that poorly designed overseas voting might entrench systematic discrimination rather than enhance inclusion.

Civil society respondents linked diaspora participation debates directly to Gen Z demands and the emergence of overseas youth networks. Some warned that diaspora voting could be captured by opportunistic blocs or populist actors if introduced without wide public debate and robust safeguards. They therefore called for broad consultation—including with youth groups, minorities and marginalized regions—before any electoral reforms are enacted.

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On youth inclusion more generally, respondents observed that Gen Z activists expect to be treated as key stakeholders, not merely as a ‘security problem’ or voting bloc. Several emphasized that bringing youth representatives ‘to the negotiating table’ was essential for restoring trust, especially given their central role in organising the protests. Others cautioned that the movement itself was internally divided and politically inexperienced, and that expectations about immediate leadership roles may be difficult to reconcile with institutional constraints.

## Rights-based concerns beyond the political crisis

The September 2025 protests unfolded against a backdrop of structural democratic fragilities, but testimonies from Nepal's civil society and media emphasized that rights-based concerns extended well beyond the political crisis.

### **Absence of transitional justice discourse**

Respondents across civic coalitions, community rights movements and independent press houses argued that transitional justice discourse was conspicuously absent from national deliberations. Many highlighted that vulnerable communities—particularly the Madhesi and Dalit communities, refugees and displaced groups, and ethnic and religious minority communities—had been sidelined throughout both the protest phase and institutional responses. This clustering of grievances reflected a common perspective: that discrimination and inclusion safeguards must be pursued in parallel to the 2026 elections.

Across respondent categories, one dominant constitutional safeguard was uniformly cited: that meaningful transitional justice processes must be peer-owned, fully mandated and representationally balanced to rebuild legitimacy. The sequence of transitional justice and electoral reforms also attracted differing views, however. Respondents with UN engagement histories stressed that credible elections and transitional justice accountability must come after pervasive investigations into brutality, arson and weapon-breach failures, whereas others from youth groups maintained that elections should not be contingent on extended reforms that could reverse earlier constitutional gains. All, however, agreed that transitional justice cannot be allowed to fall through the cracks.

### *Dalit rights*

SAHR also interviewed senior members of the National Dalit Commission, which said it had intensified post-protest monitoring of caste-based rights violations, coordinating primarily with the Nepal police and local administration in Madhesh Province. Engagement with protest-affected Dalit students and injured participants was conducted through hospital visits, community consultations and coordination with provincial governments to mitigate educational disruption.

While the Commission said it regarded the Gen Z movement as broadly constructive—agreeing that it was driven chiefly by anti-corruption and democratic accountability





SAHR delegates with Mr Devraj Bishwokarma, Chairperson of the National Dalit Commission (*third from left*)

demands—it emphasized that Dalit concerns were not explicitly represented in negotiations with youth blocs, resulting in missed opportunities to foreground caste-based exclusion during critical national dialogues.

The Commission said that since the introduction of affirmative action policies in 2007/08, Dalit participation in security agencies had expanded, yet civil service inclusion remains disproportionately low. Representation across state institutions continued to fall well below the Dalit population share of 14 percent, and persistent misperceptions portraying quotas as granting ‘excessive opportunity’ had contributed to public polarization that obscured structural inequities.

With constitutional provisions mandating provincial offices still unrealized due to constrained resources and local authority, the implementation of the Commission’s recommendations has remained weak across successive administrations, reflecting limited political will. Planned consultations with Gen Z activists aim to develop strategies for caste system eradication and stronger caste-inequality mitigation in future civic movements. The Commission also noted that Dalit rights commitments in political manifestos had not translated into measurable implementation outcomes.





Entrance of the vandalised Office of the Attorney General, Nepal

## Disinformation and media freedom during and after the September protests

A shared concern across testimonies was the escalation of safety risks for established media organizations during the protests and immediately after. Major outlets, including the Kantipur Media Group, were perceived to be at heightened risk of attack, prompting precautionary measures such as removing external branding and shifting staff to remote work. Respondents recounted that coordinated online actors or trolls had amplified calls to target media houses first, accompanied by circulating threats, sustained harassment of reporters, and a chilling effect that fostered widespread self-censorship in online spaces. Many journalists reportedly curtailed public commentary, sharing factual reporting but avoiding personal opinion due to fears of organized trolling.

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Respondents also highlighted that the protest information ecosystem became a contested terrain, heavily saturated by mis- and disinformation. They cited claims by outside monitors that a significant proportion of online accounts driving narratives were inauthentic, including the assertion that ‘30% of accounts were fake,’ allegedly reported by a foreign organization. Testimony further noted that videos from religious festivals at Pashupatinath Temple were misrepresented as visual evidence of protests in Nepal or incorrectly sourced from India, while Nepali flags and slogans were digitally exaggerated or miscaptioned. Respondents observed that attempts at verification by civil society fact-checking bodies, such as Nepal Fact Check, were constrained by limited capacity and prioritized metadata timing over narrative content.

Differences in respondent perspectives emerged regarding media motivations and structural incentives. Several argued that media networks are perceived by the public to be entangled with commercial interests. One respondent cited the arson attack on premises of the Annapurna Media Network, alleging that public anger was driven by perceptions of its owner’s role in government formation, though respondents clarified this view remained speculative without evidentiary confirmation. Other testimony pointed to perceived ‘elite-media hypocrisy’—including comparisons between public

hardship reporting and highly visible displays of affluence by media-linked families—as contributors to institutional distrust.

Respondents also reflected on broader structural dynamics that complicated the media-security environment. The Federation of Nepali Journalists was described by some as increasingly party-dominated, diverging from the union’s historical role as a civil rights advocate. National news agencies, including the Press Trust of India, were referenced in testimony on cross-border disinformation amplification, highlighting the transnational nature of narrative framing in the digital domain.

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Media respondents converged on the assessment, however, that narrative polarization—whether claims of foreign funding or identity-driven blame—was often inflated by political actors, sometimes unintentionally, but had undermined constructive public understanding of protest drivers. Respondents stressed that protecting journalism requires securing institutions, restoring credibility through improved regulatory effectiveness, expanding disinformation verification capacity, and safeguarding reporters from coordinated digital threats, in line with constitutional guarantees of free and independent media.



## External influence narratives and regional anxieties

Respondents also offered nuanced but sometimes conflicting views on external influence. Several civil society and media interlocutors emphasized that ‘Indian involvement in recent events has been overstated,’ and that voluntary affiliations—such as with student groups linked to Tibet advocacy—had been ‘blown out of proportion.’ At the same time, many acknowledged that Nepal, as a ‘weak country,’ is ‘always exposed to influence’ and that regional and global powers see opportunities to benefit from instability.

India was frequently referenced as exerting strong political influence and opposing certain institutional reforms. There was wide acceptance that Indian social media platforms had amplified young people’s dissent more than direct misinformation alone. China, the US and other actors were seen as competing diplomatically and economically, with US and European-funded entities playing a significant role in politicizing young people. While conspiracy theories about covert orchestration circulated widely during and after the protests, most respondents ultimately framed external influence as an exacerbating factor layered onto primarily domestic grievances and institutional weaknesses, rather than as the root cause of the September violence.

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## Recommendations

Based on the testimonies that SAHR has documented, it makes the following recommendations:

- The interim administration must clearly reaffirm its limited mandate and ensure that national elections are held as stipulated in March 2026 to avoid a constitutional and governance vacuum and further public disillusionment.
- The findings of the Judicial Inquiry Commission must be made public and responsibility fixed at both operational and command levels. The authorities should clearly distinguish between peaceful protesters, violent actors and criminal opportunists. At the same time, those found responsible for arson must be identified and held to account under the law without delay.
- The government should urgently undertake comprehensive reform of crowd-control policing and ensure that law enforcement agencies are adequately trained, equipped and deployed to manage assemblies in accordance with domestic law and international standards.
- Law enforcement agencies must prioritize the identification and re-arrest of escaped prisoners and immediately implement victim-centred protection measures for survivors of violence.
- Urgent steps should be taken to reconstruct destroyed criminal records through digital backups and cross-institutional data recovery.
- Political parties should adopt internal reforms to enable youth leadership, transparent candidate selection and term limits for senior leadership, addressing long-standing barriers that exclude younger generations from meaningful participation.
- Any proposed structural reforms must strengthen, rather than weaken, federalism, secularism and institutional oversight—as hallmarks of the 2015 Constitution—to protect inclusion and prevent further the marginalization of women, Dalits, indigenous groups and other minorities.
- Civil society organizations should address perceptions of elitism, casteism and risk aversion by renewing grassroots engagement, ensuring meaningful women's leadership and prioritizing accountability, transitional justice and post-protest human rights concerns.
- The authorities must ensure the safety of journalists, address online harassment and disinformation, and support media pluralism in a rapidly changing information ecosystem, while resisting narratives that delegitimize independent journalism.



Destroyed Parliamentary building

- The subsequent elected government should prioritize transparent and independent anti-corruption mechanisms, including asset disclosure and enforcement against elite privilege, to address perceptions of impunity, cronyism and unearned wealth that have eroded institutional legitimacy.
- Transitional justice must not be sidelined in post-protest recovery and electoral planning. Any roadmap toward the 2026 elections must incorporate peer-owned, fully mandated and representationally balanced transitional justice processes that address institutional failures and the historic grievances of marginalized communities.
- The state should operationalize constitutional and statutory commitments to Dalit inclusion by strengthening the mandate, resourcing and implementation authority of the National Dalit Commission.

## Annexure

# Democracy in Peril: SAHR Calls for Accountability and Free Elections in Nepal

## SAHR statement released on 9 November 2025 upon completing the observation tour in Nepal

Following the unprecedented ‘Gen Z’-led youth uprising in Nepal in September 2025 and its violent aftermath, South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR), a regional network of human rights defenders, expresses grave concern over the country’s political and constitutional future. Testimonies from a wide range of respondents reflect deep-seated public frustration with the lack of accountability across all levels of government and state; anger at the K. P. Sharma Oli government’s violent response to the protests, which were followed by coordinated attacks on public institutions and private property; and deep concern that the upcoming elections may be marred by violence and disputed legitimacy.

The 8–9 September protests, which left over 70 people dead and over 2,000 properties hit by countrywide looting and arson, have also compounded public mistrust of the country’s established political parties, including the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist), Nepali Congress and Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre). The fact that the identity of the arsonists and looters—some of whom appear to have acted with planning and coordination—remains officially unconfirmed has added to public consternation.

SAHR is of the view that the first wave of protests on 8 September 2025, led by a cross-section of ‘Gen Z’ students and young activists’, were fuelled by allegations of nepotism, cronyism and unbridled government corruption, with protestors demanding transparency, democratization and accountability. SAHR also notes that the Oli government’s ban on social media platforms was a trigger rather than the prime driver of the protests. However, numerous testimonies suggest that the initially peaceful protests were infiltrated systematically by opportunistic elements representing a spectrum of forces arrayed against the coalition Oli government, some of whom were seeking the dissolution of the country’s 2015 Constitution. This resulted in an unanticipated march on the Parliament building, where the lax police presence meant that protestors were able to breach the barricades and enter the parliament premises, to be confronted by lethal police action.

SAHR condemns the use of excessive and lethal force by the police against unarmed protesters on 8 September. Like many in the national intelligentsia, SAHR also believes that had former prime minister K. P. Sharma Oli taken moral responsibility for the deaths that occurred on 8 September and resigned promptly that evening—as did the home minister Ramesh Lekhak—the mayhem of the next day may have been averted.

The Nepal Army's lack of intervention to safeguard crucial strategic locations such as the Parliament and Supreme Court is both perplexing and questionable. Sections of civil society have accordingly questioned whether the army was complicit in creating an extra-constitutional departure that required the dismantling of Parliament and the appointment of a caretaker government. For its part, the army has explained its inaction in protecting state and private property by saying that it was engaged in strategic restraint aimed at avoiding mass casualties.

SAHR observes that the constitutional legitimacy of the current administration, appointed with the sole public mandate of conducting inclusive, free and fair elections in early 2026, is clearly contested, but like most members of Nepali civil society, acknowledges that this was a practical solution devised by President Ram Chandra Paudel to resolve the national crisis with minimal damage to constitutional procedures and principles. Although the administration of the interim government headed by Prime Minister Sushila Karki has announced that it will hold elections on 5 March 2026, the prevailing political fragmentation, lack of consensus among political parties, security concerns, and administrative hurdles in facilitating overseas voting rights pose significant challenges. SAHR believes that Nepal's historically dominant political parties require internal democratization, accountability and inclusiveness in order to command public trust and reiterates the importance for all political parties to empower their second-tier leadership and integrate younger voices into democratic decision-making.

SAHR commends the establishment of a high-level three-member judicial commission to investigate the incidence of arson and vandalism and the use of force during the protests. However, given that questions have been raised concerning possible preconceptions and bias within this commission, SAHR highlights the need for the commission to understand the importance of impartiality and professional conduct of investigations, which will help restore national and international confidence in the ability of the Nepali polity to resolve its own issues with sensitivity and commitment. As for the allegations of corruption, SAHR urges the interim government to encourage existing government commissions and mechanisms, such as the Commission for Investigation of Abuse of

## Nepal at a Democratic Crossroads: A Human Rights Assessment following the September 2025 Unrest

Authority, to proceed without fear or favour and to build momentum so that the next elected government cannot backtrack.

SAHR notes with concern that broader rights-based issues—including transitional justice mechanisms and issues affecting vulnerable and excluded groups such as discrimination against Dalit groups, other ethnic minorities and refugees—have been sidelined amid the current political crisis. It emphasises that these concerns must be addressed in parallel to protect those communities whose rights are at even greater risk in this fragile context.

SAHR strongly urges the interim Sushila Karki government and all political parties to commit to holding fair and free elections within the stipulated period and refrain from stoking further public mistrust, which could otherwise lead to unmanageable unrest. Nepal's hard-won constitutional republicanism, federalism and secularism as well as its citizens' civil and political rights must be protected as the foundation of legality and legitimacy.

Finally, SAHR calls on the international human rights community to extend support to Nepal's domestic human rights mechanisms to foster accountability and ensure pressure on all actors to uphold democratic norms and preserve the rights and freedoms of the people of Nepal as enshrined in its constitution.

On behalf of the members of the South Asians for Human Rights,

**Dr Roshmi Goswami**

Co-Chairperson

**Dr P. Saravanamuttu**

Bureau Member







SAHR is a democratic regional network with a large membership base of people committed to addressing human rights issues at both national and regional levels. SAHR seeks to contribute to the realisation of South Asian people's right to participatory democracy, good governance and justice by strengthening regional response, including regional instruments, monitoring human rights violations, reviewing laws, policies and practices that have an adverse impact on human rights and conducting campaigns and programmes on issues of major concern in the region.

SAHR comprises both institutional and individual members. An elected bureau works as the organisation's executive body while the membership committee oversees enrolment of members. The SAHR Chairperson and Co-Chairperson are Dr Radhika Coomaraswamy of Sri Lanka and Dr Roshmi Goswami of India respectively. The Secretariat is located in Colombo, Sri Lanka.



## South Asians for Human Rights

345/18 Kuruppu Road, Colombo 08, Sri Lanka

Telephone/Fax: +94 11 2695910 • Email: [sahr@southasianrights.org](mailto:sahr@southasianrights.org)

[www.southasianrights.org](http://www.southasianrights.org)

