



Nonviolent youth mobilization and democratic expression (evidence from Sri Lanka's aragalaya in comparative South Asian perspective)

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Abstract

Youth political participation has become an increasingly influential force shaping contemporary protest movements across South Asia, particularly in contexts characterized by democratic fragility, economic crisis, and declining public trust in political institutions. This paper examines youth-led nonviolent mobilization as a form of democratic expression, using Sri Lanka's Aragalaya movement of 2022 as the primary case of analysis. The study adopts a comparative South Asian perspective by situating the Aragalaya alongside recent youth-led protest experiences in Nepal and Bangladesh, where mobilization has also emerged in response to governance failures and socio-economic grievances. Drawing on qualitative secondary data from academic literature, policy reports, and credible media sources, the paper employs a comparative analytical framework to explore patterns of youth political participation, protest strategies, and state responses. The findings demonstrate that youth engagement in the Aragalaya was marked by inclusive, decentralized, and predominantly nonviolent forms of collective action that transformed protest spaces into arenas of civic engagement, political deliberation, and public accountability. Nonviolence functioned both as a strategic choice and a normative commitment, enhancing the movement's legitimacy and enabling sustained public participation across social and ethnic divisions. In contrast, the comparative cases of Nepal and Bangladesh reveal that although youth mobilization similarly articulated democratic grievances, greater levels of confrontation, politicization, and state repression constrained the depth and durability of democratic outcomes. The paper argues that sustained nonviolent youth mobilization can operate as a democratic corrective during periods of political crisis by strengthening civic agency and limiting authoritarian responses. However, it also highlights the limitations of protest-based participation in the absence of institutional mechanisms capable of translating civic demands into long-term democratic reform. By integrating insights from peace studies and political science, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of youth agency, nonviolent action, and democratic resilience in South Asia.

Keywords: Youth political participation, Nonviolent protest, Aragalaya, Democratic expression, South Asia

1. Introduction

Across South Asia, youth have emerged as a significant political force, increasingly shaping public discourse, protest movements, and democratic engagement. Economic instability, governance failures, unemployment, and declining public trust in political institutions have intensified youth-led mobilization in recent years, making political participation beyond electoral mechanisms more visible and consequential. Protest movements have thus become an important arena through which young people articulate dissent, negotiate citizenship, and demand accountability from the state.

Within this broader regional context, Sri Lanka's *Aragalaya* movement of 2022, derived from the Sinhala term *aragalaya*, meaning "struggle" or "people's resistance" represents a critical case of youth-driven political participation through predominantly nonviolent collective action. Triggered by an unprecedented economic crisis and widespread public dissatisfaction with political leadership, the Aragalaya brought together young people from diverse social, ethnic, and class backgrounds in sustained protest. Unlike many protest movements in the region that have escalated into violent

confrontation, the Aragalaya was largely characterized by peaceful occupation of public spaces, civic creativity, and inclusive forms of participation, positioning nonviolence as a central mode of democratic expression. From a peace studies perspective, nonviolent action is widely understood as a strategic and normative approach capable of advancing political change while minimizing harm and preserving social cohesion. Scholars of nonviolent resistance argue that peaceful collective action can enhance legitimacy, broaden participation, and constrain repressive state responses. At the same time, political science literature emphasizes youth political participation as a key indicator of democratic vitality, particularly in contexts where formal institutions fail to respond to public grievances. The intersection of these two analytical lenses, nonviolent action and youth political participation offers a valuable framework for understanding contemporary protest movements in South Asia.

While recent protest movements in Nepal and Bangladesh have also been marked by visible youth participation, their trajectories reveal differing patterns of mobilization, state response, and degrees of nonviolence. These variations raise

important comparative questions about the conditions under which youth-led protests contribute to democratic expression and reform, as opposed to political instability or repression. Despite growing scholarly attention to protest politics in South Asia, limited comparative work has systematically examined youth participation through the lens of nonviolent action and democratic expression.

This paper addresses this gap by examining Sri Lanka's Aragalaya as the primary case of nonviolent youth mobilization and situating it within a comparative South Asian perspective, drawing reference cases from Nepal and Bangladesh. By doing so, the study seeks to contribute to broader debates on youth agency, peace-oriented political participation, and democratic resilience in times of crisis.

2. Objectives of the study

The present study aims to examine youth political participation in contemporary protest movements in South Asia, with particular emphasis on nonviolent collective action as a form of democratic expression. Using Sri Lanka's Aragalaya movement of 2022 as the primary case, and drawing comparative insights from recent protest experiences in Nepal and Bangladesh, the study is guided by the following objectives:

- To analyze the nature and dynamics of youth political participation in Sri Lanka's Aragalaya movement, with specific focus on nonviolent strategies, inclusivity, and forms of civic engagement.
- To comparatively examine youth-led protest movements in Nepal and Bangladesh, identifying key similarities and differences in patterns of mobilization, degrees of nonviolence, and state responses in relation to the Sri Lankan experience.
- To assess the implications of nonviolent youth mobilization for democratic expression and governance in South Asian contexts characterized by political and economic crises.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative research design grounded in secondary data analysis to examine the relationship between youth political participation, nonviolent mobilization, and democratic expression in selected South Asian protest contexts. Given the exploratory and interpretive nature of the research problem, a qualitative methodology was considered most appropriate for capturing the political meanings, protest dynamics, and contextual variations associated with youth-led collective action.

The study adopts Sri Lanka's Aragalaya movement of 2022 as the primary case study, while incorporating recent youth-led protest experiences in Nepal and Bangladesh as comparative reference cases. These cases were purposively selected due to three principal considerations. First, all three cases emerged within a relatively similar temporal period characterized by economic uncertainty, governance crises, and declining trust in formal democratic institutions. Second, each case demonstrated visible and sustained youth participation as a

central mobilizing force. Third, the selected cases reveal notable variation in protest trajectories, particularly regarding degrees of nonviolent action, state response, and democratic outcomes, thereby allowing meaningful comparative interpretation.

The research is based entirely on secondary qualitative data collected from four categories of sources:

- Peer-reviewed academic journal articles and scholarly books on youth political participation, protest politics, and nonviolent resistance;
- Reports published by international organizations and democracy monitoring institutions, including UNDP, Freedom House, and International IDEA;
- Policy analyses and civil society publications relating to governance and democratic accountability in South Asia; and
- Credible newspaper archives, analytical media reports, and documented public commentary concerning the Aragalaya movement and recent protest mobilizations in Nepal and Bangladesh.

These sources were selected on the basis of relevance, scholarly credibility, and thematic alignment with the study objectives.

For analytical purposes, the study applies a comparative thematic analysis. Data were reviewed and interpreted through three key analytical dimensions derived from the research objectives:

- The nature and forms of youth political participation;
- The use of nonviolent or confrontational protest strategies;
- State responses and their implications for democratic expression.

Through this framework, recurring patterns, similarities, and contextual differences across the selected cases were identified and critically examined.

The study is further informed by an interdisciplinary analytical lens combining peace studies and political science perspectives. From peace studies, particular attention is given to theories of nonviolent action, legitimacy, and civic resistance, while political science contributes conceptual insights on democratic participation, contentious politics, and state-society relations. This integrated framework enables a more comprehensive understanding of youth mobilization not merely as spontaneous protest behaviour, but as a politically meaningful democratic intervention.

As this research relies on secondary documentary evidence, it does not claim to provide direct participant perceptions or statistical generalization. Rather, its objective is analytical interpretation and comparative explanation. The study therefore acknowledges limitations associated with the availability of published material, potential media bias, and the evolving nature of contemporary protest movements. Nevertheless, triangulation across academic, institutional, and media sources strengthens the reliability of the interpretations presented.

4. Literature review

4.1 Youth political participation and protest politics

Scholarly literature increasingly recognizes youth as central actors in contemporary political processes, particularly in contexts where formal institutional participation appears limited or ineffective. Traditional conceptions of political participation - such as voting, party membership, and electoral campaigning - have been expanded to include non-institutional forms such as protests, social movements, and digital activism. This shift is especially evident in the Global South, where youth often engage in contentious politics to articulate grievances related to unemployment, economic inequality, corruption, and democratic exclusion.

Studies on youth political participation emphasize that protest movements provide alternative spaces for political engagement, enabling young people to exercise agency, construct collective identities, and challenge existing power structures. Rather than reflecting political apathy, youth participation in protests is increasingly interpreted as a response to systemic governance failures and declining trust in political institutions. In South Asia, youth-led mobilization has been observed across diverse political contexts, highlighting both the opportunities and constraints associated with protest-based participation.

However, existing literature often treats youth participation as a homogeneous phenomenon, paying limited attention to internal diversity, strategic choices, and normative orientations, particularly the deliberate adoption of nonviolent methods. This gap necessitates closer examination of how youth participation operates within specific protest contexts and how it shapes democratic expression.

4.2 Nonviolent action and peace-oriented mobilization

Nonviolent action occupies a central position within peace studies and social movement scholarship. Theoretical contributions on nonviolent resistance conceptualize it not merely as the absence of violence, but as a strategic and ethical approach to political struggle. Scholars argue that nonviolent movements tend to attract broader participation, enhance legitimacy, and reduce the likelihood of violent escalation, thereby increasing the prospects for sustainable political change.

Empirical research demonstrates that nonviolent protest strategies such as peaceful demonstrations, symbolic occupation of public spaces, and creative civic resistance can exert significant pressure on political authorities while maintaining public support. Nonviolence is also associated with inclusivity, enabling participation across class, ethnic, and gender lines, which is particularly relevant in plural societies.

Within South Asia, the legacy of nonviolent resistance has historical roots, yet contemporary protest movements display varying degrees of adherence to nonviolent principles. While some movements strategically embrace peaceful action, others experience fragmentation or escalation into confrontational forms. Existing scholarship often focuses on outcomes or state repression, with less attention paid to how youth actors actively

shape nonviolent repertoires and democratic narratives within protest movements. This study seeks to address this lacuna by foregrounding youth-led nonviolent mobilization as a meaningful form of democratic expression.

4.3 Protest movements, democracy, and state response in South Asia

Political science literature on protest movements in South Asia highlights the complex relationship between collective action, democratic institutions, and state power. Protests are frequently interpreted as indicators of democratic stress, emerging when formal mechanisms fail to address citizen grievances. At the same time, protest movements can function as corrective forces, revitalizing public debate and demanding accountability.

Comparative studies of South Asian protests reveal significant variation in state responses, ranging from accommodation and reform to repression and co-optation. Factors such as political polarization, institutional strength, media freedom, and economic conditions influence both protest dynamics and outcomes. In this context, youth participation has been identified as a critical variable, shaping the scale, sustainability, and legitimacy of protest movements.

Despite growing attention to protest politics in the region, comparative analyses often prioritize structural explanations or elite behaviour, overlooking the normative and strategic dimensions of protest mobilization. In particular, limited scholarly work has systematically compared nonviolent youth-led protests across South Asian contexts, especially in relation to democratic expression and governance outcomes.

4.4 Research gap

The existing literature provides valuable insights into youth political participation, nonviolent action, and protest movements in South Asia. However, there remains a notable gap in comparative studies that integrate these strands of scholarship. Specifically, insufficient attention has been paid to how youth-led nonviolent mobilization functions as a form of democratic expression, and how variations in protest strategies influence state responses and political legitimacy.

By examining Sri Lanka's Aragalaya movement as a primary case and situating it within a comparative South Asian perspective that includes Nepal and Bangladesh, this study seeks to bridge this gap. It contributes to peace studies by emphasizing nonviolent action as a normative and strategic choice, and to political science by analyzing youth participation as a critical dimension of democratic contestation in times of crisis.

5. Findings/Results

5.1 Youth political participation in Sri Lanka's Aragalaya movement

The findings indicate that youth played a central and visible role in Sri Lanka's Aragalaya movement, transforming it into a broad-based platform for political participation beyond conventional electoral channels. Young people emerged as

organizers, communicators, and symbolic leaders of the protests, mobilizing citizens across ethnic, religious, and class divisions. Participation was largely decentralized, with youth networks coordinating demonstrations, public discussions, and cultural activities rather than relying on formal political organizations or party structures.

A notable feature of youth participation in the Aragalaya was its emphasis on inclusivity and civic engagement. Protest sites functioned as spaces for political education, dialogue, and collective reflection, enabling young participants to articulate democratic demands related to accountability, transparency, and good governance. This form of engagement reflected a shift from personalized or partisan politics toward issue-based collective action, reinforcing youth agency as a democratic force during a period of severe economic and political crisis.

5.2 Nonviolent strategies and democratic expression in the Aragalaya

A key finding of this study is the deliberate and sustained adoption of nonviolent strategies by youth participants in the Aragalaya movement. Protest repertoires included peaceful demonstrations, symbolic occupation of public spaces, artistic expression, satire, and civic rituals, all of which contributed to maintaining a non-confrontational character. These strategies enhanced the movement's moral legitimacy and broadened public support, enabling sustained participation over time.

Nonviolence functioned not only as a tactical choice but also as a normative expression of democratic values. By rejecting violent confrontation, youth participants framed the protests as a collective civic response rather than a destabilizing force, thereby strengthening claims to democratic expression. This approach constrained the state's ability to justify repression and facilitated wider engagement from civil society actors, professionals, and marginalized groups. The findings suggest that nonviolent youth mobilization played a crucial role in shaping the political credibility and symbolic power of the Aragalaya movement.

5.3 Comparative insights: youth mobilization in Nepal and Bangladesh

Comparative analysis of recent protest movements in Nepal and Bangladesh reveals both similarities and contrasts with the Sri Lankan experience. In all three contexts, youth participation was driven by dissatisfaction with governance failures, economic precarity, and perceived democratic deficits. Digital platforms and social media served as important tools for mobilization, coordination, and narrative framing across cases. However, differences emerged in terms of protest dynamics and degrees of nonviolence. In Nepal and Bangladesh, youth-led protests have at times experienced fragmentation, politicization, or escalation into confrontational encounters with state authorities. These dynamics limited the sustainability of mobilization and, in some instances, contributed to restrictive state responses. Compared to these cases, the Aragalaya demonstrated a more sustained commitment to nonviolent collective action, which enhanced public legitimacy and enabled broader civic participation.

5.4 State response and democratic outcomes

The findings further indicate that the nature of youth mobilization significantly influenced state responses across the selected cases. In Sri Lanka, the predominantly nonviolent character of the Aragalaya constrained immediate coercive responses and intensified domestic and international pressure for political accountability. While the movement did not fully institutionalize its demands, it contributed to leadership change and reframed public discourse around governance and democratic responsibility.

In contrast, in Nepal and Bangladesh, instances of protest escalation and political polarization were met with more restrictive responses, including repression and legal constraints on dissent. These outcomes highlight the importance of nonviolent strategies in shaping state behaviour and democratic trajectories. The comparative findings suggest that youth-led nonviolent mobilization can function as a critical mechanism for democratic expression, particularly in fragile political contexts.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the significance of youth-led nonviolent mobilization as a meaningful form of democratic expression in South Asia, particularly in contexts marked by political and economic crisis. By examining Sri Lanka's Aragalaya movement alongside recent protest experiences in Nepal and Bangladesh, this paper contributes to ongoing debates in peace studies and political science concerning youth agency, nonviolent action, and democratic resilience.

From a peace studies perspective, the Aragalaya illustrates how nonviolent action can function both as a strategic choice and a normative commitment. Consistent with theoretical arguments on nonviolent resistance, the movement's emphasis on peaceful protest broadened participation, enhanced moral legitimacy, and constrained the scope for violent state repression. Youth actors played a central role in sustaining this nonviolent orientation through creative protest repertoires, civic dialogue, and symbolic occupation of public spaces. This supports existing scholarship that views nonviolence as a mechanism for preserving social cohesion while advancing political change.

At the same time, the findings reinforce political science literature that conceptualizes youth political participation beyond formal institutional channels. In the Sri Lankan case, youth engagement in the Aragalaya represented a response to perceived failures of representative institutions, rather than a rejection of democratic principles. Protest spaces became alternative arenas for democratic deliberation, accountability, and citizenship practice. This challenges narratives that portray youth-led protests as inherently destabilizing and instead highlights their potential to revitalize democratic discourse.

The comparative analysis further demonstrates that youth participation alone does not guarantee democratic outcomes; rather, the nature of protest strategies and state-society interactions play a decisive role. In Nepal and Bangladesh, youth-led protests have similarly articulated democratic

grievances, yet episodes of confrontation, politicization, and fragmentation have limited their transformative potential. These contrasts suggest that sustained nonviolent mobilization enhances the capacity of youth movements to maintain public legitimacy and influence political trajectories, whereas escalation and repression can undermine democratic gains.

Importantly, the Aragalaya's experience also reveals the limitations of protest-based participation. While the movement succeeded in reshaping public discourse and prompting leadership change, its inability to fully institutionalize demands highlights the structural constraints facing youth-led mobilization. This observation aligns with broader scholarship on social movements, which cautions that nonviolent protests, though powerful, require complementary institutional pathways to translate civic energy into long-term democratic reform.

This study advances an integrated understanding of youth political participation that bridges peace studies and political science. It suggests that youth-led nonviolent protest can serve as a critical democratic corrective in moments of crisis, but its long-term impact depends on political opportunity structures, state responsiveness, and the capacity to connect protest with institutional reform. In the South Asian context, where democratic institutions remain uneven and contested, fostering nonviolent avenues for youth participation may be essential for sustaining democratic resilience and social peace.

7. Conclusion

This study examined youth political participation and nonviolent collective action as forms of democratic expression in South Asia, with Sri Lanka's Aragalaya movement of 2022 serving as the primary case of analysis. By situating the Aragalaya within a comparative South Asian perspective that included recent protest movements in Nepal and Bangladesh, the paper sought to understand how youth-led nonviolent mobilization shapes democratic engagement and state responses during periods of political and economic crisis.

The findings demonstrate that the Aragalaya represented a distinctive model of youth political participation characterized by inclusivity, civic creativity, and sustained nonviolent action. Youth actors transformed protest spaces into arenas of democratic deliberation and accountability, reinforcing nonviolence as both a strategic and normative approach to political contestation. In contrast, the comparative cases reveal that where protest dynamics became fragmented or confrontational, youth mobilization faced greater constraints, including restrictive state responses and limited democratic impact.

The study contributes to peace studies by reaffirming the relevance of nonviolent action in preserving social cohesion and enhancing the legitimacy of protest movements. From a political science perspective, it expands understandings of youth political participation by highlighting protest-based engagement as a constructive democratic practice rather than a symptom of political instability. Together, these insights underscore the importance of nonviolent youth mobilization as a democratic corrective in contexts marked by institutional fragility.

At the same time, the analysis acknowledges the limitations of protest-led political participation. While nonviolent

mobilization can generate significant symbolic and political outcomes, its long-term democratic impact depends on the availability of institutional pathways capable of translating civic demands into sustained reform. Future research could build on this study by incorporating longitudinal analysis, additional regional comparisons, or mixed-method approaches to further explore the conditions under which youth-led nonviolent movements contribute to democratic consolidation. In conclusion, this paper argues that fostering inclusive and nonviolent avenues for youth political participation is essential for democratic resilience in South Asia. As the region continues to navigate economic uncertainty and governance challenges, recognizing and engaging youth as constructive political actors remains vital for sustaining peace and democratic legitimacy.

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