

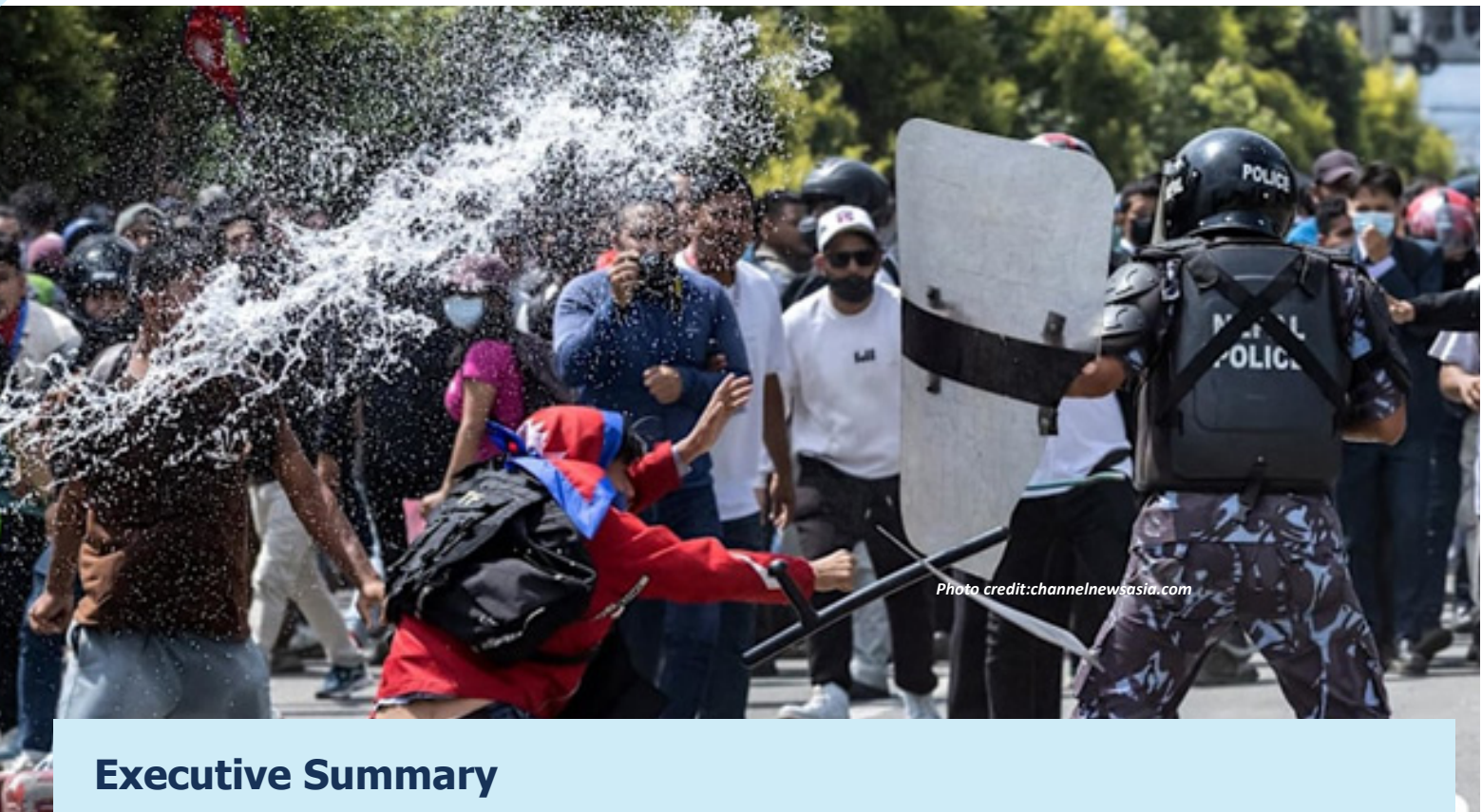
The GLOCEPS

Policy Brief

Research and Analysis in Governance and Ethics Focus

Redressing Youth Grievances in Eastern Africa: Comparative Lessons from Nepal's 2025 Crisis

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Executive Summary

The 2025 youth-led uprising in Nepal, which culminated in the resignation of Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, serves as a critical case study for political instability driven by a convergence of youth-specific grievances. This policy brief argues that the broader Eastern Africa region, encompassing the member states of the East African Community (EAC) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), is replicating the Nepal precipitating conditions, which include systemic political exclusion, entrenched corruption, economic despair, and digital repression. With over 70% of its

population under 35, this vast region faces an existential threat to its stability and development gains. Drawing on comparative analysis and regional data, this brief contends that state responses of repression and co-option are failing. It concludes that preemptive, institutionalized reforms focused on meaningful youth inclusion are not merely beneficial but essential to avoiding a region-wide crisis. The recommendations provide a multi-level roadmap for national governments, regional bodies, and private actors to transform the region's demographic youth bulge from a risk into a dividend.





Introduction

In September 2025, Nepal experienced a seismic political shift. A Gen Z-led protest movement, initially triggered by a ban on social media platforms, rapidly escalated into a nationwide uprising that toppled the government. This movement was not a singular reaction to digital repression but the culmination of deep-seated frustrations over systemic political exclusion, entrenched corruption, and mass economic despair. This event provides a stark warning for other regions grappling with similar demographic and governance challenges.

This policy brief posits that the Eastern Africa region spanning the member states of the EAC and IGAD, namely Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan, is on an alarmingly similar trajectory. From the 2024 #RejectFinanceBill protests in Kenya and discontent over elite capture in Uganda and Tanzania, to the mobilization of disenfranchised youth in Sudan and South Sudan, a wave of youth-led mobilization is sweeping the region. This analysis provides a comparative risk assessment, drawing direct parallels between Nepal's crisis and the convergent drivers of unrest across Eastern Africa. It moves beyond diagnosis to offer a concrete, multi-level roadmap for preemptive action, arguing that the cost of inaction is not merely cyclical protest

but severe political destabilization that could reverse decades of development progress.

Comparative Analysis: Convergent Drivers of Unrest

The catalysts of Nepal's crisis are not unique; they are a checklist of governance failures prevalent across Eastern Africa. The analysis below breaks down these parallel drivers across the EAC-IGAD nexus.

Political Exclusion and Gerontocratic Governance

A primary driver in both regions is the palpable exclusion of youth from meaningful political power, despite their demographic majority. In Nepal, protesters decried an elderly-dominated political elite perceived as monopolizing power and ignoring youth priorities like unemployment, education reform, and digital access.

A near-identical pattern of exclusion is evident across Eastern Africa. In Kenya and Uganda, youth constitute over 75% of the population but hold less than 22% of parliamentary seats, with political systems characterized by dynastic politics and veteran dominance. In Tanzania and Burundi, ruling party youth leagues function primarily for mobilization rather than genuine policy influence, creating a facade of inclusion. While Rwanda is an outlier with significant youth representation in



parliament due to quotas, the space for independent political dissent remains tightly controlled.

This dynamic is even more acute in IGAD's fragile and post-conflict states. In Sudan and South Sudan, militarized political structures and aging liberation-era elites systematically marginalize the very youth who were central to protest movements. Somalia's clan-based 4.5 power-sharing model inherently limits youth access to top leadership. In Eritrea, an authoritarian, militarized state suppresses all forms of independent political organization, leaving youth with no formal channels for expression. The clear implication is that political closure is a primary driver of unrest. Without legitimate channels for influence, youth will create their own, often outside formal systems, leading to destabilizing cycles of protest.



Photo Credit: peopledaily.digital

Corruption as a Daily Barrier

For the youth in both Nepal and Eastern Africa, corruption is not an abstract concept but a daily barrier to survival and dignity, making it a powerful mobilizing force. In Nepal, the "NepoBaby" scandal became a potent symbol of kleptocracy, starkly contrasting the lavish lifestyles of the political class with the struggles of ordinary citizens.

The Eastern African region remains mired in corruption. The 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) paints a troubling picture, with most countries scoring well below the global average of 43. The CPI

ranks 180 countries and territories worldwide based on perceived public sector corruption, using a scale from 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). Scores in the region include Rwanda (57), Tanzania (41), Kenya (32), Ethiopia (37), Uganda (26), South Sudan (8), Somalia (9), Eritrea (13), DRC (20), Sudan (15), and Djibouti (31). This corruption is felt intimately. In Kenya, protests have directly targeted specific scandals, such as the alleged misappropriation of National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF) and infrastructure funds. In South Sudan and the DRC, corruption is existential, directly linked to the control of mineral wealth and aid flows, fueling conflict and state capture. In Sudan, the pre-war political economy was defined by elite kleptocracy, a key grievance of the revolution. This translates into daily encounters with bribery in education, healthcare, and public services, which intensifies youth frustration and fuels demands for systemic reform, not just individual accountability.

Erosion of Civil and Digital Liberties

In both contexts, digital repression has emerged as a critical trigger, signaling state weakness and instantly legitimizing dissent. In Nepal, the ban on social media platforms was the immediate catalyst for protests, widely interpreted as an attempt to silence dissent over corruption and exclusion.

Eastern Africa exhibits a clear and worsening pattern of digital repression. This includes outright internet shutdowns, as seen in Uganda during the 2021 elections and repeatedly in Ethiopia during conflicts and protests. It also involves more sophisticated tactics like platform blocking and surveillance. For instance, Kenya throttled internet access and blocked Telegram during the 2024 protests, while Rwanda and Djibouti employ sophisticated surveillance apparatuses to silence critical voices. In Eritrea, the state maintains a near-total information blackout. Media censorship remains a key tool,





exemplified by Tanzania's Communications Regulatory Authority suspending a major online platform for 30 days over a critical animation.

The lesson from Nepal is that these tactics are a failed strategy. Rather than quelling unrest, they deepen distrust and reinforce the perception that states prioritize control over genuine dialogue and reform, ultimately amplifying the dissent they seek to suppress.

The Jobless Growth Paradox

Persistently high youth unemployment rates ensure that macro-level economic growth does not translate into micro-level stability or opportunity. In Nepal, a youth unemployment rate of 20.8% forces mass economic migration, rendering national GDP growth a hollow statistic for millions.

The same paradox of jobless growth is prevalent across Eastern Africa. Regional youth unemployment and underemployment rates exceed 50% in



most states. Kenya sees an estimated 800,000 new graduates enter the job market each year to compete for a handful of formal sector jobs. Uganda and Tanzania post high growth rates (5-7%) driven by capital-intensive sectors like oil, gas, and infrastructure, which create few jobs for the burgeoning youth population. In the Horn of Africa (HoA), the situation is even more dire. In Sudan and South Sudan, economies are shattered by conflict, offering only precarious livelihoods. In Ethiopia, the pre-conflict rapid growth struggled to absorb millions of young entrants, a key factor contributing to unrest. In Djibouti and Eritrea, state-controlled economies provide limited opportunities outside of military or public sector patronage networks.

This structural mismatch means youth observe economic progress from which they are systematically excluded, deepening their sense of injustice and providing a potent catalyst for social unrest.

National Mitigation Efforts

Governments across Eastern Africa have launched youth programs with visible but uneven outcomes. In Kenya, initiatives such as Ajira and Jitume trained over 390,000 youth in digital skills by 2024, contributing to the rise of nearly 1.9 million young people earning from online work. Equally, the Climate Workx Program has opened new opportunities in green jobs and climate-smart agriculture for the youth. Yet this impact is modest compared to the 800,000 graduates entering the labor market each year. Rwanda has reserved seats for youth in parliament and capitalized its Innovation Fund to support start-ups, advancing representation and entrepreneurship, though restrictions on political space constrain genuine influence. Uganda's Youth Livelihood Programme and the Parish Development Model have financed thousands of small-scale enterprises, but loan recovery rates remain low



and politicization undermines credibility. In Tanzania, a statutory 10% of council revenue is earmarked for youth and women's groups, expanding access to credit, but enforcement is inconsistent across districts.

The record is weakest in conflict-affected states. In South Sudan, the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) Youth Empowerment Activity had trained over 7,000 young people by 2024, while the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Seed4Youth program reached more than 4,000, with women accounting for more than half of the participants. Yet instability, displacement, and patronage limit sustainability. In the DRC, programs aim to reach 20,000 vulnerable youth in eastern provinces with education and livelihood support, but recurring conflict and resource competition undermine results. In Sudan, youth peace dialogues and vocational schemes persist in isolated areas but cannot scale under conditions of war. In Somalia and Eritrea, entrenched governance models leave little room for youth participation, reducing donor projects to isolated interventions.

Across the region, the lesson is clear. While programs like Kenya's Ajira, Rwanda's quotas, and South Sudan's vocational schemes provide tangible entry points, they remain too small, donor-dependent, or politically constrained. Without

structural reforms, these initiatives risk being seen by youth as temporary relief rather than pathways to systemic change.



Conclusion

The evidence demonstrates that the EAC and IGAD regions are replicating the exact conditions that led to Nepal's profound political crisis. The lesson from Kathmandu is unambiguous. Tomorrow is already too late. The choice for Eastern African policymakers is clear: preemptive, inclusive reform or reactive, costly instability. Continuing on the current path of subjugation, tokenism, and economic exclusion will inevitably lead to a region-wide replication of Nepal's destabilizing turmoil, threatening the very foundations of state legitimacy and decades of hard-won development progress. Averting this fate requires a fundamental shift in governance from viewing youth as a threat to be managed to engaging them as essential stakeholders in building a stable and prosperous future.

Recommendations

Averting crisis requires coordinated, multi-stakeholder action at national, regional, and international levels.

The EAC and IGAD National Governments should:

- a) Mandate substantive youth quotas (e.g., 30%) in cabinet, parliament, and public service commissions. This must be paired with genuine political openness to avoid cosmetic inclusion.
- b) Co-fund vocational training centers aligned with labor market needs (e.g., digital skills, green energy).



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- c) Scale up successful national models like Kenya's Ajira Digital and Rwanda's Innovation Fund.
 - d) Fast-track prosecutions of high-profile corruption cases identified by youth protests.
 - e) Publicize asset declarations of senior officials and partner with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) for real-time monitoring of public spending.
 - f) Jointly and publicly commit to ending blanket internet shutdowns and respect net neutrality to restore trust.
 - g) Integrate youth into national development plans by making job creation and skills training core economic priorities.
 - h) Ensure accountability in youth financing through annual independent audits and transparent reporting.
 - i) Expand opportunities to rural and marginalized areas with targeted training, financing, and infrastructure.

The East African Community (EAC) Secretariat and IGAD Council of Ministers should:

- a) Establish a Joint EAC-IGAD Youth Advisory Council composed of elected youth leaders from each partner state, with a formal mandate to advise the respective regional summits on cross-border policy challenges.
- b) Enact a Binding Regional Protocol on Digital Rights to create a harmonized legal framework that prohibits arbitrary internet shutdowns and guarantees data privacy and freedom of expression online across both regions.
- c) Strengthen regional anti-corruption bodies like the Eastern Africa Association of Anti-Corruption Authorities (EAAACA) and the Eastern Africa Anti-Corruption Platform by mandating a joint committee to investigate cross-border corruption and rights violations, with public reporting to the EAC Assembly and IGAD Council.

Technology Companies and International Partners should:

- a) Partner with CSOs and governments to develop secure communication tools that reduce surveillance risks while enabling safe civic discourse across the region.
- b) Focus initiatives on rural, marginalized, and conflict-affected youth to bridge the digital divide and ensure informed, critical, and safe political engagement online.

