AUTHORITARIANISM, YOUTH PROTESTS AND THE DECAY OF DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

This research paper aims to study the recent rise in youth protests across the globe in the backdrop of rise in corruption perception across major democracies, while also touching upon the rise in authoritative governance and its new-found popularity amidst the discontentment within democracies. It begins by discussing the concept of Decoloniality and Post-Colonialism, the historical context of the rise in democracies and the past stages of colonialism, followed by the defining events of the 20th century that led to the decline in colonialism and the rise of alternative power centres in the newly-globalized world. It then discusses events as recent as of 2025 which include youth protests in the so-called "third world" countries, the exponential rise in authoritative measures which enjoy popular support and future trends for the same.The paper highlights the role of India in the dynamic world order and how it is redefining democratic practices in the backdrop of collapse of democracies in its neighbourhood. At the end, it analyzes general economic metrics and corruption perception indexes to showcase real-world changes in the world order.

Keywords: Democracy, Youth Protests, Authoritarianism, Decoloniality, Post-Colonialism, Industrial Revolution, Colonialism, Globalization, Alternative, Geopolitical, Economic, Corruption Perception, Soft Power

OBJECTIVES

Objectives

- To trace the context behind increase in youth protests across the world
- To find out the reasons behind rise in corruption perception in democracies
- To study the impact of rise in authoritative governance against democratic governance
- To study decolonial patterns in the wake of rise in alternative global powers



INTRODUCTION

"The lady doth protest too much, methinks"
-William Shakespeare

The twenty-first century is witnessing a political environment characterized by what experts refer to as “democratic backsliding” or “democratic recession”. Democratic institutions around the world are experiencing a gradual decline, not through sudden coups but through a slow deterioration of checks and balances, restrictions on civil liberties, and manipulation of electoral systems. This coincides with the rise of adaptable authoritarianism and an increase in youth-led protests, making their intersection a vital area for analyzing the current trends of democratic governance.

Modern authoritarianism often does not present itself through outright dictatorship. Instead, many states employ hybrid, illiberal, or electoral authoritarian models that preserve democratic appearances while undermining their essence. Leaders consolidate power through constitutional changes, politicized judicial systems, controlled media, and national security narratives that justify increased state surveillance. These actions alter political culture by normalizing state control and diminishing public trust in democratic accountability.

At the same time, young people have emerged as influential political participants, challenging unresponsive or oppressive governance. With digital skills, increased political awareness, and global exposure, youth mobilize around various issues, including economic inequality, corruption, environmental issues, gender discrimination, ethnic marginalization, and police violence.

Protests in locations such as Hong Kong, Nigeria, Chile, Nepal, Bangladesh and Iran represent a broader quest for dignity, inclusion, and democratic participation. In many cases, youth activism acts as a counterbalance to authoritarianism, testing the strength of democratic norms and expanding the political possibilities within societies.

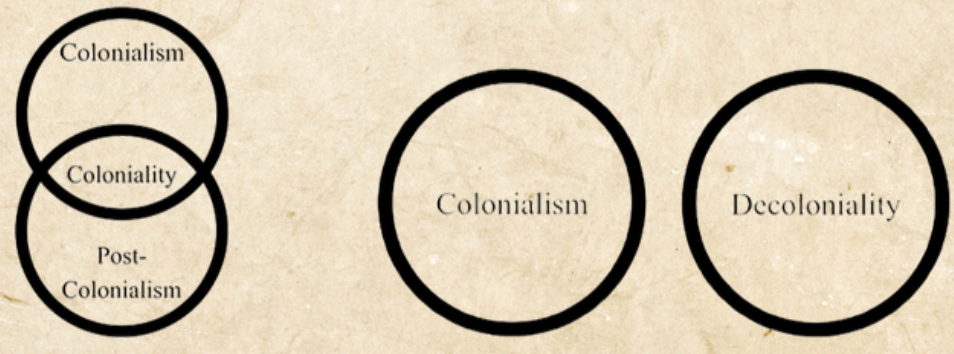
Responses from governments to youth protests vary significantly. Some resort to coercive tactics in the form of mass surveillance, internet shutdowns, restrictive assembly laws and targeted repression to suppress dissent. These strategies often exacerbate democratic decline by reducing public spaces, undermining civic engagement, and fostering a narrative that prioritizes stability over freedom. However, repression can also energize youth movements, leading to new forms of protest and fostering international solidarity. The relationship between state control and youth mobilization, thus, becomes a key aspect of modern political conflict. Geopolitical factors add further complexity to this situation. Strategic rivalries, digital influence campaigns, and the global spread of surveillance technologies empower authoritarian-leaning governments, while international civil society networks offer platforms for youth voices to be heard. Economic challenges such as unemployment and inequality heighten frustrations among younger generations, turning political protests into socio-economic demands which authoritarian regimes struggle to suppress without major repercussions.

All in all, the interaction of authoritarian governance, youth activism, and democratic erosion highlights a larger struggle over the future of political order. The trajectory of democracies, whether they will weaken further or experience a “Renaissance” of their own, will depend on how these societies navigate these new challenges. As the youth continue to assert their influence worldwide, their role in challenging or reshaping political systems will be crucial for understanding the evolving landscape of democracy in a rapidly changing geopolitical context.

DECOLONIALITY VS POST-COLONIALISM

Before we go ahead, we must understand the difference between "Decoloniality" and "Post-Colonialism", a common but relevant theme that resonates within the following paper. Oftentimes it is seen that Decoloniality is interchangeably used along with the term "Post-colonialism". However, both these terms are not related as one might assume them to be. Both are two distinct ways in which we can understand the impact of colonialism from the contemporary perspective, but the implementation methods are where both of these paradigms begin to differ. "Post-colonialism" refers to the deconstruction and the dismantling of prevailing colonial institutions, which acts in accordance with the very same institutions it seeks to break away from. It assumes that the contemporary world is one that is not plagued by colonialism as it did a few centuries ago. On the other hand, "Decoloniality" refers to colonialism being an ongoing, dynamic process that is still evolving alongside mainstream society. It seeks complete delinking from Westocentric and Eurocentric Knowledge Systems, instead opting for a rewriting of knowledge systems outside of the scope of the notion of Western Modernity. Figure 1 demonstrates a simplified venn diagram to understand the distinction between the two.

Figure 1: Post-colonialism vs. Decoloniality



Both of these paradigms also differ in their point of origin, decoloniality being a product of the political independence gained by the Latin American countries in the early 19th century, and the Latinx representations across the world, while post-colonialism being formed as a result of the horrors of colonialism in Asia and Africa, particularly in the region of South Asia.

Decolonial thinkers such as Walter Mignolo, Enrique Dussel and Aníbal Quijano propounded the principle of Decoloniality in the 1990s, arguing that colonialism had given way to "coloniality", a way in which social interactions inherited the socio-cultural corrosiveness of colonialism and internalising them, thereby instilling deeper roots of colonialism in the form of power, knowledge and being.

Post-colonial thinkers, meanwhile, argued that these very corrosive qualities left behind after colonialism in the form of different elements around the socio-cultural framework. These include renowned thinkers such as Ashis Nandy and Partha Chatterjee, who explain the different notions of colonialism and their long-term effects, as well as understanding how post-colonial nations balance out both inherent colonial structures and indigenous frameworks of political organization

Post-colonialism got a headstart of about 30 years before the Decolonial school of thought emerged, with a well-established structure and deeply rooted principles since the 1960s. However, decolonial themes have begun to be incorporated into circles outside Latin America, including many Indian schools of thought, giving a different perspective to detach from the colonial mindset.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION AND COLONIALISM

The historical roots of contemporary behavior tendencies and age resistance lie in two monumental transformations: the Industrial Rebellion and policy. These events, without being celebrated for advancing technology and economic maturity, too entrenched deep political and social hierarchies that shape modern democracies. Understanding this lineage reveals why systems of account, exploitation, and alienation evolved to surface the behavioral frameworks of today's political regimes.

1. Industrial Revolution: Control and the Dehumanisation of Labour

The Industrial Revolution, emerging in the close eighteenth century, redefined the nature of doing and human identity. Agrarian economies gave way to mechanized production, bringing immense material development still too institutionalizing new forms of equability. The worker, once connected to land and enjoyment, became a replaceable thrust in a vast industrial less. Also, surveillance, discipline, and bureaucracy became the instruments of order, prefiguring modern state accounts.

2. Industrial Revolution: Control and the Dehumanisation of Labour

Industrial capitalism's demand for raw materials and markets soon propelled European colonial expansion, extending the identical art of insolence to entire nations treated as resources for tincture and governance, policy perfected methods of account census-taking, racial hierarchies, and centralized administration under the guise of civilization and progress. Without Europe celebrating democracy at home, it justified behavior rules abroad. This repugnancy created a conduct fracture interior modernity: the coexistence of acts with oppression. Today, that fracture persists in democratic societies that preach freedom yet reproduce equability and surveillance.

3. Youth Disillusionment in Post Colonial Democracy

For the age of postcolonial and industrial societies, this illness endures as disillusionment. Nations built on the ideals of maintenance and equality moment operate under bureaucratic elitism and corporate dominance.

Also, modern technologies, once symbols of progress, have evolved surface tools of digital authoritarianism from data surveillance, algorithmic manipulation, and media plan. The echoes of the factory series are momentarily placed in the clicks of digital accounts, showing that authoritarianism no longer requires coups it thrives interior democratic institutions themselves.

THE WORLD WARS AND THE END OF COLONIALISM

The two World Wars (1914–1918 and 1939–1945) caused a profound upheaval in the world order, permanently laying the groundwork for the end of colonialism and the following emergence of authoritarianism, which is a hallmark of modern democracy decline. Millions of colonial subjects were forced to battle and witness the frailty of their masters as a result of the conflicts, which served as the primary catalyst that destroyed the concept of European supremacy. Driven by nationalist enthusiasm and the obvious contradiction of fighting for liberty only to be denied it at home, this involvement produced a class of politicized veterans who provided the organizational and intellectual leadership for the vast anti-colonial movements that would sweep the world.

The colonial powers, especially Britain and France, were financially and militarily depleted, completely incapable of maintaining the cost and effort necessary to quell these growing calls for independence. This circumstance quickly set off a disorderly wave of decolonization across the middle of the 20th century, as did the anti-colonial position of the emerging superpowers (the US and the USSR). But the independence that was granted was a very problematic gift. A legacy of seriously faulty democratic foundations was left behind by European powers, including arbitrary borders that cut across racial and religious divides, weak economies reliant only on resource extraction, and a lack of qualified political administrators required for inclusive governance.

By using "divide and rule" strategies and centralized repression, the colonial governments had deliberately stifled the growth of strong civil societies and pluralistic politics.

The newly inherited democratic mechanisms soon collapsed in the harsh post-independence environment characterized by internal ethnic and regional conflict, crippling poverty, the pressing need for national unity and the ideological influences of the Cold War. Whether they were charismatic founders or shrewd military leaders, leaders persuasively argued that achieving economic sovereignty and overcoming internal discord required a centralized, powerful, and frequently authoritarian state.

This rationale caused democracy to rapidly deteriorate. Importantly, the very instruments of coercion and repression that the colonial powers had developed, such as one-party systems, preventive detention legislation, and the strong hand of the state security apparatus, were often embraced and institutionalized by these new regimes. One of the main mechanisms in the cycle of oppressive government is the new elites' direct transfer of these strategies.

In the end, the World Wars served as a devastating force against imperial empires, yet liberal democracy did not immediately fill the void that followed. Rather, colonialism's severely broken institutions and oppressive customs served as the model for a new type of tyranny. Thus, the authoritarian drive fatally undermined the promise of self-determination, which had been earned through the bloodshed and turmoil of international conflict, resulting in the established, centralized power structures that came to characterize post-colonial regimes. Generations of young people have protested against this persistent legacy of unfulfilled emancipation and democratic decay, opposing the strongmen and calling for the true participatory freedom that the era of decolonization first promised but eventually failed to achieve.

RISE IN A BIPOLAR WORLD

The Return of a Two-Superpower World: A Story of Influence and Choice

The world is changing. For twenty years after the Cold War, only one superpower was considered dominant in the world, and that was the United States. Now we are moving into a new era of bipolarity: a world with two main centers of power - the United States and China. The shift is not only about military or economic strength, but also about some deeper competition over whose ideas and model of development are more attractive to the rest of the world. And this competition is rooted deeply in history.

The historical trajectory of "soft power"

The concept of "soft power," that is, influencing others through culture, values, and policies rather than military force, has been around since it came into prominence during the Industrial Revolution. In the wake of that revolution, for example, nations like Great Britain led the way in modeling progress to be copied. As john Nye observes, technology, wealth, and a way of life became forms of attraction (Nye, 2004).

The United States, of course, mastered this in the 20th century. Following World War II, it did not just build a strong military but a system: leading in the creation of global institutions such as the United Nations and the World Bank, spreading its culture through Hollywood movies and music. For a long period of time, the "American Dream" was a powerful global idea. Sometimes this influence came with strings attached, though. The economic policies emanating from the World Bank and IMF often forced developing countries to make difficult changes, a practice critics view as a form of economic pressure or "neo-colonialism" (Nkrumah, 1965).

Turning Point: Indian Independence

A big crack in the old world order came with the independence of India on August 15, 1947. It was a potent signal that there was leeway for the nations to pursue their own course-a course independent of Western control. Success on the part of India-a large, diverse, and democratic country-proved there could be more ways to become a major nation. It planted the seed for the multi-faceted world we see today.

The Modern Challenge: A New Kind of Competition

Today, the central challenge to American influence is provided by China. It preaches an entirely different model: not democracy in the Western pattern, but a tale of fast economic growth, stability, and efficient long-term planning under central authority, strong and confident. Its vast infrastructure-funding offensive across Asia, Africa, and Latin America-so-called BRI-is a perfect encapsulation of its soft power strategy. It offers aid with fewer immediate political preconditions than Western aid, hence its appeal for many leaders, The World Bank 2019 . Meanwhile, other countries are not just taking sides. Large countries like India and groups like the African Union play this competition to their advantage: they play off both the US and China for the best deals that advance their own development while maintaining their independence and becoming significant powers in their own right.

COLD WAR, GLOBALIZATION AND THE UNIPOLAR WORLD

1. Cold War

The Cold War (1945-1991) was a period of strategic geopolitical rivalry between two superpowers, the USA and the USSR, and their allies, which were the Eastern Bloc and Western Bloc. The Cold War is described as an ideological war where no country fought with weapons but were divided on the basis of ideologies, where the West supported capitalism and democracy whereas the East supported communalism. There was no direct confrontation with weapons; rather, it was all about diplomatic espionage, propaganda campaigns, and embargoes .

It all started in the aftermath of World War II (1939-1945), where many reasons came one after another, which intensified the situation. With the division of Germany and the Korean War in the 1950s, which gave way to proxy ideological war, followed up by the establishment of NATO in 1949 and the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), which not only intensified the race in armies but also intensified the race of nuclear arms and space .

The Cold War has shaped the history of superpowers and international relations. The end of the Cold War from the late 1980s to early 1990s commenced a turning point. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, it ended the longstanding US-Soviet Union ideological war. It reshaped the global political and economic landscape.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 saw the collapse of the Soviet Union ultimately. The USSR disbanded in 1991 into 15 independent countries: Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. The dissolution was a significant global event that marked the end of the Cold War and created these new sovereign states.

2. Unipolar world

After the end of the Cold War era, the world saw a tremendous change in power from a bipolar world to a unipolar world with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Here, we can witness the rise of unipolar power in action, where a country doesn't possess any significant rivalry from other powers that do not pose a huge challenge to the hegemon, unlike the latter which influences most of the world order. The USA possessed unparalleled economic power, with armies shaping political policies. The USA promoted democracy and more inclusive economies with free-market capitalism and liberal globalisation. Now the global orders are centred more on US interests and face value, facilitating the spread of economies and markets. The U.S. dollar (USD) emerged as the principal currency in global banking, epitomising economic supremacy and creating hegemony all over the world, much like that of Britain and the Pound Sterling (GBP), shaping key international organisations like the World Bank and International Monetary Funds.

3. Globalisation

After the Cold War era, the world witnessed interconnectedness like it never did, with the expansion of trade, flows of investment, and cultures. 'Globalisation' is defined as a process of interconnection between different countries with their religions, ideas, and technologies because trade barriers have been greatly reduced. This period saw a wave of communication and technological advances all over the world. India experienced substantial economic growth through the globalisation model. The average rate of growth of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at factor cost according to the latest estimates is 5.68 per cent per year for the pre-reform period of 1980-81 to 1990-91 and 6.48 per cent per year for the post-reform period of 1991-92 to 1997-98.

RISE OF ALTERNATIVE CENTRES OF POWER: ASIA, AFRICA, SOUTH AMERICA

There was a time when most Asian countries constituted the "core" of the World Order model before the advent of mercantilism from the 15th century onwards. Most of the commodities were manufactured or refined in the Sino-Indian region, with the Silk Route being a prominent feature at the time, bridging the trading routes between Asia and Europe.

This went on until the beginning of sea voyages, which was much faster than travelling by foot or horse-drawn vehicles. A sleuth of voyagers and travellers now began to explore the world around them, be it Ibn Battuta of Morocco, who travelled throughout the Arabian Peninsula, the Indian subcontinent, and going as far as China, taking him around 30 years to finish his short but impactful voyage, or be it Amerigo Vespucci and Christopher Columbus who "discovered" the Americas. It was not long after the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, however, that Imperialism and Colonialism truly began to influence the world, while declining the influence of the previously-"core" countries.

Before colonial disruptions, Asia, especially China and India, comprised nearly 30% of the world's GDP and was home to vibrant economies with advanced industries and trade systems. The Mughal Empire's textile manufacturing and China's tributary network established Asia as a global economic hub. However, colonial policies redirected wealth, resources, and political authority to European powers, marginalising Asia's influence and restructuring global trade towards Europe. For the last two decades, Asia has been returning to its historical centrality. Contributing about 60% of global GDP growth, Asia has once again become the locomotive of the world economy. China, the world's second-largest economy by most measures, and India, which by 2030 is expected to become the third largest, have fueled rapid industrialisation and larger middle classes, reshaping regional economic and social landscapes. Southeast Asian economies are also key contributors to intra-regional trade, representing almost 60% of Asia's overall trade. Meanwhile, Africa is experiencing economic growth thanks to liberalisation, investment, and regional trade agreements like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Its expanding youth population and middle class provide strong

middle class provide strong prospects for future growth and influence. With abundant natural resources and trade agreements such as Mercosur, South America remains influential in global commodities and regional politics, staying active on the international stage. Together, these regions exemplify a shift from a Western-dominated unipolar world to a multipolar power structure. Large-scale initiatives like China's Belt and Road Initiative further illustrate how infrastructure development is fostering connectivity and influence across Asia, Africa, and South America, echoing historical patterns of trade and power redistribution on a modern global scale. In summary, the rise of Asia, Africa, and South America as alternative centres of power not only revives their historic significance but also reshapes the contemporary global order through economic dynamism, strategic partnerships, and growing geopolitical influence. This evolution underscores the multipolar nature of today's world and marks asignificant transition in international relations and development trajectories.

RISE IN AUTHORITATIVE GOVERNMENTS AND YOUTH PROTESTS

1. The Global Expansion Of Authoritarian Rule

Authoritarianism can be understood as a principle of blind submission to authority. In government, authoritarianism denotes any political system that concentrates power in the hands of a leader or a small elite that is not responsible to the people. Authoritarian leaders tend to exercise power arbitrarily with no regard for constitutional norms and morality. There has been renewed interest in exploring the nuances of authoritarianism. Earlier perceived as only a transitional paradigm, real-world developments have indicated the exact opposite—that authoritarianism is here to stay and is as dynamic and evolving as any other form of politics. As per the Freedom House project's Freedom in the World 2021 report, 2020 saw a sharp acceleration in the global decline of democracy.This pattern counters many experts (such as Francis Fukuyama) who had made strong predictions of the flourishing of liberal democracies in the 21st century. The political alternative presented by democracy has been actively contested by many, with the argument that the development of the modern state has not proportionally resulted in a flourishing of democratic institutions, resulting in the delegitimisation of this political form, and subsequently, the declining public trust in it.Many psychologists and sociologists have also unmasked why some citizens display unwavering obedience to authority. For instance, Wilhelm Reich, explained in his book, 'The Mass Psychology of Fascism' how fascists and authoritarians come into power through their political and ideologically oriented sexual repression on the popular masses. Eric Fromm further explained that amid all the insecurities that the modern world has to offer, authoritarianism is described as a "mechanism of escape". The internet is growing less free around the world, and democracy itself is withering under its influence and a cohort of countries is moving toward digital authoritarianism by embracing the Chinese model of extensive censorship and automated surveillance systems. Democracies are famously slow at responding to crises, as their systems of checks and balances, open deliberation, and public participation are not conducive to rapid decision-making. But this built-in caution has helped some semidemocratic countries fend off authoritarian-style internet controls over the past year.

2. What unfolds when the rise of Authoritarianism collides with the restless energy of the youth?

In the past couple of decades, concerned citizens have taken to the streets in record numbers, with students and youth at the forefront. There are many reasons that lead people to protest, and some are not new. In the past, activists also marched to voice their discontent about economic, social, environmental and political issues that mattered to them. But this recent protest wave is unfolding at a time when civic participation is increasingly restricted. Over the past few years, multiple overlapping crises, sometimes called the 'polycrisis', have made children and young people more vulnerable, particularly those who are already marginalized. Across continents from the digital surveillance of China to the street protests in Nepal, Peru, Morocco, Kenya and the Philippines a pattern has begun to emerge where Gen Z(young citizens) using digital activism through social media platforms like Facebook, X, YouTube and TikTok and rise against the system that silences them. These protests are not isolated outbursts but a collective response to the erosion of democratic values, deepening inequality, corruption, and the widening gap between political elites and ordinary people as seen in the lavish lifestyle of Nepal's "nepo kids" trend.

3. Youth Protest Across Nations: Contemporary Illustrations

Youth protests have swept the world, toppling governments in Madagascar and Nepal this month, and shaking the status quo in Morocco. While the demonstrations have various motives, they have been driven broadly by widespread dissatisfaction among young people who are angry about political corruption, lack of opportunities, crime, slow economic growth and, in the case of Nepal, a draconian ban on the internet. In Nepal, it was an abrupt social media ban. Roused on social media and led by the nation's young people, this protest is unlike any seen before in Nepal.The 'nepo kid' campaign accused politicians' children of flaunting luxury lifestyles funded by corruption. Although there has been no central point of leadership, a number of youth collectives have emerged as a mobilising force, issuing calls to action and sharing updates online.

While in Peru, youth are rallying against corruption scandals and rising crime. Jo-Marie Burt, a visiting professor at Princeton University said, The discontent has been fueled by corruption scandals, economic insecurity, rising crime and anger over a lack of accountability over dozens of protesters who were killed by security forces when Boluarte assumed power in late 2022 after former President Pedro Castillo was removed from office and arrested. Kenya has long been hailed as a stable democracy in East Africa, a nation with a progressive constitution, functioning institutions, regular elections, and relative stability in a volatile region. For decades, the country wore this crown with pride, sold it on diplomatic podiums, and repeated it in speeches and headlines. But today, this well-constructed narrative is beginning to crumble. Over the past year, the nation has witnessed a mass youth uprising led by Kenya's Gen Z, i.e., those born in the late 1990s and early 2000s, who have taken to the streets and social media to demand government accountability and reform. Rather than reform, however, the state has responded with force. Peaceful demonstrations have been met with police violence, abductions, and a well-coordinated effort to silence dissent both online and offline. The uprising is exposing the deep cracks at the heart of the country's democratic project.

INDIA: THE VISHWABANDHU AMIDST AN UNCERTAIN WORLD

Global power relations are undergoing structural change in the twenty-first century. As a multipolar world, with multiple powerful states sharing power, has resulted from the fall of Western hegemony and the rise of the new Asian powers. Among them, given its strong diplomatic ties, expanding economic capabilities, and demographic advantage, India is a major player in this changing, uncertain world order. As the analysis observes, Asia is becoming the centre of power, with India acting as a check on both China's ascent and Western dominance, sometimes maintaining balance and sometimes opposing actions and with having different dynamics of the diplomacy exercised.

1. Economic and Strategic Dimensions

As seen, one of the primary factors influencing India's significance in international affairs is its “economic growth contribution”. The IMF (2024) estimates that India's economy is currently the fifth largest in the world and will significantly rise to the third position by 2030. The consistent expansion, with developments in manufacturing, renewable energy, and information technology, greatly contributes to India's aspirations to become a superpower and a “Vishwabandhu”. India's strategic location between the Indo-Pacific and Indian Oceans makes it essential to international trade and security frameworks as we know that an economy largely depends on a sea route. Regarding this, New Delhi's dedication to an open and free Indo-Pacific is reflected in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue also known as QUAD between the US, Japan, Australia, and India. Its active involvement in the G20, SCO, and BRICS further solidifies India's expanding diplomatic clout even in the international economic context. Comparing India to its neighbours who occupy the same geopolitical space makes this strategic ascent even more noticeable and getting comparatively more attention. For example, Pakistan was divided from the same colonial map in 1947, experienced weak civilian institutions, frequent political unrest, and military takeovers. In contrast, India's continued commitment to electoral democracy allowed for long-term strategic planning, economic reforms such as the 1991 LPG shift and ultimately its current strong international economic positioning. India's position as a stable actor in the otherwise unpredictable South Asian region is strengthened by this comparative growth.

2. Soft Power and Global Image

India's soft power such as its culture, ancient history, democratic ideals, and worldwide diaspora in addition to its hard power enhances its standing abroad. India's humanitarian diplomacy, which includes distributing vaccines, example - Operation Vaccine Maitri and providing disaster aid example- Operation Dost, as well as the popularity of Indian yoga, film, and food, portray the country as a responsible global player. An appealing alternative to authoritarian development, India's democratic model allows it to establish moral legitimacy in international fora which strongly stands for humanitarian causes.

On the other hand, neighboring nations frequently face diminishing cultural diplomacy, political fragmentation, and extremist pressures. India has been seen by the world as a democracy that can self-correct due to its internal reforms be it formation of new parties as a rebel to the ruling government and even getting in power after it and also a historical significance is an example when the expansion of coalition-based governance following the fall of the one-party dominant system, the strengthening of electoral institutions, and the constitution's resilience even during crises like the 1975 Emergency. India's political and historical stability raises its legitimacy as a soft power while also having a huge impact from its cultural and ethnic traditions be it food, entertainment media or rituals.

3. Challenges and Constraints

Notwithstanding these benefits, India is facing numerous obstacles in its quest to become a global superpower. These include managing its relations with the West and the Global South, a complex geopolitical environment marked by tensions with China and Pakistan (one of the real life and current examples of Kautilya's Mandala Theory), and socioeconomic disparities, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and proper and lack of efficient infrastructure. Other long-term strategic challenges include resource management, climate change, and technological reliance on foreign powers.

Even though India's credibility is further enhanced by the way it has handled previous internal issues. The end of the Emergency period demonstrated that India was a country capable of reviving democracy and can stand for its spirit and structured existence.

The shift from the Congress's one-sided rule to the coalition era demonstrated how flexible India's political system can be, making it truly democratic and republic. The 1991 LPG reforms set the stage for India's current economic confidence and expedited its entry into international markets and assisted it to become more significant in international trade while also strengthening its internal economic structure. These pivotal events set India apart from many of its neighbours, whose political and economic structures lacked comparable institutional resilience. India's rise in a multipolar world is a structural reality that is playing out in front of the world, not an ideal.

The foundation for superpower potential has been established by diplomatic assertiveness and economic growth, but the rate and sustainability of India's rise will depend on internal reforms and strategic flexibility to make the core or base stronger. India's unique combination of democracy, diversity, and diplomacy along with its growing soft power puts it in a unique position to be a balancing force as the world shifts toward a decentralized power structure, a superpower characterized by leadership through collaboration rather than dominance.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

It has been noted that many democracies are experiencing a rise in corruption which declines the level of confidence towards democratic institutions. As democracies' integrity has been noted to drop as much as 15% over the past ten years according to the Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International, the trust decline has been noted to correlate with a decline in faith towards democratic governance. On the contrary, there has been a decline in corruption perceptions in developed democracies, as can be noted in Figure 3. This has become concerning as many are more attracted to authoritarian forms of leadership that are more decisive and offer a greater sense order. This coincides with the rise in Youth-led protests across the globe, especially between 2015 and 2025, as shown in Figure 2.

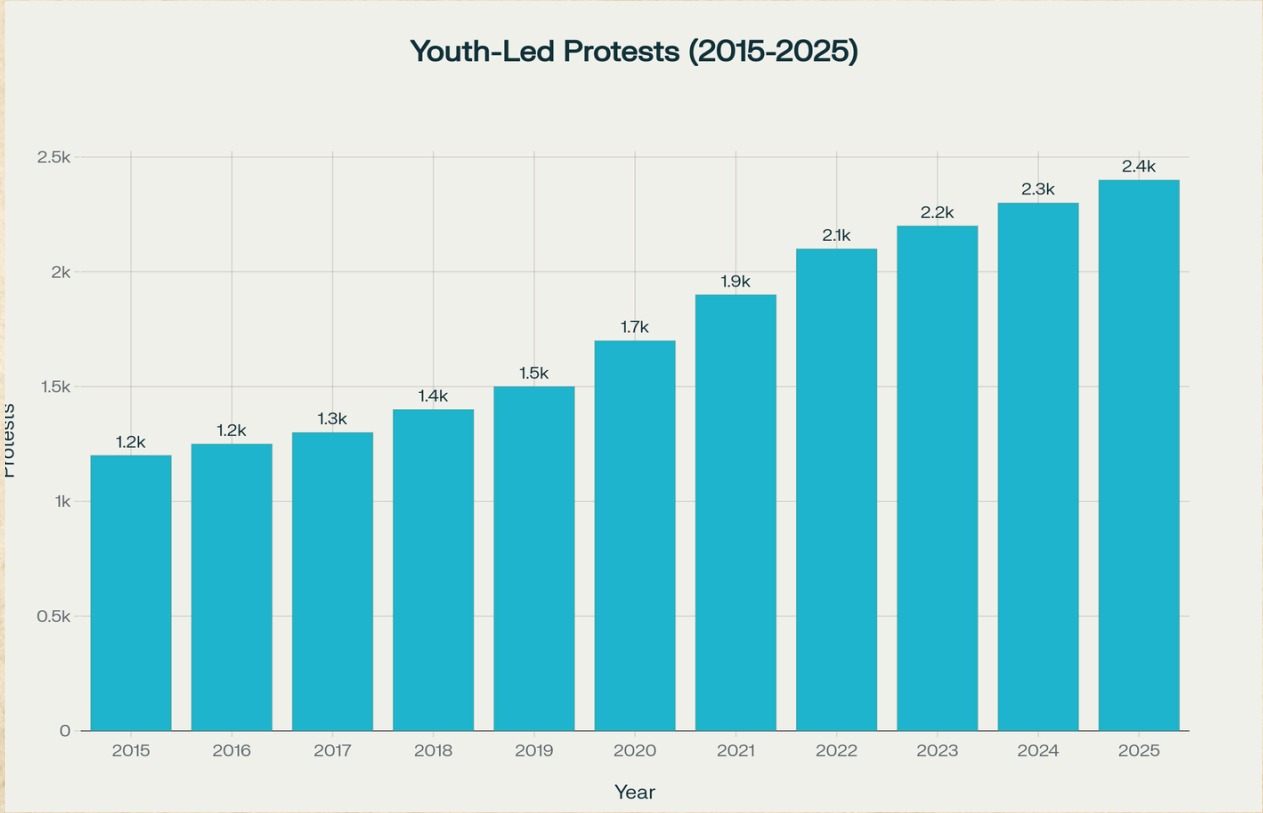


Figure 2: Number of Youth-Led Protests Globally per Year (2015–2025)

On the other hand, the rise of new economic powers has changed the economic landscape and the axis of power. Countries in Asia, Africa, and South America have embraced economic advancement and rising regional cooperation to become new global players. This includes the use of soft power through technological advancements and cultural diplomacy. As data from the World Economic Forum and the IMF indicates, over the past five years, China, India, Brazil, and South Africa have contributed over 30% of global economic growth. The Soft Power Index has also noted that these countries have significantly progressed in cultural diplomacy. Figure 4 showcases the economic contribution distribution as reported by the World Economic Forum as of 2017.

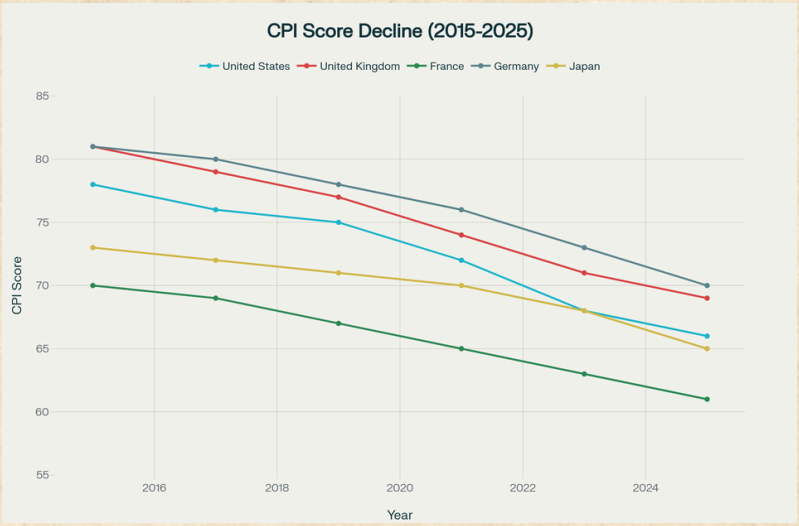


Figure 3: Decline in Corruption Perception Index Scores for Major Democracies (2015–2025)

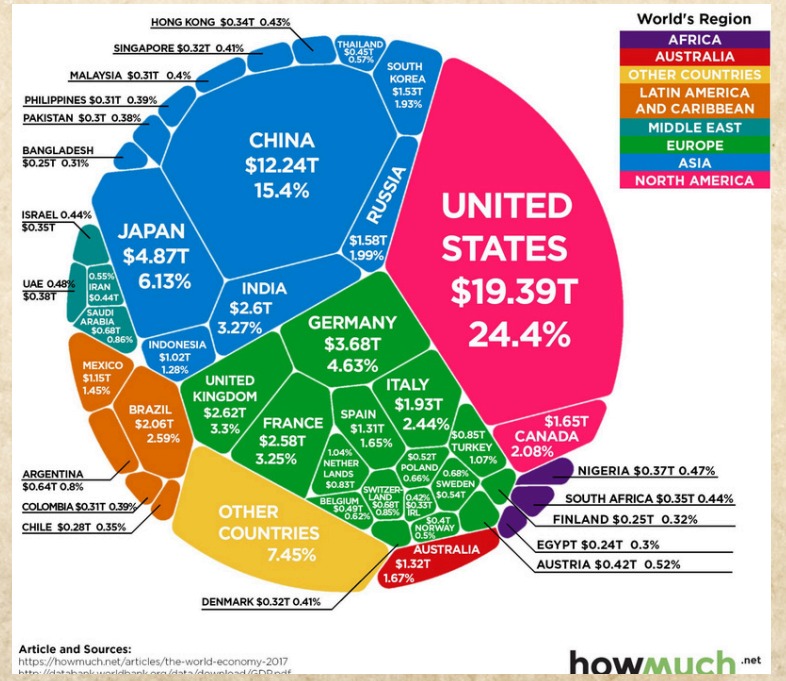


Figure 4: The World Economy: Global GDP share by country as of 2017

CONCLUSION

A major shift in world politics is indicated by the rise of authoritarian rule, increase in youth-led demonstrations and the progressive erosion of democratic institutions. As this paper has demonstrated, open dictatorship is no longer the typical form of modern authoritarianism. Instead, it shows itself through the slow suppression of public dissent, digitally enabled surveillance along with constitutional manipulation. Young people across regions have reacted to these changes by becoming more mobilized than ever before, fighting against political exclusion, inequality, and corruption. Deep-seated structural resentment arising from economic inequality, colonial legacies and the enduring problems in postcolonial democracies are reflected in their protests.

This tension between growing youth resistance and authoritarian control shows that democracy's decline is not uncontested. Youth movements have grown more organized, politically aware and globally interconnected with advancing technologies, while authoritarian governments are modernizing their methods of repression. The ability of these movements to convert protest energy into lasting political influence depends on the resilience of civic institutions and on the willingness of states to place accountability above coercion.
Geopolitical transformations strengthen this contest further. As China, India and other Global South powers gain influence, states now choose between competing development models, reducing the automatic global appeal of liberal democracy. The survival or renewal of democratic systems will depend on how societies reconcile development with freedom, and how effectively they address the grievances driving youth activism.

Looking ahead, several trends are likely to shape the political future. Many states may move toward hybrid regimes that preserve elections but restrict civil liberties through digital policing. Youth-led protests will continue but will become more decentralised as governments expand censorship and online controls. Countries that reduce corruption and expand economic opportunities for young people have a higher chance of stabilising democratic institutions, while those that ignore these problems may face recurring unrest.

In a multipolar world, states that combine technological progress with democratic safeguards will gain legitimacy, while those relying heavily on coercive power may struggle with persistent instability and eroding public trust. Overall, the struggle between youth-driven demands for accountability and dignity and authoritarian adaptation will determine the course of democracy in the future. How societies react to this defining struggle will determine whether democracies continue to fall apart or find renewal.

"***Hard times create strong men.***
Strong men create good times.
Good times create weak men.
And, weak men create hard times."
G.Michael Hopf

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