

The “*One Piece* Jolly Roger” and Shared Political Identity in Gen Z’s Asian Spring

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Introduction

In August and September 2025, a wave of Gen Z–led protests erupted across Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines. Amid protestors’ handmade signs and demands for justice, one image stood out: a skull wearing a straw hat, smiling against a black background. The Jolly Roger from the anime *One Piece*, once a simple flag for fictional pirates, had become the unexpected banner of a generation in revolt.

Across Southeast Asia, Generation Z has emerged as a major political force, challenging corrupt governance, youth unemployment, censorship, and the erosion of accountability. In Indonesia, the Jolly Roger gained prominence during mass demonstrations ahead of the nation’s 80th Independence Day, reflecting widespread discontent with the state of democracy (Budiman & Purwanto, 2025). In Nepal, the government’s strict ban on 26 major social media platforms ignited the “Wake Up Nepal” campaign, where digitally fluent youth coordinated rallies overnight via VPNs, Discord servers, and Telegram channels. They took inspiration from Indonesia, hanging *One Piece* banners on vehicles, buildings, and waving the flags in their hands as a symbol of resistance against state surveillance (Saallq, 2025). In the Philippines, similar imagery circulated in the Trillion Peso March and other movements responding to corruption and dissatisfaction with public infrastructure spending.

Altogether, these protests raise a central question for this paper: How does East Asian pop culture imagery (in this case, the “*One Piece* Jolly Roger”) generate political consciousness among fans across Southeast Asia? To answer this, my paper expands on Dina Nurul Fathiya (2025)’s study, “Pop Culture Protest Symbol: *One Piece* Flag in Non-Violent Political Expression in Indonesia,” which identifies three functions of the flag within Indonesian protests: (1) enabling a shared political identity, (2) fostering universal recognition through digital virality,

and (3) communicating nonviolent dissent through symbolic rather than physical confrontation. I extend this framework across Nepal and the Philippines and introduce an additional dimension: shared imagined futures, which highlights how young activists draw inspiration from fictional worlds to envision political alternatives in their own.

The rise of the Jolly Roger in political spaces is part of a broader generational shift. Gen Z blends activism with the cultural narratives that shaped their upbringing, turning familiar icons into tools for critique, solidarity, and creative expression. The convergence of pop culture and activism shows how young people today imagine justice, community, and power, and why a once-fictional flag can inspire real-world change in the twenty-first century.

The Emergence of an Asian Spring

News outlets across Asia have increasingly used the term “Asian Spring” to describe the wave of uprisings that have spread throughout the region. Although the label is unofficial, it reflects a growing recognition that South and Southeast Asia are undergoing a period of rapid change. Other phrases such as “Gen Z protests,” “Gen Z revolutions,” and “Asian uprising” have also circulated, each highlighting how young people are reshaping political life on an unprecedented scale.

Many observers have drawn parallels between these movements and the Arab Spring, the series of mass protests that swept through the Middle East and North Africa in the early 2010s. The Arab Spring was driven by frustration with corruption, authoritarian governance, and economic precarity (Singh, 2025). Despite clear differences in political systems and historical contexts, the same frustrations are visible in today’s Asian movements. Reporting from *Deutsche Welle* emphasizes that anger over corruption, elite impunity, and economic strain played central roles in places such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Timor-Leste, where long-standing

dissatisfaction erupted into nationwide demonstrations (Deb, 2025). It is within this broader regional landscape that the Indonesian, Nepalese, and Filipino cases examined in this paper take shape.

Indonesia: From Local Grievances to Mass Demonstrations

In Indonesia, the 2025 uprisings unfolded gradually, beginning with frustration over daily economic pressures and soon expanding into a nationwide critique of political authority. Earlier in the year, public resentment had intensified in response to increased military involvement in civilian governance, cuts to social spending, and the rising cost of living. These grievances became the Pati demonstrations, which were triggered by a proposed 250 percent increase in the land and building tax (PBB-P2). Such a sharp tax hike threatened to make property ownership unaffordable for many households, particularly in areas where wages had not kept pace with inflation. The demonstration drew over one hundred thousand participants and widened the gap between government officials and the ordinary citizen (Adilah & Kurniawan, 2025).

The national mood shifted again in mid-August, when a parliamentary proposal to grant only legislators a monthly housing allowance of 50 million rupiah ignited widespread anger (Oktafian & Febrianna, 2025). Many Indonesians saw the proposal as a symbol of elite privilege, especially at a moment when everyday expenses such as food, transportation, and education were becoming increasingly difficult to manage. Student organizations, labor unions, and youth coalitions began coordinating protests across the country.

Tragedy struck on August 28th, when Affan Kurniawan, a motorcycle taxi driver, was killed after being struck by an armoured military vehicle during a police crackdown in Jakarta (Teresia et al., 2025). Outrage spread both online and offline, with street clashes erupting and

viral criticism circulating under the hashtag #PolisiPembunuhRakyat. For many Indonesians, Affan's death crystallized longstanding concerns about police brutality and deepened public mistrust of state institutions. The movement gained renewed momentum as anger turned into sustained collective action.

During this period, the *One Piece* Jolly Roger emerged as the defining symbol of protest. Many Indonesians carried the flag in place of the national red-and-white, partly in response to President Prabowo Subianto's call for citizens to display the national flag for Independence Day on August 17th. Young protesters embraced the Jolly Roger as a powerful counter-symbolic act because it stood for freedom, resistance, and a playful but pointed rejection of authority. However, government officials reacted strongly, calling the pirate flag disrespectful and even treasonous, and police attempted to confiscate it during raids (Ng, 2025). Still, the imagery spread, fueled by meme culture and the safety of a fictional banner unclaimed by formal political groups.

On September 1st, movement leaders released the "17+8 Demands," outlining priorities that included withdrawing the military from civilian administrative roles, releasing detained protesters, ending police violence, and pursuing long-term structural reforms to increase government accountability (Indonesia Demands, 2025).

As of late 2025, nationwide demonstrations have decreased, but localized actions persist, particularly around university campuses and district offices. Four protesters died, thousands were detained, and universities across the country held vigils calling for justice and institutional reform (Teresia et al., 2025). Many activists continue to call for the release of detainees, investigations into police violence, and meaningful changes to Indonesia's political landscape.

Nepal: Digital Mobilization and Regime Change

With a median age of 25, Nepal is one of the youngest countries in Asia, and its youth are highly digitally connected. Longstanding concerns about elite privilege, misuse of public funds, and structural economic stagnation had already eroded trust in government. By 2025, remittances accounted for 33.1% of Nepal's GDP and supported millions of households, reflecting the absence of a domestic employment model capable of absorbing the country's growing labor force (Bhandari, 2025). At the same time, youth unemployment had reached 22.7%, and approximately 740,000 Nepalis left the country for foreign employment in 2024 alone, many in jobs far below their skill level, which intensified feelings of betrayal toward a stagnant elitist political class (Bhandari, 2025)

The digital economy was particularly vulnerable. Many young Nepalis relied on social media for income, whether through small online businesses, freelance work, or content creation. Posts on Reddit captured the panic immediately after the shutdown, including one widely shared message titled "*Online businesses in Nepal are doomed? I can barely pay my company's rent and staff salaries if they ban social media,*" which reflected widespread fear that entire livelihoods would collapse overnight (Gaandumandu, 2025). The heavy dependence on remittances and informal digital work underscored a broader structural failure: Nepal had not built an economy capable of providing stable, well-paying domestic opportunities.

The immediate trigger for the uprising occurred on September 4th, when the government ordered the shutdown of 26 major social media platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter (X), LinkedIn, and Signal. Officials framed the shutdown as a regulatory measure requiring each and every platform to register under the new rules of the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology lest they be banned. However, the ban was finalized after a viral wave of posts exposing the luxury lifestyles of political leaders' children (known as the "nepo kids")

trend) had spread rapidly (NDTV, 2025). The social media shutdown effectively wiped out the country's online economy overnight and severed family communication channels used by millions of migrant workers abroad. Outrage spread instantly, and Nepalese citizens used VPNs, QR-coded flyers, TikTok reposts, and neighborhood organizing to arrange protests (Hameed & Mir, 2025).

Large crowds gathered peacefully across Kathmandu, particularly at Maitighar Mandala and New Baneshwor, but the situation escalated sharply on September 8th when protestors attempted to enter the Federal Parliament. Security forces responded with tear gas, water cannons, rubber bullets, and ultimately live ammunition, resulting in more than 70 deaths in Kathmandu alone (Barma & Thapa, 2025). As unrest spread across the country, demonstrators set fire to key government buildings, including parts of Singha Durbar, the Supreme Court complex, and the residences of both the president and prime minister. Curfews were imposed in multiple cities, door-to-door searches intensified, and police even fired tear gas into the Civil Service Hospital while injured protestors were being treated (Nepal et al., 2025)

On 9 September, Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli resigned under immense pressure, though the president initially refused to step down. With conventional political parties absent from leadership, organizing shifted to Discord, where more than 100,000 Nepalis joined a server named "the Parliament of Nepal" (Ahmed, 2025). Youth groups, particularly Hami Nepal, coordinated food distribution, medical aid, political debates, and leadership polls. Across several days of deliberation and fact-checking, more than 10,000 participants voted to nominate former Chief Justice Sushila Karki as interim prime minister. Although a few online channels advocated violence, the broader movement emphasized collective decision-making and demanded accountability for state violence.

On September 12th, Karki was officially appointed as Nepal's first female interim prime minister. Organizers from Hami Nepal began removing officials linked to corruption, reshuffling ministries, and drafting new oversight and accountability committees (Ahmed & Mukherjee, 2025). A national day of mourning was held on September 17th, honoring the 76 people killed and more than 2,000 injured during the unrest.

By late 2025, the new interim government dissolved parliament and scheduled elections for 5 March 2026, prompting debates over leadership renewal and the emergence of new political parties (Gurubacharya, 2025). Although mass protests have subsided, Nepal's "Wake Up Nepal" movement reshaped the political landscape and demonstrated the organizing power of Gen Z digital networks. The *One Piece* Jolly Roger, which appeared on rooftops, vehicles, and protest banners, became a rallying sign for transparency and democratic accountability.

Philippines: Corruption and Climate Vulnerability

Under President Bongbong Marcos, the Philippines entered a new cycle of anti-corruption protests centered on allegations involving government-funded flood control projects. Despite years of large government expenditures, flooding continued to devastate communities across the archipelago. In 2024, investigative reports pointed to billions of pesos allocated to infrastructure programs riddled with irregularities. These programs, dubbed "ghost" contracts, were substandard construction and procurement schemes that appeared to benefit the private interests of a small circle of contractors and their families (De Guzman, 2025).

In a country frequently struck by typhoons and monsoon rains, Filipinos saw the scandal not only as financial misconduct but as a fundamental betrayal of public trust. Effective flood mitigation could determine life outcomes for entire neighborhoods. Social media feeds became saturated with satirical attacks on "flood control nepo babies," the children of politicians and

contractors showcasing lavish lifestyles despite widespread storm damage. Their conspicuous displays of wealth, prohibited under Philippine law (De Leon, 2025), solidified public anger and helped mobilize a broad coalition demanding stronger accountability measures.

The protests began on September 4th, when demonstrators staged symbolic actions such as throwing tomatoes and spoiled vegetables at government buildings (Ratcliffe, 2025a).

Between September 7th and 20th, thousands of students walked out of campuses across the Philippines, including the University of the Philippines (Diliman, Manila, Los Baños), Bulacan State University, and Saint Louis University. At UP Diliman, students organized a protest fun-run branding Marcos as “the original nepo baby,” blending humor and civic critique in ways that reflected broader Gen Z political culture (Zheng, 2024). The *One Piece* Jolly Roger also appeared on protest banners and campus installations.

By mid-September, demonstrations diversified and expanded across Metro Manila and regional cities. On 14 September, more than 500 residents of Marikina City joined Takbo Laban sa Korapsyon, a community-run protesting corruption in infrastructure spending (Sarmiento, 2025). On the same day, 150 cyclists from Youth Advocates for Climate Action Philippines and partner organizations completed the #KontrakTOUR Bike Protest, riding from Quezon City Hall to Luneta Park to condemn the misuse of public funds. These actions drew attention to how climate vulnerability, environmental advocacy, and anti-corruption politics were increasingly intertwined.

The movement reached its peak on September 21st, a date chosen for its symbolic connection to the anniversary of Ferdinand Marcos-era martial law. At Rizal Park, thousands gathered for the “Baha sa Luneta” rally, led primarily by youth, students, and activist networks. At the EDSA Shrine and People Power Monument, religious organizations, civil society groups,

labor unions, and professional associations converged for what became known as the Trillion Peso March. Their demands included the arrest of individuals implicated in the scandal, recovery of ill-gotten wealth, public release of officials' Statements of Assets, Liabilities, and Net Worth (SALNs), and lifting of bank secrecy restrictions (Eva, 2025). As of December 2025, marches are continuing to be led by these groups.

Social Listening Methodology

To understand how the *One Piece* Jolly Roger circulated digitally during the 2025 protests, I conducted a multi-platform social listening analysis using Google Trends and Talkwalker. These tools offered complementary views: Google Trends captured *public search interest*, while Talkwalker traced *actual conversational volume* across a wide range of sources.

Google Trends was used to measure where and when interest in the term “*One Piece* flag” intensified. I collected data for the period from July 31st to November 1st, 2025. The results showed that Nepal, the Philippines, and Indonesia were the top three regions searching for “*One Piece* flag,” with Nepal scoring 100, the Philippines 73, and Indonesia 45 (see Appendix, Figure 1). These scores are normalized measures of search interest, meaning Nepal generated the highest relative volume of searches for “*One Piece* flag” (set at 100), while the Philippines and Indonesia reached 73% and 45% of that level during the same time period. The timeline graph displayed three major peaks of interest (see Appendix, Figure 2). The first and sharpest appeared at the end of July, shortly before Indonesia’s Independence Day tensions, when the Jolly Roger began circulating as a critique of nationalist symbolism. A second spike emerged in mid-September at the height of Nepal’s “Wake Up Nepal” movement, coinciding with extensive international media coverage of the government’s social media ban. A third rise occurred in late September during the Philippines’ Trillion Peso March and nationwide student walkouts.

Although interest declined in October, it did not fall back to pre-protest levels, which suggests that the symbol continued to serve as a reference point in global protest discourse.

Talkwalker was used to complement the search data by tracing how the Jolly Roger appeared in posts, articles, and conversations. This tool monitors more than thirty major social platforms along with one hundred and fifty million news sites, blogs, forums, and newsletters across two hundred and thirty-nine countries and regions. I created a Boolean query that linked *One Piece* terminology with protest-related keywords connected to Nepal, Indonesia, and the Philippines. This ensured that the results captured political and protest-related uses of the flag rather than general anime discourse. Between May and November 2025, Talkwalker returned more than 172,000 posts and an estimated sixty-three billion impressions (see Appendix, Figure 3). The timeline revealed that Indonesian netizens had already been comparing their government to the narrative in *One Piece* since May 2025 (Seno GP, 2025). Large spikes in late July and early August aligned with Indonesia's protest wave. The September surge reflected global attention to Nepal's crisis, even though Nepali-origin posts decreased due to the platform bans. A final wave in late September reflected rapid adoption of the symbol in the Philippines and circulation in other countries such as Morocco.

Social listening provided a fuller picture of how the Jolly Roger moved from anime fandom into political activism and became a shared reference point among Gen Z protesters in different countries.

The World of *One Piece*

Understanding why the Jolly Roger resonates politically requires an understanding of the narrative world of *One Piece*. The series takes place on a planet almost entirely covered by ocean, where isolated islands are ruled by monarchies, dictatorships, theocracies, and military

states. Information, food distribution, and movement between islands are controlled by an institution known as the World Government, which supports a hereditary ruling class called the Celestial Dragons. First introduced in Chapter 497 (Oda, 2008), the Celestial Dragons maintain their noble status through violence, slavery, and control of resources. Their alliance with the government and its Navy creates a system where political institutions primarily protect elite privilege rather than public welfare.

The story revolves around the Straw Hat Pirates, who travel the seas challenging authoritarian governments and liberating islands from oppression. The main character, Luffy, and his crew symbolize justice, loyalty, and autonomy. To the World Government, they are criminals, but to ordinary people, they are liberators who question an authority that rules through fear and violence.

Luffy's immunity to bullets, revealed in Chapter 1 (Oda, 1999), captures this theme. Because his rubber body repels gunfire, the standard weapon of coercion becomes powerless against him. This immunity embodies a refusal to be controlled by the mechanisms that uphold the World Government's tyranny. This idea resonates deeply with youth protesters in Southeast Asia, who have been facing state violence and surveillance for years. The weapons used by the other Straw Hats further reflect this ideology. For instance, Zoro's swords, Usopp's slingshot, and Franky's inventions are extensions of personal discipline and collective purpose. Nami, the crew's navigator and cartographer, creates her own maps as they travel because the World Government hoards the only complete world map. Her work symbolizes the reclamation of knowledge and movement, which are controlled and restricted under authoritarian rule.

One of the most politically charged elements in the series is the Void Century, a hundred-year gap in the historical record that the World Government has erased. Researching the

Void Century is punishable by death, and entire civilizations have been destroyed to protect this secret, as seen in Chapter 395 (Oda, 2006). The archeologist Nico Robin, one of two people capable of reading the ancient Poneglyph slabs that record this lost history, has been wanted by the government since childhood. Fans often interpret the Void Century arc as a metaphor for historical censorship and the suppression of collective memory.

When protesters raise the Jolly Roger, they align themselves with a story about resistance shaped by determination and shared purpose. The flag becomes a reminder that justice begins in community and that freedom must be built collectively. For youth in Nepal, Indonesia, and the Philippines, it expresses a desire to live differently from the systems that govern them and to challenge political structures built on fear and exclusion.

Concepts and Prior Research

This analysis draws on several concepts in media studies and social movements. Scholar John Street examines how popular culture shapes political identity formation. In *Music and Politics* (2012), Street argues that popular media give people emotionally meaningful ways to understand themselves as political actors, communicate who they are aligned with, and position themselves in relation to systems of authority. Cultural theorist Douglas Kellner, in *Media Culture* (1995), similarly shows that media narratives help audiences construct moral identities by offering symbolic resources through which they interpret power, justice, and belonging. Together, Street and Kellner's theories form the basis of the first concept of shared political vocabulary: protest movements depend on common symbols drawn from media and culture to form a collective identity. These symbols function as markers through which participants recognize one another, express collective frustrations, and signal a shared moral stance.

A second key concept comes from political sociologist Sidney Tarrow, whose book *Power in Movement* (2022) remains one of the most influential works on social movements. Tarrow introduces the idea of contentious repertoires, which are the familiar protests that groups use when making political claims. However, these repertoires are portable, meaning they can spread from one context to another, even across national borders, while retaining their original meaning. Nick Couldry extends this understanding into the digital age in his work *Media, Society, World* (2012). Couldry explains how memes and digital artifacts enable political ideas to travel quickly, mutate creatively, and take on renewed significance as they circulate online. Seen through Tarrow and Couldry's frameworks, the Jolly Roger is a portable repertoire that moved from anime fandom into protests across nations.

The third concept shaping this analysis is collective political imagination by John Storey and UyenThi Tran Myhre. In *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (2021), Storey argues that popular culture helps people imagine alternative possibilities beyond existing social structures. In her essay, Myhre (2023) explores how the K-pop group BTS fosters what she calls abolitionist imagination, or the ability to envision life beyond systems of punishment and exclusion. Through music videos and songs such as "Spring Day," BTS encourages forms of remembrance and emotional solidarity that help fans create communities grounded in mutual support. Myhre argues that this artistic empathy allows fans to practice, in small everyday ways, the values of compassion and collective healing that can guide them toward imagining the kind of world they want to build.

Building on these concepts, this essay also positions itself against the existing scholarship on Gen Z protests in Asia, which largely focuses on governmental failures, legal structures, economic conditions, or policy recommendations. While these analyses explain why protests

erupt and what to do afterwards, they rarely address the cultural tools young people are using to build solidarity, voice dissent, and envision alternatives to the systems they challenge.

Function 1: Shared Political Identity

The first function of the Jolly Roger in contemporary protest movements is its ability to create a shared political identity. Building on Street and Kellner's argument that popular culture offers an accessible vocabulary through which people express moral values and belonging, the Jolly Roger becomes a symbol that allows Gen Z to articulate who they are collectively and what they stand against.

In Indonesia, the Jolly Roger gained power precisely because it offered a specifically nonpartisan way to express political frustration. Fathiya (2025)'s first-hand interviews with Indonesian activists showed that they deliberately chose the flag because it "doesn't belong to any political party... it belongs to everyone who loves freedom." In her findings, participants rated the flag as highly neutral (8/10), universally recognizable (7/10), and non-confrontational in aesthetic (9/10). Displayed on homes, motorbikes, cars, and trucks, it united both fans and non-fans within a civic community grounded in the values of *One Piece*: friendship, courage, and defiance of oppression. This symbolic unity forms what Castells (2012) calls a "networked space of autonomy," where people develop political identities independent of hierarchical structures. The flag's emotional appeal creates solidarity through symbolism, linking individual frustration to collective purpose.

The government's reaction reinforced this symbolic power. When officials confiscated Jolly Roger flags and warned that displaying them could be interpreted as anti-national, protestors interpreted the crackdown as validation (Ng, 2025). As Indonesian writer Farhan Rizqullah noted, "By treating a cartoon flag as a threat to national security, they have

inadvertently validated the entire premise of the protest. They have shown that the dream of Monkey D Luffy, the simple, unwavering desire to be free, is the one thing they truly fear.” The government’s alarm signaled that the flag had become an official marker of political identity grounded in resistance.

The flag functioned similarly in both Nepal and the Philippines. In both countries, the symbol helped young people understand themselves not as isolated critics of corruption but as members of a broader collective demanding transparency and accountability. As one 20-year-old Filipino protester explained, “Even though we have different languages and cultures, we speak the same language of oppression.” (Alvarado, 2025). Both fans and non-fans alike came together under the Jolly Roger, finding in it a shared identity that transcended individual backgrounds or political affiliations.

Function 2: Universal Recognition and Virality

The second function of the Jolly Roger lies in its universal recognizability and its ability to circulate rapidly across digital and geographic boundaries. Unlike traditional political symbols, which often rely on local histories or party affiliations, the Jolly Roger draws its power from *One Piece*, one of the most widely consumed stories of the past three decades. The series is the best-selling manga in history, with more than 530 million copies sold worldwide (Betancourt, 2025). Its popularity has grown even further through anime streaming platforms and the 2023 live-action adaptation, which brought new audiences into the fandom. Because of this global reach, the flag is instantly legible to millions of viewers, many of whom recognize it as a symbol of resistance before encountering it in the real world.

This familiarity is what allows the Jolly Roger to function as a viral political meme. Content analysis from Fathiya (2025)’s research shows that conversations around the Indonesian

protests generated thousands of supportive posts from abroad, including more than 4,200 posts from Japan, 2,800 from the Philippines, 1,900 from Thailand, and 1,500 from the United States, countries with large and active *One Piece* fanbases. This pattern shows that people outside Indonesia immediately understood and resonated with the protest's visual message.

The Jolly Roger is also aesthetically simple and endlessly remixable, making it ideal for what Fuchs (2020) identifies as “counter-hegemonic communication.” Through creative media production, ordinary users challenge dominant narratives and insert their own political interpretations into public discourse. Across Nepal, Indonesia, Morocco, and other countries, artists created localized versions of the flag that blended the original skull-and-straw-hat motif with national and cultural aesthetics. Nepali designers incorporated the twin-pennant shape and Nepali text; Indonesian artists adapted the flag using traditional mask iconography and street-art color palettes; Madagascar protestors reimagined the skull wearing a Betsileo hat. Many of these designs were shared freely on Reddit and Twitter, where artists posted threads titled “*Made that Jolly Roger for our nation. Feel free to use it,*” inviting others to download and utilize their designs. This open sharing practice reinforced the idea that the flag belonged to no single group but to anyone who identified with its message of liberation. (HaDeSxD, 2025)

This process reflects Tarrow's argument that movements can spread across borders while remaining recognizable and legitimate to the public. The Jolly Roger becomes transnational because it carries the same core message wherever it appears. Couldry adds that social media platforms turn audiences into “producers of meaning,” shaping not only how symbols circulate but how protests look and feel. Memes, posts, and customized flags became part of each movement's visual language, proving that the aesthetic dimension of protest is as influential in generating solidarity and public attention as its political claims.

Function 3: Nonviolent Resistance and Imagined Futures

The third and final function of the Jolly Roger operates through political imagination. While the flag is visually striking and symbolically defiant, it also communicates a distinctly nonviolent vision of the future, as in the story of *One Piece*.

In *One Piece*, marginalized communities lead the fight against oppression, shaping new models of solidarity and governance. Amazon Lily, an island governed by women who overthrew enslavement and reclaimed authority, models a society free from patriarchy and grounded in sisterhood (Oda, 2009, ch. 514–523). New Kama Land, a refuge for queer and gender-nonconforming people hidden inside the depths of the world’s most feared prison, embodies the dream of inclusion and chosen family in a world that rejects difference (Oda, 2009, ch. 536–548). The arc of the Fishmen, who have long been oppressed through racialized violence and enslavement, illustrates anti-colonial and environmental struggles, portraying a world where diversity and cooperation replace exploitation (Oda, 2011, ch. 622–624). These spaces represent what Postero (2017) calls moral alternatives: worlds shaped through resistance that redefine power as care, solidarity, and collective joy.

This imaginative dimension becomes politically significant in real protests. In Indonesia, the Jolly Roger originally functioned as a nonviolent strategy, allowing youth to express critique without resorting to confrontation. In Nepal, after intense clashes, many young people returned to the streets with brooms to clean up, while legal experts and civil society advocated for resolving the political crisis through constitutional and electoral means (Indian Express, 2025). In the Philippines, youth organizers connected their use of the Jolly Roger to a broad history of pop-cultural protest symbols like the Hunger Games salute in Thailand and Harry Potter

references in Myanmar, but described *One Piece* as uniquely hopeful and transnational (Ratcliffe, 2025b).

Across all three countries, the Jolly Roger functions as more than a simple reference to a popular series. Luffy's heartbeat, described in the series as the "Drums of Liberation," is a distinct, rhythmic drumming that signifies freedom, joy, and the promise of a brighter future to both the characters and the audience (Brutalvandal, 2025). Liberation is not an abstract demand but a living, joyful, and collective experience. When protesters raise the Jolly Roger, they signal a commitment to challenging injustice through peaceful, imaginative forms of resistance.

Conclusion

As scholar Bingyu Zheng observes, "Gen Z youths are playing an active role in shaping the history of their nations, engaging with political matters on their own terms using methods and tools that they are familiar with." The 2025 protest movements in Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines clearly illustrate this shift. Young people mobilized not only through marches, petitions, and formal political channels, but also through anime references, memes, and fandom practices that feel native to their lived experience. These cultural tools help explain how a fictional pirate flag from *One Piece* achieved such political traction during what many commentators have called an emerging "Asian Spring."

This study expands the framework first proposed by Dina Nurul Fathiya, who first identified the *One Piece* Jolly Roger as a meaningful element in Indonesia's nonviolent protest landscape. By extending her analysis across Nepal and the Philippines and incorporating social listening data, this paper demonstrates that the flag performs three interconnected functions for Gen Z activists. First, it fosters shared political identity, allowing youth across different backgrounds to form around one message. Second, it thrives through universal recognition and

viral circulation, drawing power from *One Piece*'s global reach and the adaptability of online culture. Third, it serves as a tool of nonviolent political imagination, enabling young people to envision just and livable futures rooted in the narrative worlds that have shaped them.

The Jolly Roger's political life now extends far beyond Asia. Protesters in Madagascar adopted the imagery during demonstrations that ultimately toppled their government (Litoussi, 2025). Youth movements in France, Palestine, Peru, Morocco, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Mexico have also carried the flag in rallies for transparency, economic justice, and democratic accountability (Bartlett, 2025).

These developments raise important questions for future research. Does the *One Piece* manga resonate especially strongly in countries facing corruption, democratic erosion, or youth precarity, and if so, why? Beyond anime, how might other transnational fandoms with Asian origins, such as K-pop or gaming communities, generate similar forms of shared vocabulary? Exploring these questions may shed light on how pop culture shapes political consciousness in the digital age.

Ultimately, the rise of the *One Piece* Jolly Roger across protests in 2025 signals a generational reimagining of how political participation looks, feels, and communicates. Southeast Asian youth, and their counterparts worldwide, are demonstrating that the future of activism lies in the cultural narratives that inspire them and the worlds they choose to build together.

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Appendix

Social Listening Results

This appendix contains the Google Trends and Talkwalker data used to track the online circulation of the *One Piece* Jolly Roger during the 2025 protest movements.

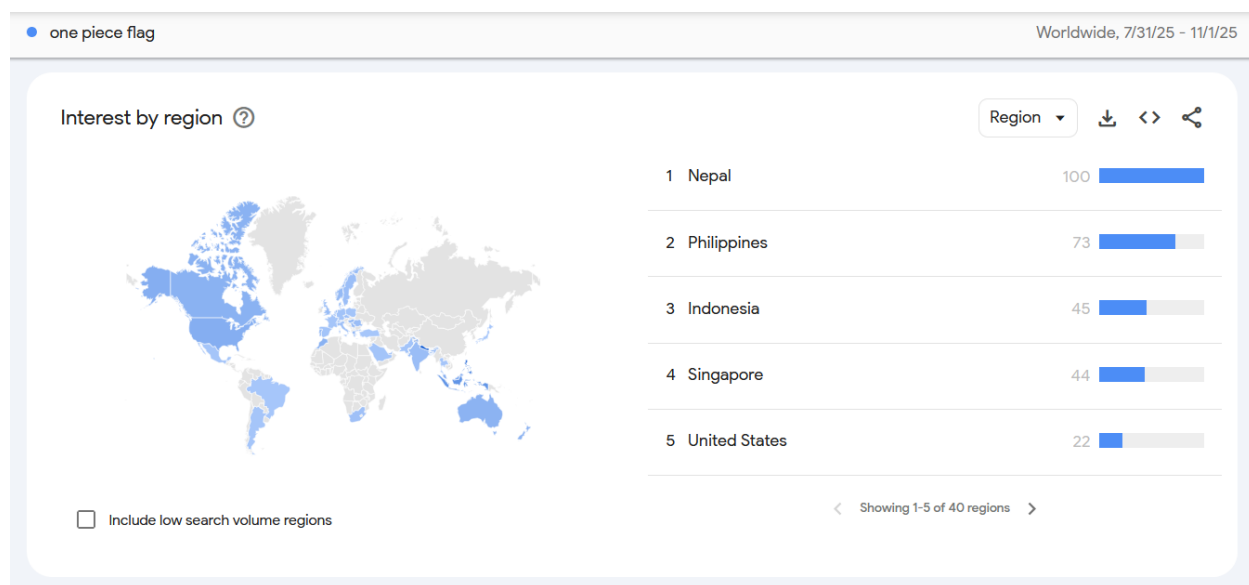


Figure 1. Google Trends results for global searches of “One Piece flag” from July 31 to November 1, 2025.

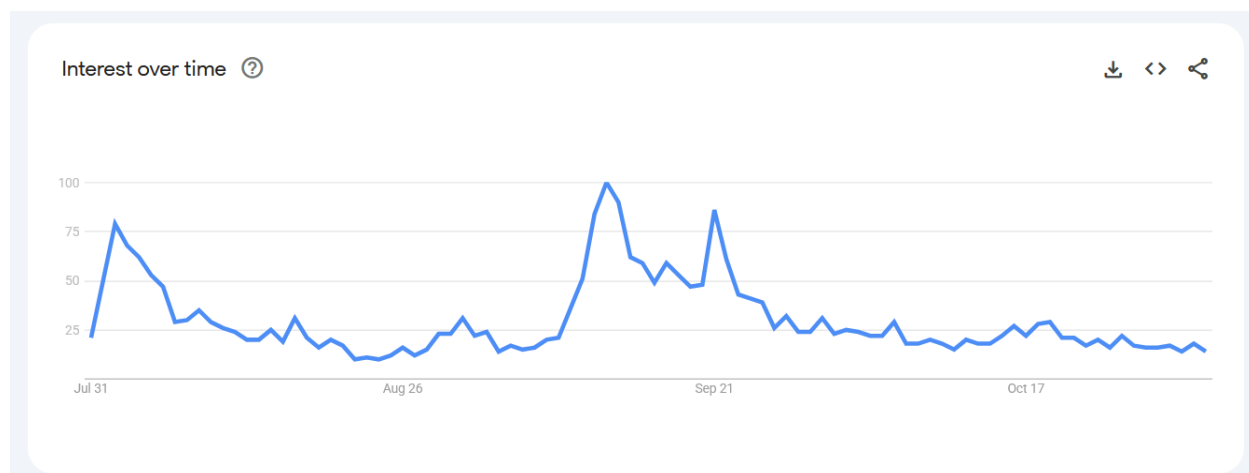


Figure 2. Google Trends timeline showing fluctuations in global search interest for “One Piece flag” between July 31 and November 1, 2025.

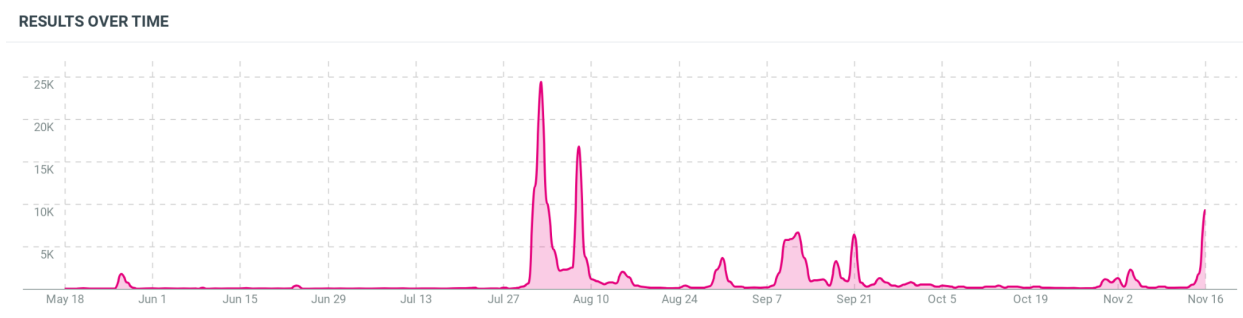


Figure 3. Talkwalker data illustrating spikes in posts containing One Piece protest-related keywords from May to November 2025, with major peaks in late July, early August, and mid-September.