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# The Ontological Security Trap: How Regime Anxiety Reconfigures Power and Protest in South Asia

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## Abstract

Why do regimes confronted by protest waves, legitimacy crises, and elite fractures increasingly govern through "security" even when such moves intensify instability? Drawing on Critical Security Studies and ontological security theory, this article argues that contemporary South Asian regime instability is partly produced by ontological security strategies, discursive and institutional practices aimed at preserving a coherent state-self amid anxiety. Through comparative vignettes of Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka; and interpretive analysis of securitizing narratives of law-and-order, "foreign hand," digital blackouts, emergency governance, this paper shows how identity-preserving state practices can generate tactical calm while deepening strategic volatility. The contribution is a mid-range conceptual framework linking regime anxiety to security performances, and a typology of ontological security strategies that helps explain recurring cycles of repression, backlash, and legitimacy erosion in South Asia.

**Keywords:** Ontological Security, Securitization, Regime Instability, South Asia.

## Introduction

South Asia's political present is marked by a paradox: regimes facing deep contestation repeatedly resort to "security" as the primary instrument of governance, even when securitized responses appear to amplify rather than resolve instability. From protest crackdowns and hybrid civilian–military arrangements to curfews and digital shutdowns, states increasingly manage political uncertainty as a security problem. In Bangladesh, the UN human rights system documented severe repression during the July–August 2024 protest cycle, including large scale fatalities and systematic violations. In Nepal, youth led protests triggered emergency-style controls and policy reversals around internet governance and restrictions. Sri Lanka's 2022 upheaval culminated in a dramatic erosion of executive authority and leadership exit under mass mobilization. Matthew J. Nelson, in his article, "Pakistan in 2024: Reconstituting a Hybrid Regime" argues that Pakistan's instability, meanwhile, is widely analysed as the reconstitution of a "hybrid regime" where electoral politics is persistently shaped by extra-civilian veto power and coercive politics. The central question of this paper includes: How do ontological security strategies adopted by anxious regimes shape and reproduce political instability in South Asia? In South Asia, regime anxiety routinely translates into securitization. While this may generate short-term control, it produces medium-term instability through backlash, legitimacy loss, and the institutionalization of exceptional governance.

This paper develops a critical security studies explanation for this regional pattern. It argues that regime instability is not merely responded to through security practices; it is also partially produced by them. Specifically, regimes under stress engage in ontological security strategies (OSS) practices that seek to stabilize the state's self-identity about who "we" are, what order means, who counts as legitimate in conditions of anxiety. These strategies often require repeated securitizing moves, casting opponents as existential threats, normalizing emergency measures, and staging performances of order. Over time, however, identity protecting security performances can create the very instability they attempt to contain by eroding legitimacy, widening polarization, and generating cycles of escalation.

**Bangladesh: repression as identity-restoration**

The Bangladesh case illustrates how regime anxiety can translate into coercive identity-restoration. Within the OSS typology, this corresponds strongly to exception normalization and internal othering: dissent becomes framed as disorder requiring extraordinary force, while the state-self is presented as guardian of stability and national continuity. "Based on deaths reported by various credible sources, the report estimates that as many as 1,400 people may have been killed between 15 July and 5 August, and thousands were injured, the vast majority of whom were shot by Bangladesh's security forces. Of these, the report indicates that as many as 12-13 percent of those killed were children. Bangladesh Police reported that 44 of its officers were killed." (OHCHR, 2025)

From an ontological security lens, the key is not only repression but the identity narrative that supports it: the regime cannot be seen to "lose control," because losing control threatens the story that legitimizes rule. The consequence is a spiral: coercion damages legitimacy further, generating deeper anxiety and a heavier dependence on security instruments. Thus, from an ontological security lens, the importance is not only in the violence per se, but in the identity narrative underpinning it. For the regime, losing control symbolically or practically would amount to losing the story that legitimizes its rule; therefore, extreme coercion becomes necessary to project an image of sovereign authority, stability, and continuity. In this sense, the violent suppression and widespread arrests are not just punitive measures, they are performative acts of identity-restoration: the state reasserts who "we" are, who counts as legitimate, and what counts as dissent.

Yet this identity-restoration through coercion carries a paradoxical effect: the more the regime seeks to stabilize its public image through force, the more it erodes legitimacy among youth, civil society, minorities, and the wider population. As documented by both OHCHR and major human-rights organisations, the scale, coordination, and severity of abuses have cast doubt on any claim to moral or democratic legitimacy, even from a transitional authority. Consequently, coercion risks generating a spiral of instability: repression damages trust in institutions, fuels grievances, polarizes society, and entrenches cycles of fear and resistance. The state's reliance on exceptional security instruments becomes heavier not lighter and its identity as "guardian of security and order" increasingly contested and unstable. Over time, what is meant as a strategy for consolidation may instead deepen structural fragility and set the ground for renewed unrest and legitimacy crises.

**Pakistan: hybrid stability and chronic insecurity**

Pakistan highlights a different regime form hybrid governance, where the regime's identity is split between electoral legitimacy and security establishment dominance. Political analyses of Pakistan in 2024 emphasize reconstituted hybrid rule and intensified contestation around the boundaries of civilian authority. This creates a durable condition of ontological insecurity: the regime cannot fully narrate itself as either purely democratic or openly coercive, so it manages contradiction through securitizing routines. The hybrid form may prevent abrupt collapse, but it reproduces chronic instability by delegitimizing alternation in power and making political competition appear existential.

**Nepal: youth mobilization and infrastructural securitization**

The Nepal case provides a vivid demonstration of how contemporary regimes increasingly interpret political legitimacy crises through the prism of communication insecurity, turning to digital and infrastructural controls as primary mechanisms of ontological security. In 2025, Nepal witnessed a wave of youth-driven protests often labeled the Gen Z movement, triggered initially by economic grievances, frustration over corruption and a deepening sense of generational exclusion from formal politics. The situation escalated dramatically when the government imposed sweeping social-media restrictions that blocked major platforms, citing concerns about misinformation, unrest and national security. Reuters reporting indicates that this abrupt digital shutdown catalyzed widespread anger among students, activists and urban youth who viewed online spaces not merely as communication tools but as essential arenas for political speech, community building and civic engagement. The social-media ban, instead of suppressing dissent, triggered immediate backlash and brought tens of thousands into the streets, transforming disparate frustrations into coordinated mass mobilization. Security forces responded with curfews, baton charges, tear gas, arrests and targeted violence in several districts, resulting in multiple fatalities and hundreds of injuries. What is crucial here is not just the repression but its ontological function: the government attempted to reassert control and restore a sense of ordered national identity by controlling the infrastructure through which narratives, emotions and collective meaning circulate. Infrastructural securitization became the primary ontological security strategy deployed by the regime, where the state sought to stabilize the symbolic boundaries of the polity by regulating information flows at their source. This reveals a profound anxiety at the heart of the state-self: the fear that losing control over digital discourse equals losing control over political authority itself. As protests spread, the ruling elite faced a crisis of legitimacy not only because young people opposed specific policies but because the episode revealed the regime's inability to manage the expectations of a digitally literate generation whose political identity was shaped in online publics. The youth interpreted the digital ban as an attack on their visibility, voice and dignity, which in turn amplified their sense of collective agency. The ontological insecurity of the regime deepened as it became clear that its performance of authority was failing to convince its most politically active population cohort. Ritualized order performances such as heavy police deployment, public speeches warning against unrest and symbolic gestures of discipline were aimed at projecting stability but came across as reactive and out of touch, reinforcing the perception that the regime was increasingly dependent on coercion rather than consent. As resistance intensified, the government attempted to delegitimize protesters by portraying them as manipulated by foreign interests, morally misguided or disruptive to national harmony. This internal othering reaffirmed the state's attempt to construct a singular national identity, but it also exposed its inability to accommodate pluralistic expressions of citizenship in a rapidly changing society. The youth protests eventually forced major political shifts, including the resignation of the Prime Minister and renewed debate over information governance, public accountability and structural political reform. From the ontological security perspective, the Nepal case exemplifies how regimes that rely on digital controls to manage identity crises confront a problem of diminishing returns: the more they attempt to regulate narrative space, the more they provoke challenges to their legitimacy. The digital public sphere becomes simultaneously a site of threat and a site of potential democratic renewal, complicating the regime's efforts to maintain a coherent political identity. Ultimately, Nepal's experience reveals how anxious regimes increasingly conflate communication disorder with political disorder, relying on infrastructural controls that may temporarily centralize narrative authority but ultimately destabilize the political order by alienating an entire generation whose sense of citizenship is inseparable from digital participation. It demonstrates that ontological insecurity now resides not only in territorial or institutional threats but also in the perceived fragility of the communicative architectures through which political selfhood is narrated, contested and reproduced.

**Sri Lanka: economic collapse and the collapse of routine authority**

The Sri Lankan crisis of 2022 offers a distinctive but equally revealing illustration of ontological insecurity in anxious regimes, showing how the collapse of everyday governance routines can undermine the very foundations of state identity and trigger mass political transformation. Sri Lanka entered 2022 with a deepening economic crisis marked by skyrocketing inflation, foreign-exchange depletion, shortages of fuel and food, prolonged power outages and mounting debt obligations that rendered the state incapable of fulfilling basic administrative functions. As shortages intensified, everyday life became strained to the point

that long queues for fuel, cooking gas and essential commodities became emblematic of governance breakdown. This collapse of routine, which ontological security theory identifies as crucial to maintaining a stable sense of self for both individuals and states, created an existential crisis for the regime of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. The regime had long constructed its identity around narratives of strong leadership, national protection and postwar stability, but the economic collapse exposed these narratives as hollow, generating widespread anger and disbelief. What made the Sri Lankan crisis different from typical protest movements was the extent to which the state-self itself became delegitimized in the eyes of citizens. When the President fled the official residence as protesters stormed the premises, it symbolically communicated the total breakdown of the regime's ontological foundation: the figure who embodied the state was unable to inhabit its physical or symbolic space. Unlike Pakistan's hybrid regime or Bangladesh's coercive restoration, Sri Lanka's crisis was not managed through sustained securitization, partly because the legitimacy deficit was too severe and partly because coercive measures risked provoking even greater resistance. Instead, the crisis unfolded as a collective redefinition of national identity. Protesters occupying state buildings, cooking meals in the presidential kitchen, swimming in the presidential pool and turning symbolic spaces into common public spaces reflected a reappropriation of political identity by ordinary citizens. These actions challenged not just the government but the very narrative of state authority. From an ontological perspective, this was a moment of radical narrative rupture: the state was no longer the unquestioned center of political identity, and citizens actively participated in rewriting the story of who holds legitimate power. The military and police, although deployed at various points, were unable or unwilling to enforce a violent crackdown that would have contradicted the overwhelming public sentiment against the ruling elite. The regime attempted ritualized order performances such as emergency declarations, cabinet reshuffles and appeals for calm, but these symbolic gestures were ineffective because the underlying routinized expectations of governance had collapsed, leaving citizens bereft of trust in state capacity. As the crisis deepened, the regime's ontological insecurity intensified. Governments that rely on strong narratives of competence are particularly vulnerable to legitimacy crises rooted in material failures. In Sri Lanka, the material collapse of everyday routines made it impossible for the state to claim its role as guardian of public welfare. The protests, known as the Aragalaya, were not simply expressions of anger but acts of collective meaning-making in which citizens negotiated new identities, forms of solidarity and visions of political community that excluded the ruling elite. This produced a transformative moment in which the ontological instability of the regime translated into institutional collapse, culminating in the resignation of the President and the reconfiguration of the political leadership. However, the resolution of the crisis did not fully restore ontological stability to the state. Structural economic issues remained, political distrust persisted and the memory of state failure continued to shape public expectations. Sri Lanka's experience demonstrates that when ontological insecurity stems from the collapse of everyday governance routines, securitization strategies are insufficient or counterproductive; identity restoration requires rebuilding institutional capacity and reestablishing trust rather than relying on coercive signs of authority. The Sri Lankan case thus shows the limits of anxious regimes' reliance on performance and security narratives, illustrating how profound material crises can strip away the symbolic power that normally sustains the state-self, leaving political authority vulnerable to displacement by collective citizen agency.

**Review of Literature:**

Critical Security Studies (CSS) starts from the premise that "security" is not merely a reaction to threats but a political practice that authorizes exceptional measures, rearranges hierarchies, and redefines legitimate political contestation. Foundational CSS work insists that the central analytical question is not simply what threatens the state, but who gets secured, by what means, and at whose expense. The Copenhagen School sharpens this insight through securitization theory, which conceptualizes security as an intersubjective process in which political elites construct an issue as an existential threat so that extraordinary measures become legitimate (Buzan, Waever, & de Wilde, 1998). This framework is particularly useful for analyzing regimes under stress because it clarifies how protests, opposition mobilization, and digital dissent are discursively reclassified from "politics" into "security," thereby shrinking democratic space and normalizing coercion. At the same time, feminist and post-structural critiques caution that securitization is not equally available to all actors: some groups' insecurity becomes "unspeakable" due to structural silencing, while state narratives

dominate the definition of threat and the boundaries of legitimate speech (Hansen, 2000). Together, these CSS debates establish a conceptual basis for treating repression, surveillance, curfews, and internet restrictions as security practices that aim to reorganize political life by managing disorder through exceptional governance. A second theoretical cluster comes from work on governmentality and exception, which explains why emergency tools become durable features of governance in moments of instability. This insight helps explain why contemporary regimes rely not only on direct violence but on administrative tactics such as curfews, preventive detention, and media controls. Agamben's theory of the state of exception adds a sharper political warning: emergency is increasingly normalized, producing situations where legal protections are suspended in the name of preserving order and sovereignty (Agamben, 2005). The literature on exception thus clarifies a key dynamic in regimes facing instability: legality is not simply broken; it is often reconfigured so that extraordinary measures appear routine, necessary, and lawful. This theoretical move is crucial for understanding how "law and order" becomes a legitimizing grammar through which regimes institutionalize security logics in everyday governance.

Ontological Security Theory (OST) provides the central conceptual bridge between coercive governance and identity. Rather than treating security as only physical survival, OST argues that political actors seek continuity of self identity, sustained through routines, narratives, and predictable social relations; threats to these routines generate anxiety and provoke compensatory strategies (Giddens, 1991; Mitzen, 2006). In world politics, this implies that states may prioritize identity coherence over instrumental efficiency, even adopting costly or escalatory policies because these reaffirm who the state believes itself to be (Steele, 2008). OST is therefore well suited to analyzing regime instability as a crisis of identity and authority: when mass protests, economic collapse, or elite fragmentation disrupt the regime's narrative of competence, legitimacy, and sovereignty, the regime experiences ontological insecurity and seeks restoration through securitizing routines. Subsequent OST work expands this framework by showing how "critical situations" rupture political biographies and force urgent identity work, often producing intensified threat narratives and hardened boundaries of belonging (Ejdus, 2018; Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017). Importantly, critical engagements with OST warn against turning regime anxiety into an implicit justification for coercion. Rossdale (2015) argues that ontological security approaches can unintentionally "enclose critique" if analysts treat state identity needs as politically legitimate necessities rather than as effects of power. This critique is analytically productive: it requires keeping the normative orientation of CSS intact, distinguishing explanatory attention to regime identity work from any endorsement of repression, and maintaining visibility of human insecurity generated by state practices. Any application of CSS and OST to South Asia requires explicit engagement with postcolonial and Global IR scholarship because conventional security studies often universalizes European state formation and treats the Global South as merely empirical terrain for Western theory. Barkawi and Laffey demonstrate how mainstream security studies is shaped by Eurocentric historical geographies that marginalize colonial violence and the co-constitution of Western and non-Western security orders. Bilgin (2010) further argues that Western centrism is not an accidental "blind spot" but a constitutive practice that frames what counts as security knowledge. In South Asia, these critiques matter because regime security narratives are deeply entangled with colonial legal inheritances, emergency policing traditions, contested nation making, and the symbolic centrality of sovereignty in postcolonial legitimacy. Acharya's Global IR agenda reinforces this point by arguing that regions should be treated as sites of theoretical production, not only sites of application; concepts such as security, legitimacy, authority, and order carry regionally specific histories and political meanings (Acharya, 2014). Postcolonial readings therefore sharpen the analysis of "anxious regimes" by situating securitization not only as a strategic choice but as a historically sedimented repertoire through which postcolonial states reproduce authority when legitimacy is contested.

Regime instability in South Asia also intersects with comparative politics scholarship on competitive authoritarianism and hybrid regimes, which explains how democratic institutions persist while incumbents

systematically undermine competition through coercion, media control, and legal manipulation (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Schedler's work on electoral authoritarianism emphasizes that such regimes are haunted by uncertainty about popular compliance and opposition capacity, producing incentives for preemptive coercion and informational control (Schedler, 2013). This literature provides a structural explanation for why regimes treat political contestation as existential. OST adds a distinctive security studies extension: in hybrid contexts, coercion and manipulation do not only manage opposition; they stabilize a fragile regime self narrative. The regime's identity is staged as lawful, democratic, and sovereign, while dissent is framed as disorderly, illegitimate, or externally influenced. The consequence is a political field structured around existential threat claims, where alternation of power becomes difficult and instability becomes chronic rather than episodic.

Recent scholarship on digital authoritarianism adds a final necessary layer, especially for cases in which regimes respond to instability through communication controls. Digital authoritarianism refers to governance practices that shape political life through surveillance, platform regulation, content control, and infrastructure-level interventions, including internet shutdowns and platform bans (e.g., the growing literature reviewed in studies of digital repression and platform governance). This scholarship is conceptually useful because it treats technical measures as political instruments that manage publics by controlling circulation, coordination, and visibility. In an OST frame, infrastructural control operates as identity work: by restricting what can be said, shared, and seen, regimes attempt to restore narrative coherence and prevent the public emergence of alternative political selves. The broader implication is that contemporary securitization increasingly operates through infrastructures, not only through police and law, making "information order" a central site of regime security.

## Methodology

This is a qualitative, interpretivist study using comparative vignettes. The method is discourse-informed process tracing: identifying recurrent securitizing narratives and governance responses during episodes of instability, and mapping them onto the OSS typology. Evidence is drawn from credible public documentation and secondary scholarship: UN human rights reporting for Bangladesh, Reuters reporting for Nepal, and peer-reviewed political analyses for Pakistan; Sri Lanka's crisis is referenced through reputable reporting and institutional commentary. The cases vary in regime type and crisis trigger (economic collapse, protest waves, hybrid rule), but share a common pattern: insecurity is governed as a security problem, making them analytically useful for theorizing "anxious regimes."

## Scope of Study

A deeper empirical program could systematically code securitizing speech acts, emergency legal measures, and digital shutdowns across South Asian cases to test whether higher "ontological insecurity signals" reliably precede escalatory security governance. The scope of this study includes an interpretive and comparative examination of securitizing practices deployed by contemporary South Asian regimes during moments of political disruption. The analysis focuses on three clusters of empirical material: securitizing speech acts articulated by state elites, the invocation of emergency legal instruments, and the use of digital shutdowns and communication controls. By tracing how these practices emerge in response to legitimacy crises, protest waves, and elite fractures, the study assesses whether heightened signals of ontological insecurity such as intensified law-and-order rhetoric, existential threat framing, and expanded claims of sovereign custodianship regularly precede shifts toward escalatory security governance. Through the comparative reading of cases from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, the study delimits its inquiry to the relationship between identity-threat perceptions and the repertoire of security performances regimes mobilize under stress. This scope therefore centers on the conceptual linkage between ontological insecurity and the institutionalization of coercive governance routines in South Asia, rather than providing a full causal explanation of each country's political trajectory.

## Conclusion

Regime instability in South Asia cannot be reduced to episodic shocks such as protest waves, economic downturns, or elite splits; it is also shaped by how regimes interpret uncertainty and attempt to preserve political selfhood. The comparative analysis of Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka indicates that contemporary volatility is partly produced by identity work undertaken under conditions of anxiety. Critical Security Studies clarifies that "security" is not a neutral response to threat but a political practice that authorizes exceptional measures, narrows the space of legitimate contestation, and reallocates authority toward coercive institutions. Ontological security theory deepens this account by explaining why regimes cling to securitizing repertoires: beyond material survival, regimes seek continuity, narrative coherence, and routinized control over the meanings through which authority is recognized.

Across the cases, securitization functions as a strategy of identity maintenance. In Bangladesh, coercive restoration framed dissent as disorder, enabling the normalization of emergency practices and the construction of internal enemies. In Pakistan, hybrid governance managed contradictions between electoral legitimacy and security-establishment dominance through narrative closure, internal othering, and ritualized performances of order. In Nepal, infrastructural securitization operated through digital restrictions aimed at controlling circulation, coordination, and visibility in a youth-led political moment. In Sri Lanka, the collapse of everyday governance routines produced an ontological rupture so profound that security performances could not credibly restore legitimacy. Despite variation in regime type and crisis trigger, the mechanism remains consistent: regimes confront disruptions in authority as threats to the state-self, and respond by securitizing dissent, uncertainty, and information environments, which can generate tactical calm while intensifying strategic volatility.

The broader implication is that instability is not only what regimes confront; it is also what security-centered responses reproduce. Securitization often corrodes institutional trust, delegitimizes opposition, and entrenches polarization, thereby deepening the very uncertainty it seeks to suppress. A recursive dynamic emerges: ontological insecurity encourages securitization; securitization undermines legitimacy; legitimacy loss generates further ontological insecurity. Desecuritization, therefore, is not a naïve call for softness but a stability strategy. Regimes that limit exceptional governance, widen the boundaries of legitimate dissent, and safeguard information infrastructures are more likely to reduce anxiety-inducing uncertainty in durable ways than those relying on coercive performances of control.

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