[ADRN Issue Briefing]

From Streets to Courtrooms: Youth Activism and Democratic Resilience in Indonesia

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Introduction

Recent scholarship on Indonesian politics has been dominated by diagnoses of democratic regression. While the erosion of democratic institutions is well documented, this emphasis fails to acknowledge an equally significant counter-dynamic: the presence of democratic resilience. In recent years, youth activists have assumed a pivotal role in this process, expanding their activities from episodic street mobilization to the consolidation of protest networks and the pursuit of policy change through judicial review at the Constitutional Court (Mahkamah Konstitusi/MK). The effectiveness of these actors is facilitated by intensive use of social media and strategic linkages with established civil society organizations. Together, these factors enhance coordination, legal capacity, and agenda-setting power. These dynamics illustrate how societal actors can partially compensate for institutional weakening by generating bottom-up accountability. However, youth-led democratic resistance in Indonesia is frequently constrained by inconsistent modes of movement and sustained regime pressure, which limits its capacity to convert episodic contention into durable institutional change and long-term democratic resilience.

Youth Protests as a Mechanism of Democratic Resilience

In the context of Indonesian democracy, scholarly debates have predominantly centered on democratic regression, thereby overlooking the examination of democratic resilience. However, it is precisely during this period of decline that civil society has assumed an increasingly significant role, emerging as a central societal force capable of countering democratic erosion and generating alternative sources of accountability. In the context of a deteriorating system of formal checks and balances, precipitated by an intensification of authoritarian consolidation at the nexus of the presidency and parliament, civil society has emerged as a pivotal domain for the preservation of democratic norms and the safeguarding of public interests. In this context, the phenomenon of youth activism has emerged as a critical mechanism of democratic resilience. Democratic resilience is defined as the capacity of youth actors within civil society to adapt to institutional weakening by consolidating collective action and translating social mobilization into institutional challenges that

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sustain democratic accountability through both contentious and formal channels.[1]

A salient contribution of contemporary youth activism in Indonesia is its capacity to consolidate protest movements. Student Executive Boards (Badan EksekutifMahasiswa/BEM) have historically functioned as pivotal mobilizing entities in contentious politics. This role has been evident in various contexts, including the student-led protests that contributed to the collapse of Suharto's authoritarian regime in 1998. It has also been observed in recurrent mass actions throughout the reform era, such as the "Cicak versus Buaya" anti-corruption protests in 2009, the opposition to revisions of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) Law and the Criminal Code (KUHP) in 2019, resistance to the Job Creation Law in 2020, and protests against parliamentary allowance increases in 2025.[2] However, over the past two years, there has been a shift in the dynamics of protest movements. Large-scale mobilization is no longer driven primarily by students, but rather, it is increasingly involving a broader constellation of young actors embedded in civil society organizations and digital networks. This shift indicates a transition toward more networked and connective forms of collective action, which facilitate the aggregation of grievances across sectors and enhance coordination among dispersed actors.

This transformation is evident in the Indonesian Emergency Commemoration protests of August 2024 and the demonstrations that followed a year later. In both episodes, significant numbers of young people mobilized beyond formal student organizations and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), to include influencers, artists, and subcultural communities. These actors formed horizontally networked coalitions that enabled rapid coordination among diverse actors and strengthened the capacity of protest to exert pressure on the state. Furthermore, the mobilization of youth actors was also reinforced by the principle of symbolic continuity. In 2024, a viral social-media narrative centered on the Blue Garuda—Pancasila rendered in blue with the slogan "Indonesia Emergency"-framed elite actions as a democratic crisis. In 2025, young activists consolidated dispersed grievances into the "17+8" platform, visually articulated through the colors blue, pink, and green. Blue explicitly referenced the earlier emergency narrative.[3] Consequently, the expansion of youth networks and the persistence of shared symbols transformed episodic protest into more cohesive and sustained collective action, thereby reinforcing societal oversight of state power.

[1] Marc Hooghe and Sofie Marien. 2013. A comparative analysis of the relation between political trust and forms of political participation in Europe. European Societies 15(1): 131–152; Helix Lo. 2025. Fostering or Restricting Youth Political Participation? A Longitudinal Analysis of High School Civics Textbooks in Japan. International Journal of Educational Research 134.

[2] Edward Aspinall. 2005. Opposing Suharto: Compromise, Resistance, and Regime Change in Indonesia. Stanford University Press; Indonesia Corruption Watch (ICW). 2009.11.3. "Elemen Mahasiswa dan Beberapa Tokoh Ungkapkan Dukungan ke KPK." https://www.antikorupsi.org/id/article/elemen-mahasiswa-dan-beberapa-tokoh-ungkapkan-dukungan-ke-kpk; Aryo Putranto Saptohutomo. 2022.6.21. "Saat RKUHP Picu Demo Besar Mahasiswa pada 2019." Kompas. https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2022/06/21/17233991/saat-rkuhp-picu-demo-besar-mahasiswa-pada-2019?page=all; BBC Indonesia. 2020.10.20. "Demo 20 Oktober, Mahasiswa dan Buruh Kembali 'Tolak Omnibus Law', Mahfud MD Minta Aparat 'Jangan Bawa Peluru Tajam'." https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/indonesia-54611952

[3] Anindya Milagsita. 2025.9.2. "Arti Warna Resistance Blue, Brave Pink, dan Hero Green yang Viral di Medsos." Detik.com. https://www.detik.com/jateng/berita/d-8092753/arti-warna-resistance-blue-brave-pink-dan-hero-green-yang-viral-di-medsos

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New Youth Activism in Pressing Legal Change for Democratic Resilience

Beyond street-level protest, young Indonesians have increasingly engaged in institutional channels of policy change through judicial review at the Constitutional Court (MK). Constitution and Law No. 24 of 2003 authorizes citizens with legal standing—defined as parties directly harmed by the statutory provision under review—to submit both formal reviews, which assess legislative procedures, and material reviews, which examine the substantive constitutionality of laws. These mechanisms are not subject to age restrictions and are therefore accessible to young Indonesians. Judicial review constitutes a structured and rights-based mechanism for contesting laws deemed unconstitutional. All admissible petitions are formally examined by the Constitutional Court Judges. The Court's open and publicly accessible proceedings, including live broadcasts, serve to further enhance transparency and accountability in the adjudication process. These features establish judicial review as a strategic institutional pathway through which youth activism can advance beyond contention to reinforce democratic resilience by correcting legal deficits within the constitutional order.

Since 2023, at least five Constitutional Court decisions have amended laws that conflicted with democratic principles and public interests, thereby responding to demands that has been raised but previously ignored during legislative processes (see Table 1). A significant portion of these judicial reviews were initiated by young people from millennial and Gen Z cohorts, including both NGO activists and students. It is noteworthy that NGO-affiliated activists such as Fatiah Maulidiyanty (Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS)) effectively challenged provisions of the Criminal Code and the Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Law. This led to the annulment of "false news" articles and a narrower interpretation of defamation. In a similar vein, Khoirunnisa Nur Agustyati and Irmalidarti (both representing the Association for Elections and Democracy (Perkumpulan untuk pemilu dan Demokrasi/Perludem)) have advanced reforms to parliamentary legislation, resulting in a MK ruling mandating a minimum of 30 percent women's representation in parliamentary supporting bodies and conditional unconstitutionality of the State Civil Apparatus Commission (KASN). Concurrently, students spearheaded the successful judicial review of the Election Law (Law No. 7 of 2017), which abolished the presidential threshold. These cases illustrates that youth activism in Indonesia is evolving beyond mobilization at street level to encompass institutionalized legal strategies that reinforce democratic accountability and resilience within the state.

Table 1. **Major Judicial Reviews Supporting Democratic Principle and People's Interest in Indonesia from 2023 to 2025.**

No.	Law Challenged	Issue Challenged	Petitioners (coalitions/actor)	MK Decision/ Status
1	**UU 1/1946, KUHP, UU ITE** (False news & defamation)	Criminalisation of expression; "kabar bohong" and defamation articles enabling criminalisation of criticism	Coalition of digital-rights, legal-aid, & civil-liberty CSOs; petition included Haris Azhar & Fatia	**Partially granted** — Articles on "false news" annulled; defamation interpreted narrowly (Putusan 78/PUU-XXI/2023)

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2	UU 1/2024 (Revised ITE Law)	Overbroad defamation provisions enabling lawsuits by institutions	CSO coalition on digital rights; petition formally by Daniel Tangkilisan	**Partially granted** — "Orang lain (another person)" interpreted *only as individuals*, excluding state institutions (Putusan 105/PUU-XXII/2024)
3	UU 17/2014 & UU 2/2018 (MD3 Law)	Lack of women's representation in parliamentary leadership bodies (AKD)	Coalition of gender & democracy CSOs (KPI, Perludem, Kalyanamitra, etc.)	**Granted** — Minimum 30% women's representation in AKD mandated (Putusan 169/PUU-XXII/2024)
4	UU 20/2023 (ASN Law)	Abolition of KASN & weakening civil-service neutrality and meritocracy	"Koalisi untuk Netralitas ASN" (Perludem, KPPOD, ICW, etc.)	**Partially granted** — Abolition of KASN *conditionally unconstitutional*; state must create independent oversight (Putusan 121/PUU-XXII/2024)
5	UU 7/2017 (Pemilu Law) — Presidential Threshold (Article 222)	Requirement of 20% DPR seats / 25% vote share to nominate presidential candidates	Students	**Granted** — Presidential threshold **abolished** as unconstitutional (Putusan 62/PUU-XXII/2024)

Source: Data compiled from various media reports, Constitutional Court website, and CSO websites.

To illustrate how judicial review has been strategically employed by young people to effect legal change, the examination of the Constitutional Court's abolition of the presidential threshold (PT) on January 2, 2025, provides a clear example. The legal proceedings were initiated by four students from the Faculty of Sharia and Law at Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University. These students challenged the provisions of Law No. 7 of 2017 on Elections. The students were granted legal standing as voters whose electoral choices were directly constrained by the PT.[4] The court issued a ruling that declared the PT to be unconstitutional. This decision was based on the assertion that the PT violated the principle of popular sovereignty and infringed upon constitutionally guaranteed political rights.[5] Despite the fact that civil society actors and election scholars had previously denounced the PT for its long efforts to consolidate party dominance, curtail electoral competition,

[4] Mahkamah Konstitusi Republik Indonesia. 2025.1.2. "Putusan No. 62/PUU-XXII/2024." chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.mkri.id/public/content/persidangan/putusan/putusan_mkri_11344_1735807848.pdf

[5] Mahkamah Konstitusi Republik Indonesia. 2025.1.2. "Putusan No. 62/PUU-XXII/2024." chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.mkri.id/public/content/persidangan/putusan/putusan_mkri_11344_1735807848.pdf; BBC Indonesia. 2025.1.2. "MK Hapus Ambang Batas Pencalonan Presiden, 'Smua Parpol Berhak Mengajukan Calon'-Apa Alasannya?" https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/articles/c1el19dy1gjo

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and subvert voters' rights—particularly within the context of a simultaneous election system—these concerns had been persistently disregarded by the government and parliament.[6] Consequently, the ruling constituted a substantial institutional intervention, effectively rendering the PT inapplicable for the 2029 election and obliging policymakers to comply. The decision was made in the context of the Court's efforts to regain its institutional credibility following the 2024 controversy surrounding presidential age limits. This controversy stemmed from a ruling issued under then–Chief Justice Anwar Usman, the brother-in-law of President Joko Widodo. The ruling enabled the President's son to qualify as a presidential candidate. However, the policy shift would not have occurred without the judicial review initiated by the students. This review underscores the importance of judicial review as a strategic pathway through which youth activism can directly reinforce democratic resilience.[7]

Constraints, Pressures, and the Future of Youth-Led Democratic Resilience

By consolidating mass protest through expanded networks and sustained symbolic repertoires, while simultaneously engaging institutional arenas through judicial review, young Indonesians have played an increasingly significant role in sustaining democratic accountability amid broader trends of democratic weakening. The implementation of these dual strategies has contributed to the enhancement of civil society's capacity to address the diminution of formal oversight mechanisms in Indonesian politics, thereby facilitating the alignment of state policy with democratic principles. In this sense, youth actors should be understood as a central component of Indonesia's contemporary democratic resilience, with important implications for the future trajectory of the country's democracy.

Notwithstanding this accomplishment, the phenomenon of youth-led democratic resistance in Indonesia continues to be characterized by inconsistencies in its modes of movement and a pervasive environment of pressure from the regime. Networked and digitally mediated action often generates fragmented movements, fluctuating participation, and weak mechanisms for long-term coordination. For instance, the "17+8" protests, despite achieving viral visibility and extensive media coverage, failed to sustain the large-scale mobilization observed in earlier protest episodes in August 2025. Consequently, youth-led mobilization frequently operates in a reactive manner, responding to immediate political challenges rather than proactively shaping a comprehensive and enduring reform agenda.

The lack of uniformity among youth movements is further demonstrated by their divergent approaches to judicial review at the Constitutional Court. Filing a judicial review is an inherently arduous process, involving complex and time-consuming procedures, meticulous legal analysis, and a profound understanding of constitutional adjudication. These requirements pose substantial barriers for many youth groups, limiting their capacity to pursue judicial review consistently. Compared to their counterparts, youth activists affiliated with established NGOs are comparatively better positioned to navigate this process due to their access to legal expertise and institutional resources. However, these advantages are not uniformly distributed across the broader youth movement.

[6] Ferry Hidayat. 2013.9.13. "LIPI: Sistem Presidential Threshold Harus Dihapus." Kontan. https://nasional.kontan.co.id/news/lipi-sistem-presidential-threshold-harus-dihapus; Perludem. 2017.6.14. "Perludem Tegaskan Presidential Threshold Bertentangan dengan Konstitusi." https://perludem.org/2017/06/14/perludem-tegaskan-presidential-threshold-bertentangan-dengan-konstitusi/; Fadel Prayoga. 2017.7.12. "Tidak Berdasar, Presidential Threshold Dinilai Sudah Tak Relevan." Okezone News. https://news.okezone.com/read/2017/07/12/337/1734212/tidak-berdasar-presidential-threshold-dinilai-sudah-tak-relevan

[7] Tempo.co. 2025.12.13. "Anwar Usman Meredup, Mahkamah Konstitusi Berbenah Lagi." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtjMBb4cKJg

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Consequently, the utilization of judicial review by youth actors is found to be uneven, contingent upon their access to legal knowledge, resources, and institutional support.

Beyond the constraints imposed by internal limitations, the phenomenon of youth activism in Indonesia is subject to ongoing pressure from the regime, a factor that further restricts its capacity for transformative impact. The state has increasingly employed legal, administrative, and discursive instruments to manage dissent, including selective law enforcement, surveillance, and the instrumental use of regulations such as the ITE Law. For instance, a number of young protesters involved in the demonstration that took place in August of 2025—including Delpedro Marhaen of the Lokataru Foundation and Khariq Anhar, a student at the University of Riau—were arrested and prosecuted under the ITE Law and the Criminal Code on charges of disseminating false information and incitement.[8] Such actions function not only as direct repression that generates broader chilling effects on youth-led political criticism and discourages sustained activism, but also as a form of social control.

The potential contributions of youth activism to democratic resilience in Indonesia are contingent upon its capacity to surmount the aforementioned constraints. This can be achieved through the institutionalization of coordination, the diversification of action repertoires, and the cultivation of cross-generational alliances within civil society. The hypothesis is that the strengthening of links between protest networks, legal advocacy, and long-term civic organizing may enhance the durability of democratic resistance under adverse conditions is supported by the available evidence.■

[8] *BBC Indonesia*. 2025.12.16 "Deldepro dkk Menolak Dakwaan 'Menghasut' dalam Demo Agustus - 'Kami Menyampaikan Pendapat Bukan Menghasut'." https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/articles/c62vdr45r70o

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