

The narrative battle of youths for Indonesia’s future

As the protests that rocked Jakarta and several other cities—leaving at least 10 people dead in the final two weeks of August—began to wane, the battle over Indonesia’s future shifted from the streets to digital platforms.

Deddy Corbuzier’s *Close The Door* YouTube channel became a key public square where the next act of the national narrative unfolded in early September, hosting Abigail Limuria to discuss democratic deficits and Ulta Levenia to talk about instability risks, with both drawing millions of views.

Other platforms like *Malaka Cinematic Podcast* and *Akbar Faizal Uncensored* amplified this narrative clash, making digital spaces as crucial as the streets.

Neither guest was entirely new to Deddy’s orbit. Ulta had appeared on his channel as far back as 2023, while Abigail had crossed paths with him in other formats, supplementing her own strong social media presence. Their return in the immediate aftermath of the riots lent weight to their voices, presenting them as credible interpreters of a shaken nation.

Deddy, in this context, was not just a host but a curator of legitimacy. By staging these two contrasting voices in quick succession, he framed them as emblems of Indonesia’s divided youth—between reform and resilience, making his platform as consequential to the political imagination as the protests themselves.

Abigail and Ulta, though nearly the same age, represent sharply divergent currents within their generational cohort. Positioned between the youngest Millennials and the oldest of Gen Z, they share the same precarity of their peers—about 16 percent youth unemployment, a 2.31 percent inflation rate squeezing the workforce, 56 percent of jobs being informal and a 40 percent drop in young farmers as agriculture ages. Yet their idioms diverge dramatically.

Abigail speaks in the cadence of reformist activism, amplifying the 17+8 demands drafted in civil society and legalist circles that trace their lineage to *Reformasi* 1998. She resonates with senior reformist figures like Todung Mulya Lubis, advancing the concern that democratic gains are being hollowed out by corruption and institutional capture. Her visibility across global outlets—Al Jazeera, DW English, TRT—has reinforced her image as a youthful spokesperson for the Reform Era’s unfinished business.

Ulta, by contrast, projects intimacy with the “gray world” of geopolitics and national security. She echoes senior voices such as former spy chief A.M. Hendropriyono, stressing loyalty, order and vigilance against foreign interference. Her style mirrors the nationalist-populist ethos of the Prabowo-Gibran camp, appealing to youths who value stability over contestation.

Both are urbane, articulate and highly educated. Yet their



AFP/Juni Kriswanto

Two wrongs: A person carries looted goods past a burning police station targeted by violent protests on Aug. 31 in Surabaya, East Java.



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appearances underscored that Indonesia’s youth are not a monolith but contested terrain—caught between competing narratives of accountability and order, reform and resilience.

What their interventions also reveal is how much the youth’s debates remain tethered to older frameworks. Neither Abigail nor Ulta invented the idioms they voiced; they inherited them.

Abigail channels reformist ideals from 1998 while Ulta draws on a lineage of nationalist-security thinking that predates even the Reform Era. The innovation lies less in their substance than in their form: Digital fluency, sharp presentation and a performative balance of candor and control tailored for online audiences.

This is the paradox of their influence. Their credibility stems not from the originality of their ideas but from the impression that these older frameworks have been reborn in younger voices. Past discourses are repackaged in a generational vernacular, gaining fresh traction not because they are new, but because they are performed as youth speaking to youth.

These recent riots became the crucible for these competing performances. Each side cast the turmoil through its own lens: For Abigail and her peers, a cry for accountability and proof that Indonesia’s democratic deficit can no longer be ignored; for Ulta and her sympathizers, a warning

of instability, evidence that only loyalty and vigilance can safeguard national cohesion.

On social media, the riots were remembered less for their casualties or property damage than for the narratives that crystallized around them. Protests were reframed as either an awakening or a manipulation; chaos was viewed as either a symptom of democratic neglect or a threat to order. This false dichotomy narrowed the conversation, reducing complex socioeconomic grievances to rival storylines of change versus preventing chaos.

Yet these narratives also revealed a distance from the lived realities of many young Indonesians. The 17+8 demands championed by Abigail and her peers are pressing, but they tilt toward middle-class concerns—legal reform, anticorruption, media freedom—while leaving aside the struggles of youths like Afan Kurniawan and his peers, for whom insecure work, housing, health care and survival are the daily crises.

Ulta’s nationalist-security frame, meanwhile, may resonate with those already skeptical of liberal ideals, but risks deepening polarization by appealing to youth inclined toward order at the expense of democratic norms.

Both perspectives capture slices of generational sentiment, yet they risk failing to address the broader mood of

inequality, precarity and disillusionment that defines young Indonesians. The gap between performance and lived experience underscores the unfinished task of building narratives that truly embody the realities of Indonesia’s rising generation.

For Indonesia’s youth to claim real credibility, they must move beyond interpreting older frameworks and begin authoring their own. Reformist ideals need to be rooted in the insecurities of 2025—precarious work, inequality, the fear of declining opportunity—rather than only the memories of 1998.

Nationalist calls for resilience must be coupled with inclusiveness, ensuring that democracy speaks not just to abstract threats but to everyday lives.

Imagine youth-led platforms merging Abigail’s What is Up Indonesia? (WIUI) voter education with Ulta’s resilience focus, proposing subsidized training to curb unemployment while strengthening national industries. Such hybrid solutions could unify 44 million youths, whose 15 percent voter registration spike post-protests shows growing agency.

Abigail and Ulta show that young Indonesians are ready to enter the arena of ideas. But unless their narratives dig deeper into generational realities, they risk becoming new performances of old battles.

Deddy’s platform may amplify their reach, yet authenticity will only come when youth voices move from curation to authorship. The test ahead is whether Indonesia’s rising generation can craft stories unmistakably their own—stories that reconcile aspiration with lived realities and offer a future beyond the inherited divides of the past.