



NEWS

Young and Restless Can Be a Volatile Mix

A new theory proposes that swelling groups of young people, or "youth bulges," lead to conflict

SOON AFTER PROTESTERS TOOK TO THE STREETS across North Africa and the Middle East last winter, experts began casting about for explanations. A series of WikiLeaks cables had just revealed the extent of corruption among greedy dictators. Or the uprisings were a technological phenomenon made possible by Facebook and Twitter organizing. But one group of scholars looked no further than demographics. The Arab Spring, they point out, occurred at a time when Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and other countries had a large share of young people in the adult population.

In this interpretation, a so-called youth bulge, or a large proportion of adults concentrated in the 15-to-29 age group, is a good predictor of conflict and instability. The theory makes intuitive sense—the foot soldiers of protests and insurrections are, after all, typically young. Proponents also make their case through historical examples and predictive models. That growing body of research may explain why youth bulge analysis has taken hold in intelligence circles, cropping up in foreign policy briefs from the U.S. Agency for

International Development (USAID), groups affiliated with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and elsewhere.

Others contend evidence is limited, outbreaks of unrest depend on a slew of other factors, and a large number of young adults may be an asset as well as a threat.

A youth bulge is "incendiary," says John Weeks, a demographer at San Diego State University in California who is among the theory's proponents. Although a growing number of youth doesn't alone translate into unrest, he adds, the increase can be the kindling that sparks rebellion. When conditions deteriorate, "you have more young people who will be out there protesting," he says.

The demographers and political scientists who study the phenomenon say the balance starts to tip when the proportion of adults in the troublesome youth demographic reaches 35% to 40%. Tunisia and Bahrain each have youth bulges of 38%, Egypt has one of 43%, and Yemen has one of 53%, according to United Nations population estimates for 2010. As the ranks of



Tinderbox. Political scientists suggest Yemen's large population of unemployed young men helped spark revolution there.

young people swell, demand for jobs soars, and governments often have a hard time providing work.

A rise in unemployment leaves already malleable young people even easier to recruit to various causes, says Richard Cincotta, a political scientist at the Stimson Center in Washington, D.C., and a consultant to the U.S. National Intelligence Council (NIC), which advises the White House and policymakers on long-term intelligence strategy. Whether revolutionary ideas take hold, he contends, depends in part on "how easy it is to get this ideologically naïve, experimental, risk-taking, perhaps creative group of people into politics."

In North Africa and the Middle East last spring, Cincotta and others say, recruitment was a cinch. Nearly a quarter of 15- to 24-year-olds in the region are unemployed, according to the International Labor Orga-

nization (ILO), compared with a global average of 12.7%. Many more are what ILO deems "inactive," or not seeking work for various reasons. "If the economy doesn't provide jobs for a large number of people with a high school or college educa-

tion, you can get a cohort-focused spike in unemployment," says Jack Goldstone, a political scientist at George Mason University in Arlington, Virginia. "That's what we saw very strongly across North Africa and the Middle East."

Predicting violence

Scholars like Cincotta and Goldstone were predicting trouble in the region well before protests broke out after a Tunisian street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire last December. For the cluster of government agencies where their ideas have taken hold, too, the uprisings would not have come as a surprise. In 2008, then-CIA Director Michael Hayden highlighted population growth as one of the trends threatening to undermine global stability. The Political Instability Task Force, a panel of scholars funded by the agency, had also been studying the youth bulge issue. (Goldstone sits on the task force.) Last year, USAID issued a report on youth bulges and conflict. And NIC's recent *Global Trends* report forecasting geopolitical developments out to 2025 contains a section on youth bulges, describing an "arc

of instability” stretching from Latin America across sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East to South Asia. The document singles out Pakistan, Yemen, Nigeria, and Afghanistan as particular threats.

An interplay between volatile young populations and upheaval is not new, according to proponents of youth bulge analysis. They say an imbalanced age structure has contributed to several major historical conflicts, including everything from the English rebellion of the 1640s to World War I and II, which occurred when Europe’s population was youthful. More recently, they contend, a large number of young people helped fuel both the Iranian revolution and Latin America’s Marxist revolts of the 1970s.

And yet, although friction sparked by youth bulges is easy to pinpoint in hindsight, using the indicator to predict future conflict, and conversely, where stability might take hold, is much more difficult. Cincotta is among the few scholars who have tried to translate the new research into a forward-looking model. Analyzing population and governance trends beginning in 1970, he tracked the share of youth in the working-age population in countries that have achieved liberal democracy, qualifying as “free” in democracy watchdog Freedom House’s annual rankings of political freedom. (Cincotta calculates a youth bulge differently from the way Goldstone does, using the 15-to-29 age group as a proportion of the working-age population rather than of the total adult population.)

Although a young country was prone to conflict, Cincotta found, as its population matured and the proportion of 15- to 64-year-olds concentrated in the youth bracket declined, the chance it would adopt and maintain democracy improved. The tipping point came when the share of youth in the working-age population fell to between 36% and 42%. At that point, a country has a 50-50 chance of achieving liberal democracy, and chances improve if it can get beyond its youth bulge and on a path toward maturity.

In addition to predicting where democracy might take hold, Cincotta says, his model can indicate which countries might be roiled by unrest. There is hope for democracy in Tunisia, he says. Thanks to a declining birth rate, the country is now at the tail end of its youth bulge, with a median age of 29. But prospects for Egypt and Yemen, with median ages of 24 and 18, are dimmer, he adds. “For those two populations, one would expect more violence,” Cincotta says.



Wise women. In many nations, women over age 65 are becoming a growing force in community stability and social change.

GRAY LADIES IN THE SPOTLIGHT

VAST THRONGS OF ANGRY YOUNG MEN MAY BE ONE OF THE LASTING IMAGES OF THE protests that toppled Egyptian strongman Hosni Mubarak earlier this year. But it’s a member of another rapidly growing demographic group—call it “wise old women”—that some Egyptians have named “the mother of the revolution.” At the height of the fray, a silver-haired, 79-year-old activist, author, and physician named Nawal El Saadawi appeared in the streets and on television screens to counsel and encourage her younger allies. “We will win!” she assured one interviewer.

For researchers who chart the growing numbers and shifting roles of women older than 65, El Saadawi represents one emerging trend: a growing corps of graying women who are actively engaged in the civic life of their often male-dominated communities, taking on stabilizing social roles that others sometimes can’t. Already, studies show older women are a major source of community cohesion in many cultures by taking care of grandchildren and ailing family members, often men who typically die at younger ages than women. And “go-getter grannies” are also a disproportionately high source of volunteer labor in many nations, including the United States.

Not all women, however, are experiencing “active aging.” In another trend, more older women are living alone on meager financial resources, with a disability or an illness. In the United States, for example, 40% of women over 65 years old now live alone, according to census figures, compared with just 19% of older men, and many other nations are seeing similar trends. That’s feeding growing concerns about isolation and poverty among older women, as demographers predict that their global number will surge from some 300 million today to more than 850 million in 2050.

One nation paying close attention to these twin trends is China, which expects to have more than 100 million older women by 2050, many left behind in rural villages as young workers move to the city. “Aged women are seen as a burden” but also as possible “contributors to building a civil society” in China, says Xiangxian Wang, a sociologist at Tianjin Normal University in China who has been studying the issue. But they are often frozen out of village leadership committees due to “pervasive public and private” gender discrimination that has “systemically destroyed women’s fair representation,” she concluded in a 2009 study published in the journal *Asian Women*.

What may help turn this tide, Wang says, are hundreds of “Aging Associations” that have come into existence in the past few decades. Originally established to help care for older people, in some places they have now become “the main force to promote rural democracy” by providing training in leadership and activism. Many older women will need such “outside help to have the chance to fully contribute,” she says.

In the meantime, the Chinese government is pondering other solutions, including a law that would provide pensions to elderly women and require children to regularly visit their aged mothers.

—DAVID MALAKOFF

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Angry young men

The belief that demography drives conflict is hardly new. At the turn of the 19th century, Thomas Robert Malthus wrote of population growth being checked only by the “vices of mankind.” That specter reemerged in the 1960s and ’70s, as concern about overpopulation heightened in the West. Scholars connected a mushrooming population to a scramble for resources, predicting that scarcity would spark conflict. Several decades later, the Canadian political scientist Thomas Homer-Dixon refined neo-Malthusian ideas to account for urbanization, resource ownership, and other factors.

Some of the recent research on youth bulges grew out of this earlier body of work. In 2001, Henrik Urdal, now a political scientist at the Peace Research Institute Oslo and a research fellow at Harvard Kennedy School, looked into neo-Malthusian theories for his dissertation and found “a high interaction between resource use and conflict” was difficult to prove, he says.

Instead, Urdal stumbled across Goldstone’s work and shifted his own focus to include youthfulness. In one study, he found that in some cases youth bulges can exacerbate the risk of low-intensity conflicts, in which at least 25 people are killed in 1 year, breaking out. In another analysis, Urdal determined that youth bulges were significant factors in sparking two types of conflict in India between 1956 and 2002: Hindu-Muslim riots and general political violence.

Such research is specific to certain regions and conditions. In drawing broader conclusions about youth bulges, however, Columbia University population historian Matthew Connelly cautions that the collapse of past theoretical frameworks should give social scientists pause. “Scholars have been looking into the purported link between population trends and economic and political problems for decades,” he says, with little concrete data to show for it. The youth bulge analysis would have failed to predict events such as the civil wars in the former Yugoslavia and the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia—bloody conflicts that occurred following periods of relatively low fertility.

Indeed, the demographers and political scientists working on the question differ on how heavily to weight demography.

Goldstone says various trends exacerbated demographic risk in Egypt and neighboring countries ahead of the Arab Spring. Governments in North Africa hugely expanded higher education, he says, even as they scaled back public sector employment and state subsidies. As the number of educated young people increased, he says, “the private economy was not taking up the slack and providing jobs for these people.”

Related to soaring unemployment, Goldstone says, is a low marriage rate. The lack of jobs has prevented many men from amassing the capital necessary to attract a wife, so that in Egypt fully 50% of men age 25 to 29 remain unmarried. “That’s very difficult in a family-centered society,” Goldstone

In East Asia, in fact, a surge in the number of young workers in the 1970s and ’80s may have been an asset that contributed to the region’s economic boom. “So much depends on whether there are overall reforms that loosen up the economy,” says Nancy Birdsall, president of the Center for Global Development in Washington, D.C. She is wary of using youth bulges to foretell conflict, although she agrees that the swelling proportion of young people in countries like Pakistan is a concern.

Another region that defies prediction is sub-Saharan Africa, the site of the world’s fastest growing populations. AIDS has hit hardest there among the working-age population, killing the very people who might

form a youth bulge—and yet the region is often the site of strife. The situation in sub-Saharan Africa is “truly puzzling,” Cincotta acknowledges. “The age structure is not necessarily representative of what’s happening there.”

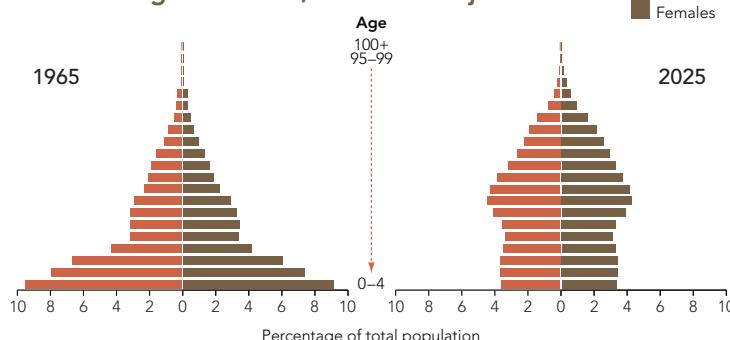
And although the youth bulge analysis examines only the total youth population, both male and female, other scholars say a sex ratio skewed toward males, or a low status of women vis-à-vis men, is also an indication of conflict. The USAID report acknowledges

that “fears about youth bulges are really fears of young men.” But studies examining the role that gender inequality plays in sparking conflict are relatively rare.

In the end, Goldstone says, demography has turned out to be a better tool for analysis than any alternatives—and the youth bulge theory works more than it fails. “In terms of broad probabilities,” he says, “demography tells you almost everything you ought to know.”

But Connelly, the historian, submits that population projections are not more accurate than other ways of forecasting conflict. The youth bulge theory has taken hold, he says, not because it is better than other approaches but simply because it is more straightforward, with United Nations population projections readily available online to researchers. Connelly says, “Projecting demographic trends is easier than projecting trends in religious national fervor or future discoveries in biotechnology.” The theory that explained the 2011 Arab Spring may not work as well for the next bout of unrest. —MARA HVISTENDAHL

Tunisia’s Age Structure, Past and Projected



Growing up. Tunisia has long had the young and volatile population that theorists say breeds conflict, but it will soon start to mature.

says. The unusually low marriage rate may have contributed to the recent unrest, he adds: Unmarried men have been found to be more volatile than married men.

Cincotta agrees that other factors play a role but maintains that looking at demographic indicators in isolation can help predict where conflict might break out—a key concern within the U.S. government agencies studying the issue. Because a skewed age structure affects employment and education, he says, a youth bulge “mirrors other things that are happening at the same time.”

Cincotta is candid about where his predictive model falls short. Although it works for military caretaker regimes, weak personal dictatorships, and partial democracies, it holds less true for countries ruled by strong, single-party governments or charismatic leaders, he says. His model suggests that Russia and Cuba should be liberalizing, which they’re not. And China and Singapore both got through their youthful stages without either a significant conflict or a transition in government.