The Youth Bulge, Rapid Urbanization and Political Violence: Understanding Egyptian Revolution.

Tsegaye Tegenu

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Youth bulge is a demographic period in which the proportion of youth in the population increases significantly compared to other age groups, both older and younger. I define youth bulge as large cohorts in the ages 15–29 relative to the total adult population. Other studies define youth bulge in the age group 15-24. Whichever definition one chooses to use youth bulge refers to a growing population of a country which is younger (median age 20-26) and more urban. According to the UN data there are approximately 1.3 billion people worldwide between the ages of 12 and 24. Currently in the Middle East there are more than 100 million people between the ages of 15 and 29. In 1990 this number was 67 million. The youth in the Middle East makes up 30 per cent of the region’s population and almost 47 per cent of the working age population. Like much of the Middle East and North Africa, Egypt is at a stage in its demographic transition characterized by a pronounced youth bulge. In early 2007, the Egyptian population between the ages 15- 29 was 28%. In the Sub-Saharan African countries, according to the 2006 Revision Population Database of the UN, the young adult makes up 28% of the total population.

Figure 1: Youth (15-24) Population Shares of Total Population in 2010

Source: United Nations, World Population Prospects Prepared by USAID Economic Analysis and Data Services
Analysis model: The youth bulge and life course theories

The definition of young or youth is not simply a matter of age. It refers to events of a life transition (such as ending schooling, starting work, leaving home, first cohabitation, first marriage, and first birth) and the associated attributes of status and responsibilities related to each of the markers of the life transition. These markers of life should occur in a sequence manner and in a short interval time period between them. The timing and duration of these events and, in some cases, the sequences of these events depends on opportunity structures. If there are no or limited opportunities, the youth may experience only one or two of the events for long duration, without transition to another event and this creates deep frustration and grievances leading to different forms of political violence.


Demographic and Spatial Factors

There are two given fundamental factors which precipitate political violence during the period of demographic transition.

a) Size Matters: The bigger the youth bulge, a higher risk for a political violence. Barakat, Paulson and Urdal estimate that countries experiencing youth bulges at the level of 35% of the total adult population run a risk of armed conflict which is 150% higher than countries with an age structure equal to the year 2000 median for developed countries (15%), with all other variables at mean (for a causal glance see Figure 1). In the context of the Middle Eastern countries, this is particularly relevant for Yemen, the West Bank and Gaza, Iraq, and Djibouti, which are all currently experiencing youth bulges around that level. In the case of Yemen and the West Bank and Gaza, these youth bulges will not fall below 30% for at least another 20 years. See Barakat, Bilal, Paulson, Julia and Urdal, Henrik (2010), Youth, Exclusion and Conflict in the MENA Region: Thematic Paper for the MNA Study on Peace, Stability and Development” (forthcoming);

b) The level and rate of urbanization: the higher the level and speed of urbanization, the higher risk for urban disturbance. It not only that the size should be large; it must also be physically concentrated. In addition to size, spatial concentration of the youth is another favourable factor for political violence. Young adults are more mobile by character and resource scarcity in rural areas often leads to out-migration. Youth often constitute a disproportionately large part of rural-to-urban migrants.
The urban concentration of the youth is conducive for agglomeration economies. Due to the spatial concentration of services and people, it is much easier to establish closer personal relationships, effective associations and networks. Compared to rural areas, ideas can easily be spread or accessed due to the concentration of the economy. In 2008, about 43% of the Egyptian population live in urban areas. The average annual growth rate of urban population was 1.9%, 2000–2008. There are two types of urbanization processes: growth-driven urbanization and migration-led urbanization (Tsegaye and Bo, 2010, Urban Growth and Urbanization in Ethiopia). Growth-driven urbanization is a result of the productivity of manufacturing firms and an increase in tradable services. This type of urbanization does not necessarily lead to violent political conflicts. Migration-led urbanization is rapid and it increases both in number of towns and proportion of the population located in the urban areas. Since the growth rate of migration led urbanization is faster than the financial and human resources available for managing its development, there is a risk political violence.

Migration led urbanization increases the risk of political violence under conditions of social, economic and political exclusion. The population is increasing without an increase in industrial production and rising incomes. To the extent that high urban growth rates may be accompanied by unemployment and economic marginalization, causing higher levels of frustration and dissent, we expect to see that the interaction with exceptionally large youth cohorts is associated with increasing levels of political violence.

**Contextual factors**

The size of the youth and the speed of urbanization are neither good nor bad by themselves. What makes them good or bad are the political situation and the kind of development policy the country is following. In autocracies such as the Derg military junta, youth bulge appears to provide greater opportunities for armed conflict. If the rural youth population constitutes more than 20% of the adult population, the youth provides the rebel group with the financial means to fight, or factors that reduce the cost of rebellion, such as unusually low recruitment costs for rebel soldiers. Collier (2000) has suggested that relatively large youth cohorts may be a factor that reduces recruitment costs through the abundant supply of rebel labour with low opportunity cost, increasing the risk of armed conflict. Collier and Hoeffler. (2004), Greed and Grievance in Civil War. Oxford Economic Papers 56:563–595.

In countries where there is democracy, there is also a risk of spontaneous and low-intensity unrest, such as nonviolent protests, riots, and rebellions if there is a lack of access to quality education, employment and housing. An increase in the number of young adult means an increase in the number of people searching for work places and production resources. Young adult may want to be teachers, soldiers, administrators, traders, farmers, etc. That means there is a constant search for new work place and resources as their number increases. Empirical evidence does suggest that large youth cohorts are more likely to experience higher unemployment rates and pressure on wages. Consequently, if the labor market cannot absorb a surplus of young job seekers, levels of frustration and conditions of exclusion will increase. In a
setting with a large youth population increased incidence of exclusion and grievance serve as a motivator towards armed conflicts.

**What should be done?**

If youth bulge is to be seen not as a problem, rather as a resource and an opportunity, one needs to put the right policy in place. One thing that should be clear from the outset is that there is no excellence in development strategy in the abstract. Development strategy has to be anchored on the given conditions and dynamics. In this case we have the conditions of youth bulge and the question is how issues of development, such as access to quality education, employment and housing, can be addressed at the speed and demand level of the youth bulge both in urban and rural areas. My alternative policy suggestion on industrial decentralization and green revolution is based on my understanding of the youth bulge in Ethiopia.