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Namasaka, Martin

London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)

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Demographic Transition and Rise of Modern Representative Democracy

Martin Namasaka

Abstract

By focusing solely on the institutional reforms and changes in the political leadership that precede political liberalisation, studies on the determinants of democracy have often overlooked the influence of demographic factors such as population age structure as a catalyst for and reflection of a host of changes in societies that can affect governance and stability of liberal democracy. It is not surprising, noting the recent revolutions such as the Arab spring ¹and the Egyptian Uprising², that numerous research now tends to spotlight the so called youth bulge and how they tend to either support authoritarian regimes or sustain liberal democracies as a result of youth-led democracy movements as witnessed in Costa Rica, India, Jamaica and South Africa (Cincotta, R. (2008/09).

¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12813859>

² <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/egypt-uprising>

Introduction

In these studies, the allure remains powerful with questions such as; can a measured demographic indicator, like median age, tell us much of what we need to know about a country's likelihood to become or maintain a democracy? As argued, youth bulges give rise to youth cultures that coalesce around fractious ideologies and are somehow responsible for potential violence when much of the population is young, and jobless. In this view, countries with large proportion of young adults often find themselves saddled in a social environment where the political regimes are constantly strained and mobilisation of the young disillusioned men is relatively easy by political groups for their own interests.

In as much as a young age structure comprising of young adults in the working age population can constrain liberal democracy and destabilize it, in contrast, as noted by both Huntington (1991) and Schmitter (1980), with much of society's political volatility depleted, authoritarian executives tend to lose support of the commercial elite, or the young people who often find the regimes grip on communication and commerce economically stifling, with privileges granted to family members. Political calm and improved economic and social conditions which usually advance in tandem with the maturing age structures provide authoritarians with the opportunity to make a deal for safe exit (Cincotta, R. 2008/09).

In relation to this backdrop of the correlation between youth bulge and liberal democracy, countries that have a young people as the majority of the population, have high birth rates and high rates of population, as exemplified in Africa with a projected 200 million people aged between 15 and 24. Current trends indicate that this population will double by 2050 according to an African Economic Outlook report, which aggregates data from several multilateral organizations including the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA).

As a consequence of this kind of rapidly growing population, when the large proportion of adolescents move into working years, wages typically slump and unemployment swells. It may become difficult to provide sufficient job opportunities for these young men, a consideration that is rightly seen as problematic (Dyson, T. 2012). According to Richard P. Concotta in "How Democracies Grow Up," countries high proportion of young people and every rapid growth of those entering their work years (ages 15-64) are far less likely to maintain democratic gains than those with mature population. This denotes that a country's chances for meaningful democracy increase as its population ages.

Of course, there are caveats. By itself a society's age alone can't tell us for example which countries really are on the verge of democracy and why. Ideally, in some contexts such as Uganda under Yoweri Museveni, Angola and President Eduardo Dos Santos, Equitorial Guinea under President Teodoro Obiang Nguema and Cameroon under President Paul Biya, who have all ruled for more than 28 years, some for more than 30 years, when Barrack Obama was still in high school at the Punahou School in Honolulu Hawaii. This manifests that young populations under mature or let alone aged leaders, can be less likely to be in stable democracies.

Demographic transition

Whilst it is important to understand how modern democracies are established, so is demographic transition, and its role for the rise of liberal democracy. In essence, demographic transition is the move from high death and birth rates to low death and birth rates. A combination of increased education for

women, national and international support for policies of population planning and the spread of economic development and accompanying movement along the demographic transition frontier have led to falling population growth rates around the world. Good examples being China and India, or among the smaller but rapidly growing nations such as Saudi Arabia, Kenya and Malawi population growth rates have dropped dramatically in the last decade (Goldstone J. (2002).

As Goldstone noted, “whilst population growth rates have dropped around the world, they remain high in some areas. In particular, many nations in the Middle East, southeast Asia and central and northern Africa still are growing at nearly 3 percent per year, a growth rate that leads to a doubling of population in approximately 25 years.” However as the fertility continues to decline and the age structure matures in most of the world’s contemporary youth bulge countries it should be expected according to Richard P. Concotta that most of these states are likely ultimately to attain and maintain liberal democracy. He argues that, “recent leveling off in measures of global democracy is temporary and as youthful demographic profiles mature, new and more stable liberal democracies are likely to arise before 2020 in Latin America, North Africa and Asia.”

The demography transition draws from many alternatives depending on the context of different societies. Mortality decline as indicated by the fall in death rate is the first to occur after which it produces a rise in the rate of population growth. Because of a delay in fertility, an inception of fertility decline begins, to what is known as the “second transition” (Lesthaeghe 1995; Van De Kaa 2002). Fertility decline on the other hand, has demographic effects such as initiating a fall in the rate of population growth as well as causing the age structure of a population to get much older (Coale 1964). Looking back at history, it presents considerable experiences of the demographic transition starting with the European societies from the second half of the eighteenth century. By the final decades of the twentieth century the demographic transition was complete in Europe and North America. Latin American countries experienced limited mortality decline during the nineteenth century. However, for the region as a whole, fertility only began to fall from around the 1960s. In Asia a few countries experienced mortality decline in the first half of the twentieth century, but progress became substantial almost everywhere in the decades after World War II (Dyson, T. 2012).

Discussions

These kind of changes brought about by the demographic transition are arguably unfavorable to autocracy and conducive to democracy. Some mortality decline is probably necessary but not sufficient for the creation of stable democratic conditions. But today, this requirement has been met almost everywhere, and through the population growth it generates it raises challenges for any political regime. Fertility decline is crucial in this context. It produces a fall in the rate of natural increase so enhancing the conditions for political stability. No country with a low median age i.e. with high fertility and rapid population growth can be regarded as being a stable democracy. Consequently, a population with a high median age experiences fertility decline (and mortality decline). Such a population is expected to have a low rate of natural increase; and it is one where adults of both sexes are prominent (Dyson, T. 2012). Essentially, what is presented here is to mean that as the structure of society becomes more composed of adults so autocratic political structures are likely to be challenged and replaced by democratic ones.

In considering the consequences of the processes for the emergence of modern democracy, it is equally significant to understand democracy as a difficult concept that has seemed to change with time (Inkeles 1991). Following earlier mentions of the demographic transition in Europe, the structural change that

occurred in the population led to an increasing demand of a common voice in the how politics was conducted. In this view, many developing countries could improve their chances of maintaining high levels of freedom if they would just demographically speaking grow up (Cincotta, R. 2008/09).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the significance of the demographic transition and its role in ensuring modern democracy cannot be looked down upon in the contemporary developing world, with its faster mortality and fertility declines facilitated by the role of the media and family planning programs. Admittedly giving people options to control their own fertility helps them to focus on other areas of life or let alone political affairs in order to get through the late development effect. In addition, increased life expectancy leads to reduced fertility. And when women have fewer children, they enter the workforce and are more likely to engage with political processes. These factors help to explain why much of Western Europe and the US became democratic between about 1890 and 1930.

Significantly, it is worth noting that the progress made as a result of the demographic transition, does not in itself guarantee democracy. Examples of scheduled failures include China, Cuba and Russia which should have held onto their liberal democracy but did not. In Southern Africa, AIDS should be making states more fragile politically, but it is not. A maturing population may be far too weak a phenomenon on its own to undermine strong personal dictatorships-regimes run by tough charismatic authoritarians like Fidel Castro or the intensely ideological one party system such as China. Countries that are still experiencing high birth rates and an expanding young population are thus unlikely to form stable democracies. If fertility continues to decline and age structure continues to mature in many of the world's current youth bulge countries, it should however be expected that most of these states will ultimately attain and maintain liberal democracy.

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