



**LIFE BEGINS AFTER 25:
DEMOGRAPHY AND THE SOCIETAL TIMING OF THE ARAB SPRING**
By Richard Cincotta

Dr. Richard Cincotta is a political demographer whose research focuses on the demographic transition and human migration, and their relationships to political, economic, and environmental change. His publications on these topics have appeared in Foreign Policy, Nature, and Science magazines. He contributed to the National Intelligence Council's most recent global futuring exercise, Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World (2009) and The Geneva Declaration Secretariat's Global Burden of Armed Violence (2008).

Much has been written about the circumstances that led Middle East experts to be blindsided by the successful series of popular demonstrations that kicked off the Arab Spring in December 2010. Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, political scientist Gregory Gause recounts how regional specialists, like himself, overestimated the strength and cohesiveness of North Africa's autocracies, as well as the depth of personal allegiances available to these authoritarians among their military's highest ranks.¹ Another article in the same journal, by Nassim Taleb and Mark Blyth, draws a strikingly dissimilar conclusion from political science's most recent failure.² They describe North Africa's dramatic political events as a "black swan" – the unpredictable terminus of a buildup of tensions brought to a head by complexly interacting forces.

Little, if any, mention has been made, however, of an article describing the relationship between demography and democracy ("How Democracies Grow Up") that was printed on the pages of *Foreign Policy* in March of 2008³ – more than two-and-a-half years before pro-democracy demonstrators took to the streets in Tunisia. In that essay, I describe a simple model driven by population age structure (the distribution of population by age) that can be used to statistically forecast democratization, with reasonable success. Based on that research, I reached the following conclusion:

"The first (and perhaps most surprising) region that promises a shift to liberal democracy is a cluster along Africa's Mediterranean coast: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, none of which has experienced liberal democracy in the recent past. The other is in South America: Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela, each of which attained liberal democracy demographically "early" but was unable to sustain it. Interpreting these forecasts conservatively, we can expect there will be one, maybe two, in each group that will become stable liberal democracies by 2020." [*Foreign Policy*, March, 2008, pp. 81-83]

That forecast appeared again in print in 2009 ("Half a Chance: Youth Bulges and Transitions to Liberal Democracy"), in the Woodrow Wilson Center's *Environmental Change and Security Report* the following year,⁴ and is detailed in *Political Demography: How Population Changes Are Reshaping Security and National Politics*, edited by Jack Goldstone,

¹ Gause III, F. Gregory, "Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 4 (July/August 2011): 81-90.

² Nassim Nicholas Taleb and Mark Blyth, "The Black Swan of Cairo: How Suppressing Volatility Makes the World Less Predictable and More Dangerous," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 3 (May/June 2011): 33-39.

³ Richard P. Cincotta, "How Democracies Grow Up: Countries with Too Many Young People May Not Have a Fighting Chance for Freedom," *Foreign Policy*, no. 165 (2008): 80-82.

⁴ Richard P. Cincotta, "Half a Chance: Youth Bulges and Transitions to Liberal Democracy," *Environmental Change and Security Project Report*, no. 13 (2008/09): 10-18.

Monica Duffy Toft and Eric Kaufmann (launched at FPRI on December 13, 2011).⁵

Of course, the forecast of “one, maybe two,” North African liberal democracies has yet to be realized. Nonetheless, the first step toward democratization, the ouster of the authoritarian head of state, is a *fait accompli* in three of the region’s states—in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. And, despite tensions that will likely arise between the Nahda, Tunisia’s Islamist party, and the secular center and left-wing parties, the country’s Jasmine Revolution remains, for the time being, well on track.

Was this forecast for North Africa a lucky guess? Or did it make use of information that was unavailable to regional specialists? The answer to both questions is “no—not at all.” The forecast is one of several recent products of unclassified research in political demography that has been funded by the (U.S.) National Intelligence Council over the past six years. The methodologies that were developed during this effort are repeatable and draw on the UN Population Division’s biennially revised demographic data, which can freely be downloaded from the Internet or purchased in its entirety.

One other important point: During 2008, I presented these forecasts, on two separate occasions, to assembled groups of senior Middle East scholars. On both occasions, those present—almost to a person—strongly rejected the possibility of political change among North African regimes (in one case, senior experts broke into laughter at the mention of the possibility of regime change in Tunisia).

OF BULGES AND BARGAINS

My research (with co-author John Doces) on the demographic timing and stability of liberal democracy uses a rather straightforward “age-structural model” to produce statistical forecasts. In turn, that model rests on two basic theories that predict the general behavior of states. The first theory, the *youth bulge thesis*—developed over the past four decades through the successive efforts of Herbert Möller,⁶ Jack Goldstone,⁷ Christian Mesquida,⁸ Henrik Urdal,⁹ and others¹⁰—asserts that states with youthful age structures face an elevated risk of experiencing armed intra-state conflict and other types of political violence.

The second basic theory, the *authoritarian bargain thesis*, harkens to a three-hundred-and-fifty-year-old observation of the English political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes. Writing in the 17th century, Hobbes argued that polities are born of a trade-off: when threatened, elites and citizens willingly trade their political and civil liberties for guarantees of security.¹¹ Combining the two theories generates an expectation that is easy to test: one would expect countries with youthful age structures to encounter the lowest risk of liberal democracy (“free” in the same survey). Indeed, statistically, they do.

Is this “authoritarian bargain” reversible? In other words, when the demographic source of insecurity fades—in this case, when declining fertility transforms a politically volatile, youthful population into a more age-structurally mature populace—will elites and common citizens rally to recoup their political and civil liberties? Statistically, it appears that they will; as fertility declines and median age advances, the probability that Freedom House will assess a state as “free” increases.

In fact, this pattern of “regime timing” has remained remarkably stable since the early 1970s, when Freedom House first began its global surveys (see Figure 1). In each decade since then, only about 10 percent of all countries with a median age less than 25 years have been categorized as “free”. Moreover, that youthful-yet-liberal 10 percent is, by and large, a highly unstable group of democracies. Since Freedom House started keeping score, few have kept their high rating much more than a decade. Most have been rocked by electoral violence or an insurgency, and then slipped

⁵ Richard P. Cincotta and John Doces, “The Age-Structural Maturity Thesis: The Youth Bulge’s Influence on the Advent and Stability of Liberal Democracy,” in *Political Demography: How Population Changes Are Reshaping Security and National Politics*, ed. Jack A. Goldstone, Eric Kaufmann and Monica Duffy Toft (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2011), 98-116

⁶ Herbert Möller, “Youth as a Force in the Modern World,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 10, no. 3 (1968/69): 237-60.

⁷ Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

⁸ Christian G. Mesquida and Neil I. Wiener, “Human Collective Aggression: A Behavioral Ecology Perspective,” *Ethology and Sociobiology* 17 (1996): 247-62.

⁹ Henrik Urdal, “A Clash of Generations? Youth Bulges and Political Violence,” *International Studies Quarterly* 50 (2006): 607-29.

¹⁰ Richard P. Cincotta and Elizabeth Leahy, “Population Age Structure and Its Relation to Civil Conflict: A Metric,” *Environmental Change and Security Project Report* 12 (2006/07): 55-58; Elizabeth Leahy, Robert Engelman, Carolyn Gibb Vogel, Sarah Haddock, and Todd Preston, *The Shape of Things to Come: Why Age Structure Matters to a Safer, More Equitable World* (Washington, DC: Population Action International, 2007).

¹¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1658*, ed. Edwin M. Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994 - originals 1651/1658).

to “partly free” (partial democracy) within the five years. Others have spiraled quickly downward to “not free” (autocracy) in the wake of a coup d’état.

COMING OF AGE

For a modern state, a median age of 25 years appears as a milestone. Around that benchmark (more or less), the incidence of civil conflict declines perceptibly, and the chance of being a liberal democracy increases markedly. For the past four decades, Freedom House has assessed about half of all countries in the 25-to-35-year median-age range as “free”. Much of this political liberalization appears to be related to the newfound stability of “intermediate-aged” liberal democracies.¹² Unlike states with more youthful populations, those assessed as “free” in this demographic range – particularly in the 30-to-35-year range – tend to hold onto their high ratings.

The next 10-year quartile looks even better. Since the early 1970s, Freedom House has bestowed its “free” rating on about 90 percent of all countries in the 35-to-45-year median-age range (mature age structures). Clearly, the advance of age-structural maturity – and the societal transformations that go hand and hand with this transition – are tough on illiberal regimes. And that should make analysts curious about the identity of the remaining (and very resilient) 10 percent.

This hardy lot of illiberal survivors in the mature category fits into three overlapping categories. The first includes regimes led by a charismatic founder figure – like Fidel Castro and Lee Kwan Yew; and perhaps a founder-like-figure, Vladimir Putin (who appears to be losing his charm). The second category comprises regimes ruling one-party states, where party and state are synonymous and where the regime has reconstructed its own military and commercial elites. The most obvious example was the Soviet Union (for a while). No doubt China, which crosses the 35-year median age mark in the next five years, will continue to function as an autocracy. The final category is composed of regimes that are beholden to a militarily superior, autocratic neighbor, intolerant of the rise of a liberal regime in its sphere of influence – the situation of Eastern Europe during the Cold War.

FORECASTING, WHEN OTHERS CAN'T

How did these findings lead to my 2008 forecast of political change in North Africa? According to UN projections, between 2010 and 2019, each of the region’s five coastal states were due to reach the 25-to-35-year median-age range – a span within which around 50 percent of all countries are, quite consistently, liberal democracies. Assuming that the age-structural model was as applicable to North Africa as elsewhere, the calculated probability that, by 2020, no country in the region would be assessed as a liberal democracy turned out to be extremely low, around 3 percent – much more like a “safe bet” than one of Taleb’s and Blythe’s black swans.

Gousse’s assessment of Middle East experts’ analytical lapses is much less easy to dismiss. Moreover, that assessment should perplex policymakers who rely on regional and country expertise for conceptual insights and warnings. Gousse concedes that an entire field of seasoned regional and country specialists, some of whom are native to the region itself, missed or mis-assessed critical shifts in relationships among elites – the very focus of their pre-Arab Spring narrative.

Given these circumstances, I see only one possibility: The methodologies upon which these analysts relied – their sources of evidence and the theories that used this evidence to generate conclusions – are inadequate for sensing the rapid onset of dramatic political change. If the case of the Arab Spring seems anecdotal, then one needs only to revisit those narratives that dominated the foreign affairs literature before the fall of the Berlin Wall, before the rise of liberal democracy in East Asia (particularly Indonesia), and before the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Few experts perceived the impending onset of those dramatic political reversals.

Would political demography have saved the day in all cases? Maybe not – but the development of, and openness to, repeatable and testable means of tracking long-term trends within those societies, as well as among elites, may have questioned the prevailing assumptions of political stasis that led policymakers astray. The disciplines that contribute to international relations analysis frequently miss dramatic changes, and then have a nasty habit of encouraging a field day of convenient, untestable *a posteriori* explanations. After interest in these has waned, those who have erred most often move on without revisions to the questionable methods and erroneous assumptions that produced failure. Thus, no one, and no theory, ever loses – except foreign affairs policymakers, who need and deserve a better understanding of the political future.

¹² Richard P. Cincotta and John Doces, “The Age-Structural Maturity Thesis: The Youth Bulge’s Influence on the Advent and Stability of Liberal Democracy.”

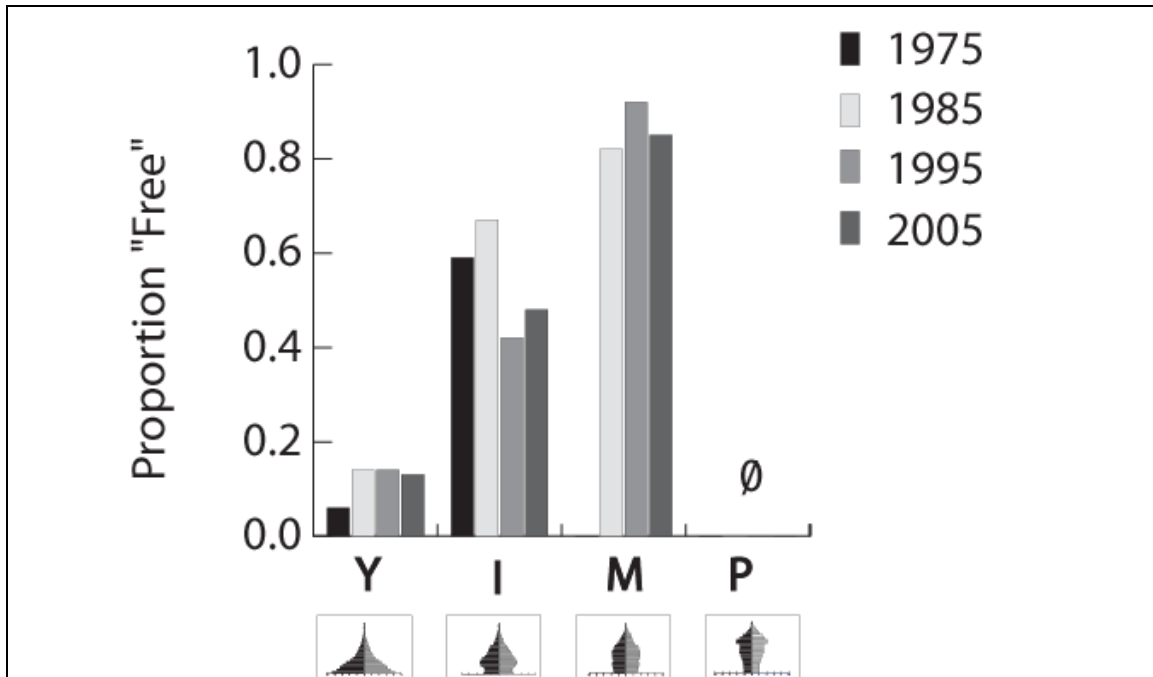


Figure 1. The proportion of states assessed as “free” in Freedom House’s annual survey, 1975 to 2005, in each of three, currently extent, age-structural categories (no state yet occupies the fourth category, P). These categories are: Y (youthful), having a median age less than or equal to 25.0 years; I (intermediate), 25.1 to 35.0; M (mature), less than 35.1 to 45.0; P (post-mature), equal to or greater than 45.1 years.

Of Related Interest

Audiofile, FPRI BookTalk by Jack Goldstone, Richard Cincotta, and Monica Duffy Toft on “Political Demography,” December 13, 2011: http://www.fpri.org/multimedia/20111213.goldstone_toft_cincotta_demography.html

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