The Hazards of Youth

In more than 100 countries, people are getting not only more numerous, but younger. “Youth bulges,” combined with economic stagnation and unemployment, can burden these countries with disproportionately high levels of violence and unrest—severely challenging their hopes for social and economic stability.

Just before dawn on April 28, a band of machete- and knife-wielding attackers launched a surprise assault on a police post in Thailand’s southern province of Pattani. Failing to overrun the building, the militants fled to the nearby Krue Sae mosque, where they engaged in a three-hour shootout with heavily armed government security forces. Troops riddled the 16th century red brick building with automatic weapon fire, killing more than 30 of the attackers and leaving their bodies sprawled in pools of blood.

The uprising was only one of several clashes in Thailand’s restive south that day, which ended with at least 108 suspected militants dead across three provinces. It marked a severe escalation of four months of unrest in a country that had not seen such bloodshed in three decades. As news of the conflict spread, analysts attributed the tensions to rising ethnic discontent among the south’s largely Muslim population, which has long complained of cultural, religious, and economic repression by the central government in Bangkok. In an address to the nation soon after the attacks, however, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra pointed to another variable: the age and prospects of the combatants, most of whom were under the age of twenty. “They are poor and have little education and no jobs,” he noted. “They don’t have enough income and have a lot of time, so it creates a void for people to fill.”

Unlike the more prosperous north, Thailand’s south has lagged on several key development indicators, including demographics. Although population growth in the country overall has slowed dramatically, reaching “replacement level” at just above two children per woman by the mid-1990s, birth rates in the southern provinces remain high. Meanwhile, industrial growth in the region has stagnated, leaving few opportunities for this surging young population.

Thailand is not the only country in the world feeling the effects of a demographic imbalance. According to the United Nations, more than 100 countries worldwide had characteristic “youth bulges” in 2000, i.e., young adults ages 15 to 29 account for more than 40 percent of all adults. All of these extremely youthful countries were in the developing regions. By and large, the youth bulge is a thing of the past in North America and Europe, where the young adult share of the population is only about 25 percent of all adults.

Loss of Opportunity

In most cases, a youth bulge is the result of several past decades of high birth rates. It typically occurs in countries that are still in the earlier stages of their transitions to slower-growing populations: although infant and child mortality have begun to fall, birth rates still remain high, resulting in higher proportions of children surviving overall. A youth bulge usually lingers for at least two decades after fertility begins to decline, as large cohorts of children mature into young adulthood. If low fertility is maintained, however, this bulge gradually disappears.

Other demographic processes can create a youth bulge as well. Sudden drops in infant mortality or a baby boom in an industrial country can create a bulge in young adults two decades later. Disproportionately high youth populations can also be present in countries where large numbers of adults emigrate, or where AIDS is a major cause of premature adult death.

An excess of youth isn’t necessarily a bad thing. In the United States and other industrial countries, where most young adults have been educated or technically trained, employers view young people as an asset and actively seek out their energy and ingenuity. Indeed, economists have long recognized that a large cohort of young workers can provide a demographic boost to growth in economies where the productivity, savings, and taxes of young people support smaller subpopulations of children and elderly. In Thailand, for instance, young, educated, and industrious workers—including
a large proportion of young women working in the country’s manufacturing and financial sectors—have contributed significantly to the growth of the country’s dynamic economy.

In other circumstances, however, the predominance of young adults can be a social challenge and a political hazard. In many developing countries, labor markets have been unable to keep pace with population growth, contributing to high rates of unemployment. While unemployment tends to be high in developing countries in general, that among young adults is usually three to five times as high as overall adult rates.

Leif Ohlsson, a researcher at the University of Göteborg in Sweden, notes that young men in rural areas are often hardest hit relative to their expectations. Agriculture is the single largest source of livelihood worldwide, but many young rural men expecting to inherit land increasingly find themselves disinherited. In some cases, their fathers and grandfathers have long since divided up the family property into tiny parcels that would be unworkable if they were further divided. In other cases, the land has degenerated as a result of unsustainable practices, or larger commercial agricultural enterprises have swallowed up any remaining cropland.

Without a secure, independent living, these men find themselves unable to marry or earn the respect of their peers, contends Ohlsson. British researcher Chris Dolan has coined the expression “the proliferation of small men” in reference to the growing number of disenfranchised young men in northern Uganda who cannot fulfill their culture’s expectations of a “full man.” Dolan has found that such men disproportionately become alcoholic, engage in violence, or commit suicide.

Or join a militia. Insurgent organizations can offer social mobility and self-esteem, particularly in countries that are economically backward and politically repressive. During the recent civil war in Sierra Leone, young people constituted about 95 percent of the fighting forces, in part because there were few other options. Sierra Leone ranked as the world’s least developed country on the United Nations’ 173-nation Human Development Index in 2002, and the gross national income per capita in 2000 totaled only $140 (compared with $34,870 in the United States). An official with the Christian Children’s Fund in Freetown explained of the large body of young soldiers, “They are a long-neglected cohort; they lack jobs and training, and it is easy to convince them to join the fight.”

What shall we do to live today? Homeless street kids wake up in Bangkok, Thailand.

Urban Youth

With few opportunities in rural areas, young people in many developing countries are increasingly forced to leave behind more traditional lifestyles and migrate to cities in search of work, education, and urban amenities. The United Nations projects that by 2007, for the first time ever, more people will be living in cities than in rural areas. This urban share could top 60 percent by 2030—with almost all of this growth projected to occur in the developing world.

With the influx of young workers and students,
many urban areas are now home to significant, and potentially volatile, youth bulges. Drawing on case studies of several Asian countries, University of Hawaii political scientist Gary Fuller warns that rapidly industrializing cities and frontier areas can be spawning grounds for political unrest because thousands of young men migrate to these sites in search of livelihoods. Yet urbanization is proceeding faster than municipalities can provide infrastructure, services, and jobs. Municipal governments in the least-developed countries are often the least able to muster the human and financial resources to contend with these problems, especially when the poorest, non-taxable segment of the urban population continues to grow rapidly.

But it is not just the poor or uneducated who are discontented. “We have a large number of youth between 18 and 35 who are properly educated, but have nothing to do,” lamented William Ochieng, a former government official, in Kenya’s The Daily Nation in January 2002. Urban discord, more than the rural sort, afflicts diverse social classes, including recruits from politicized students, the angry unemployed, and the politically disaffected. Many of these, especially those from middle-class backgrounds, bring with them the skills and resources to organize and finance civil protest.

Studies show that the risks of instability among youth may increase when skilled members of elite classes are marginalized by a lack of opportunity. Yale University historian Jack Goldstone has noted that the rebellions and religious movements of the 16th and 17th centuries were led by young men of the ruling class who, upon reaching adulthood among an overly large cohort, found that their state’s patronage system could not afford to reward them with the salary, land, or bureaucratic position commensurate with their class and educational achievements. Rather than allow political discontent to fester, European militarists and Ottoman expansionists induced thousands of young men of privilege to serve their interests in military campaigns and overseas colonial exploits, putting them in charge of literally millions of the unschooled from the urban and rural under-classes.

It isn’t difficult to find contemporary parallels. Goldstone attributes the collapse of the Communist regime in the Soviet Union in the early 1990s in part to the mobilization of large numbers of discontented young men who were unable to put their technical educations to use due to party restrictions on entering the elite. And Samuel P. Huntington, Harvard professor and author of the controversial treatise on the “clash of civilizations,” has pointed to connections between tensions in the Middle East (where 65 percent of the population is under the age of 25) and the unmet expectations of skilled youth. Many Islamic countries, he argues, used their oil earnings to train and educate large numbers of young people, but with little parallel economic growth few have had the opportunity use their skills. Young educated men, Huntington concludes, often face only three paths: migrate to the West, join fundamentalist organizations and political parties, or enlist in guerrilla groups and terrorist networks.

Discontented elites may in turn mobilize less-educated groups to their cause. Investigations into
Thailand’s recent upsurge in violence point to the possible involvement of Muslim extremist groups, who may be actively targeting young men of strong religious faith and little formal education to further their broader Islamist goals. In the town of Suso, which lost 18 men under the age of 30 to the April uprising, most of the dead had graduated from the country’s privately run Islamic schools (pondoks), which are often a last resort for families that cannot afford mainstream college educations. In Pakistan, meanwhile, studies estimate that as many as 10 to 15 percent of the country’s 45,000 religious schools (madrasas) have direct links to militant groups.

Looking Ahead

How strong is the link between youth and conflict? In 2003, researchers with the Washington, D.C.-based group Population Action International (PAI) reviewed the data on population and past conflicts and found that countries in which young adults made up more than 40 percent of all adults were about two-and-a-half times as likely to experience an outbreak of civil conflict during the 1990s as other countries. The study identified 25 countries where a large youth bulge, coupled with high rates of urban growth and shortages of either cropland or fresh water, creates a “very high risk” of conflict. Fifteen of these countries are in sub-Saharan Africa, two are in the Middle East (Yemen and the Occupied Palestinian Territories), and the rest are in Asia or the Pacific Islands. According to Uppsala University’s Conflict Database, nine of these countries experienced a civil conflict just within the first three years of this decade (2000–2002).

As evidence of this link emerges, the global security community has begun to take notice—though it’s been slower to take action. In April 2002, in a written response to congressional questioning, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency noted that “several troublesome global trends—especially the growing demographic youth bulge in developing nations whose economic systems and political ideologies are under enormous stress—will fuel the rise of more disaffected groups willing to use violence to address their perceived grievances.” The CIA warned that current U.S. counterterrorist operations might not eliminate the threat of future attacks because they fail to address the underlying causes that drive terrorists.

Large youth bulges should eventually dissipate as fertility rates continue their worldwide decline. Already, between 1990 and 2000, the number of countries where young adults account for 40 percent or more of all adults decreased by about one-sixth, primarily because of declining fertility in East Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America. However, a more persistent group of countries in the early stages of their demographic transition—most in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and the Pacific Islands—remain as a challenge to global development and security.

Fortunately, demographics is not destiny. But the likelihood of future conflict may ultimately reflect how societies choose to deal with their demographic challenges. In its recent analysis, for instance, PAI discovered that roughly half of the very high risk countries navigated the post-Cold War period peacefully. How? In at least some of these cases, policies were in place that provided young men with occupations and opportunities—including land reform and frontier settlement schemes, migration abroad, industrialization, and the expansion of military and internal security forces. The latter strategy, PAI suggests, probably helped repressive regimes such as North Korea, China, and Turkmenistan maintain political stability during the post-Cold War era despite large proportions of young adults.

In the short term, governments will need to tackle the underlying factors contributing to discontent among young people, including poverty and the lack of economic opportunity. And governments can address part of the risk associated with youth unemployment by investing in job creation and training, boosting access to credit, and promoting entrepreneurship.

Ultimately, however, the only way to achieve the necessary long-term changes in age structure will be through declines in fertility. Governments can facilitate fertility decline by supporting policies and programs that provide access to reproductive health services—voluntary family planning services and maternal and child health programs and counseling, including providing accurate information for young adults—and by promoting policies that increase girls’ educational attainment and boost women’s opportunities for employment outside the home.

For countries in the early stages of their demographic transitions, it could take nearly two decades after fertility begins to fall to observe a significant reduction in the proportion of young adults. Given the many risks of delaying the demographic transition, this only underscores the need for governments to put supportive policies into effect sooner rather than later.

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