

The Jasmine Revolution and demography

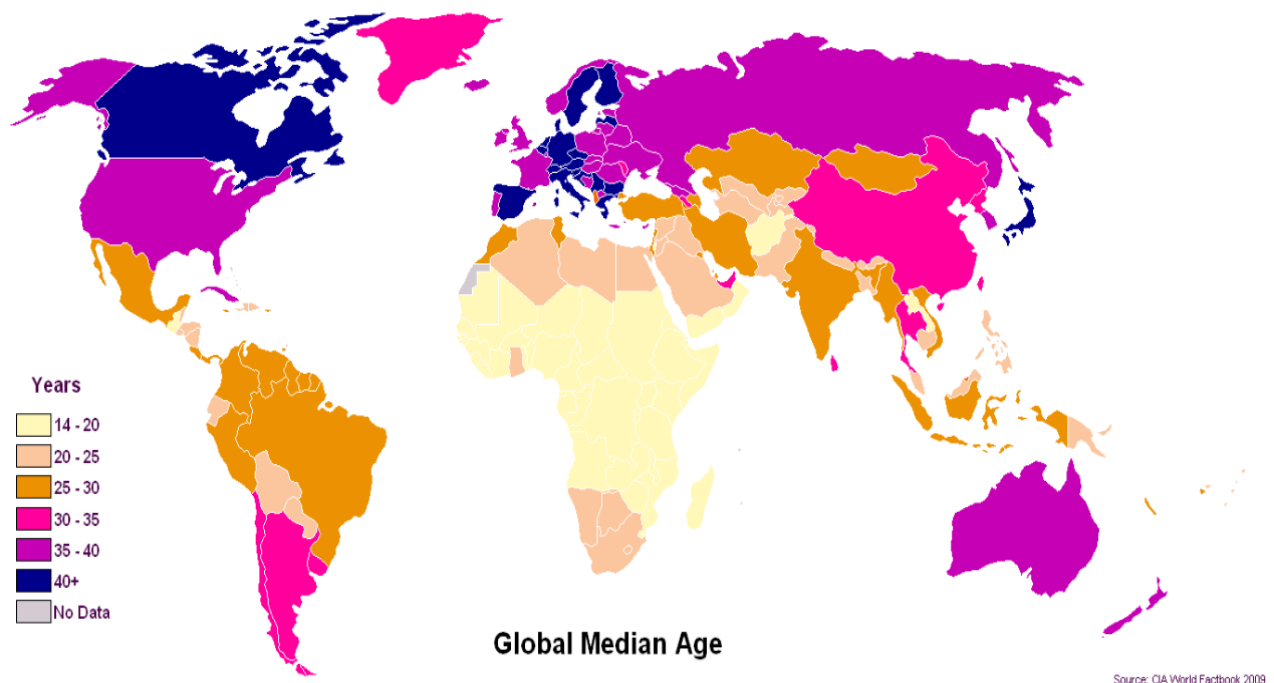
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1. Politics fuelled by demography

The so called “Jasmine Revolution” in NAME (North Africa and Middle East) caught many by surprise. However, without even going into geopolitical and economic considerations, the demographic signals have been on the wall for long.

Let’s take a look at the global distribution of young and old people using a convenient map compiled by the CIA. Read the map like this: the lighter the colour for a country/region/territory, the lower the median age of its population. The world’s average is about 28.4 years. Hence a light colour implies that proportionally more youngsters are roaming around. NAME is rather light in colour. As a word of caution, a country could be “young” because men and women do not live very long! Lamentably, central Africa (with the lightest colour) is a sad testimony.



Citation source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Median_age.png

2. Demographic dividend or nightmare

Demographers have been split-minded about a population being “young”. The phenomenon creates a “demographic window”, generating “dividends” in terms of more labour supply and supposedly greater demand as the young grow up, get married and set up new homes.

But there is an important proviso: only if they enter the theoretical virtuous circle. The recent turmoil in NAME partially illustrates the opposite problem. If you cannot educate young boys and girls properly, provide meaningful early employment, and let “youthful excesses” have ventilation outlets that stay within your pre-set standards but match their modern expectations, you are going to run into deep troubles! The “youth bulge” would become a big headache.

The region's work force is estimated to rise by 80% from 2000 to 185 million in 2020 (<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Spotlight+on+Middle+East+Youth.-a0222856858>).

Being an unprecedented trend in its history, the number represents an average annual rate of 3.0%, putting heavy pressure on the labour market.

3. Relativity comes into play

To be fair, NAME countries are mostly not economic laggards. In fact, a number of them are quite rich. Bahrain hosts the glamorous opening F1 race, which had to be postponed as a result of protests and instability.

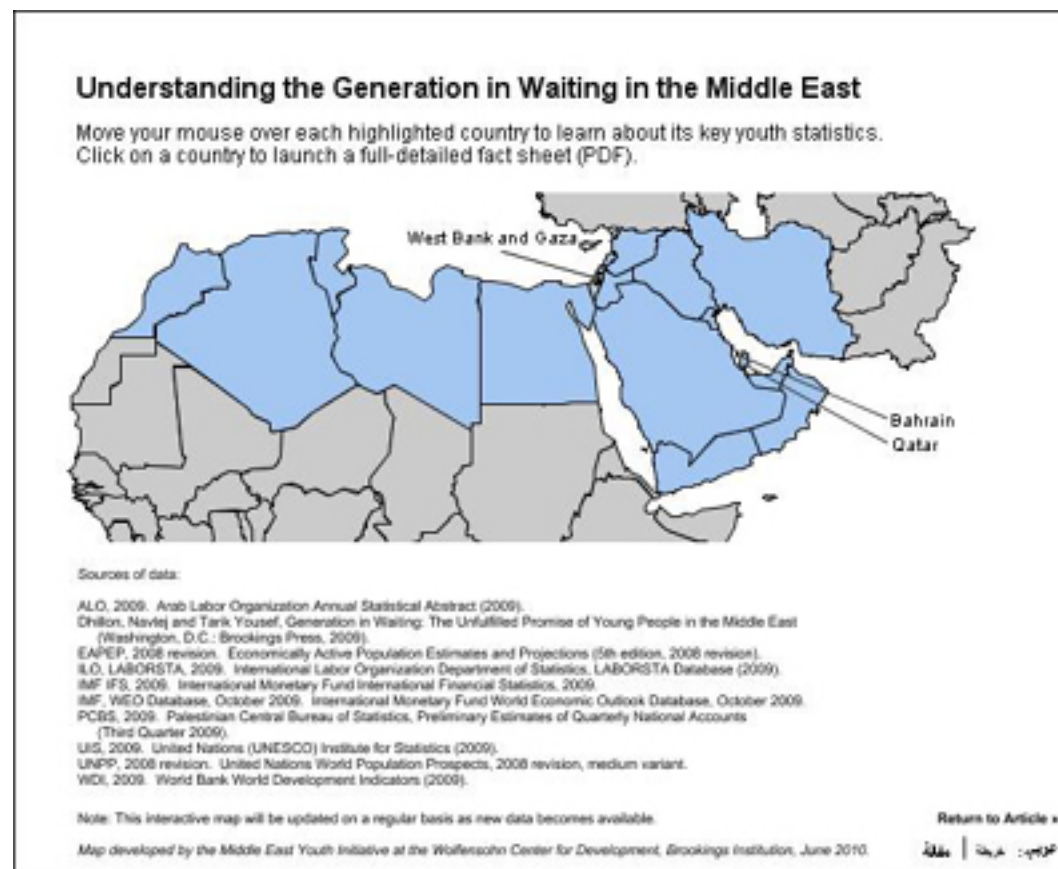
In any case, youth unemployment has turned into a key issue because a rising proportion of young people could not catch up with the “progress” in the economy and traditional social norms are felt to be increasingly constraining by them in the era of internet, mobile phones, Facebook and Twitter.

The “Jasmine Revolution” started from Tunisia, which, according to one estimate, has a median age in the range of 25-30 and youth (15-24) unemployment rate of 27.3%. The age structure is not in itself a worry; but the unemployment picture is.

An interactive map constructed by researchers shows the serious situation in the region:

http://www.brookings.edu/articles/2010/06_middle_east_youth.aspx?sc_lang=en

http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/articles/2010/06_middle_east_youth/06_middle_east_youth_map.swf :



Putting it in another way, many youngsters in NAME are sufficiently intelligent, but handicapped in developing a meaningful career and transiting smoothly to adulthood. Gender difference also has a big impact: young women in the Middle East are three times more likely than male counterparts to be unemployed.

4. Responsible citizens or rebels with a cause

Young people have to live, and live with a reasonable horizon over which they can eventually become responsible men, women, husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, and citizens. They may skip some of the roles; but everyone grows up. Any society that stifles such expectations would be in a trajectory of turbulence. Many would turn rebels by default.

A succinct piece from the Middle East Youth Initiative speaks volume and nothing is better than quoting it here:

“5. What are the challenges young people face with forming a family?

In the Middle East, marriage and family formation is a major passageway for the transition of young people into adulthood. In the region today, nearly 50 percent of men between the ages of 25 and 29 years are unmarried, compared with 23 percent in Asia and 31 percent in Latin America.

Experts believe that financial costs associated with marriage (housing, furniture, wedding ceremonies, etc.) and economic hardship contribute to the delay. For example, as Dr. Diane Singerman has shown in Egypt, the average cost of a wedding is the equivalent of 43 months of the entire earnings of both the groom and his father. Among the poorest wage earners, the groom and his father must save their entire earnings for more than seven years. The largest burden for Egyptian weddings is carried by young men and their families: the groom pays about one-third of marriage costs, the groom's family covers about one-third, and the bride's family slightly less than one-third. The bride herself pays very little, reflecting low levels of labor force participation by women.”

Source: <http://www.shababinclusion.org/section/about/facts>

5. Human, all too human

Authoritarian regimes in the world better pay good attention to the human factor, a sublime but cardinal generator of changes in paradigms and behavioural patterns. Staying in power for a prolonged period numbs oneself, while the rest of the population, especially the young, have their patience wearing thin.

Indeed, their daily life forces them into making an existential choice. After the turmoil, things might turn worse. It seems better than continuing with the doldrums, though.

Of course, not everything can be boiled down to demography. Economic and political developments, the usual focus of attention, do matter. Governments sometimes think they could manage elections, placate with fiscal and monetary measures, or use brute force to deal with short run problems. Their success rate has not been too bad. Nevertheless, when the tide really turns, they might find to their horror how events could unfold so rapidly beyond their wildest imagination.