

# Authoritarianism as a Form of Sustained Low-Intensity Civil Conflict: Does Age Structure Provide Insights into the Democratic Transition?<sup>1</sup>

Richard P. Cincotta<sup>2</sup> and Christian G. Mesquida<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract.** Arguably, the most puzzling question pertaining to recent analyses of the democratic transition is: Why has there been a tendency for democratizing states to stall or retreat along the path to full democracy? We approach this question by assuming that authoritarianism is a form of low-intensity civil conflict perpetuated by states on non-state actors and state-faction rivals, and that full democracy is civil peace (a cessation of violence, coercion and intimidation). This assumption allows for adapting the “youth bulge model of the risk of civil conflict” to investigate the democratic transition. To assess our “successive transitions model” of progress to full democracy, we use polity scores from the Polity IV Dataset (Center for International Development and Conflict Management, University of Maryland, 2005) and population age distribution data (UN Population Division, 2005). We hypothesize that partial democracies (polity scores from 1 to 7) and limited autocracies (scores from -6 to 0) with a “youth bulge” – with high proportions of young adults (aged 15 to 29 years) in the working-age population (15 to 64 years) – are at risk of retreating or stalling on the path to full democracy (scored 8 to 10) and sliding back from full democracy (if already a full democracy). Conversely, we hypothesize that where the youth bulge has dissipated, states are likely to advance toward full democracy or maintain full democracy. We find this general pattern to prevail among states in East and Southeast Asia, in Latin America and in the Caribbean, but with notable exceptions. We suggest explanations for these exceptions, and we report a temporally consistent negative correlation between the regional proportion of young adults (YA) in the working-age population and the proportion of countries that have attained full democracy, from 1950 to the present. We use this relationship to generate the likelihood of full democracy,  $L$  (where  $L(YA) = -3.41 YA + 1.82$ ,  $r^2 = .89$ ), and then employ this function to identify geographic regions and individual countries that, before 2015, are projected to experience a significant degree of demographic opportunity to achieve full democracy. Our model predicts that, nearing 2015, the most promising regions for full democracy will be states along Africa’s Mediterranean coast, and states in the northern Andes region of South America (Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela and Guyana).

## Introduction

The National Intelligence Council's review (2006) of recent trends in democratization noted a tendency among contemporary states to stall along the path toward full democracy, or to backslide after democratic reforms.<sup>4</sup> The results of this analysis suggest that the political tensions and insecurities fostered by a population age structure with a large proportion of young adults (often referred to as a *youth bulge*) could provide a partial explanation for the lack of recent democratic progress observed in several regions of the world. In these regions, fertility (the number of children women are expected to bear, on average) either remains relatively high among significant national and sub-national populations, as in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and the Pacific Islands; or fertility has declined only recently, as in much of southern Asia and the Andes region.

The following analysis: (1) briefly outlines the hypothetical means by which a young population age structure could inhibit the achievement and maintenance of full democracy; (2) reviews supporting evidence generated by quantitative methods employing *Polity IV polity scores* (published by the Center for International Development and Conflict Management, University of Maryland)<sup>5</sup> and *age structural data* (published by the UN Population Division);<sup>6</sup> and (3) identifies and discusses key geographic regions and individual countries that, before 2015, are projected to experience a significant degree of demographic opportunity to achieve full democracy.

## The Successive Transitions Model

As an initial step, we approached the problem of explaining regime stagnation and instability along the path to full democracy by assuming that authoritarianism is a form of low-intensity civil conflict waged by regimes on restive non-state rivals and potential state-factions, and that full democracy is the opposite: civil peace — a cessation of violence, coercion and intimidation — arising under conditions of *democratic consolidation* (a term used by theorists to describe a political environment lacking viable alternatives to democracy).<sup>7</sup> Thus, we expected demographic conditions promoting political tension and violence to inhibit the attainment of full democracy.

A more refined explanation of the interaction between population age structure and democratic progress can be generated by conflating two models of political behavior. The first model, known as the *authoritarian bargain*, assumes that citizens prefer to exercise basic freedoms, but asserts that they are willing to relinquish political rights to an authoritarian when they perceive threats to their

personal or economic security.<sup>8</sup> Thus citizens, and particularly the commercial elites whose investments are often targeted when civil order disintegrates, are likely to support the maintenance of a fully democratic regime only when the risk of violence and economic loss becomes low and when they perceive that order can be maintained.

The second model, the *youth bulge model*, seeks to explain the relatively high frequency of political violence associated with national and sub-national populations in the early phases of the *demographic transition* (the transformation from high to low birth and death rates). According to this model's proponents, in opportunity-poor societies — where economic and social mobility is highly constrained — a large proportion of young adults and a rapid rate of growth in the working-age population tend to exacerbate unemployment, prolong dependency on parents, diminish self-esteem and fuel frustrations, particularly among young-adult males actively seeking to establish an identity and to gain the respect of their peers.<sup>9</sup> Rather than acting as immediate causes of political violence or armed civil strife, the social and economic conditions emerging as a product of a large youth bulge are assumed to promote the proliferation of rivals of the extant regime by facilitating recruitment to militant non-state actors and state-sponsored regular and irregular forces.

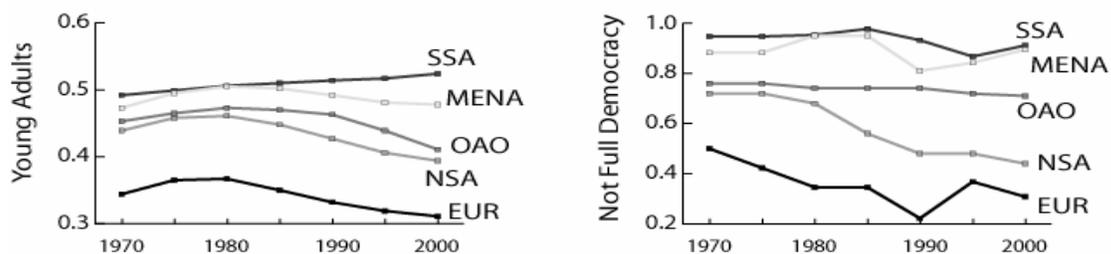
Combined, these models predict that opportunities to establish full democracy, and the ability to retain this form of government, should improve among states in developing regions as their proportion of youth declines from high levels. This synthesis does not, however, yield an expectation that progress through the demographic transition is, by itself, sufficient to motivate a *partial democracy* (states with polity scores from +1 to +7) or a *limited autocracy* (scored from -7 to 0) to attain *full democracy* (+8 to +10) and be able to maintain this regime type. Moreover, this age structural effect may have little impact on political arrangements in *full autocracies* (-10 to -8).

Proponents argue that three intervening factors could impede full democratization where a youth bulge is in decline. First, popular democratic movements can be deterred by strong and boldly coercive central governments (China in the late 1980s, Cuba in the 1990s, and Iran in the early part of the current decade). Second, citizens and reformist politicians can be dissuaded from pursuing political freedoms by the rise of other insecurities — real or imagined, internal or external, emerging within the state or concocted by it (as in Russia and Venezuela during the current decade). And third, a decline in fertility in the majority ethnic group, while promoting a more mature population age structure, can also promote political insecurity by facilitating gains in an ethnic minority's national population proportion (as in the proportional growth of Shi'ia in Lebanon, and of Indios populations in states of the Andes region and Central America).

## Evidence and Expectations

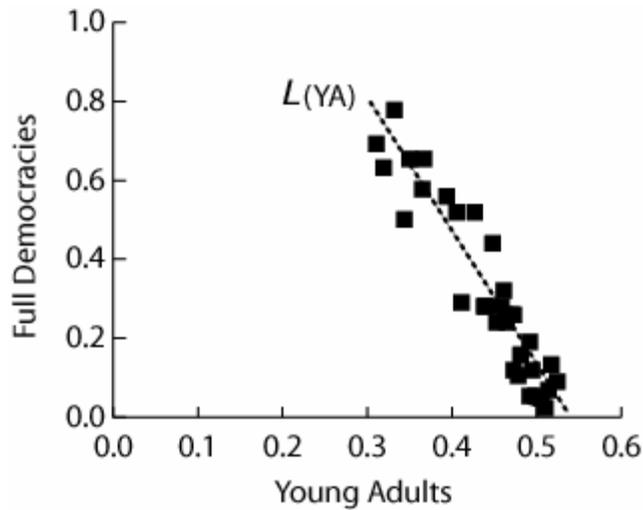
Keeping in mind that research on the nexus of age-structural transformation and progress to full democracy is still in its infancy, there is some evidence lending support to this hypothesis. On the regional level, trends in the proportion of young adults (15-to-29 year olds) in the working-age population (15-to-64 years) roughly parallel trends in the regional proportion of states (Figure 1) that are not, at the time, full democracies (see endnotes<sup>10</sup> for country criteria and regional assignment). Moreover, the regional young-adult proportion and the regional proportion of full democracies are negatively correlated (Pearson's  $r = -0.94$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). If one assumes that these regional measures are linearly related, the resultant least squares regression line (Figure 2) predicts a young-adult proportion of 0.39 as the 50-percent-likelihood level for full democracy.

At the country level, particularly in Southeast Asia and Latin America, sturdy full democracies began to evolve and to appear resistant to military pre-emption as the young-adult proportion steeply declined into the region between 0.42 and 0.36 (Figure 3), a zone corresponding to a 40 to 60 percent likelihood of full democracy. However, this tendency toward full democracy has not been observed where the influx of labor migrants depresses the young-adult proportion, as in the Arab Gulf States.<sup>11</sup>

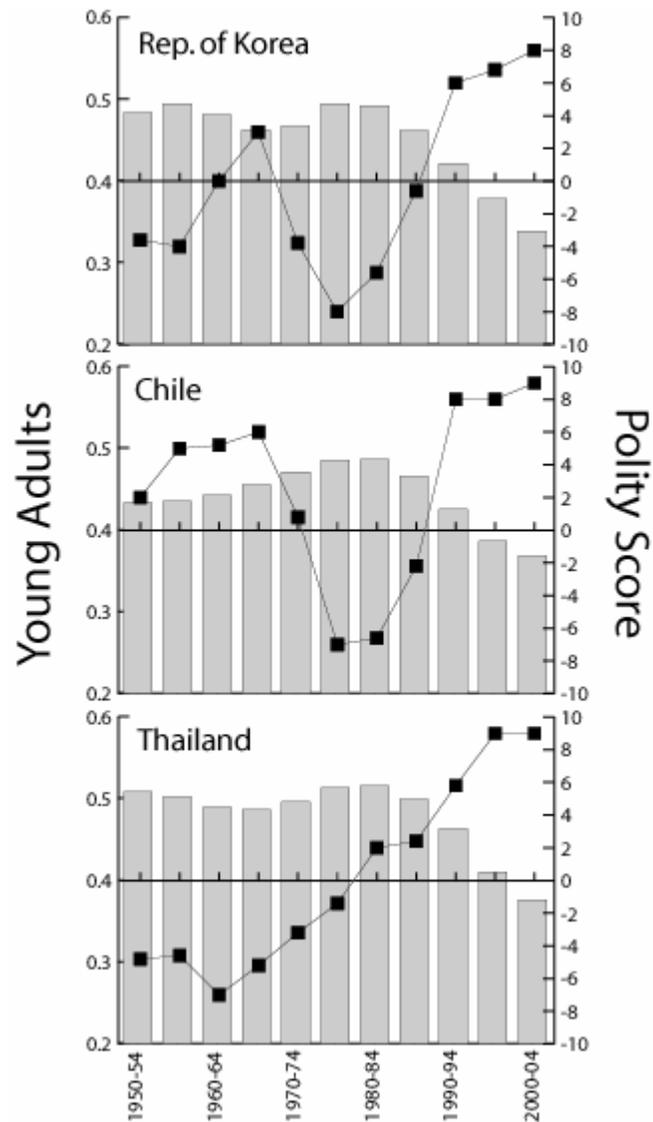


**Figure 1. Trends in the proportion of young adults (15 to 29 years) in the working-age population (15 to 64 years), and the proportion of countries that are not a full democracy.** These two trends run roughly parallel in Sub-Saharan (SSA), the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), other Asian countries and Oceania (OAO), North and South America (NSA), and Europe (EUR). The proportion of states that are not a full democracy is drawn from polity scores in

the Polity IV Data Set, published by CDICM (2006); young-adult proportions are calculated from data published by the UN Population Division (2005).



**Figure 2. The relationship between the regional proportion of young adults (ages 15 to 29 years) in the working-age population (15 to 64 years) and the proportion of full democracies, 1970 to 2000.** The trend ( $L(YA) = -3.41 YA + 1.82$ ,  $r^2=.89$ ) derived by least-squares regression analysis (using the data shown in Figure 1) suggests that the likelihood of being a full democracy,  $L(YA)$ , increases as the proportion of young adults,  $YA$ , declines. Regime data are drawn from country polity scores in the Polity IV Data Set, 2006; young-adult proportions are calculated from data published by the UN Population Division, 2005.



**Figure 3. Trends in the proportion of young adults and in polity scores in three countries.** In much of Latin America and East Asia, full democracy (polity scores from +8 to +10) has often been attained and stabilized following a sharp decline in the proportion of young adults (ages 15 to 29 years). Polity scores, which range from complete autocracy (-10) to complete democracy (+10), are from the Polity IV Data Set (CIDCM, 2006); young-adult proportions are calculated from data published by the UN Population Division (2005).

## **Betting on the Next Stable Full Democracy**

If this relationship continues to hold, demographic projections could help analysts identify regions, and states within regions, that in the near and medium term are likely to experience population age structures conducive for achieving full democracy. States in two geographical regions that experienced significant fertility decline in the 1990s should enter the 40-to-60 percent likelihood zone for full democracy before 2015 (Table 1): those along the northern rim of Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt) and along the northern Andes region of South America (Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela and Guyana).

Several additional geographically scattered partial democracies and limited autocracies are projected (using the UN medium-fertility variant) to enter the “40-to-60 percent zone” before 2015, including: in Asia, Iran (2010-15), Lebanon (currently), Turkey (currently), Kyrgyzstan (2010-15), Kazakhstan (currently), Vietnam (2010-15) and Myanmar (before 2010); in the South Pacific, Fiji (before 2010); in southern Europe, Albania (currently); and in the Caucuses, Armenia (currently) and Azerbaijan (currently).

Admittedly, several of these states face daunting impediments to completing democratic reforms. For both Colombia and Lebanon, transition to a stable full democracy is unlikely while non-state actors control substantial territory and operate state-like institutions and militias. Ruling political elites and their foreign patrons may also impede serious reforms in Muslim-majority states if convinced that harsh political constraints deter gains by radical Islamists.

Political conditions among today’s short-list of demographically transitioning states are not all that different from conditions in many states along the Pacific Rim during the early 1980s. At that time, the East Asian states that would later become full democracies — Taiwan (in 1996), the Republic of Korea (in 1998), Thailand (from 1992 to 2006) and Indonesia (in 2004) — were limited autocracies or partial democracies at the crest of their youth bulge, struggling to cope institutionally with under-employment, varying levels of student and labor unrest, and — in Thailand and Indonesia — ongoing insurgencies.<sup>12</sup>

Region	Country	Regime (2004)		Young-adult proportion		
		Polity Score	Regime Type	2005	2010	2015
<i>northern Africa</i>				<b>0.47</b>	<b>0.44</b>	<b>0.40*</b>
	Algeria	2	<i>pd</i>	0.49	0.45	0.39*
	Egypt	-6	<i>la</i>	0.47	0.45	0.42*
	Libya	-7	<i>la</i>	0.49	0.44	0.38*
	Morocco	-6	<i>la</i>	0.46	0.43	0.39*
	Tunisia	-6	<i>la</i>	0.44	0.41*	0.36*
<i>northern Andes</i>				<b>0.43</b>	<b>0.41*</b>	<b>0.39*</b>
	Colombia	7	<i>pd</i>	0.42*	0.40*	0.39*
	Ecuador	6	<i>pd</i>	0.45	0.45	0.41*
	Guyana	6	<i>pd</i>	0.44	0.43	0.36*
	Venezuela	6	<i>pd</i>	0.44	0.44	0.40*

*pd* partial democracy

*la* limited autocracy

\* 40 to 60 percent likelihood of full democracy

**Table 1. Two regions showing an increasing likelihood of transitions to full democracy.** Along the northern rim of Africa and the northern Andes, declines in the young-adult proportion (15-to-29 year olds as a proportion of 15-to-64 year olds) may infer improved opportunities for democratization. Polity scores are from the Polity IV Data Set, 2006; young-adult proportions are calculated from data provided by the UN Population Division, 2005 (estimates and medium-fertility variant).

As the population age structure of these states matured over the following decade, the youth bulge began to dissipate, growth slowed among the working-age population, and social tensions eased. Coupled with the “small-family effect” – another product of fertility decline that boosts household and government savings – these changes improved the climate for investment and contributed to economic growth. During this same decade, elite and popular support for military authoritarianism decayed, leading the way to more open political discussions in the media, gradual gains in individual liberties, parliamentary reforms, and ultimately to the rise of coherent opposition parties with elite support. The timing of these events in East Asia’s democratic transition bear some similarity to piecemeal reforms now unfolding in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. By 2015, age structural shifts will produce conditions in these states of the Arab Maghreb that could make the political *status quo* increasingly difficult to sustain.

States within the Andes region, however, have wended a very different path of political development. Several have ascended to full democracy, one time or another within the past three decades, only to lapse into partial democracy years later. If gauged by their youthful age structures, these states ascended prematurely – showing a dynamic akin to the Malaysian experience. Malaysia’s full democracy, established at independence in 1958, survived for a decade before post-election violence between Malays and ethnic Chinese led to a chain of political restrictions.<sup>13</sup> As of its last assessment (2004), Malaysia remains a partial democracy. If this demographic model is accurate, further progress along the demographic transition is likely to yield more favorable conditions for states to gain, or in the case of the Andean partial democracies, to regain full democracy.

## **Nuanced Conclusions**

To clarify: This analysis does not suggest that states with a high proportion of young adults are unable to democratize political institutions. They can; states in early phases of the demographic transition, where youth bulges prevail, have frequently made progress toward democracy (positive changes in polity scores). Instead, the successive transitions model predicts that a lack of progress in the demographic transition tends to limit political liberalization to levels below full democracy, or to impart instability in fully democratic regimes.

## Notes and References

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<sup>2</sup> Consultant to the Long Range Analysis Unit, National Intelligence Council, Washington, DC. Conclusions and opinions in this article do not express policy or consensus within the NIC or the US government.

<sup>3</sup> University of York, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

<sup>4</sup> The tendency for states to stall or fall back on their path to democracy has been noted in several studies and reviews, including: National Intelligence Council. 2006. "Rethinking Democracy Promotion Efforts." Washington, DC: Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

<sup>5</sup> Marshall, M.G. and K. Jagers. 2002. "Polity IV Project, Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800-2000: Dataset Users' Manual." College Park: Center for International Development and Conflict Management, University of Maryland. The Polity IV data set (updated to 2004) rates regime types on a scale from +10 (complete democracy) to -10 (complete autocracy). This analysis follows categorical conventions employed by the State Failure Task Force (Science Applications International Corp. 1995. *Final Report of the State Failure Task Force*. Washington, DC: Science Applications International Corp. & U.S. Agency for International Development) for the categories of *full democracy*, which ranges from regime scores of +8 to +10, and *partial democracy*, ranging from +1 to +7. Other categories used in this research are: *limited autocracy*, -7 to 0; and *full autocracy*, -10 to -8.

<sup>6</sup> UN Population Division. 2005. "World Population Prospects: 2004 Revision." New York: United Nations. This analysis employs current estimates (for 2005) and projections (medium-fertility variant for 2010 and 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Linz, J.J. and A. Stepan. 1996. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America and Post-Communist Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> For perspectives on aspects of the authoritarian bargain, see: Desai, R.M., A. Olofsgard, and T.M. Yousef. "Logic of Authoritarian Bargains," unpublished manuscript available from author (in review).

<sup>9</sup> This model's assertions are supported by cross-national statistical research and historical studies published from the late-1960s onward, including: Urdal, H. 2006. "A Clash of Generations? Youth Bulges and Political Violence." *International Studies Quarterly* 50:607-629; Mesquida, C.G. and N.I. Wiener. 1996. "Human Collective Aggression: a Behavioral Ecology Perspective." *Ethology and Sociobiology* 17:247-262; Mesquida, C.G. and N.I. Wiener. 1999. "Male Age Composition and the Severity of Conflicts." *Politics in the Life Sciences* 18(2):181-189;

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<sup>10</sup> Countries with less than 1.0 million residents in 2004 were excluded by the Polity IV database and are therefore excluded from regional calculations in this paper. The five regions used in calculations and shown in figures 1 and 2 are: *North and South America* (NSA), which aggregates the UN regions of North America, South America and the Caribbean; *Europe* (EUR) comprises all states in the UN designation (including Russia) plus Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan; *Middle East and North Africa* (MENA) includes Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Iraq and Iran; *Other Asia and Oceania* (OAO) includes all Asian states east of Iran, plus Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Fiji.

<sup>11</sup> Since the early-1960s, petroleum producing states in the Arab Gulf Region (Saudi Arabia, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Bahrain) have encouraged temporary migration to provide labor and technical expertise to support their petroleum and construction industries. These workers typically leave before retirement age. Because of the large proportion of experienced labor migrants between 30 and 40 years of age in the Arab Gulf States, the age structures of the total population tend to be considerably more mature than the age structure of the indigenous population.

<sup>12</sup> Myers, R.H. 1996. "A New Chinese Civilization: The Evolution of the Republic of China on Taiwan." *The China Quarterly* 148:1072-1090; Park, J. 1990. "Political Change in South Korea: The Challenge of the Conservative Alliance." *Asian Survey* 30(12):1154-1168; Neher, C.D. 1988. "Thailand in 1987: Semi-Successful Semi-Democracy." *Asian Survey* 28(2):192-201; Englehart, N.A. 2003. "Democracy and the Thai Middle Class: Globalization, Modernization, and Constitutional Change." *Asian Survey* 43(2):253-279; Indonesia's evolution to democracy, like its demographic change, lagged behind these countries (see Hein, G.R. 1990. "Indonesia in 1989: A Question of Openness." *Asian Survey* 30(2):221-230).

<sup>13</sup> Heufers, R. 2002. "The Politics of Democracy in Malaysia." *ASIEN* 85(October): 39-60.