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Can Demography Save Afghanistan?

► FEATURE

Afghanistan's sky-high birthrate seems to be declining -- and that's a very good thing.

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Posted NOVEMBER 16, 2009



Picture Afghanistan two decades from now. Difficult? Not really -- if you're a demographer.

The two agencies that independently publish population estimates -- the U.N. Population Division and the U.S. Census Bureau's International Programs Center -- routinely project an array of demographic statistics for the world's nearly 200 countries on a timeframe of decades. Until now, the U.S. and U.N. agencies closely matched one another's projections for an Afghanistan-to-be. Not anymore. The U.N. believes Afghanistan's population (around 28 million today) will pass the 50 million mark by 2030, whereas the Census Bureau foresees a 2030 population under 43 million.

If the Census Bureau's prognostications are right -- if Afghanistan experiences a sharp decline in family size and slower subsequent growth -- this change would represent a milestone in Afghanistan's development. But if Afghan population growth remains at a high level, auguring a continued surfeit of young job seekers, their disaffection and armed violence, the breakdown of schooling and health services, and the perpetuation of high fertility, it bodes very poorly indeed.

Unbeknownst to much of the foreign-policy community, the population of this impoverished Texas-sized pseudo-state is among the world's fastest growing. In 1950, there were barely 8 million Afghans, a population about the same size as New York City today. Since then, the population has nearly quadrupled, despite horrendous rates of childhood death and three decades of warfare.

This trend, should its pace continue, guarantees a lengthy perpetuation of Afghanistan's extraordinary "youth bulge." Today over half of the country's adults are 15-to-29 year olds, compared with only 26 percent in the United States. So much competition in an opportunity-sparse society is bad news for young men seeking employment or land ownership -- and good news for extremist recruiters.

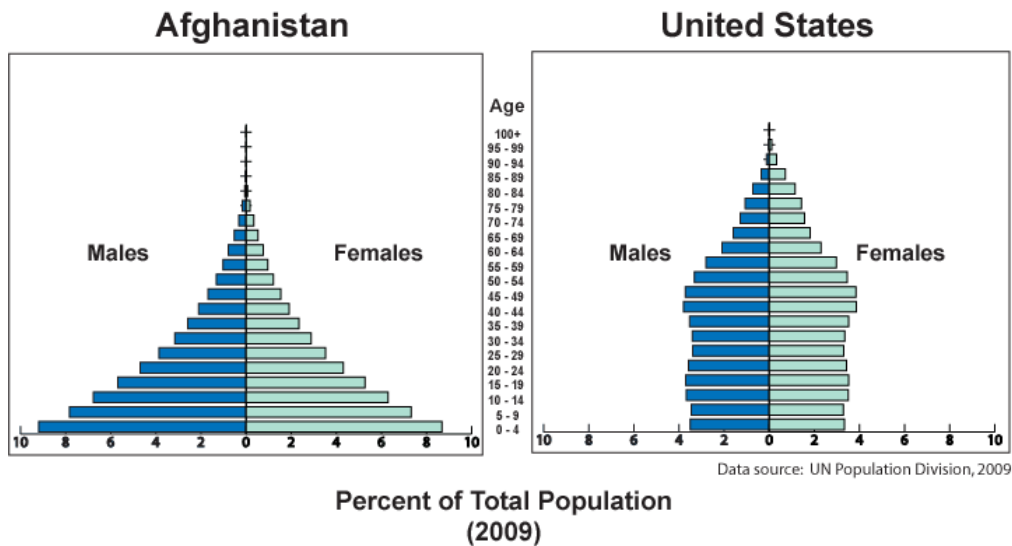


Figure. While Afghanistan's population (28 million) is currently less than 10 percent as numerous as that of the United States (315 million), its age structure (the distribution of its population by age) is far more youthful than the U.S. Typically, countries with a youthful age structure tend to be more prone to civil conflict, less likely to be liberal democracies, and less likely to fulfill their health and education obligations to their citizens than countries with more mature age structures.

This pace of growth strains government services as well. This year alone, Afghanistan's school-age population grew by more than 3 percent, or 250,000 children. Even if the Taliban stopped destroying schools and obstructing attendance, the government would face a momentous challenge in furnishing enough classrooms and teachers for this burgeoning generation.

These population factors, if unaddressed, diminish the possibility that a coherent Afghan state, if one emerges, could remain intact. Then why have we heard so little mention of this issue from either the Afghan or U.S. governments, or for that matter, the press? Perhaps because an honest discussion leads unavoidably to two touchy (and tightly interwoven) topics: the status of Afghan women and the size of Afghan families.

It's not that the West has failed to acknowledge that Afghan women are being deprived of their basic human rights. It's that Western governments have failed to recognize the degree to which such deprivation in half the population is incompatible with the notion of a viable, politically stable state. Fewer than half of all the school-age daughters of rural Afghan families are receiving basic education. Many are married during adolescence, and are then limited to performing household chores. If abused, most have no recourse to a fair judicial system. It is little wonder then that, according to the Census Bureau, on average, Afghan women can expect to bear 5.6 children in their lifetime -- a rate that appears to have dropped from pre-invasion levels, which ranged between 7 and 8 children per woman. Evidence for this decline is supported by a 2006 health survey conducted by Afghan survey teams (organized by the ministry of health and Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, and supported by the World Bank). It shows that contraceptive use among married women has increased from 5 percent in 2003 to 16 percent at the time of the survey -- at least in the rural areas surveyed.

This is reason to be hopeful. If Afghanistan's ministry of health can continue the difficult job of extending the reach and quality of its maternal and child health services, as it has in the years since the Taliban were first evicted, fertility will probably continue on its downward

path. As it does, the numbers of maternal and infant deaths are bound to drop from today's extreme levels. In 2005, the World Health Organization estimated that one in eight Afghan women die from pregnancy-related causes (in the United States, the lifetime risk is one in 4,800 -- and that's high for an OECD country). To put this figure in perspective, in 2008, about four times as many women died from pregnancy and childbirth in Afghanistan (about 20,000) than anyone did from battle-related causes within its borders.

Is it possible that Afghanistan's society is on the verge of a rapid transition to the two-child family, already achieved by its neighbor, Iran? Doubtful. Iran's family-planning program drew support from its Islamic government (believe it or not), and offered services in a stable, albeit authoritarian, political environment within a society that encourages education for women. But where the Taliban governs, the chances of even a slow, steady fertility decline, the type assumed by the Census Bureau projections -- and even the U.N.'s less optimistic projections -- are negligible.

Nowhere does the connection between women's low status and long-term instability make itself more apparent than in Afghanistan. This relationship helps explain why the Taliban uncompromisingly maintain traditions of female subjugation and roll back any hint of social reform, and why they intimidate families who send their daughters to school and murder teachers who nurture them. Whenever the United States and its allies decide that it's time to leave Afghanistan on its own, they may do so before women's lives significantly improve, and before their government sufficiently expands education, health care, family planning, and economic opportunity. If that should occur, don't be surprised if, a few decades later, a foreign power (perhaps the United States, again) finds it prudent to intervene -- this time, in a much more populous, and perhaps an even more impossibly problematic Afghanistan.

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