



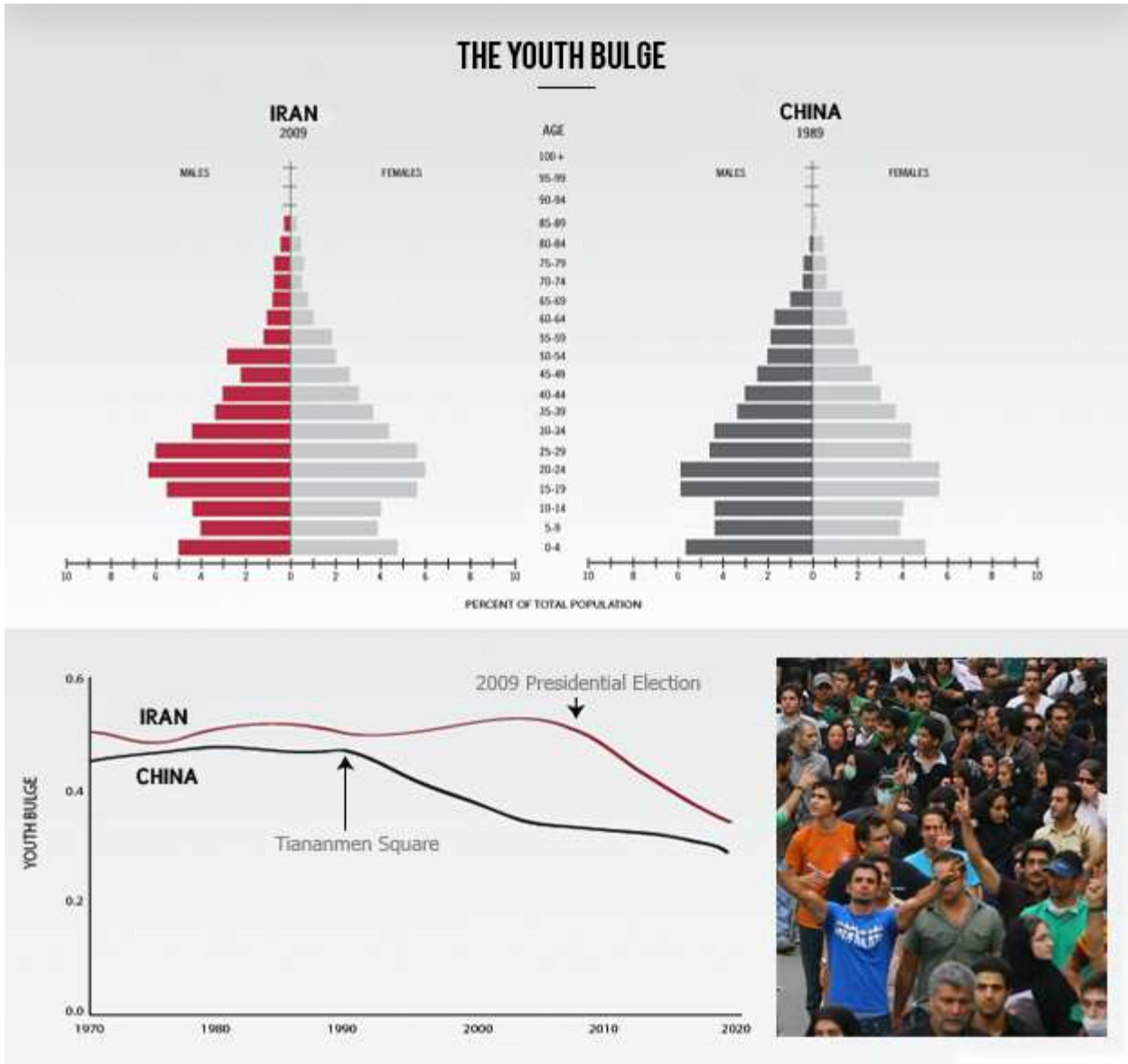
Iran's Chinese Future

BY RICHARD CINCOTTA | JUNE 25, 2009

The past few weeks' images of tens of thousands of brave, bold, and mostly youthful opposition supporters crowding Tehran's boulevards have encouraged some onlookers to draw hopeful parallels to the protests that helped topple most of the authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe, from the late 1980s onward. But, from a demographer's standpoint, Iran's youthful population age structure (in other words, its distribution of residents by age) suggests a different analogy. Depressingly enough for the democracy protesters in Iran and those who stand with them around the world, a closer comparison may be with China's youth bulge experience 20 years ago, including the social fractures that pervaded that generation's political culture and the ruthless and ongoing response by conservative elements of Chinese leadership.

Age structure has two big implications. First, youth-bulge countries -- like Iran and most of its Middle Eastern and South Asian neighbors -- have been, on average, two-and-a-half times more vulnerable to the onset of political violence or civil conflict than relatively mature populations. Secondly, and perhaps more counter-intuitively, revolution and political infighting hasn't generally led to high levels of democracy in those places. Statistically speaking, in fact, the opposite is true. The best bets to make a smooth and long-lasting transition to liberal democracy are those countries where the proportion of young adults (15

to 29 years) in the working-age population (15 to 64) has diminished. Besides Eastern Europe's collection of post-Soviet-era liberal democracies, examples include Taiwan, South Korea, Indonesia, Chile, and Brazil after family sizes declined in East Asia and much of Latin America.



Researchers will continue to argue over the causal mechanisms that are at work and what really happened to create some glaring exceptions -- Singapore, China, Russia, and, more recently, Thailand. But, by and large, a mature age structure tends to serve as a statistical bellwether for durable liberal democracy.

Just like China's youth bulge in the late 1980s, Iran's is very large, yet destined to dissipate rapidly over the following two decades. Today, 15-to-29-year-olds comprise half of all working-age Iranians. At a time when private-sector job growth is virtually stagnant, this final surge of 1980s baby boomers -- most born before the Islamic Republic's surprisingly comprehensive family planning program was up and running -- has been boosting the work-eligible population by nearly 3 percent annually.

But not all paths to mobility are dismally narrow for young Iranians. Men can ply their route into adult society through the 125,000-strong Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRG), Iran's overtly politicized security force -- or, less glamorously, through the IRG's local militia, the Basij (an active participant in the violent suppression of recent opposition demonstrations). Unlike the other Iranian military services, the IRG's ties to the theocratic regime are existential, and they manage -- and reap extensive revenues from -- state-owned industries and lucrative construction contracts. The antagonisms separating IRG and Basij personnel from opposition demonstrators are not unlike the rural-urban and class cleavages between People's Liberation Army foot soldiers and students who the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership so successfully exploited in 1989 and thereafter. Although divisions in Iran's political elite are now public knowledge, the country's youth bulge remains a tinderbox that neither military nor commercial elites care to ignite.

The notion that Iran is China, just delayed by 20 years, has already made its rounds through the Iranian theocracy. The media exposure of recent events could provide an opportunity -- as it did for the CCP -- for Ayatollah Khamenei's hard-liners to purge dissenters from within the inner circles of the political elite and to jail or expel opposition organizers in the Iranian street. Such a turn of events could leave Iran without a viable opposition as it grows more demographically mature, and probably more politically quiescent, in the coming decades -- a grim outlook for the protesters currently fighting for freedom in Tehran.