

## Minority Youth Bulges and the Future of Intrastate Conflict

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From a demographic perspective, the global distribution of intrastate conflicts is not what it used to be. During the latter half of the 20th century, the states with the most youthful populations (median age of 25.0 years or less) were consistently the most at risk of being engaged in civil or ethnoreligious conflict (circumstances where either ethnic or religious factors, or both, come into play). However, this tight relationship has loosened over the past decade, with the propensity of conflict rising significantly for countries with intermediate age structures (median age 25.1 to 35.0 years) and actually dipping for those with youthful age structures (see Figure 1 below).

Why has this relationship changed? At least two underlying trends help explain the shift:

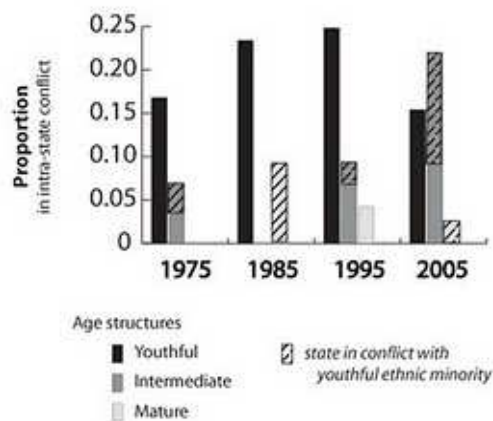
1. Over the last two decades, the deployment of peace support operations to countries with youthful populations has surged (described in a [previous post on New Security Beat](#)); and
2. Ethnoreligious conflicts have gradually, though noticeably, increased among a group of states with a median age greater than 25.0 years (including Thailand, Turkey, and Russia).

Countries represented by the latter trend share a demographic arrangement known as a “persistent minority youth bulge” – a rapidly growing, age-structurally youthful minority that is politically dissonant and regionally or residentially segregated within a more mature country-level population.

### Youthful Minorities, Older Majorities

National level comparisons of [total fertility](#) rates tend to communicate the false impression of a world with demographically homogeneous states. When available, sub-national data present a very different picture.

Fertility has fallen earlier and faster in urban areas than rural, and [minority-majority fertility gaps](#) have become increasingly apparent since the 1960s, as modern contraception has been disseminated through public programs and sold to clients who can afford it through private sources. Most recently, [Neil Howe and Richard](#)

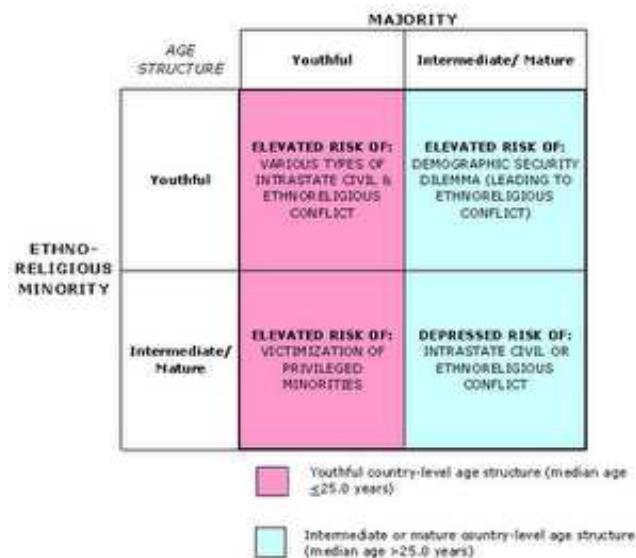


Jackson have warned that hopes for a “demographic peace” – a world of states with mature age structures, each with a depressed risk of intrastate conflict – are likely to be thwarted by uneven fertility declines among ethnoreligious groups in youthful states, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

In his demographic studies of Lebanon during the late 1970s, Joseph Chamie documented a steady decline in marital fertility among Lebanese Christians (of all types), as well as the emigration of members of this community to the West. Next, Sunnis and Druze entered their fertility transitions, leaving behind Lebanese Shiites – the most rural, the most religious, and the most economically and politically marginalized of Lebanon’s four major ethnoreligious communities. Despite recent fertility declines, the age structure of Lebanese Shiites remains the most youthful and fastest growing of Lebanon’s major ethnoreligious communities. To proponents of the youth-bulge hypothesis this data would suggest that, among Lebanon’s communities, young Shiite men should be the easiest to mobilize and the least risk averse – and for those proponents, it helps explain the rise and durability of Hezbollah.

A similar underlying demographic gap marked Sri Lanka’s civil war (1983 to 2009). As early as the mid-1960s, fertility declines had been noted among the majority Sinhalese population. However, the fertility transition in the rural Tamil community, situated in the northeast corner of the island, lagged behind by nearly two decades. In the early 1980s when Tamil demands for political reforms were rebuffed by Sri Lanka’s government, thousands of young Tamils were mobilized by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, creating an insurgent organization that was able to wage a guerilla war for nearly three decades. According to the UN, the conflict took the lives of more than 80,000 Sri Lankans, nearly 1,200 Indian peacekeepers, and ultimately prompted thousands of Sri Lankan Tamilians to emigrate.

This demographic pattern characterizes other intrastate conflicts. Currently, similar configurations typify strife involving ethnic Kurds in Turkey, the Pattani Muslims in southern Thailand, Palestinians in the full extent of Israeli-controlled territory, and the Baluch in eastern Iran. Like the conflicts in the Indonesian states of Aceh (ending in 2004) and East Nusa Tenggara (from 1999 to 2003), some have terminated in political settlement. Yet in youthful, economically depressed, politically embittered geographic corners of otherwise developed states, conflicts involving a youthful minority can grind on for decades, extracting debilitating political, social, and economic costs – like the Chechen conflict in southern Russia, which continues today, and Northern Ireland’s “Troubles,” which dragged on from 1969 to 1998.



### The Demographic Security Dilemma

Most social scientists are likely to explain a minority-majority gap in fertility and median age as the product of history and culture, an artifact of income differences, and/or the result of discriminatory policies or inadequate protections on the part of the state. While political demographers recognize these as contributing factors, they also identify the political volatility and rapid population growth of youthful minorities as central features in a dynamic relationship known as the demographic security dilemma.

The demographic security dilemma, first described by [Christian Leuprecht](#), arises when a state permits or promotes the political, economic, and social marginalization of an ethnoreligious minority. The recent historical record suggests that under conditions where modern education, economic opportunity, and quality services are denied, poorly developed, or poorly accessed, ethnoreligious minorities are likely to retain traditional gender relationships and local institutions that support high levels of marital fertility. As a result, whereas the more privileged, educated, and generally urbanized majority will ultimately experience the transition to lower fertility, high-fertility minorities confined to neglected rural regions and low-income urban neighborhoods lag, typically retaining their youthful age structure longer and sustaining a [higher population growth rate](#) than the majority.

An absence of proactive policies to bring youthful communities into the economic, social, and political mainstream tends to strengthen radical and traditionalist religious political organizations, which often take advantage by filling in gaps in local services and governance. Typically, they restrict girls' access to education, thwart women's attempts to gain social and economic autonomy, restrict speech, and campaign against modernization and secularization.

And thus the dilemma: The more states marginalize a dissonant minority, turn a blind eye to a minority's exclusion from mainstream social and economic participation, or allow minorities to exclude themselves, the more those youthful minorities tend to grow as a proportion of the state's population. (Notably, minority-state tensions do not naturally emerge out of the opposite circumstance: when the majority is youthful and the ethnoreligious minority is not – see Figure 2.)

### **Looking Beyond the Demographic Arc of Instability**

For political demographers, it may be time for a broader definition of demographically at-risk states, a definition that takes sub-national groups into account. This new description acknowledges that the youthful age structure of a politically organized minority is a significant risk factor for intrastate conflict. Whereas for now and the near future, the vast majority of intrastate conflicts will emerge within the so-called [demographic arc of instability](#) – a geographic swath of states having a population with a median age less than or equal to 25 years – the acknowledgment of this emerging trend suggests that analysts should look beyond country-level demographic data for telltale signs of minorities that sustain a youthful age structure.

That's easier said than done. Because of restrictions associated with ethnic and religious data collection and the political sensitivities surrounding conclusions drawn from these data, relatively few countries currently provide public access to data that are disaggregated by ethnic and religious affiliation. For now, analysts attempting to estimate qualities of a minority's age structure must approximate from related measures, such as estimates of minority birth and death rates, fertility rates, and school attendance. Rather than being accessible from a central source, these are published in scattered government reports and in the international demographic and public health literature.

In the future, progress in discerning the political implications of minority demographic trends could hinge on the ability of researchers to gain access to ethnoreligious demographic data. For this to happen, many governments will have to overcome deep-seated political inhibitions and overturn laws prohibiting identification by ethnicity or religion, while data collectors will need to promote conditions that encourage survey participants to self-identify their ethnic and religious affiliations anonymously and without fear.

Despite persistent [high fertility across sub-Saharan Africa](#) and the [Arabian Peninsula](#), [UN demographers](#) foresee a world in the not-too-distant future that will be dominated by states with populations near or below replacement-level fertility. In that future, foreign affairs analysts can expect the ethnoreligious composition of many states to be unstable and extremely sensitive to minority-majority fertility gaps. Yet if political scientists fail to acknowledge these and other demonstrable relationships between demographic trends and political tensions and transformations, analysts could once again be caught by surprise – much like they were during the [onset of the Arab Spring](#).

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*Sources: Chamie (1981), Cincotta, Engelman, and Anastasion (2003), Fernando (1983), Fuller (1984), Jackson and Howe (2011), Leuprecht (2010), Puvanarajan and Indralal De Silva (2001), UN.*

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*Posted at: <http://www.newsecuritybeat.org/2011/10/minority-youth-bulges-and-future-of.html>*