

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN POLITICAL EDUCATION AND MOBILIZATION: ANALYSIS OF ARAB SPRING IN THE PARADIGM OF YOUTH BULGE THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Political education can be defined as the process of learning and obtaining knowledge and awareness regarding the political process and activities. Political mobilization and participation is natural outcome of this awareness. Arab uprising of 2011 onwards can very conveniently be described as finest and rare example in contemporary age, where role of social media and networks has played key role in political education and subsequent political mobilization. It successfully contributed towards regime change and pro-democracy/parliamentary movement. Youth population of any society always play pivotal and fundamental role in political uprising and revolution. Most of the political analysts considered Arab Spring as the logical outcome of the Youth Bulge i.e. predominant youth population in the region coupled with frequent use of social media by them. Since the state-run media did not facilitate the flow of information of the uprisings, so youth successfully used the modern instruments of social media i.e., YouTube, Twitter and Facebook in transmitting, communicating, organizing, gathering, and coordinating information and subsequent political movement. In this study, an effort has been made to find out the causes of uprisings of 2011 in MENA in the context of Youth Bulge, focusing on the gigantic role played by social media and networks.

Keywords: Uprisings, Youth Bulge, Middle East, North Africa, Social Media and Networks

INTRODUCTION

It is scholarly admitted that every research work, hypothesis and statement of the problem need to be evaluated in the light of some theoretical perspective. During the course of present study about Arab Spring and Uprisings of 2011 in Middle East & North Africa, the study will be adjudged with the prism of Youth Bulge Theory. Justin Yifu Lin opines that youth bulge has been frequent in developing countries whereas in the least developing countries, it is the most common. How a country faces a youth bulge? It is a common question and the answer is again very simple. When a country is able to control the death rate of infants but females still have high rate of fertility; the disproportion in population is the natural outcome. Therefore, large portion of population consists of youngsters & children who will take no time in becoming young adults. Resultantly most of the population comprises youth (Lin: 2012). In an interview with The Weekly Standard magazine, Heinsohn emphasized that youth bulge takes place “when thirty to forty percent of nations’ males are between the age of fifteen and twenty nine” (Whelton: 2007).

Youth Bulge Theory

Before discussing the role of youth bulge in Arab Spring, its connotation needs to be grasped in true letter and spirit. Youth Bulge is a disproportion resulting into large number of male young people. ZakariaFareed discusses that most of the countries in Arab World are facing gigantic youth bulge as “more than half of most countries’ population is under the age of 25” (Zakaria: 2011).

There is an undeniable co-relation between countries facing rampant civil conflicts and experiencing burgeoning young population. This demographic expression is called youth bulge. Leanne Baumung said that the present upheaval in society can be associated with the truth that “65 per cent of the region’s population is youth” (Baumung: 2012). Theory unequivocally advocates that ceaselessly growing youth population leaves the youngsters unemployed, unsatisfied, desperate thereby rendering them susceptible to be recruited into inflammatory, rebel and terrorist groups. It goes without saying that countries with strong political institution, effective command & control and growing economy will hardly be affected with such an increase in population growth. But the countries with fragile economy, weak institution along with law & order situation become more vulnerable to youth - bulge - associated demonstrations and unrest. Robert Atkins, Daniel Hart, James Youniss, and Patrick Markey elucidated their perspective that most of the revolutions of seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were the result of youth bulge. Its association with “activism, revolution, and warfare” cannot be overruled especially once the societies are experiencing economic difficulties (Hart 2004:591).

Origin of the Youth Bulge Theory

Gunnar Heinsohn; German social scientist, first coined the term “Youth Bulge” which was latter improved upon “by Gary Fuller and Jack A Goldstone” (Beehner:2007) who contended that almost all developing nations are facing "demographic transition" (Beehner:2007). If they are experiencing growth in working class so it is likely to result in unemployment, prolonged and increased dependency on parents, blow to self-respect / esteem and fueled frustration thereby leading to volatile demonstrations and rebellion activities. It is again noteworthy that competition for job may not be the only reason for social unrest but it is true that youth has fewer responsibilities and are not supposed to be supporting large families and kids so they have an ample time to go for demonstrations and conduct protests and gatherings. Presently sixty-seven countries are facing youth bulge and sixty countries confront “unrest and violence” (Beehner:2007). Besides the youth bulge there are few other factors like monarchy, non-representation in public institutions, unemployment, poverty, corruption, ethno - religious tensions, fragile economy, weak political institutions and volatile law & order situation which may possibly lead towards social unrest.

The regions which are reflective of youth bulge are North Africa, Middle East, South Asia and Pacific Islands. If we put the cognitive spotlight fixed on the region of Middle East, we come to know that 65 percent population is under the age of twenty nine (Whelton: 2007) which renders this region one of the most volatile regions of the world. It is again noteworthy that youth bulge should not always, be taken as a curse. Large youth population are utilized in some productive way by creating jobs and if level playfield is provided for growth then unimaginable economic gains can be obtained and they can prove the strong factors for progress. It has exactly happened in China, Europe, even in South Africa where youth played significant role in Anti-apartheid Movement of 1980s, thereby establishing this fact that youth bulge can be effectively utilized too and this phenomenon is known as "demographic dividend" (Whelton: 2007). In contrast, if the situation / ambience is not

favourable, youth bulge might prove otherwise. But this is reality that youth bulge invites demonstrations and vitality.

Youth Bulge in Historic Context

Henrik Urdal maintains that young people have always played vital role in “political violence from the English Revolution to the Revolutions of 1848” (Urdal 2012: 607). Therefore, youth bulge has historically been related to political upheaval. Youth bulge has brought considerable vitality, activism and vibrancy to the society. History is replete with examples where youth bulge in the society led towards the eruption of unrests, uprisings and revolutions. Some of these are appended below:-

French Revolution -1789

An increase in population enhanced the demand for food leading towards inflation; reducing the purchasing power of people and sparking the social unrest (Queen Marie Antoinette, on the news that peasants have no bread to eat had to say that let them eat cake), consequently triggering revolution in France. Storming of Bastille; a symbol of power and pride for ruling Bourbon Dynasty for liberty, equality and fraternity and subsequent Revolution brought about colossal changes in France and throughout the rest of Europe. People stood against the absolute monarchy, ruling by the concept of Divine Rights of kings and brought epoch-making changes in social and political system.

World Wars (I & II)

A number of political scientists believed that these two wars erupted because of unusual growth in population and international tensions between Russia and Austria disturbing the balance of power in the region and pitching the massive population against large-scale devastation.

The Bolshevik Revolution - 1917

Bolshevik Revolution was uprising of people; mostly the youth, taking the form of revolutions in Russia in 1917 destroying the Tsarist autocracy and deposing the Tsar of Russia.

National Day of Protest of South Africa - 1950

Political party of Nelson Mandela consisting of youth, especially students “organized anti-apartheid work stoppage in 1950” (Whipps: 2013) paving a way towards freedom of people of South Africa.

March on Washington - 1963

Martin Luther King's epoch making speech "I Have a Dream" promoted racial equality in front of 200,000 demonstrators, mostly the youth gathered peacefully, at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. in August 1963, creating greatest ripples and forcing the president “to draw up firm civil rights legislation” (Whipps: 2013).

The Iranian Revolution – 1978 -1979

The Iranian Revolution; the outcome of the youth having become desperate with the despotic rule, triggered the uprising which eventually ended at the overthrow of Iran's monarchy (Pahlavi dynasty) under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

The Nicaraguan Revolution -1979

People, especially the youth of Nicaragua stood against the autocratic regime and successfully overthrew the dictatorship from their soil for getting more representation in state

affairs. This revolution witnessed a gigantic opposition against the Somoza dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s.

Tiananmen Square Protests - 1989

Massive number of people; mostly students vibrantly demonstrated for reforms and occupied the Tiananmen Square in Beijing for seven weeks. “Chinese Army rolled tanks, opened fires” (Whipps: 2013) but the youth remained steadfast till the realization of their objectives.

Berlin Wall Protests - 1989

Violent demonstrations orchestrated largely by the youth throughout Germany caused falling down of Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989; having separated the East and West Germany for 28 years and proving “final straw for the East German government” (Whipps: 2013) thereby establishing and consolidating the power of protests by youth.

The Orange Revolution – 2004

Hundreds of thousands of demonstrators mainly the youth protested in Kiev's main square in Ukraine against the fabricated results of presidential election. Demonstrations lasted for 12 days “through sleet and snow until a revote was called” (Whipps: 2013). It has further augmented the power of protests and demonstrations by the youth of the country.

Factors Contributing to Youth Bulge Related Violence

Youth bulge certainly brings vitality and does not let lethargy or dormancy to be prevailed or continued. Youth may resort to violence in case of desperation and frustration. The causes of youth bulge related violence in general and especially for this region are discussed in succeeding paragraphs.

Lack of Democracy

Henrik Urdal explained this phenomenon that when large number of youth is deprived of their lawful rights, unwarrantedly denied the political participation, and devoid of basic necessities then frustration and violent protests are the natural outcome. Then youth become prey to “radical mobilization for terrorist organizations” (Urdal 2012: 607).

Rapid Urbanization

Ceaseless migration of people from villages to cities created dearth of infrastructure, jobs and resources. It increased the problems of cities where people especially the youth started feeling frustration. It created the conditions for black-market thereby forcing youngsters to make various gangs as well dangerous groups.

Expectations among Job Seekers

In this era of increased trends of getting higher education and technical education, skilled labour and university graduates with degrees in their hands, very rightly expect to have good jobs but once they come across a situation contrary to their high expectations, they become slave to the feelings of dejection, desperation and resort to violence. Isabel Ortiz and Matthew Cummins maintained that “Youth bulge should be a primary concern” (Ortiz: 2012) for the governments.

Environmental Stresses

Increased population led to suffer a country setback on the aspects of water supplies, forests, arable land and natural / serene environment which caused an over stressed ambience where violence becoming order of the day.

Religions Aspect

Youth believed in new ideas and were fed up from the older forms of authority. Their beliefs in innovations and novelty did not commensurate with the disciplines and confines of religion. Heinsohn believed that because of this reason, out of twenty seven large youth-bulge societies there are thirteen Muslim societies. And in these societies, major role was played by the male population growth during 1960s, 1970s and 1980s giving rise to “a huge youth bulge” (Huntington 1996: 15).

Unemployment

With an increase in population and consequent youth bulge, dearth of jobs has become more acute. It posed a greater challenge to the peace and tranquility of the country and has led to civil conflicts. The region has the highest “rates of joblessness in the world” (Knickmeyer: 2011) and “about 500,000 additional people in MENA are unemployed each year” (Raphaeli:2000).

Poverty

Poverty contributed significantly in exacerbating the youth bulge related violence and unrest. It is true that if there is one percent increase in the population of youth, it will result in “4 percent increase in the likelihood of conflict” (Urdal: 2007). And if society has 35 percent young people then the “risk of armed conflict is 150 percent higher” (Raphaeli:2000). Panel Collier also associated poverty with unrest (Collier 2007: 49-50). Henrik Urdal found direct link between “overall economic performance of a society” (Urdal 2012: 607) and unrest as well as rebel movements.

Social Unrest

Daniel LaGraffe has stated that the unemployment of the youth became prime cause of “feelings of alienation from society” (LaGraffe: 2012). Unemployed youth finds disrespectfully alienated from the social respect and political process. Finding it humiliation, they eventually resort to taking up the arms and males always take lead in this regard. Dr. Henrik Urdal argues that due to harmonic specifications adult male population orchestrates “criminal as well as political violence” (Urdal: 2007). Disappointment amongst the youth is likely to expose them to the dangers of radicalization as compared to any other segment of society. Literate youngsters, who have nurtured high expectations about their future/career, once confront the unemployment / un-acknowledgement of their existence, they tend to raise their voices against prevalent norms, customs, traditions and laws of society as well as system. This pitches them against the writ of the government.

Education

The most viable response to youth related violence could be expanding the higher and technical education which could certainly create better income-earning possibilities and the youth could “be less likely to join a rebellion” (Urdal 2012: 607).

State of Youth in Middle East & North Africa

This region is one of the most youthful regions of the world. It is startling fact that over 60 percent population of Middle East & North Africa comprises youth; under the age of 25 and the percentage of enrolment in educational institutions is again higher which conspicuously reflect that there is a large number of educated youth existing in the region who are prone to fall victim to desperation / dejection more easily than the aged population.

These facts reveal that high percentage of unemployed youth with an additional weapon of education as well as internet are likely to prove more fatal for any kinds of injustice,

depravation, corruption, low wages and political non-representation. Therefore, youth bulge has certainly played a vital role in the Arab Spring in Middle East & North Africa.

Julius Agbor, Olumide Taiwo and Jessica Smith collectively advocated that the most destabilizing and volatile factor in this region is the youth who are educated but unemployed. This state of affairs has become more deplorable in the atmosphere of rising food cost and living cost (Agbor: 2012). Young people in this region are generally unhappy over the presence of such unpleasant factors and the situation has become even more painful as the existing regimes are not ready / interested to pay heed to addressing such issues.

Youth Bulge and Arab Spring

Youth has played a paramount role in sparking and triggering protest movements across the region. Henrik Urdal opined that youth were “more susceptible to political violence” (Urdal 2012: 607). Youth bulge has been instrumental in unleashing widespread uprisings in previously dormant region of Middle East & North Africa. Argument has further been augmented by Stephanie Schwartz who anticipated youth bulge as “a ticking time bomb” (Schwartz: 2011).

It is noteworthy from the events of 2011 that youth is a major force to bring change by youth activism. Youth protests, uprisings and unrests can be regarded as an instrument to have their voice registered in their respective societies. Their companions, in staging their protests have been using the tentacles of social media; Facebook, WhatsApp, hip hop, Twitter and YouTube. Youth has not only been able to get their voice registered in their political and social system but also has been successful in communicating their long standing issues of price hike, skill mismatches, least opportunities in every walk of life, non-representation, low wages and unemployment (IMF:2012). It is again a fact that how a society can neglect the rights and role of around 60 percent of its population and how a country can afford to do so? This had become intolerable for the youth and they have certainly used this right opportunity to communicate and register their demand.

Then it is a matter of preference / priority that whether the youth desires to waste their time in film, art, cell phone and love affairs or really want to contribute to the social, philanthropic and political role in their society. This research has opted for the second one that they have preferred the philanthropic role and going further in assuming the political role. The Egyptian author Tarek Osman **has** consolidated this perspective in his scholarly research by narrating that the youth of Arab has significantly contributed towards philanthropy, poverty alleviation, vocational assistance and improving educational infrastructure in the “most deprived areas of the Middle East and North Africa” (Osman: 2012) **and this is a truly a great service to their societies.**

Youth Bulge; A Demographic Dividend or Bomb?

An important question arises that whether this large number of youth will always be playing a negative role or it can be of some benefit too? Whether it can give colossal benefits in this region like it did in China by becoming a demographic dividend or it will necessarily prove a demographic bomb and keep posing a danger as it is doing in Middle East & North Africa? This question can only be answered with the fact that if a nation is concentrating to address the issues of youth and keep giving the youth their due role like jobs, social status, economic opportunities based on equalities, political representation and equitable playfield to progress then youth will surely prove a demographic dividend. In the absence and negligence of all these factors, youth will prove a demographic bomb. Justin Yifu Lin has put this assertion that with the provision of requisite infrastructure and facilities, youth bulge can prove to a

“demographic dividend” (Lin: 2012). He further described that at the same time, if employments, equal opportunities and justice are denied to the youth; it will lead towards frustration and will prove them to be a “demographic bomb” (Lin: 2012).

It can be reiterated with responsibility that youth bulge might either prove fatal or might yield maximum dividends. And it certainly depends upon the government and society that how these are able to utilize this ambivalent situation. If the governments are able to create requisite atmosphere and adequate opportunities for the effective utilization of youth; the youth will surely prove an asset for the country. In other situation, it may take an undesired turn. Therefore, Youth Bulge became instrumental in unleashing and triggering the uprising in Middle East & North Africa and social media has proved very helpful in this regard especially in the atmosphere of state-controlled media.

CONCLUSION

Media is a fourth pillar of the state which safeguards the three state institutions i.e Legislative, Executive & Judiciary and serves as a watchdog. In Middle East & North Africa, media was governed by the state and faced enormous curbs. In this scenario, a substitute; social media took birth and acted in the absence of free media to mobilize the people, coordinate activities and communicate. During the course of present study, it is observed that the role of social media and networks in uprisings of 2011 in Middle East & North Africa has played a vital role in consolidating the uprising designs and in the absence of this social media, these uprisings could have not been as fruitful and decisive as these have yielded the dividends now.

As a matter of fact, social media communicated the appalling situation of people to already dissatisfied youth who happened to be educated and privy to the Western ideas, modern concepts, fruits of democracy and human rights. It is admitted that most of the youth of the Middle Eastern and North African regions became desperate with the monarchy/non-representative governments, unemployment, corruption, economic disparity, discriminatory attitude towards minorities and weak government institutions and they raised their voices against the existing regimes and social media remained instrumental in helping them achieve this goal.

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