

of instability” stretching from Latin America across sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East to South Asia. The document singles out Pakistan, Yemen, Nigeria, and Afghanistan as particular threats.

An interplay between volatile young populations and upheaval is not new, according to proponents of youth bulge analysis. They say an imbalanced age structure has contributed to several major historical conflicts, including everything from the English rebellion of the 1640s to World War I and II, which occurred when Europe’s population was youthful. More recently, they contend, a large number of young people helped fuel both the Iranian revolution and Latin America’s Marxist revolts of the 1970s.

And yet, although friction sparked by youth bulges is easy to pinpoint in hindsight, using the indicator to predict future conflict, and conversely, where stability might take hold, is much more difficult. Cincotta is among the few scholars who have tried to translate the new research into a forward-looking model. Analyzing population and governance trends beginning in 1970, he tracked the share of youth in the working-age population in countries that have achieved liberal democracy, qualifying as “free” in democracy watchdog Freedom House’s annual rankings of political freedom. (Cincotta calculates a youth bulge differently from the way Goldstone does, using the 15-to-29 age group as a proportion of the working-age population rather than of the total adult population.)

Although a young country was prone to conflict, Cincotta found, as its population matured and the proportion of 15- to 64-year-olds concentrated in the youth bracket declined, the chance it would adopt and maintain democracy improved. The tipping point came when the share of youth in the working-age population fell to between 36% and 42%. At that point, a country has a 50-50 chance of achieving liberal democracy, and chances improve if it can get beyond its youth bulge and on a path toward maturity.

In addition to predicting where democracy might take hold, Cincotta says, his model can indicate which countries might be roiled by unrest. There is hope for democracy in Tunisia, he says. Thanks to a declining birth rate, the country is now at the tail end of its youth bulge, with a median age of 29. But prospects for Egypt and Yemen, with median ages of 24 and 18, are dimmer, he adds. “For those two populations, one would expect more violence,” Cincotta says.



**Wise women.** In many nations, women over age 65 are becoming a growing force in community stability and social change.

## GRAY LADIES IN THE SPOTLIGHT

**VAST THROGS OF ANGRY YOUNG MEN MAY BE ONE OF THE LASTING IMAGES OF THE** protests that toppled Egyptian strongman Hosni Mubarak earlier this year. But it’s a member of another rapidly growing demographic group—call it “wise old women”—that some Egyptians have named “the mother of the revolution.” At the height of the fray, a silver-haired, 79-year-old activist, author, and physician named Nawal El Saadawi appeared in the streets and on television screens to counsel and encourage her younger allies. “We will win!” she assured one interviewer.

For researchers who chart the growing numbers and shifting roles of women older than 65, El Saadawi represents one emerging trend: a growing corps of graying women who are actively engaged in the civic life of their often male-dominated communities, taking on stabilizing social roles that others sometimes can’t. Already, studies show older women are a major source of community cohesion in many cultures by taking care of grandchildren and ailing family members, often men who typically die at younger ages than women. And “go-getter gran-nies” are also a disproportionately high source of volunteer labor in many nations, including the United States.

Not all women, however, are experiencing “active aging.” In another trend, more older women are living alone on meager financial resources, with a disability or an illness. In the United States, for example, 40% of women over 65 years old now live alone, according to census figures, compared with just 19% of older men, and many other nations are seeing similar trends. That’s feeding growing concerns about isolation and poverty among older women, as demographers predict that their global number will surge from some 300 million today to more than 850 million in 2050.

One nation paying close attention to these twin trends is China, which expects to have more than 100 million older women by 2050, many left behind in rural villages as young workers move to the city. “Aged women are seen as a burden” but also as possible “contributors to building a civil society” in China, says Xiangxian Wang, a sociologist at Tianjin Normal University in China who has been studying the issue. But they are often frozen out of village leadership committees due to “pervasive public and private” gender discrimination that has “systemically destroyed women’s fair representation,” she concluded in a 2009 study published in the journal *Asian Women*.

What may help turn this tide, Wang says, are hundreds of “Aging Associations” that have come into existence in the past few decades. Originally established to help care for older people, in some places they have now become “the main force to promote rural democracy” by providing training in leadership and activism. Many older women will need such “outside help to have the chance to fully contribute,” she says.

In the meantime, the Chinese government is pondering other solutions, including a law that would provide pensions to elderly women and require children to regularly visit their aged mothers.

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