

AMR DALSH/REUTERS



Electioneering in Egypt

How democracy comes of age

Sara Reardon

A YEAR after ousting Hosni Mubarak, Egypt appears poised this week to elect his former minister of foreign affairs, Amr Moussa, as its next president. Many commentators say his presidency will differ little from Mubarak's, disappointing those who hoped to see a liberal democracy emerge from the youthful uprisings last year.

Meanwhile, Yemen elected their ousted leader's vice-president on a single-candidate ballot, violence surrounds Libya's elections and Syrian protests get bloodier by the day. Was the Arab Spring all for naught?

The recent turn of events does not surprise demographer Richard Cincotta of the Stimson Center in Washington DC. The fact that the populations of these countries are all very young, he argues, predicted not only that

revolutions would occur, but also that it may be some time before they make a successful transition to liberal democracies.

Cincotta studied revolutions between 1972 and 1989, focusing on the age structure of countries. He found that oppressive autocracies with a median population age between 25 and 35 had the best chances

of becoming democracies.

All of the countries that made the transition when their median age was greater than 30 are still democracies today. Nine out of 10 countries with a median age less than 25 slid back into oppressive regimes following revolution. Any older than 35 and revolutions did not occur in the first place. The only other indicator that came close to predicting transition success with the same level of accuracy was wealth per capita. Cincotta presented his results at the Population Association of America meeting in San Francisco earlier this month.

If the pattern holds, Tunisia – with a median age of 30 – is the Arab Spring country most likely to hold a democracy permanently. Egypt and Libya have median ages of 25 and 26, respectively, giving them a fighting chance of moving to democracy in the next few years, according to Cincotta. But Syria and Yemen – at 21 and 17, respectively – will be lucky to end up with even partial democracies, he says.

Why this pattern exists is unclear. Cincotta himself admits that age is a useful indicator but not a cause for stable transitions. One possible explanation is that older populations tend to be associated with mature, complex societies, says Yaneer Bar-Yam of the New England Complex Systems Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts. As societies mature and acquire the

institutions and infrastructures of developed nations – urbanisation, higher income, women's rights and education to name a few – birth rates tend to drop, and the median age goes up (see diagram). All these factors reinforce each other, says Bar-Yam.

At the same time, a complex societal infrastructure is key for a country to make the transition from revolutionary chaos to a newly organised democracy, he

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says. Under the right conditions, a new leadership can be slotted in at the top of existing infrastructure without too much disruption.

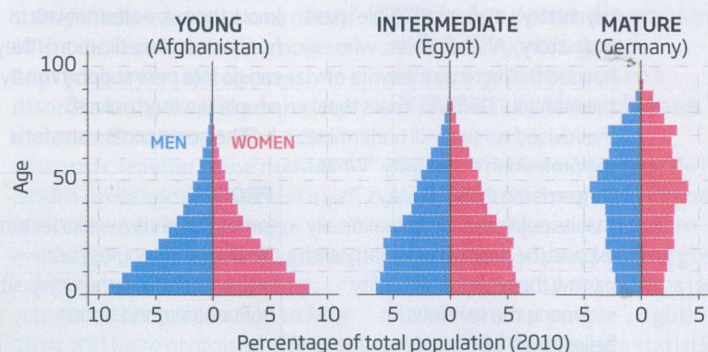
Trust – of leaders in their people and vice versa – is another key factor, says Jack Goldstone of George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. He points out that such mutual trust is less likely to manifest in a young population, which tends to be suspicious of government.

What does all this mean for the Arab Spring countries? According to Bar-Yam, although its relatively low median age suggests Egypt will not immediately move to a stable democracy, the fact that it has a well-organised military system means it may do so in future. By contrast, Syria and Libya have no such organisation.

Watch for Algeria and Morocco to change within the coming years, Cincotta says, followed by Saudi Arabia and Jordan in the 2020s. Revolutions are likely in sub-Saharan Africa, where most regimes are oppressive and most countries' median age is younger than 20. "But there's no point in talking about transition to democracy because fertility there is so high," says Jennifer Sciubba of Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee. Unless birth rates decline, she says, Africa is doomed to continuous revolts for decades to come. ■

Growing into democracy

As societies evolve, birth rates typically drop and the population ages



SOURCE: UN DESA