Politics and Complexity

27 NOVEMBER 2024

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Political systems are rarely as stable as they appear on the surface. Although what might be most visible to the political observer are diplomatic conflicts or regime strategies, there are deeper, underlying structural forces that shape the fate of countries. This is because political orders are dynamic and complex systems made up of intricate interconnections and undergo adaptations and transformations similar to what can be observed in natural systems. In my view, understanding these structural factors is key to gaining a deep understanding of international politics and acknowledging the role internal dynamics play in shaping foreign and security policy.

One theory that aims to advance such a structural approach is Structural Demographic Theory (SDT). Counter to many traditional approaches, SDT

analyzes societies by placing them along three key dimensions: demographics, elites and the state. These three factors are interconnected through non-linear feedback mechanisms that generate the potential for sociopolitical instability.

Why Traditional Approaches Are Insufficient

The most popular theories on how political dynamics function share a form of deterministic reductionism which leaves out the nuances of multifactorial political change. Geopolitical realism, whether classical, offensive or defensive, fundamentally misunderstands state behaviour by leaving out the critical role of internal political processes (see Zakaria's "From Wealth to Power"). Marxist theory likewise reduces the state to a mere sphere of economic class relations and thereby ignores the autonomous strategic interests of the state to secure itself in the international system. Lastly, traditional demographic frameworks such as Malthusianism also suffer from overly focusing on population growth while neglecting demographic shifts, elite behaviour, state responses and its complex interplay. This lack of analytical means calls for a framework that encompasses the various factors and players that interact in complex and interwoven networks and form adaptive political systems.

Applying Structural Demographic Theory

A fitting example which exemplifies the structural conditions that produced turmoil in a political system is the Arab Spring. These conditions, namely youth bulges, elite overproduction and decreased state legitimacy, were all present in this case and vindicate the theory's main point that political instability is the product of the interaction and feedback loops created by these structural factors and not of single factors.

Youth Bulges

Egypt represents a perfect example to illustrate the demographic factor of SDT theory. From 1950 to 2010, the population grew from 21,5 to 81 million inhabitants, with under-24-year-olds making up 54% of the population. But why are these youth bulges significant? Goldstone notes that "the rapid growth of youth can undermine existing political coalitions, creating instability. Large youth cohorts are often drawn to new ideas and heterodox religions, challenging older forms of authority. In addition, because most young people have fewer responsibilities for families and careers, they are relatively easily mobilised for social or political conflicts." The preceding era also saw a dramatic increase in highly educated youth who faced high levels of unemployment/underemployment and were concentrated in the capital city. This new educated class, whose upward mobility was hampered by the government's inability to create enough fitting jobs, represented a significant factor in the revolution.

Elite Conflict

Elite dynamics play another critical role in the theoretical framework of SDT. In it, established elites (inherited status), new elites (self-made), aspirant elites (seeking status through wealth or education), and counter-elites

(frustrated aspirants) interact in intricate ways. Moreover, as competition among this group increases, conspicuous consumption rises, inflating the income levels deemed necessary to maintain elite status. This process can lead to a decline in social cooperation norms and generate internal tensions.

In Egypt, this dynamic can be observed in the growing tensions between the military establishment and the civilian economic elite represented by Gamal Mubarak, son of President Hosni Mubarak and his heir apparent. Egypt's military had been a critical supporter of the regime led by Hosni Mubarak and played a pivotal role in politics and controlling significant economic assets.

However, in the time period prior to the upheaval, this power balance began to shift. Gamal Mubarak sought to shift power away from the military by building a parallel network of political and business elites. With this came huge benefits for this aspiring elite class, such as government monopolies and deals with foreign investors, which led to Gamal's allies amassing fortunes of over $1 billion each.

When the protests began, the military thus viewed it as an opportunity to remove the emerging counter-elite rather than loyally stamping out the protest, thereby playing an enormous role in the revolution's success.

State legitimacy

State fragility was a crucial factor in the Arab Spring, particularly in sultanistic regimes like, for example, those in Egypt and Tunisia. These regimes delegitimised formal institutions and heavily relied upon patronage to ensure control, thus concentrating power in the hands of an autocrat. Over time, this form of control combined with rampant corruption, inequality and unemployment led to the delegitimisation of the regime and thus created a vulnerability which could then be taken advantage of.

Why Structural Demographic Theory Matters Today

The Arab Spring provides a clear example of how SDT's framework can help us understand the dynamics of political instability. The revolutions were not caused by isolated events but were the result of complex interactions between demographic changes, elite competition and a delegitimised state.

As was shown in this article, SDT offers a unique and novel way to analyze long-term patterns within specific countries which have an enormous influence on global politics. Understanding and recognising these patterns affords policymakers and analysts a tool with which they can preempt and mitigate the causes of instability.