



The Politics and Economics of Pakistan's Youth

The effect on youth and its development in Pakistan

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Disclaimer

This paper has been developed by the external Contributing Author, Ms. Niloufer Siddiqui. The opinions, statements and advice contained within this paper do not necessarily represent those of the UN, UNDP nor NHDR.

Introduction

The changing demographic composition of Pakistan is likely to have far-ranging effects, impacting both the political landscape and the nature of conflict in this turbulent county. The average age for Pakistanis in 2010 was 21.6 years, and 67% of the population is currently estimated to be under the age of 30. Nearly half (47.8%) of the 84 million registered voters in the 2013 elections were aged between 18 and 35.¹ About 20% (19.77%) were under the age of 26.² There is a strong need to understand the political and policy preferences of this age group in order to more accurately assess the future of democracy, the possible successes of various policy agendas and the likely course of development in the country.

In this memo, I first outline the possible advantages and disadvantages of these demographic changes and the current age structure. Then, I leverage existing public opinion data to provide a profile of Pakistani youth – who they are and what they believe – and what that may mean for future political leanings of the Pakistani populace. Thirdly, I assess the extent to which Pakistani youth are politically engaged by examining their support of various political parties and political platforms. Finally, I explore the history of student politics in Pakistan and assess what its role is today, given the long-time ban on student unions. Ultimately I conclude that youth in Pakistan are not necessarily more pessimistic about the future of the country than their older counterparts, and that in key ways they are more liberal and progressive.

Demographic Dividend or Disaster? What the literature tells us

Pakistan is currently experiencing a youth bulge whereby its working age population is increasing and its dependency rate falling. Such youth bulges are often perceived as “demographic dividends” which are characterized by a rise in the rate of economic growth that occurs due to a rising share of working age people in a population. In situations such as Pakistan’s, where a fragile political and security situation has rendered the economic outlook bleak, however, there is a risk of this burgeoning population of youth becoming demoralized as a result of an increasing unemployment rate. There is also the real fear that these demographic

¹ Gallup Pakistan Election Studies, “Pakistan’s National Election 2013: Exit Poll Survey Report.”

² Ibid.

changes may cause massive social upheaval, including mass migration patterns which place newfound resource pressure on food, water, and energy.³

The economic advantages of a demographic dividend are straightforward. According to estimates, one-third of the East Asian miracle growth can be attributed to the demographic dividend⁴; a study of 78 Asian and non-Asian countries further showed a positive correlation between demography and economic growth.⁵ With fewer children being born, the theory predicts that more women will join the workforce. The effect on savings is also important – a decline in the nation’s dependency ratio is usually associated with a rise in the average savings rate.⁶ According to Modigliani’s life cycle hypothesis, income varies systematically over people’s lives and saving allows consumers to “move income from those times in life when income is high to those when it is low”; consumers smooth consumption over their lifetimes and will save and accumulate wealth during their working years.⁷ Thus, unlike the very young and very old, who consume more output than they generate, members of the working age population contribute to both output and savings more than they consume.

On the other hand, however, scholars have found a correlation between youth bulges and political violence. Henrik Urdal, for example, has argued that “in countries where youth make up 35% of the total adult population, the risk of conflict, with all other factors being equal, increases by 150%” compared to countries where youth make up only 17% of the adult population.⁸ Indeed, youth bulges increase the likelihood of spontaneous and low-intensity violence (such as riots and protests) as well as more organized forms of armed conflict. There are many possible reasons for this. First, unemployed youth face a low opportunity cost of joining a rebellion (Collier 2000). Second, their motivation for joining a rebellion may be high if they have cause for grievance against the state, and a large group of young men looking for employment who are unable to be absorbed by the labor market may prove fertile ground for recruitment to various causes.

Pakistani youth are more educated than their older counterparts. According to UNICEF data from 2012, the literacy rate of male individuals aged between 15-24 is 79.1% while for

³ Cohen, Craig. “Pakistan 2020: The Policy Imperatives of Pakistani Demographics.” Working Paper Series, NPEC.

⁴ Bloom, D., and J. Williamson, “Demographic Transitions and Economic Miracles in Emerging Asia,” *World Bank Economic Review*. Vol. 12, 1998, pp. 419–456.

⁵ James. *Ibid.*

⁶ Basu, Kaushik. “India’s demographic dividend.” *BBC News*. July 25, 2007.

⁷ Mankiw, N. Gregory. *Macroeconomics*. Sixth Edition. Worth Publishers, New York. 2007. Page 474.

⁸ http://www.wilsoncenter.org/events/docs/Urdal_2.pdf

women in the same age range, it is 61.5%.⁹ Yet, half of Pakistan’s youth, according to a Dec 2012-Jan 2013 British Council nationally representative survey of 5,271 young people (aged 18-29), is not working: 7% are unemployed, while 43% are home-makers. An additional 12% are self-employed and another 18% are students, indicating that only a very small minority has a secure form of employment. British Council survey respondents considered Pakistan’s biggest problem to be inflation, followed by unemployment. This low rate of employment means both that Pakistan is unlikely to leverage the economic advantages provided by the existing demographic structure and that for those men actively seeking employment, the possibility of being seduced by other pursuits, including anti-state causes, is high. Given the existence of institutionalized extremist outfits, a network of religious schools intended to recruit precisely from these groups of individuals and a national narrative that is sympathetic to certain radical Islamist causes, this remains a real fear.

Who are the Pakistani youth and what do they believe?

The British Council concluded, on the basis of their 2012-3 national survey, that the 18-29 age group in Pakistan demonstrates an overwhelming degree of pessimism. 71% expressed an unfavorable opinion of the government, 67% of parliament and 69% of political parties. By contrast, 77% of young people approved of the army, while 74% were favorably inclined towards religious organizations. Only 29% favored democracy. While these percentages are certainly striking, particularly the small number in favor of democracy, they must be analyzed against a benchmark of overall public opinion in Pakistan. For example, Pew data from 2012 indicates that, compared to the older respondents, younger people held more unfavorable opinions of Gen. Parvez Kayani, Chief of Army Staff at the time (at a statistically significant level). Young people were also more likely to believe that it was important that relations between America and Pakistan improve. While generally unfavorable opinions of India are held by most Pakistanis across all age groups, those under 30 were also significantly more likely to hold more favorable opinions of India than those above 30.

Indeed, younger people expressed greater optimism in response to questions meant to more directly measure their assessment of the state of affairs and confidence in the future of Pakistan. For example, in response to the question, “And now thinking about the future, overall, today are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the country?” those under 30 were

⁹ UNICEF Statistics: http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/pakistan_pakistan_statistics.html

significantly more optimistic than those over 30 in the Pew survey of 2013. They were also more likely to have more optimistic views of Pakistan’s economy. In response to the question “When children today in Pakistan grow up, do you think they will be better off or worse off financially than their parents?” younger people were also significantly more likely to believe that their children would be better off.

Of course, this data should be interpreted with caution, just as the British Council findings. No doubt the absolute levels of some youth beliefs are worrisome – the lack of faith in democracy and the elevated support for the military, in particular. However, as mentioned, the youth express *relatively* more optimistic and progressive opinions on many of these issues. Still, even these relative results can be interpreted in two ways: 1) that the new generation is more optimistic than previous generations (a “cohort” effect); or 2) that youth in general are more optimistic overall than their older counterparts (a “period” effect). The “period” effect suggests that there is something about being young that in itself leads to greater optimism, just as it is more frequently associated with liberal ideals, and that these opinions taper off as one grows older. Hence, the oft-quoted adage: “Any man who is under 30 and is not a liberal has no heart; and any man who is over 30 and is not a conservative has no brains.” Indeed, American, Indian and Arab youth have all demonstrated more optimism about their future than have their parents.

If the period effect holds true – and some political science research has found that it does (for example, Crittendon 1962)¹⁰ – then Pakistani youths’ relatively more dovish views on relations with India and the United States should not be surprising. However, some other statistical results then become more worrisome. For example, while still generally unfavorable, Pakistani youth have a more favorable opinion of the Taliban than their older counterparts. According to Pew data from 2013, 17% of young people had a somewhat or very favorable opinion of the Taliban, while 13% of their older counterparts had similar opinions of the Taliban. This difference is statistically significant. Only 11% of British Council survey respondents believed that terrorism was the biggest problem facing the country.

Perhaps this finding is indicative of the context in which youth in Pakistan have come of age (or, are coming of age). A working paper by Ghitza and Gelman finds that, “The political events of a voter’s teenage and early adult years, centered around the age of 18, are enormously important in the formation of these long-term partisan preferences.”¹¹ According to their model, events at age 18 are about three times as powerful as those at age 40. For the latest American

¹⁰ Crittendon, John. 1962. “Aging and Party Affiliation.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 26(4):648–657.

¹¹ Ghitza, Yair & Andrew Gelman. “The Great Society, Reagan’s Revolution, and Generations of Presidential Voting.” Working paper, July 7, 2014.

generation, born in 1985 and later, the authors find that the effect of the Cold War and foreign policy successes of Presidents Reagan and Bush are memories of the past generation, not their own. This group entered their “peak socialization years” in 1999 and two years later, in 2001, President George W. Bush, a deeply dividing figure, began his tenure. As a result of the events of 9/11, this younger cohort shifted in a pro-Republican direction though this eventually declined as Bush’s policies became increasingly unpopular.

No research currently exists to indicate whether such a model travels to the developing world or contexts such as Pakistan’s. Partisanship in Pakistan is weak and parties are not as clearly divided on ideological grounds as the Democratic and Republican parties in the United States. Hence, it is unlikely that the policies of a particular president or prime minister will have long-ranging deterministic effects on young people’s ideological leanings. Nonetheless, the main point of Ghitza and Gelman may still apply broadly. Youth in Pakistan lived their formative years through the Musharraf dictatorship, and faced the after-effects of the war on terror directly. Many may not truly know a world beyond the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its various affiliate groups. It is very likely that the previous generation did not know that the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) even existed in Pakistan, let alone any details about this region. The current generation has been immersed in a dialogue involving the pros and cons of military operations in FATA and of drone strikes; they have had to deal with the reality of internally displaced people (IDPs) more directly and discuss possible solutions to regular militant attacks. There is little doubt that this context has had an impact on the youth’s ideological leanings.

Political Engagement in Pakistan: The PTI Phenomenon

In assessing the political engagement of youth in Pakistan today, it would be remiss not to begin with a discussion of Imran Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI).

The striking rise of the PTI has raised a number of questions about party politics in the country and forced us to reexamine our understanding of the major determinants of voting behavior in both urban and rural settings. One of the issues worthy of further investigation is the role of the “youth vote” in propelling PTI to the position of second-largest party and challenging the long-standing status quo in the country. The large number of young people who have repeatedly shown up at PTI rallies and protests over the last few months is also an indication that this is not merely a passing trend. Even a cursory examination of social media platforms (admittedly a biased sample) prior to the elections of 2013 and in the months after demonstrated a

political zeal that caught many observers by surprise. The zeal appeared as much indicative of hope for a *naya* Pakistan (as PTI’s slogan goes) as it did demonstrate a degree of disillusionment regarding the political status quo which privileges dynastic and patronage-based politics.

According to Pew data from the 2013 elections, 26% of new voters (aged 18-24) voted for PTI and 21% of those between 25-29 years. Interestingly, the PTI vote bank has a considerably higher share of new voters who are educated till at least high school compared to PML-N. Unlike voting trends in 2008, when there was no perceptible difference in the support of the PPP, PML-N or PML-Q among the young or old, in 2013, there was significantly less support for the PML-N among those aged under 30. Gallup’s exit poll data finds that, “Among voters over 30 years of age, PML-N wins by 19% points. Among those under 30, this edge gets reduced to 7% points only.” This should not have been a surprising result. In a 2012 global attitudes survey conducted by Pew, those under 30 were significantly more likely than their older counterparts to express favorable opinions of Imran Khan.

These numbers, while impressive for a party that had been largely a non-entity until this point, nonetheless indicates that there is no monolithic youth vote. A Dawn editorial written soon after the election results stated, “The mistake the PTI leadership made was that of a foolish army: it believed its own propaganda. On television, Khan advanced the complacent view that PTI would be swept to power by a wave of new young voters. No supportive data was furnished. Neither the media, nor Khan’s team, scrutinized the claim of a monolithic youth vote. In reality, young voters were divided.”¹² Perhaps the dividing line among young voters is similar to that between their older counterparts – across rural and urban lines, for example, or patronage or *biradari*. More research remains to be done about voting determinants across all age groups.

Nonetheless, as a USIP report writes, “This engagement with politics by Pakistani youth marks a major divergence from recent years, during which high demand by Pakistani youth for positive political change was inversely met with high disapproval of active political engagement.”¹³ Indeed, the above statistical evidence is corroborated by qualitative examples and anecdotal evidence which suggest a greater degree of participation and interest in politics than has been seen in the recent past.

Imran Khan’s statement that “I only need the youth of Pakistan to bring change, not big names or big politicians”¹⁴ and other similar proclamations have been effective primarily because

¹² “Why PTI Lost.” Dawn, May 28, 2013.

¹³ Flamenbaum, Stephanie. “The PTI and Pakistan’s Changing Political Landscape.” United States Institute of Peace, Peacebrief. May 23, 2012.

¹⁴ Ilyas, Ferya & Ali Usman, “PTI only needs Pakistan’s youth, not big politicians: Imran Khan,” The Express Tribune, November 4, 2012.

no other political party had directly taken youth into confidence and made them a central part of their party’s agendas. One effect of the PTI’s successful engagement with young voters – even if just voters of a certain social class – then, was to mobilize other political parties to similarly engage with this important constituency. The USIP report cited earlier states, “As the PTI phenomenon transforms Pakistan’s youth into an accessible and arguable vital voting bloc, the PPP and PML-N have been forced to heighten their youth outreach.” For example, prior to the 2013 elections, the PML-N assembled a team specifically to address why urban youth in Punjab were pro-PTI and to try to arrest this trend. They found that, “the [youth] are pro-PTI because they feel like they have a role to play in that party. They basically want importance. If the PML-N gives them room, [they would be more likely to hold pro-PMLN opinions]”¹⁵ In an effort to further engage with this important constituent group, the PML-N implemented a youth training program and promised the distribution of laptops to students at Punjab University.

Thus, while the PTI phenomenon does broadly indicate a growing degree of political engagement by the youth, in others ways, it is still too new and transient for us to fully analyze. For example, does support for the PTI indicate that this generation is more conservative than the last? The left-right ideological spectrum does not fully apply in Pakistan, where liberals and conservatives often find themselves on the same end of the spectrum (such as on national security issues), albeit for different reasons. Support for the PTI is no exception. Akbar Zaidi right argues, “Questions about which party supports which political ideology, remain largely unclear in the *naya* Pakistan.”¹⁶ Certainly a vote for the PTI is not a vote for Islamist parties. Its means of governance in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, for example, is not steeped in Islamist ideology, and Imran Khan’s personality is not comparable to either the JUI’s Fazlur Rehman or any of the past or present Jamaat-e-Islamist leaders. Many of Khan’s supporters are inspired by his purported desire to challenge the status quo, including the maintenance of power and wealth in a few hands, certainly a progressive value. Still, as Imran Khan has himself stated, the PTI considers itself closer to the Jamaat-e-Islami than any other parties¹⁷ and has partnered with it in KP, has adopted a relatively pro-Taliban stance and has appeared hawkish in statements regarding foreign policy.

Political scientists have found that party identification is the biggest predictor of voting behavior and that such identification is normally sticky; that is, the party with whom one identifies tends to remain constant over that person’s life. Campbell et al. (1964) finds that party

¹⁵ Interview conducted as part of author’s dissertation research. Islamabad, Pakistan. March 2014.

¹⁶ Zaidi, S. Akbar. “The Old and the New in *Naya* Pakistan,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol XLVIII No. 24, June 15, 2013.

¹⁷ “PTI Closer to JI than Other Parties, says Imran,” Dawn, Nov 5, 2014.

identification is formed early in life and is directed in large part by parental influence. In Pakistan, where party identification is weak, party membership rare, and party labels only one of the many possible determinants of voting behavior, this research should be read with caution. In addition, the longevity of the PTI movement remains uncertain. It is possible that young people will become disillusioned by the party or its leader as it continues to employ risky tactics. However, it also appears unlikely that the youth, who were propelled to vote for “change”, will turn back to old established centers of power, whether dynastic, feudal or patronage-based. The most likely fear is that if disillusioned, the PTI fanbase may just once again revert back into itself and become more politically disengaged.

Student Unions

Student politics in Pakistan have had a long, pivotal and, at times, sordid history. A 2013 Jinnah Institute report explains that in the early years of Pakistan’s independence, student politics were dynamic in part because there were few other avenues for representation; for example, during the Ayub regime, there were indirect elections. The increasing cooptation of student unions by political parties, however, brought violence on to campus in a way that indelibly marked the engagement of students in politics. Eventually the state stepped in to ban their presence and activities.

In the early years of Pakistan’s independence, student groups played key roles in such seminal moments of the country’s history as the movement which forced Ayub to step down and the Bangladesh movement (in what was East Pakistan at the time). Groups were ideologically divided and passionate but remained largely free of violence. However, a combination of an influx of weapons during the Afghan jihad coupled with “a policy of using students as proxies for national-level political battles” resulted in student politics becoming increasingly steeped in violence.¹⁸ In 1984, Zia ul Haq decided to ban student unions. However, researchers agree that this ban was not uniformly implemented so student groups such as the Jamaat-e-Islami’s Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba, a particularly violent offender, continued to function. Violence on campuses reached alarming levels, particularly in Karachi where political parties played out their battles in colleges and university. The Jinnah Institute finds that the end result was that student politics no

¹⁸ “Apolitical or Depoliticised? Pakistan’s Youth and Politics: A Historical Analysis of Youth Participation in Pakistan Politics,” Jinnah Institute Research Report, 2013.

longer influenced national politics in the country, in stark contrast to the 1970s, during which student unions produced many of today’s politicians.

Thus, an environment which had proven to be a natural one for activism and politics to grow and flourish was no longer available to new generations of Pakistanis. Even as the ban on student groups has been lifted, the strong association between political parties and their affiliated student groups has prevented new and progressive voices, thoughts and ideas from emerging. In many cases, the nepotism and political patronage seen as necessary for entrance into politics at the national level has been equally prevalent at the college/university level, further demoralizing the youth.¹⁹

Conclusions

- 1) Pakistan is unlikely to be able to take advantage of the demographic dividend, given existing employment rates and forecasts for the future. This increases the risk that a disillusioned and frustrated youth will be a recruiting ground for extremist outfits.
- 2) Reports suggesting that Pakistan’s youth is both pessimistic and conservative need to be read with caution. While absolute levels of support in democracy and faith in Pakistan’s future may be dismally low, they are nonetheless greater than their older counterparts’, at statistically significant levels. Current research, however, does not allow us to decipher whether we are seeing a cohort or period effect.
- 3) Youth support of PTI indicates a growing level of political engagement in the country, unlike what we have seen in the last few decades. This is a positive development. However, the PTI movement also indicates a support of policies that are perhaps more conservative than progressive. For example, despite being more likely to want better relations with India and the U.S., young people in Pakistan are significantly more likely to view the Taliban favorably than older generations. This generation came into political consciousness during a military dictatorship and soon after the events of 9/11 changed the nature of militancy in the country – both factors which are likely to have affected their ideology and partisanship. While definitive statements of youth’s ideological leanings cannot be made, these data points are worthy of our attention.
- 4) The ban on student unions, their cooptation by national-level party politics and the overall violent nature of campus politics has meant that colleges and universities are no

¹⁹ Jinnah Institute Report. Ibid.

longer places that see the production of future activists and leaders, nor do they directly affect the direction of national politics.