

Demography and Democracy in Ethiopia: The Disruptive Potentials of a “bottom-heavy” Age Structure and its Capacity to Breed Endless Generations of Rock Throwing Youths.

By Aynalem Adugna* May, 2020

Do not ask me why former President Lemma Megersa’s trip to Bahir Dar and declaration of Ethiopian-ness as an addiction became the launch pad - a time-stamp – for my near-compulsive tracking of the travails of Ethiopian politics. I couldn’t tell you for sure but my training in demography might have something to do with it. Along the way though, my (not always virtual) rendezvous relished the rollercoaster ride of bursting adrenaline rush interspersed by moments of apparent calm. I say ‘not always virtual’ because I did make a sojourn back home to attend a [conference](#). Political moves by activist leaders provided the backdrop for the aforementioned ride as well as much needed respite points. I came to realize much later that the former president’s remarks were just a signpost along a new road paved first by a visit to Bahir Dar of Oromo youths (the largest demographic block in the country) who sought to declare figurative ownership of Lake Tana (“*Tana keigna*”). The youth group’s visit was itself an apparent overture of solidarity with the second largest demographic block – Amhara youths – who had earlier stood by their Oromo compatriots in the struggle to bring down a brutal repressive system. Demography appears to also have had a hand in the eventual rise to power of the youngest African leader who had barely breached his 4th decade in age – Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed. The whirlwind ride could give one a whiplash except for the calm manners and call for unity – *Medemer* – espoused by the new leader who may have subconsciously discovered the built-up wave of demographic momentum in the country and its capacity to wipe away everything in its path unless managed with care and due diligence. That is precisely what the prime minister appears to be doing, lest he be swept away himself by the might of pent-up demographic energies, aka the youth bulge in Ethiopia’s age pyramid (see Figure 1 below).

This article seeks to present the links between Ethiopian demography and the stiff challenge it brings to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s *Medemer* philosophy aimed at achieving democracy to usher in a new era of stable governments. It does so by providing a synthesis of three vital sources 1) a keynote [presentation](#) I gave at the Ethiopia-2020 [conference](#) on population and development 2) [interview](#) with Ms. Solome Tadese on Ethiopian women’s education and human rights, and its links to the future of Ethiopian demography and democracy, and 3) text of a keynote speech by Jan Abbink, Professor of Politics and Governance in Africa, entitled “Political renewal in Africa? Agency of protest and structure of governance in Sudan and Ethiopia, 2016-2020”.

With readers’ permission, I would like to start by laying out the main premise - that, in my view, and given Ethiopia’s youthful age structure, activist leaders of Ethiopia’s youth movement will not be a force for stability in the long run unless they mend their ways. I will make my case in the ensuing paragraphs by focusing on Ethiopia’s age pyramid (Figure 1) which looks the same now as it did under TPLF/EPRDF’s 27-year dominance, the Derg’s 17-year dictatorship, and a near half century of monarchic rule by Emperor Haile Silasie’s. What’s more, leaders that rode the demographic wave of the youth-bulge that toppled Haile Silasie’s regime and the young fighters cum war captives that brought us the un-ceremonial departure of Mengistu Hailemariam, did not in the long run bestow on us the democracy and stability they promised. Neither can the political elites now riding the demographic wave of the youth bulge at the bottom of today’s age pyramid. The latter’s democratic achievements, if any, will most likely be upended by that of the next wave of rebellion launched by

youngsters who are not yet of high school age, and their not yet born compatriots. In case you didn't figure this out already, the succeeding generation of revolutionary youth will far outnumber those that came before them. Given these inescapable demographic facts of what I call Ethiopia's "bottom heavy" age structure, the best choice is for leaders of the youth-bulge that toppled the TPLF/EPRDF's tight grip on power, to seize opportunities that are available to them now. This includes once-in-a-lifetime prospects provided by the prime minister's open invitations for political rivals to join forces and help break the cycle of volatility and work, instead, toward achieving and securing a long-lasting stable democracy. The key word here is stable.

At this juncture, a moment has arrived for me to lay out my second politico-demographic premise: that, despite the able leadership of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (my view) structural political change in Ethiopia is unlikely to be decisively permanent unless demographic patterns shift. Unfortunately, however, the shift I have in mind takes decades to take shape or reshape. Here, I am recalling what I referred to during the December 2019 [conference](#) as "Age Structure Transformation" or AST. Such transformations provide countries a window of opportunity to enjoy the fruits of what demographers call, the "Demographic Dividend". If leaders only seek to address or advance the political demands of the generation of youth they represent, which often includes taking or sharing power, the stabilizing actions now taking shape under Prime Minister Abiy will continually be challenged.

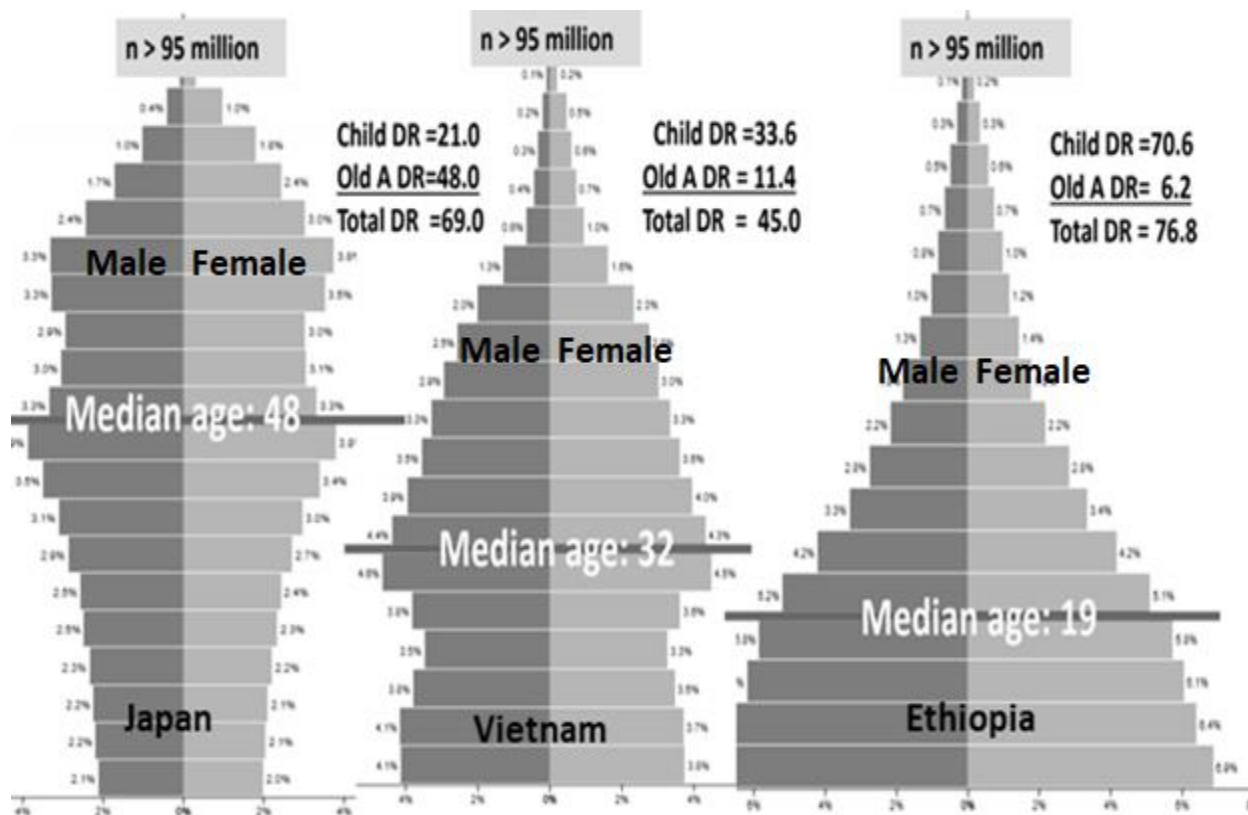


Figure 1. Age structure and level of development. DR stands for dependency ratio. Click [HERE](#) to see the source.

Ethiopian Demography and the Illusive Demographic Dividend

Researchers' attention to demography and its linkage to democracy cum societal stability is growing. This includes a more in-depth understanding of how the demographic dividend happens, how long it lasts, and its sustained impacts on democracy building. However, while the connectedness of economic factors with demographic trends is much widely recognized, demography's impacts on democracy and political stability, i.e., what it foretells about future revolts, youth uprisings, revolutions, or reforms (as is currently the case in Ethiopia), etc. are not fully understood. That said, the demography-democracy interface is a subfield which is in rapid advance and can equip us all with new insights on future developments, especially when considered in combination with known historical and sociopolitical paradigms.

A country is said to be reaping the benefits a demographic dividend when the age structure has shifted enough for a large segment of the population to be in the labor contributing post-middle school age range, and the tax-paying pre-retirement labor force. This is marked by a significant bulge in the middle (not the bottom) of the age pyramid. Since Ethiopia's median age is 19 (half of the country's population is 19 years old or younger) the bulge is firmly at the bottom, not in the middle (Figure 1). That is why I called it "bottom-heavy" during my [interview](#) with Fana Television.

Ethiopia and Sudan: Demography and the Road to Democracy

Professor Abbink refers to Ethiopia's and Sudan's age structure as 'not mature' because it is skewed towards a high proportion of young and economically dependent populations. Such age structures are shown by research not to be favorable for democracy building or long-term political stability, but instead for recurrent political contestations and violent uprisings. In other words, countries such as Ethiopia and Sudan that have low median age resulting from high fertility and high annual growth rates which lead to high dependency ratios (sum of populations in age 0 – 15 and 65+ divided by the size of the population between age 16 and 64) have demographic characteristics which are not amenable to democracy building or the creation of solid foundations for a stable political systems. The professor stresses that under such demographic landscape, the trigger to revolt is usually that of both perception and reality where state elites are viewed as politically corrupt and abusive of their power and privileges. He mentions Tunisia (population: approximately 12 million) as a confirming example where demographic balancing and political liberalization are taking place in tandem. Going back 35 years, the data on Tunisia shows a notable decrease in fertility and dependency ratios and an increase in median age with the age structure progressing toward greater maturity in advance of the 2015 political earthquake which further strengthened the foundations of a stable democratic system as, perhaps, the only functioning democracy in northern Africa.

Conversely, Ethiopia's population size during the above-mentioned [conference](#) was 112 million (up from an estimate of 19 million in 1950 and 66.5 million in the year 2000). The current doubling time is about 25 years. The conventional consensus among those working on the demography-economics interface is that the demographic 'dividend reaping window' opens up around the median age of 26-27 (a demographic "sweet-spot?"). This "sweet-spot" is considered very conducive to democracy building and institutional systems stabilization. Professor Abbink believes that Ethiopia will not reach this demographic milestone until 2045.

Of particular interest to me in Professor Jan Abbink's keynote is his comparative look at Africa's latest uprisings that have succeeded in toppling two dictatorial regimes in the neighboring countries of

Ethiopia and Sudan. These resulted in the installment of reformist prime ministers in both countries. In Ethiopia, however, even as the promise of democracy offered by Prime Minister Abiy was being well received by the masses, grumblings among those who stuck to stories of past grievances and group-think, started to advance the demands of their so-called constituencies. Hence fragmentation along ethnic-regional lines soon ensued subverting the Prime Minister's call for unity. As an example, an article in Addis Standard titled "[Dangerous Interregnum](#): The Anatomy of Ethiopia's Mismanaged Transition" sought to highlight the author's conviction that the reform movement was being mismanaged by the prime minister. I respectfully disagree even as I affirm my friendship with the author going back to high school years (family feud?). I believe that, such political flame-throwing loses sight of the disruptive potentials of a "bottom heavy" age pyramid and its capacity to breed endless generations of rock throwing youths. It also loses sight of the specter of 27 years of ethnic groupthink and politicking anchored in old grievances against generations of perceived offenders who are no longer alive but enshrined in quarter century narratives by TPLF's twisted exercise in the so-called constitutional federalism or regional self-determination.

What about Sudan? According to Professor Jan Abbink, Sudan saw a series of urban-centered youth upheavals while Ethiopia's revolts were mainly by small town male youth with focal points in rural or per-urban countryside. Other differences include the fact that in Sudan, a) protesters' ethnicity did not have a prominent role as it did in Ethiopia b) the role of young women was much more prominent and instrumental; women were a clear minority in Ethiopia's uprisings, c) perhaps the most significant and possibly most consequential difference is the role of professional organizations in Sudan, specifically that of the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) - a non-ethnic civil society groups in existence since the 1960s, and d) while the narrative of national unity and joint destiny re-emerged in Sudan, accounts of ethnicized grievances pushed by the political elite came to dominate the airwaves in Ethiopia thereby fueling ethno-regional agendas with unclear civic rights goals or economic programs. It is also worth noting that government structures that youth movements seek to topple and harness for their own ends, are very resilient in nature as entrenched authority figures and hierarchical institutions remain influential often through foreign support for old political actors as is suspected to be happening in Tigray. This is often based on political or economic expediency and vested interests rather than principled engagements. According to Professor Abbink, this can have disturbing influences with potentials to embolden elements in regional governments to launch subversive actions (as the TPLF in Tigray has been suspected of doing) or mischievous acts by elements in armed forces (this happened in the Amhara region). By hierarchical institutions, the professor is alluding to what is currently being referred to as 'deep state' among conservative circles in the United States.

Summary

In sum, this article sought to show that Ethiopia's current demographic profiles present unlikely scenarios for sustained democracy building, institutionalized systemic changes, or genuine political freedoms to materialize unless the current crop of political players are made aware and moderate their messaging and actions. Unless political contestants calibrate their views and actions with the prime minister's message of unity and stability, the country will most likely continue to face youth contestations along with conditions of significant unemployment and economic uncertainty. The article also showed differences and similarities between two upheavals and reformist governments agendas in Sudan and Ethiopia as well as the key pressure points for the two countries. Further, it reviewed the text of Professor Abbink's keynote which suggested first and foremost that, in Sudan, ethnicity and its

attendant demographics did not play a divisive role, but that it did so in Ethiopia, even as groups such as Oromo youths voiced support for Amhara youths, and vice versa in the early months that set the stage for the rise to power of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. Secondly, it showed that, in Sudan, women were much more instrumental in the demonstrations and in the media whereas in Ethiopia they were a clear minority, partly due to Ethiopia's protests occurring primarily in small town and rural setting, and not in the capital or other large cities. Thirdly, unlike the influencers in Ethiopia who had their roots in ethnic constituencies, professional organizations and non-ethnic civil society groups led the protests in the Sudan. Last but not least, the discourse of national unity and joint destiny re-surfaced in Sudan, but only haltingly in Ethiopia, where feelings of shared grievances against a generation of persons who are no longer alive (mainly long-gone heads of governments who were mostly Amhara) seemed to dominate. Ethnicized regional elites are continuing to push ethno-regional agendas even in the face of the prevailing COVID-19 threat. Remarkably, many failed to tune into the national discourse (unawares or by design), or heed persistent calls for unity that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed had powerfully outlined with skill and persuasive rhetoric. And in this way, the fate of the nation remains pinned to this generation of political leaders' success (or not) in understanding the undercurrent of demographic forces and the balancing act it requires to achieve political liberalization and a stable democratic future for Ethiopia. Ethiopian-ness does not have to remain an addiction for this to happen – just a principled acceptance coming from somewhere deep in one's own convictions.

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