

The Education Bulge

The literature on comparative conflict processes across the Arab and African regions have predominately focused on issues of natural resources, corruption, and underdevelopment. Few studies have centered education attainment as an important factor in inciting and shaping protest onset or protest outcomes. My dissertation contributes to the conflict literature by centering the transformative impact of education attainment upon labor market configurations into studies on grievance. I link economic studies on returns to education to the contentious politics literature of political science to analyze when educational attainment increases job insecurity along the occupational spectrum. My work is generously supported by the Diversifying Faculty Initiative fellowship and the Adam Smith Fellowship from the Mercatus Center at George Mason University.

My research speaks to international development theories on regime stability. I offer a unique take on under-development examining the impact of changing labor markets upon job security and wages for skilled labor. As higher education became more assessible and normalized, university graduation rates increased, as did stores of professional and skilled labor¹. I argue that oversupplies of university graduates in limited labor markets encourage skilled labor “downgrading”, or competition against secondary degree holders for jobs. When skilled labor downshift, less skilled employees are moved down and out of the labor market, inducing grievance for both groups. I argue that it is the behavior of educated labor in response to job insecurity that has negative downstream consequences along the occupational spectrum. Building from the existing literature, I make a three-fold argument: that (1) stable, highly repressive authoritarian regimes are most vulnerable to mass protest onset when experiencing an education bulge-sharp increases in higher education attainment that oversupplies the skilled labor market; (2) protests emerging from education bulges have higher intensity and durability than other protests; (3) and education bulge protests have a greater likelihood of success. I find that regimes which act as the main employer of skilled labor may be exceptionally vulnerable to antigovernmental protests during austerity periods or government hiring freezes.

I also find that large pools of skilled labor may also encourage greater mobilization during protests, boosting protest intensity. In examining mobilization, I initially find that the multiple social networks available to university graduates via alumni associations, professional associations, and the personal networks developed at university allow for an additive effect to protest networks. This chapters offers a rare examination of education variation in network size and impact and will be converted into conference papers prior to publication submission. The protest outcomes literature is undermined by a lack of consensus on defining, much less measuring what constitutes a protest success. I offer an innovative measurement of success: narrative control. I argue that education bulge protests benefit from a large cross-section of society, severely diminishing the ability of a regime to frame the protestors as aggrieved outsiders, greedy bourgeoisie, or common rabble. As such, regimes may find it difficult to control or co-opt the narrative, allowing education bulge mass protests to shape the acceptable slate of government responses. I find that education bulge protests may pose a greater escalation threat, in both size and means, than other protests, encouraging swifter and greater government concessions.

¹ Here labor is categorized along 4 dimensions. Professional labor is characterized by highly specialized training in the form of post-baccalaureate degrees. Skilled labor is characterized as individuals with specialized training in the form of advanced technical training and/or baccalaureate degrees. Semi-skilled labor is defined as individuals with more than a high school degree but less than a baccalaureate degree, indicating training in the form of completed associates degree or certification. Non-skilled labor is characterized as individuals with a high school degree.