

## A CRITIQUE OF THE YOUTH BULGE THEORY IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA AND MELANESIA

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### Introduction

IN THIS PRESENTATION, I ADDRESS A PRESSING DEVELOPMENT ISSUE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA, an independent nation in the subregion of the Pacific known as Melanesia. Papua New Guinea is undisputedly the largest country in Melanesia in terms of land mass and population size. The sociocultural diversity and complex precolonial history of Papua New Guinea is highlighted as one of many contributing factors to the contemporary challenges it faces as a nation.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I will use Papua New Guinea and Melanesia interchangeably.

The issue I will discuss is the perceived problem associated with Papua New Guinea's increasingly youthful population. Youth are defined by multilateral development institutions such as the UNICEF (2001) as the population between the ages of fifteen to twenty-five years. The age range useful in this research will be limited to the population between the ages of fifteen to twenty-nine years.

Papua New Guinea, like other Melanesian countries has consistently recorded a high population growth rate. PNG's annual population growth rate is estimated at 2.7 percent. In the general population, a significant number is comprised of young peoples. Papua New Guinea, like its Melanesian neighbor, the Solomon Islands, is said to have a very young population (Fig. 1).

Demographers refer to the significantly high population of young people in the population as the youth bulge. The youth bulge is evident where there

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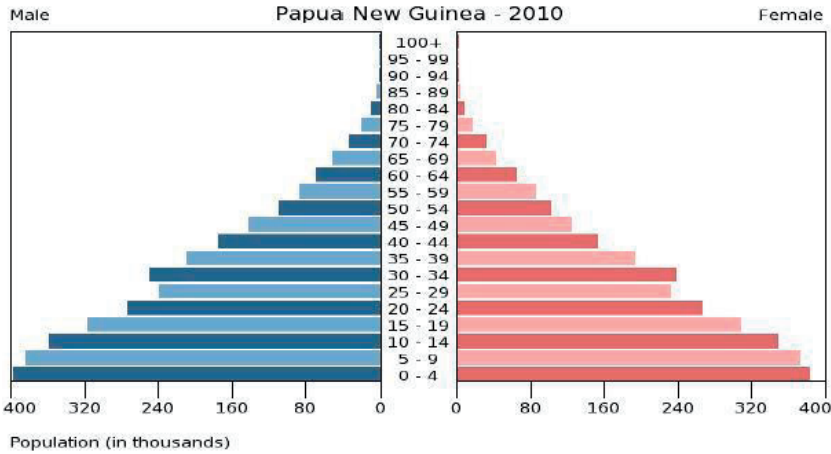


FIGURE 1. Papua New Guinea Population Pyramid. Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2010).

is “a sudden change in the age-structure of the population characterized by an increase in the number of young people aged 15–24 (or 29)” (Daumerie, 2008, 2), or the “population comprised of a large number of youth compared to other age groups” (UNICEF, 2001).

Since 2001, scholars and commentators on Melanesia argue that the unprecedented increase in the number of young people in the demographic structure of these countries as alarming developments, with potential effects on stability in the region. For instance, Graeme Dobell (2006) observes that “[W]hen 20 per cent of a country’s population is aged between 15 and 24 years *you got something that looks like it is potentially revolutionary*. . . [In] . . . Papua New Guinea and the Solomons the youth demographic was already hitting the 20 per cent mark. It averaged 17 per cent for the rest of the Pacific” (emphasis added).<sup>2</sup>

Neil Plimmer (2007) also states that “. . . demographers pointed out the seriousness of the ‘youth bulge’ in many PICs [Pacific Island Countries] as a factor behind unemployment and social unrest . . . [Moreover, this] . . . bulge is and will be more marked in the Melanesian states than elsewhere in the Pacific.”<sup>3</sup> These impressions of the potential threats that high numbers of youth in Melanesia stand to generate are perhaps the most telling indicators of the preoccupation with the demographic phenomenon of the youth bulge.

Understandably, some of these impressions are viewed through the strategic and security lens within the post–September 11 global environment and especially the fear of failed states and instability in the region. Even the Australian

**TABLE 1. Median Age Range of Selected Melanesian Countries. Source: International Labor Organization (2000).**

	Total Population, 2,000 (millions)	Median Age (years)	Youth Pop (15–24), 2,000 Number (millions)	Percent of Total Population
Melanesia				
Fiji	0.8	23.7	0.2	21.30
PNG	4.8	20.5	0.9	19.70
Solomon Islands	0.4	18.2	0.1	20.50

*Defense Update* of 2007 specifically refers to the youth bulge in Australia's neighborhood as a potential threat to Australia's national security interests.

Other scholars and commentators merely promote well-meaning policy agendas such as the labor mobility scheme pushed by various interest groups in Australia and New Zealand and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF).

Because the discussions on the youth bulge in PNG or Melanesia has been defined by mostly non-Melanesian scholars and commentators, how do Papua New Guineans or Melanesians understand and deal with challenges of the youth bulge? Are there mitigating factors that non-Melanesian youth bulge theorists know little about, and shouldn't these be articulated in mainstream scholarly circles? This study is informed in part by research data I generated in the MA work I carried out in 2009–2010 as a graduate student in the Pacific Islands Studies program at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa.

### **A Pessimistic View of Demography—The Youth Bulge Theory**

In Melanesian countries, considerable discussion is focused on the increasing number of young people in the general population. Such discussions are usually framed in negative terms. The youthfulness of the populations in Melanesian countries is evident from the demographic data (Table 1). In their problematizing of the youthful populations in Melanesian countries, analysts and commentators advance the notion that these countries will, because of the demographic bulge, inevitably confront issues of instability and crisis. Combined with weak governance and a lack of socioeconomic advancement, the mere presence of so many young people will only exacerbate internal insecurity in Melanesian countries (Ware 2005; AusAID 2006; Booth et al. 2006; Dobell 2006).

The potential security threat that large cohorts of young people pose is the very basis of the youth bulge theory. This security aspect of the youth bulge is informed by the “power in numbers” argument—the more people in that age category, the more dominant and imposing their presence in society will be. Samuel Huntington (1996) here provides a threshold of 30percent—that is, if 30percent of the general population comprises of young people, the probability of violence and armed conflict or unrest are high.

Young people are portrayed in the youth bulge theory as devoid of complexity and humanity. There is no ownership of any collective optimistic destiny in the youth bulge discourse. Little wonder Anne Hendrixson (2004) argues that the theory of the youth bulge is inspired by racist and gendered considerations outside of the contexts it purports to describe.

The problematic nature of the youth bulge theory as it is applied to the Melanesian context focuses primarily on its security implications.<sup>4</sup> These discussions assume that lack of socioeconomic opportunities in these countries will only create a generation of discontented young people who will ultimately seek to influence the outcome of development in their countries through a range of unlawful or even revolutionary means. Limited opportunity for Melanesian young people to migrate out of their countries<sup>5</sup> in search of employment is seen as exacerbating this discontent (Ware 2004).

Confined within nation-states that persistently fail to provide for their well-being and aspirations, young people are seen as being extremely susceptible to being mobilized into disruptive or destabilizing movements. Although relatively recent in the Pacific Islands or Melanesia, the strategic implications of the youth bulge theory feeds into an existing imagery of Melanesia as the most problematic part of the Pacific Islands Region.

However, there is ambiguity as to logic of cause and effect in explaining the potential role of youth in conflict and violence. Are young people the cause of conflict and violence, or are they just mere pawns in some of the crisis situations in the Melanesian subregion? Based on my survey of the literature on the comparative historical progression of the youth bulge, the impression is that there is no consensus on the triggering factors of violence and conflict.

To illustrate, Beatrice Daumerie (2008) and Paul Dyer (2008) outlined three basic conditions where violence and conflict instigated by youth is high. First, they argued that there is a higher probability of political violence and armed conflicts when youth are faced with limited economic opportunities.

Second, an uninspiring education system that either produces disenchanting graduates without any available employment opportunities or, conversely, an education system that is dysfunctional leaving youth without any form of education and potential recruits into armed groups or indoctrinated (“schooling”) by extremist ideologies.

Third, a generation of young people growing up in a political system that is intransigent to the political ideals of the general population is also seen as a trigger point for youth becoming a source of instability in society.

### **A Critique of the Youth Bulge Theory**

A reading of the assumptions of the youth bulge theory, one will notice how limited it is in providing context and history and answering the critical question of whether youth are the actual source or symptoms of large-scale violence and instability. With a superficial look at the incidences of crisis situations in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands (two countries that have featured prominently in the youth bulge thesis in Melanesia), it is obvious that assumptions in the youth bulge theorists seem unjustified and at best inconsistent as a predictive science of human behavior.

We read of young men significantly involved in the notable crisis situations in PNG (and Melanesia). However, the youth bulge omits the converging influences of external global forces and the historical developments of societies. For instance, the youth bulge theory may not account for the agitation that evolved out of exploitative agenda of the multinational corporation, Bougainville Copper Limited (BCL) on Bougainville. Through its subsidiary Rio Tinto, BCL plundered the environment of the people of Panguna, leading to resentment by younger generations of Bougainvilleans who subsequently joined the fight to dispel the BCL.

The youth bulge theory could be least informed on the colonial partition of Bougainville from the British Solomon Islands Protectorate to Germany in the Anglo-German Treaty of 1884—an event that invariably contributed to long-standing secessionist sentiments of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA). Even the challenges of nation-building in a country such as Papua New Guinea with more than 850 different languages and traditions has no place in the predictive method of the youth bulge theory.

Moreover, the youth bulge theory notes that the presence of the formal Western education system as a precondition in the mass production of potential violent young men. The context where this Western education system is situated is secondary or irrelevant in the assumptions of the theory. The youth bulge theory is not an empowering approach to appreciating the complex transitions of societies. If it were, it would admit that the modern education system in Melanesia is a system that promotes false expectations and churns out culturally displaced young men in society.

Commenting on some of the underlying factors leading up to the crisis in the Solomon Islands in 1998, one observer said that “the bulk of Solomons youth has been schooled for non-existent urban jobs, effectively alienating them from

their village resource base and branding them as failures in a system foreign to their lives” (Roughan, 2002). If the Western education system is a catalyst for the displacement of young Melanesians from their sense of identity to the land and cultures, it is disregarded as a contingent variable in the assumptions of a Eurocentric discourse as the youth bulge theory.

The Papua New Guinean and Melanesian systems of social relationships and interactions also provide an enabling environment for an interactive generation of youth, not wholly committed to violence and armed conflicts. There is no conclusive evidence to suggest that the high numbers of young people in Papua New Guinea will naturally lead to uncontrolled and sustained youth-initiated acts of crisis.

And if youth-initiated conflicts are apparent (as was the case in the Solomon Islands), such acts may not always appeal beyond the social and cultural boundaries of the perpetrators of the destabilizing activities. To understand the dynamics of the subregion and the case of PNG, I highlighted above some of the factors that are less apparent in the overall discussions of the youth bulge theory.

For instance, the accessibility to customary land by youth is a safety net against the challenges of unemployment in the formal sectors of the economy.<sup>6</sup> And especially in predominantly agrarian societies as PNG, the delaying of civil unrest and armed confrontations becomes apparent when young people can opt to sustain themselves through working the land instead of heavily depending on the formal sector of their economy to meet their daily needs. Economic-driven conflict situations are averted given the access to customary land by youth and where the informal economic sector is a source of material sustenance.<sup>7</sup>

Also, identities and extensive social linkages are constantly being negotiated by youth in Papua New Guinea. The oppositional forces/processes of national identity formation in a postcolonial nation-state and maintenance of tribal/ethnic mobilization defines the manner and appeal of conflict situations in PNG. Indeed, the challenge of “thinking” beyond the tribal, ethnic, or regional identities is being played out in postindependence Papua New Guinea. This problematizes the youth bulge theory, which assumes that a nationally conscious youthful populace would trigger violence or instability.

Conflict or armed revolt on a national scale needs the ability of young people mobilizing around national agendas—something that is lacking in most parochially oriented communities of PNG. And in a society where the state system is limited in its reach, the most apparent source of allegiance is to the clan and tribe. Therefore, I find that the potential for young people to form long-term coalitions, and the sustenance of broad-based armed revolutionary movements is found wanting in PNG.<sup>8</sup>

However, one will find in multiethnic societies like PNG the sporadic problems of tribal or ethnic conflicts. Such acts of violence and instability will

equally be futile and isolated to specific zones—owing in part to more subtle forms of checks and balances in a multiethnic society.<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, the rural–urban divide is demonstrated in Papua New Guinea. Where mass mobilization is a prerequisite for sustained and coordinated acts of revolutions or armed conflicts, there is no definite ideological sense of commonality that rural-based youth can align with their urban counterparts. In a predominantly rural-based society as Papua New Guinea, tribal and ethnic attachments are seen as the most immediate identity markers for the rural-based youth.

The tribe and clan are more immediate affiliations that work in the village setting and where allegiance to the tribe/clan is rooted in social obligations and reciprocity of service to the tribe/clan. This is compelling evidence enough to suggest that fighting for a national cause may not necessarily appeal beyond the village boundaries where tribal or ethnic loyalty is most intrinsic.

Another theme that is worth taking note of is the self-restraining nature of Papua New Guinean society. In postcolonial societies such as Papua New Guinea, tribal and clan allegiance are checks and balances on the outburst of communal violence and upheavals. The clan and tribal distribution of Papua New Guinea mitigates any potentially destabilizing role that young people may instigate. In the context of conflict prevention, Ganjiki, one of my informants in my MA field research succulently states a positive aspect of PNG's multiethnic make-up. He says:

we don't have a big group of Papua New Guineans who can really lead, you know, like you see in countries like Rwanda, when they were divided into two—Hutus and Tutsis. . . . So you don't have one group rising up and expecting a whole bunch of people to follow that group. You will have one group of people from one province rising up but you will have one group from the other province or region will say: *Yupela husait na mipela bihainim yupela?* [Who are you that 'we' should follow 'you?']

Far from being a problematic, the multiethnic nature of Papua New Guinea lends itself into a mitigating factor in terms of its nation-building efforts and the containment of internal strife associated with communal violence. Young people are indeed denied of the opportunity to be part of any rampaging mob rule in a society when ethnic groups counterbalance their respective ambitions of national control.

The gendered nature of Papua New Guinean society provides informative insights into understanding the gendered nature of conflict in PNG and Melanesian communities. The youth bulge theory, true to its homogenizing

and stereotypical representation of the youth population fails to account for the gender relations in its conception of violence and crisis situations in Melanesia. Victims of conflict—especially women who caught up in some of the most recent outbreaks of violence in Melanesia—also demonstrate the mobilizing capacity toward the realization of peace and rehabilitation in the community.

The youth bulge discourse would ideally be engaging to providing the alternative in rethinking the role of young women in post-conflict scenarios. Drawing on these interrelated themes, I conclude that a Melanesian/Papua New Guinean-centered discussion on the notion of the youth bulge should embrace the complexity and dynamism of the contexts it depicts.

### Conclusion

The youth bulge theory perpetuates the stereotype that explosion in population growth rates and large numbers of volatile young men are inherently part of the Third World story. However, little attention is given to the context and how inherent mitigating factors are alternatively useful variables to learning about Melanesian societies. The lesson here is that such Orientalist representations are unproductive for any context-informed policy intervention.

In this study, I showed why the youth bulge theory is a problematic discourse in its application in Melanesia. I conclude that the youth bulge theory discounts significant factors that serve as mitigating factors against full-scale civil unrest or armed conflict in PNG society. The argument presented here is that there are alternative themes in explaining the situation of youth in their communities.

Factors that are contributing to the avoidance of conflicts include the extended or cross-cutting social relationships in contemporary PNG and the access to land. Unlike previous generations, young people in Melanesia and especially PNG are mobile and beholden to a variety of practical means in expressing themselves or pursuing their personal goals. The faintest of optimism is reflected in the accounts of these young Papua New Guineans, in part suggesting that not all news is bad news in this part of the world. Young Papua New Guineans are unguided by a pessimistic and determinist trope scripted of their diverse societies.

### NOTES

1. Some argue that “the absence of a sense of nationhood is the foundation of many of Papua New Guinea’s problems” (White and Wainwright 2004, 34). For instance, the law and order problems are attributed to the lack of any “sense of common identity,” and especially in a



country that had “relatively short and uneven experience of central administration,” allegiance to a central authoritative entity is an attributable cause for the lack of law and order (Dinnen 2001, 1). Faced with linguistic and sociocultural complexities, even the absence of any shared precolonial history or mythology Papua New Guineans are expected to confront challenges within the colonial construct of the Papua New Guinea nation-state.

2. Dobell is quoted in *The New Zealand Herald* article titled “Revolution warning for Pacific as ‘youth bulge’ keeps growing” (July 1, 2006).

3. Neil Plimmer (2007, 10), Chairman, Pacific Cooperation Foundation.

4. Cross-national studies have been conducted claiming to demonstrate the causal relationships between large youth-bulge proportion and high risks of political violence and civil strife (see for instance Leahy et al. 2007; Urdal 2006; Mesquida and Wiener 1996).

5. Fiji, however, is the exception where immigration is one of its major revenue earners as evident in the remittance sector.

6. The most recent global recession (2009) revealed the fallacy of absolute faith on growth-oriented “solutions” to the problems of the Pacific. Ralph Regenvanu revealed how “Vanuatu’s 220,000 people had been largely unaffected by the global financial crisis—because they did not belong to the modern economy.” He cited statistics to show that 80 percent of ni-Vanuatu “lived in the traditional village economy, while even the rest—including his Port Vila constituents—rely on tradition and kinship for food, work exchanges and dispute settlement” (McDonald 2009).

7. The informal sector of the Papua New Guinean economy may play a role as well in the preoccupations of youth. Theodore Levantis (1997) explains that “Often, people are forced into informal earning activities through necessity due to difficulties in finding formal sector employment” (73–74). In the absence of “government-provided social security system for the unemployed. . . . Informal income-earning opportunities are thereby taken up as a “second-best” option to formal employment” (74). Levantis (1997), in defining the notions of “employment” and “work” shows the vague interpretations of “unemployment” in societies where the informal sector caters for people engaging in productive, income-earning activities.

8. The case of the Solomon Islands is worth mentioning. The immediate conflict zone was limited to the northern part of the island of Guadalcanal where the capital of Honiara is located.

9. For instance, although the tribal wars or ethnically driven conflicts in the Highlands of PNG are notorious for their portrayal of PNG as a lawless society, there are increasingly a growing resentment among coastal Papua New Guineans that such acts of violence have no place in a diverse society. The ethnic violence at the Gordon market in Port Moresby in early 2011 generated a lot of condemnation from non-Highland Papua New Guineans. Some Papuans even called for the repatriation of the suspected perpetrators back to their respective provinces. Other non-Highlands commentators called for the educated elites of the Highlands provinces to take the initiative in educating “their” tribesmen” about living in a “civilized” society. This exemplifies how there are inherent checks and balances on the behavior of Papua New Guineans, potentially delimiting acts of violence and instability.

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