

Megatrends and Demographics

By Dr Chong Yeh Woei

I watched the global media with absorbed interest as the events in the Arab world unfolded over the last few weeks. It all started in Tunisia, with a young man who set himself on fire. His name was Mohammed Bouazizi. He was 26, had completed high school, but had been selling vegetables for the last seven years to support his family of eight. He had his vegetable cart confiscated by a policewoman who was unsatisfied with the 10-dinar fine he tried to pay. The policewoman slapped him, spat at him and insulted his deceased father. Bouazizi went in vain to the provincial headquarters, hoping to complain to local officials, but they refused to see him. He immolated himself outside the governor's office and was the spark that ignited the tinderbox across the Arab world, toppling the heads of state of Tunisia, Egypt, and now Libya.

How these events exploded into the mainstream has to do with the population demographics behind it all. The first of the three megatrends that have been going on, is the reduction of infant mortality across the Arab world, resulting in more children growing into adulthood. This is the reason why

Egypt, for example, has one of the youngest populations on the planet; half the population is under the age of 25. For these young people, the computer screen is a window into the world that they aspire to. Previously they had no idea of how poor their lot was, but today all that has changed.

The other two megatrends are the reduction of total fertility rate (TFR) and the rapidly greying population. The drop in TFR leads to women in these countries being freed from endless strings of pregnancies and childrearing. The fewer children they have now stand a good chance of entering adulthood. In developed countries like Singapore, we are transitioning into the last phase of the megatrend where a large chunk of baby boomers are moving into the last third of their life. I was recently in Tokyo for a conference on task shifting, and the Japanese society is a prime example. They estimated that the population would shrink to 95 million and about 40% of the populace would be over the age of 65 by 2050.

These trends are causing huge upheavals across the world. In a sense, medical science

has done its part in contributing to these megatrends – we have decreased infant mortality with better obstetric and paediatric practice, reduced TFR with contraceptives, and helped to increase life expectancy with better treatment of chronic diseases and geriatric practice.

In the Arab world, the gerontocrats have not looked after the youth well, leading to huge unemployment rates. In Japan, vested interests of the society have sapped the youths of their energy and reduced their opportunities to move ahead in life. I could not understand why the Japanese have not been able to lift themselves out of the crushing deflation they have experienced in the last two decades. In the words of one senior Japanese doctor, he said that compared with China's recent ascent as the second biggest economy in the world, the Japanese people felt "defeated".

I finally pieced together some semblance of thoughts about the Japanese society. We all exist in a net of social obligations, but the difference with them is that their obligations can transcend generations. For example, if my uncle gave your father help in starting

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his business 30 years ago, you are obligated to help me today. This massive web of inter-generational obligations has built itself into a gigantic pyramid structure, and its apex is occupied by the leaders of Japanese society. In a sense, these leaders are paralysed by their Pharaonic structures of obligations. What is needed is an event of *force majeure* when all these obligations are washed away, so that the society is free of its fetters and can then progress once again. It has happened in the past; seen in the Meiji Restoration and the Second World War.

Now the last thing we all want is war, but these megatrends can precipitate such an event if we do not understand the consequences of their movements. In China, the government understands that jobs have to be provided to all youths. The economic imperative is paramount; otherwise they will have the Jasmine Revolution on their hands. They too will face the effects of the third megatrend, as their one child policy of the past will accelerate the greying of its population. By 2050, a third of their enormous populace will be above 60.

I wrote on megatrends because I feel that

we have to understand these things that are happening around us, and appreciate how they will impact our lives and those of our children. We should also use this to understand how the youth of today think about us. The greying population, by virtue of their mass numbers, will come to dominate the youth and more worrying is whether we will block their aspirations. In occupying positions by virtue of seniority and through accumulating assets, will we therefore frustrate our youths of their goals? Of course we will help our own children if they meet with obstacles in their upward climb, but when the mass of baby boomers is perceived as a Great Wall, the vista for the young can be very daunting. We do not have the answers to these tough questions but in my interaction with young medical students, young doctors and many of my younger patients, I try to be helpful in some way. I try to connect and understand their world for what it means to them. After all they are the prospects of our society and it is our job to comprehend, understand and nurture them to be the vanguard of our future. Our job is to assist and avail, and not to obstruct their way. **SMA**

Footnote:

This column was written before the events of 11 March. The question now arises – is this trinity of earthquake, tsunami and nuclear meltdown the event of force majeure that will trigger changes in the established order of the Japanese society? Only time will tell.



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