

Iran and the link between education and democracy

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The unprecedented increase in education levels in Iran, particularly among females, suggests that the country could move toward a more democratic political system within the next two to three decades. The increase in education levels is closely linked to Iran's rapidly declining fertility, the most rapid decline of any country in recorded human history.

The suggested change in political status is based on a study released today by the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU), the Austrian Academy of Sciences, and the University of Tehran. The study is published in the June issue of the journal *Population and Development Review*.

According to the lead author of the study, Professor Wolfgang Lutz, of IIASA, the link between education levels and political awareness has long been recognized.

"Previous studies have shown that a country's development, in particular education levels, is a key determinant of the emergence and sustainability of democratic political institutions. As people become more educated they also become more inclined to participate in the political process and are thus more politically aware. This new study provides strong statistical support for this association," he says.

"It is also interesting to note that, in particular, the narrowing gap between male and female education enhances the move toward democracy," adds co-author Jesus Crespo Cuaresma (WU and IIASA).

Iran, one of the world's major Islamic cultures, has experienced dramatic changes in birth rates and a profound increase in education in recent decades. "Twenty-five years ago the average Iranian woman had 6–7 children; now, because of improved female education and an active and voluntary family planning program across Iran, this number has been reduced to less than replacement level, at about 1.9 in 2006," comments Professor Mohammad Jalal Abbasi, of the University of Tehran.

The study employs IIASA's considerable datasets and modeling expertise on age, sex, and educational attainment, that have been used previously to link education and fertility with economic growth across 120 countries (*Science* Vol. 319 no. 5866: 2008). This new study extends this earlier research by using information provided by Freedom House on times series indicators of democratic rights, to estimate the link between education and democracy.

"We assessed the association between improving education levels and the enhancement of democracy, both across the 120 countries as well as within these countries over time. And on average, there is a very significant positive association. There is also little doubt about the direction of causation due to the timing involved: the investments in education must come many years before there is an improvement in the average education of adults. New schools need to be built and teachers trained, it then takes another 5-10 years for these educated youngsters to move up the age pyramid, reach adulthood, and start influencing politics," says Professor Lutz.

"Generally, in developing countries, there is a strong interaction between improvements in female education and declining birth rates. More-educated women tend to want fewer children, and a slower increase in the number of school age children makes it easier to expand school enrolment rates. This can produce a virtuous circle of the two trends that jointly tend to improve health, foster economic growth and – as this study shows – can be a driver of more democratic political regimes.

In Iran the strong educational efforts established in the 1980s, which resulted in universal education, even among girls in remote rural areas, together with the world's most rapid fertility decline, will result in an increasingly well educated young adult population over the coming years.

"Based on the collective experience of 120 countries over the past decades there is a high chance – though no guarantee – that this future significant improvement in the level of education of the young

adult population of Iran will translate into greater political awareness, participation, and ultimately more democracy," concludes Professor Lutz.

Reference: Demography, Education, and Democracy: Global Trends and the Case of Iran. Lutz, W., Crespo Cuaresma, J., and Abbasi-Shavazi M. Population and Development Review: 36 (2): 253-281 (June 2010)

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