



Does Unemployment Drive Political Violence and Protest?

Focusing on the case of Middle Eastern and North African youth

Providing jobs is often seen as a tool through which to reduce protests or demonstrations, as well as riots, terrorism, and armed conflicts. The underlying logic is that those who work are more satisfied and have fewer motives and less time to demonstrate and rebel. This policy brief, however, shows that unemployment predicts neither political violence nor participation in protests. The brief first takes a look at the existing research on the topic globally. Based on survey data from the Middle East and North Africa, it then finds that the unemployed are not more likely to accept political violence or participate in demonstrations. Finally, possible explanations for why unemployment does not appear to be a driver of political protests and instability are mapped.

Brief Points

- Unemployment, particularly among youth, is often assumed to increase the likelihood of both protests and political violence.
- However, the existing evidence for these linkages is scant, scattered, and contradictory.
- Low interest in politics, lack of resources or stigmatisation might explain why the unemployed are not especially active protesters.
- Work still matters: those working part time and those dissatisfied with their work seem to protest more often.

Research Suggests Vague Relationship

The Chairman of the UN Peacebuilding Commission, Abulkalam Abdul Momen, has argued that '[j]ob creation, especially for young people, in all post-conflict countries is an essential part of peacebuilding and more importantly, conflict prevention or relapsing into conflicts'. Similarly, the 2011 World Development Report stated that 'when markets do not provide job opportunities [...] the likelihood of violent conflict increases'. In addition to different forms of political violence, unemployment has been repeatedly claimed to be a driver of demonstrations, which – contrary to terrorism and armed conflicts – are a feature of functioning democracy.

The logic behind the arguments seems to be that the unemployed are frustrated and angry, so they protest and rebel to rectify the deprivation they face. Meanwhile, the employed are happy with the status quo and stay calm. In addition, the unemployed are suggested to have more time to protest, riot, and soldier as they simply spend less time at work. In the case of armed conflicts, soldiering is also argued to be an inviting option to get money in times of higher unemployment and fewer employment opportunities.

Despite perhaps being logical as such, the above theorising has been criticised and further, it lacks proper empirical support. A review of research on unemployment and participation in violence concluded that '[t]here is no remotely convincing evidence [...] for any bold claims that unemployment is a mechanistic causal factor in violent conflicts in developing countries'.¹ Some

studies have reported that unemployment increases the likelihood of political violence. Others have found that the unemployed are not eager to take up arms. Maybe most interestingly, some results show that higher unemployment rates can predict less violence. Another review found only one study with primary evidence about the impacts of employment creation on stability in fragile states, indicating a significant gap in research of the topic.²

The protests of the unemployed have been documented various times during the centuries, especially in Western countries.³ Still, mobilisation of the unemployed has been sporadic and their participation has been rather low compared to peace and ecology activists, for example.⁴ A study of twelve Middle Eastern and North African countries found that compared to the employed, the unemployed were not more likely to participate in the Arab Spring protests.⁵ This calls in question also the common narrative of unemployment as an important driver behind the Arab Spring.

The Unemployed Do Not Accept Political Violence More Often

Afrobarometer survey provides interesting information on people's views about political violence. The survey asked in 2015 in five North African countries – Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, and Tunisia – what 6,000 respondents think are the main reasons for their fellow citizens to join militant Islamist movements using violence.

Figure 1 shows the five most common responses. Each respondent could give two reasons,

which are both counted in the bars. Poverty and unemployment are the most often suggested reasons. This means also ordinary citizens believe that poverty and unemployment are driving forces of political violence. Religious beliefs, religious extremism or misunderstandings of religious teachings is the third most common. Unemployment in the region is widespread; the average youth unemployment rate in the Middle East and North Africa region is higher than in any other world region.

The percentages in Figures 1–3 show averages of the studied countries. The datasets I use are representative samples of the populations of the countries.

To see whether the perceptions seen in Figure 1 hold I look at how respondents from the same countries view the use of political violence. 15% of all respondents either agreed or agreed very strongly that violence is sometimes necessary 'in support of a just cause' when Afrobarometer asked this in 2013. Figure 2 shows the acceptance of political violence among the poor, unemployed, religious, and uneducated respondents.

The poorest do not accept violence more often than the wealthier. I have determined the wealth of people based on how many of the 16 defined items they have. These items include, for example, a motor vehicle and television and availability of an electricity grid and piped water.

The unemployed are less supportive of political violence than the employed. The figures also show that those who are most religious do not accept violence more often – actually, vice versa. Further, those who have higher education are more supportive of violence in politics. However, the younger people have on average higher levels of education and higher support for political violence, so the seeming effect of education is partly explained by the age of the respondents.

Work-Related Factors Explain Participation

In the Sahwa youth survey, 10,000 respondents aged 15–29 years from Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, and Lebanon were interviewed in 2015–2016. The survey was conducted as part of the project 'Sahwa: Researching Arab

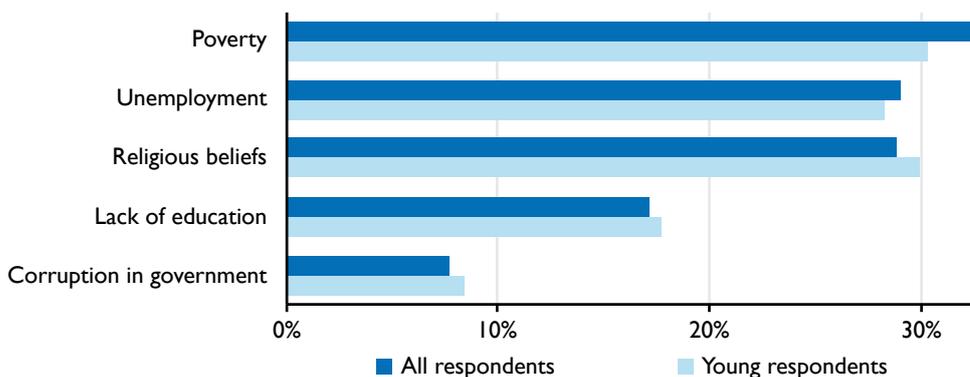


Figure 1: Top five reasons why respondents think people join militant Islamist movements. Source: Afrobarometer

Mediterranean Youth: Towards a New Social Contract', funded by the European commission.

11% of the survey respondents had participated, attended, or helped at demonstrations at least once during the previous year. A factor explaining the relatively high participation rates in this data is the age of the respondents. Various surveys show that young people are in general clearly more active protesters than older people.

Next, I study more closely how unemployment status and different work-related factors are connected to how often young people demonstrate. Figure 3 shows participation rates among different groups. Analysis reveals the same pattern as some previous studies; compared to the employed, the unemployed have not been more likely to take part in demonstrations.

I have also used more sophisticated statistical methods, regression analysis, to study the data.⁶ In these models I have taken into account the gender, education level, age, marital status, and urban residence of the respondent. The same observations of group differences visible in Figures 2 and 3 can be made also based on these models.

Interestingly, young people whose employment status is ambiguous are considerably more active protesters than those who are straightforwardly employed or unemployed. Those with ambiguous employment status are respondents who have first reported to be unemployed or students for example, but when asked for more detail later in the survey they report that they have carried out some work. Many of these respondents have worked in activities which are typical in the informal sector, such as the sale of goods on the street and agricultural work. Some of the unemployed have told that they are unwilling to work. We can expect those unemployed who are willing to work to be more frustrated with their situation and more eager to protest. This is also what the figures indicate.

Students and schoolchildren are just marginally more active than the employed. Smallness of the difference is mainly explained by the age range of the data. Many of the students and schoolchildren are under 18, and minors are less active demonstrators. If the minors are excluded from the analysis, the students are clearly more active than the employed.

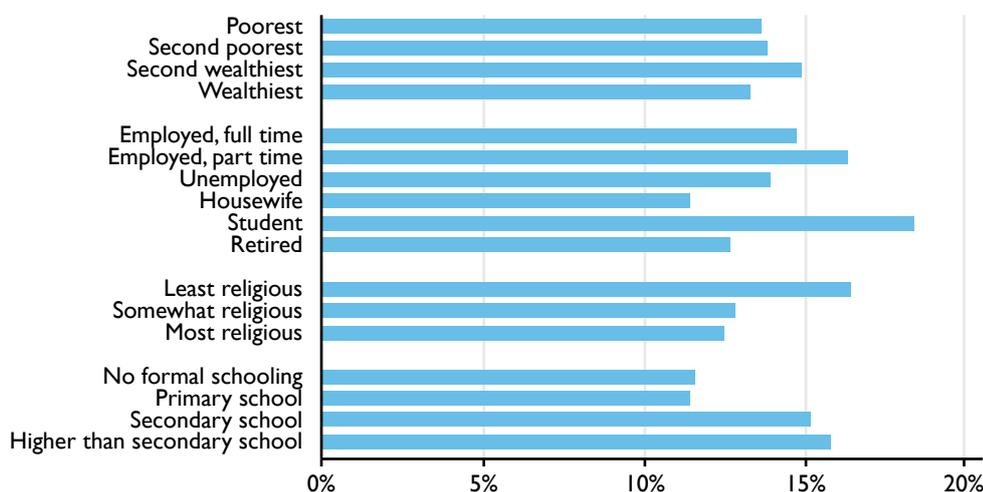


Figure 2: Support of political violence among certain socioeconomic groups. Source: Afrobarometer

Those who have told they are housewives have participated in demonstrations less often than people in any other employment status, but considering some earlier studies and the dominance of males in politics, the difference is even surprisingly slight. At least partly, this could be explained by the youth of the respondents; younger generations have less conservative views of women's participation in political activities.

There are considerable differences in protest participation among those who work. Those who work less than 30 hours in a week are clearly more active. Similarly, we saw earlier that the part-time workers accept political vio-

lence more often. Those who are unsatisfied with their work and those who have the lowest income demonstrate considerably more often according to Sahwa data. The wealth of respondents is estimated here using a number of questions on different assets, similarly as with Afrobarometer data. Interestingly, the more assets the respondents have, the more likely it is that they have participated in demonstrations. Finally, the respondents are asked to compare themselves to a population of their age and class themselves on a scale from 0, the poorest, to 10, the richest. About a third have considered themselves as a 5, which is here interpreted middle income.

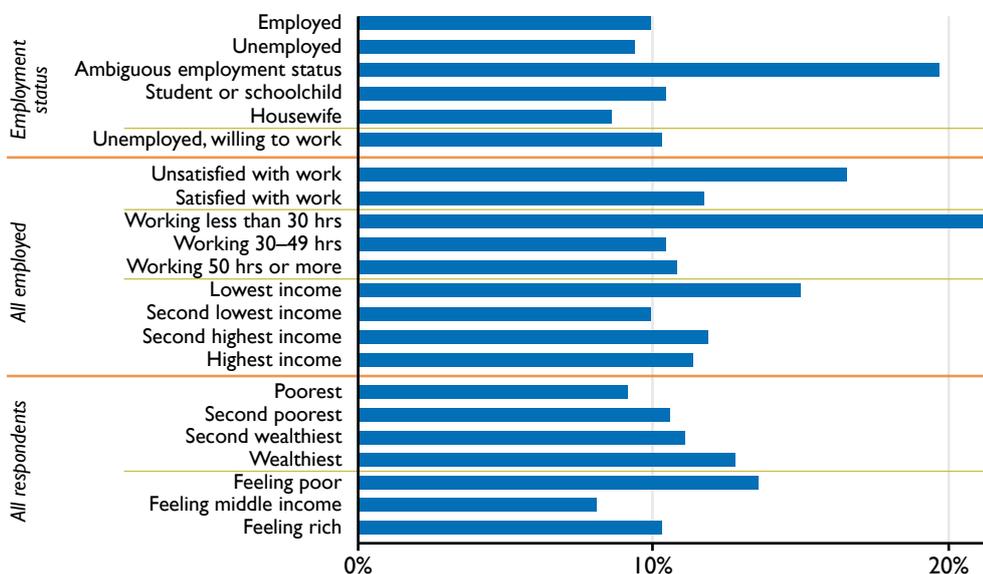


Figure 3. Participation in demonstrations among youth. Source: Sahwa

It might seem inconsistent that those who feel themselves poor participate more often while those whose living conditions are poor participate less often. The most obvious explanation for this is that people's feeling of deprivation feels unjust and turns to frustration and protest. People's assessment of their wealth, however, is not based on examination of national statistics but on their subjective comparison to their own friends and family and to regions and societal groups they are familiar with. If the actual poor-ness of the society have difficulties managing in everyday life, they are maybe less likely to have the resources to participate in political actions.

Another finding which might appear inconsistent is that, among the employed, those with the lowest income demonstrate more often, and in turn, among the whole youth population, the wealthiest demonstrate more often. One possible explanation is that those who are employed but still have a low income feel their situation to be particularly unjust if they compare themselves to other workers and desire higher income. Those with low income have also on average fewer working hours, so they have more time to participate.

The Sahwa survey also asks whether young people have used violence for social and political ends. To a great extent, the same factors – ambiguous employment status, dissatisfaction with work, low working hours and low income among the employed, and wealth and a feeling of poverty among the whole youth population – increase the likelihood of participation in political violence.

Why Do the Unemployed Not Take to the Streets?

Earlier theoretical considerations challenge in many ways the idea of the frustrated unemployed who are eager to join protests and

rebellions. Firstly, the view of the employed as wealthy and happy and the unemployed as poor and unhappy is simplistic. Many jobs, especially in the Global South, do not provide decent wages and are carried out in exploitative conditions. In addition, unemployment is perhaps not a rational reason to protest, because protesting is not likely to bring a job to a protester.

Further, given that the unemployed are often stigmatised, unemployment might lead to resignation and passivity instead. The unemployed might lack the resources needed for mobilisation, such as social connections, money, or political skills.

This could also explain why we saw that those with ambiguous employment status demonstrated so actively. Perhaps they have the same frustration to motivate participation as the unemployed, but do not face the same obstacles. As they have some jobs, even occasional, they have more social contacts and other resources.

As noted earlier, a previous study found that the unemployed were not more likely to participate in the Arab Spring uprisings than the employed. The study also showed that the unemployed were less satisfied with life but not particularly interested in politics. It also turned out that dissatisfaction with life did not increase the likelihood that an individual had protested, while interest in politics did increase the likelihood considerably. These findings indicate that, in the case of the Arab Spring, the unemployed were unhappy but, due to their low interest in politics, this dissatisfaction did not drive them to the streets.

Based on the results presented above, one should not make general conclusions about how, for example, the part-time employed participate in political violence. These relationships might be country and case specific. Further, it is still unclear why the unemployed are not

more active protesters than the employed; the explanations provided above remain speculative. However, considering the research available, to view unemployment as a strong causal driver behind political violence or demonstrations seems mistaken, or at least simplistic. ■

Notes

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THE PROJECT

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