**Another Crisis Brewing Up**

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February 22, 2023

The federal government, quite surprisingly, conceded to carry out a digital population and housing census beginning on March 1, and ending in April. This is the first time we have switched from manual census to digitization of the population and housing without any proper public awareness campaign in the country. The decision for the digitization of the population was taken by the previous government on the demand of MQM-P but could not implement it. The present regime revived this divisive plan at a time when the nation is faced with many existential problems, including economic collapse and deep political polarisation.

Though a good initiative, the timing of the decision is perplexing for many reasons. The country is faced with economic collapse and all the unessential expenditures are to be avoided. The people were teetering under unprecedented inflation. The IMF-dictated mini budget would trigger another avalanche of earth-shaking inflation while the census would cost us billions. Secondly, the exercise is being carried out without obtaining consensus among the stakeholder such as political parties, and various ethnocultural groups living in small federating units especially in Sindh and Balochistan on the modus operandi of the enumeration, conditions determining the eligibility of citizens.

The census is also being undertaken after five years after the previous one held in 2017 under the supervision of the army. It took us 18 years to hold the census of 2017 after the 1998 census due mainly to the disagreement among the stakeholders though the federal authorities are constitutionally and legally bound to hold a census after every ten years.

The cross-purpose interests are at play to trigger apprehensions about the authenticity of the current digital census.

Certain political and ethnic groups in Karachi were unhappy with the census of 2017 claiming that the population of the urban Sindh thereby meaning megacities was deliberately shown less to deny their populations their political, economic and financial rights. They objected to the delimitation of constituencies based on population as shown in the 2017 census. They carried on sustained pressure on the federal and provincial authorities to review certain blocks of the census in the megacities and increase the national, provincial and local government constituencies there accordingly.

We have almost a week to start the exercise throughout the country but the apprehensions of political parties, nationalists and various ethnic and cultural groups regarding the conditions determining the eligibility of persons living at a particular place, and appointment of enumerators have already surfaced. The political, economic and financial interests of various ethnocultural populations such as indigenous Sindhis, Baloch and Urdu speaking, and Baloch and Pashtun populations in Sindh and Balochistan respectively are at odds with each other. Their conflicting political and economic objectives were responsible to make the 2017 census controversial. The same cross-purpose interests are at play to trigger apprehensions about the authenticity of the current digital census.

A senior leader of the MQM-P, Farooq Sattar addressed a presser yesterday and raised objections to the appointment of enumerators. What he said was that the entire exercise would depend on the integrity of the enumerators to make correct entries. There would be no paperwork or record for verification. The thrust of his demand was to show the correct population of Karachi as has been perceived by them. Their demand would carry weight as the current PDM regime is dependent on their votes. As perceived by the Sindhi nationalists and social and civil society leaders, the whole exercise has been undertaken to placate the MQM-P, and the federal authority would go a whole hog to meet their demands.

The leaders of indigenous Sindhis have also been irked by the absence of the condition of the computerized national identity card for enumeration. This coupled with the stay of only six months would pave way for the enumeration of the entire alien population of Burmese, Thais, Bengalis, Biharis, Pashtuns, Afghanis, Seraikis, Hindkos and Punjabis as residents of Karachi. This would also impact the delimitation of political constituencies. The Sindhi nationalists are also apprehensive that this is all part of a hidden agenda to register a manifold increase in the population of the megacities of Sindh; turn the indigenous population into a minority; carry out delimitation of the national, provincial and local government political constituencies according to the new digital population paving way for the ultimate shift of the balance of political power in favour of the non-indigenous population. Therefore, they have made it clear that the results of the digital enumeration would be unacceptable to them unless their demand for the condition of the CNIC is met.

The Sindhi social organizations including Sindh Vision, Intellectual Forum, Servants of Sindh and Sindh Democratic Forum have already held a series of seminars on digital enumeration and voiced their apprehensions. The Sindh United Party supported by certain nationalist groups is on a road march from Kashmore to Karachi. The anger and angst among the indigenous population against the digital census without the condition of CNIC is spreading like wildfire. The ruling Pakistan people’s Party has felt the heat of the anger of Sindhis against the digital census. The Chairman of the PPP Sindh, Senator Nisar Khuhro is on record voicing his support for the demand of the Sindhi populace for the condition of the CNIC for enumeration.

The angst in many ethnocultural populations, social organizations, and civil society, national and nationalist political parties in Sindh and Balochistan about the results of the digital census is ominous and could be the harbinger of a big crisis in Sindh. We have an acute ethnic and linguistic divide in Sindh and Balochistan that manifests itself in planning, allocation of funds, elections, political representation and economic opportunities including jobs. The recent local government elections elaborately reflected this divide.

The country is already passing through a serious political and economic crisis that has impacted all the state institutions with a perennial threat to the very existence of the nation. Instead of addressing this deepening crisis, the ruling class is subjecting the populace to back-breaking economic hardships and plunging the country into another divisive exercise. This is unfortunate.

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