[**New Karachi**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1703005/new-karachi)

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LAST week, eminent urban planner and researcher Arif Hasan, along with his associates Dhuha Alvi and Amal Hashim, published an analysis of the most recent census numbers as they pertain to Karachi. One of the most interesting aspects of the analysis was that they compared the numbers available on Pakistan’s megacity to Delhi (also Lahore), another of South Asia’s megacities. The last numbers on Karachi are from 2017 and have been questioned by various politicians because they underscore the city’s representation at the federal level.

The current state of Karachi — its crumbling infrastructure, haphazard traffic patterns and the numbers that are sacrificed to accidents and other man-made catastrophes each time there is too much rain or too much heat or even an event that is not out of the ordinary — requires understanding these numbers. The numbers show that not only is Karachi the most populous city in the country but also the densest in terms of population concentration. This means that there are more people in Karachi per square kilometre than in any other place in Pakistan. As the analysis says, these numbers make Karachi “the largest and, in population terms, the fastest-growing city in the country”.

It is hardly surprising then that Karachi should be integral to the rest of the country, contributing as it does 20 per cent of GDP, 50pc of the total revenue and around 47pc of direct tax revenue. These numbers can and should upset everyone who lives in Karachi. Despite these large contributions, how much federal investment does Karachi see, in comparison to, say, Lahore? Certainly, it is not commensurate with its contribution to the national kitty. Lahore has better numbers — for instance, in terms of literacy. According to the report, the percentage of those who completed primary school in Lahore was higher than in Karachi. Similarly, the percentage of women graduates is higher in Lahore than in Karachi. The cumulative import of this is that many sections of society and government brush away the importance of the city.

If Karachi were to get a share in federal governance equivalent to its population numbers, which many claim have been understated, the politicians it elects would have the power to improve the neglected aspects of the city’s development. In the absence of that correction, money generated by Karachi is used to increase investment in cities in Punjab and other provinces. It seems that Karachi works, while everyone else counts the money.

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Three-quarters of a century after partition, Pakistanis should be able to fix this situation. Twenty-five years ago, the original migrants from India were concentrated in Karachi, but in recent years the numbers of migrants from other provinces has increased. One hopes that Karachi’s continuing absorption of people from other cities means that, instead of voting along ethnic lines, the city’s residents will be more invested in the welfare of the city itself, and usher in candidates they believe will effectively address Karachi’s many problems. When new Karachi voters begin to vote based on their stake in the city, there will be some possibility of change.

In fact, change is likely to loom large over Karachi in the coming decades. Numbers show a young city, with the majority of its millions unmarried adolescents aged between 15 and 24 years. There is always hope in the youth, and the fact that the city is so young also means that its politics, along with its ways of engagement with the rest of the country, are open to change. At the same time, the tremendous potential of youthful energy requires inspired leadership and opportunities for constructive political engagement. Given the city’s diversity, Pakistan’s ethnically based political parties are unlikely to be able to draw as much support from the city as in previous years. This presents an opportunity for political initiatives that promise to help the city overcome the neglect and exclusion that the young inhabitants know very well.

The census analysis also notes that the number of married young women has, in general, continued to decline in the city. This would suggest that the city has the largest young female workforce in comparison to other cities in the country. Sadly, no census numbers are required to underscore how neglected this group of Karachi’s constituents really is. At the same time, given that the largest concentration of unmarried young women resides in Karachi means that this group has the power to, as the analysis indicates, change gender relations in Pakistani society. Not only can they transform how gender inclusion is understood, but they can also put pressure on educational institutions and workplaces to make their environment safer for women. Efforts like the Aurat March can have much more impact in Karachi than perhaps in other cities in Pakistan. One hopes that such events aimed at collectivising women facing similar problems will proliferate in the future.

It is sad to see that Karachi continues to grow and cope, despite rather than because of the federal government’s attitude towards it. It is no surprise that this creates resentment in Karachi, where investment is desperately needed. Given that Punjab is increasing its share of middle-class urban populations, perhaps it can share some of Karachi’s revenue burden.

The present messy political situation is not presenting many answers to the set of issues that Pakistan’s megacity faces. The numbers present a story of desperate need and urgent attention. The citizens of Karachi, young as they are, are watching and waiting. These young people deserve a plan that takes them beyond simply hoping for visas that take them abroad, and turns them into engaged and contributing citizens at home. That, at least we can hope, will become a reality one day.

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