**Census & the city**

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THE federal cabinet has approved the 2017 census results. Some political parties, including those with greater stakes in Karachi, have announced their opposition to this decision. The city`s population figures have been contested since the provisional results were announced. Despite the of ficial claim that the city comprised 16.5 million people in 2017, politicians, demographers, development experts and activists have expressed reservadons, suggesdng hgures ranging from 20m to 30m. Given our politicaltrack record,one expects squabbbngfor some time before this matter is settled.

Karachi is a unique urban region, known for its matchless social, ethnic, linguistic, religious and political diversity. This enormous strength must be stated in numerically accurate terms. For instance, Karachi continues to experience substantial in-migration from KP, Balochistan, southern Punjab, many districts of Sindh and even other countries. It is important to know these figures to assess the social, economic and political impacts that may emerge from this change.

The headcount relationship between Karachi and Sindh must also be examined.

Karachi accounts for one-third of Sindh`s population. No other city possesses such a relationship with its province. Lahore, with one-twelfth of Punjab`s population, is an important megacity but has seldom experienced the kinds of challenges Karachi has since 1947. Being the first national capital, it was designated a federal territory carved out of Sindh. Thus began an uneasy relationship between Karachi and the province in which it is located; a saga that continues.

Suspicions around census figures are many. Political parties in Karachi fear the loss of vote banks. Ethnic groups are concerned about the manner in which population concentration will be finalised. Take the Urdu-speaking community, which generally claims to be the natural representative of Karachi. Its political numbers are largely divided between the ruling PTI and MQM-P.

With other ethnic groups benefiting f rom inmigration, MQM-P is clearly concerned about its political future. The Pashtospeaking population has grown considerably over the decades. But its politicalinclinations are divided amongst secular (such as ANP, PTI and PkMAP) and religious parties (like JUI-F and the Jamaat). In-migrations from Sindh and southern Punjab seem to benefit the PPP. Each party needs correct figures with apposite geographical overlays to plan and work on their respective political course of action.

Different concerns were voiced when the census was conducted. Leading technocrats and demographers identified various shortcomings. No headway could be made as thegeneral election was round the corner. When the PTI took over, it was only too pleased by the overwhelming votes it received from Karachi. Little did it know that without addressing Karachi`s core issues, its political domination might eventually be diluted.

Many remedial measures proposed by technocrats are still valid. For instance, a five per cent audit at the national level was suggested, which may have helped identify trends in undercounting or misreporting.

Karachi may have benefited, but the audit was never convened. The Sindh government maintained a meaningful silence, failing to pursue it rigorously in the CCI even though the province`s figures were not very accurate.

Karachi`s developmental challenges are well known. To start to address them requires accurate figures. The census has a direct bearing on allocation of public resources, updating of voter listings, outlining development priorities, forecasting growth trends etc. Census profiles are also used to assess the impact and effectivenessof past pubhcinvestments in public health, education, social welfare, even physical infrastructure. They are needed to study the actual coverage and penetration of mass schemes like immunisation.Karachi has received good news in the form of project and packages announcements. From the Rs1.1 trillion transformation plan to the BRT, the tally is substantial.

The real question is whether this spending will actually solve the issues faced by most of the people. If an accurate and dispassionate population profile is extracted from the census, decision-makers may be pushed to change the scale and nature of interventions.

Issues such as the absence of land supply for housing the urban poor, diminishing livelihoods for millions of unskilled and semiskilled workers, malnutrition and stunting among children, limited access to primary education and rising dropout rates, inability of households to look after the elderly and sick and hostels for men and women residing in Karachi for education or work can only be answered with dependable numbers. The city`s residents deserve the truth, and nothing but the whole truth must be spoken to them about their own existence. The writer is chairman, Department of Architecture & Planning, NED University, Karachi.