**[A digital fairy-tale](https://www.dawn.com/news/1781022/a-digital-fairy-tale)**

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THE Pakistan Bureau of Statistics has proudly branded the 2023 population census the country’s first-ever digital census. It employed cutting-edge technology to conduct this massive exercise that literally required an army of field enumerators to leave no stone unturned across the country. PBS geo-tagged all housing units through tablets that the enumerators used to collect and transmit data to the centres in real time. It collaborated with Nadra and synergised its data with the authority’s extensive citizens’ database.

A more pleasantly surprising aspect of the exercise was its transparency. PBS published a detailed field operation plan making all SOPs public. It offered a self-enumeration facility to the public for the first time and provided the provincial authorities online dashboards making data accessible to them as it was being collected. Its complaint centre was open 24/7 and its social media handles regularly made public provisional results and other details. It also frequently consulted stakeholders and experts to minimise the possibility of controversies after publication of the final results. The Council of Common Interests unanimously approved the final results in August, which required their immediate notification.

But sadly, that’s where our digital fairy-tale meets an abrupt end.

In the last two months, all that PBS has made public is a simple list of districts of each province along with their total population without giving any details. The data does not even include gender and urban-rural break-ups which have always been an essential part of the basic data set. PBS provided the ECP detailed census block-wise population data before Aug 30 to facilitate the process of delimitation of electoral constituencies. This shows that PBS has the detailed data ready in usable format. But for some unknown reason that has so far been only for the ECP’s eyes. This is contrary to the 2018 practice when the block-wise results were provided to the ECP and published on the PBS website at the same time.

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Using the data, the ECP published the preliminary delimitations and has invited representations (pleas for changes) from voters. But how can anyone suggest a change without having access to data used by the ECP to redraw the constituencies?

Contrary to popular expectations, the current delimitations have made widespread changes to the boundaries of constituencies, especially in the case of the provincial assemblies. Here is an overview of some changes:

In KP, the number of provincial seats allocated to Peshawar district has decreased from 14 to 13. Hangu has lost one seat too. The wonder constituency comprising frontier regions of six disjointed districts has dissipated because of the Fata merger. The loss of these three seats has resulted in the gain of one seat each by Shangla, Chitral and Bajaur.

Sialkot, Lodhran and Multan districts have lost one seat each in Punjab Assembly. Muzaffargarh had 12 seats in 2018 but then the new district of Kot Addu was carved out of it. The combined share of the two new districts stands at 11. Similarly, Rawalpindi had 15 seats in 2018 but it gave birth to Murree district in 2022 and now Rawalpindi and Murree have been allocated 13 seats and one seat respectively. On the other hand, Bhakkar, Khushab, Gujrat, Kasur and Rajanpur districts have gained one seat each.

Similarly, one Sindh Assembly seat each in Sanghar, Khairpur and Thatta districts has mig­rated to Karachi Central, Karachi East and Malir.

Dividing a district into one less or one more constituencies means that existing boundaries of all the constituencies in that district have to be redrawn. The changes described have resulted in completely redrawing 23 of 115 seats of the KP Assembly, 84 of 297 of the Punjab Assembly and 37 of the Sindh Assembly’s 130 constituencies. And these constitute just one type of change that has been made in the current delimitations.

A district losing a seat means that one political family will lose its home ground and will have to play second fiddle to other players. A district gaining a seat can translate into a jackpot for an underdog or an opportunity for some heavywei­ghts to multiply their power. This makes delimitations the most crucial and contested pre-poll electoral process for candidates and they have to have a say in this. However, to be able to oppose or suggest a change, they must first fully comprehend not only the new maps but also the populations of units that together form the constituency. That’s not possible without having full access to the detailed block-wise census data. The census being entirely digital, this data could have easily been one click away from the public, but it is not.

Many lawyers preparing these representations have secured the required data through unofficial means but they are struggling to work out ways to quote these numbers in legal documents.

Another layer of complications has been added by the districts created after the 2023 census was initiated. This means that the statistics of these new districts are not present separately in the original PBS data and thus have to be collated by separating census blocks falling into the new districts. In KP, South Waziristan was split into upper and lower districts after the census, while the new districts of Murree, Talagang, Wazirabad, Kot Addu and Taunsa in Punjab and Hub and Usta Muhammad in Balochistan were also created afterwards.

PBS had divided the entire country into 168,943 census blocks in 2017 but the 2023 census increased these to 185,509. The redrawing of census blocks has also made it challenging to grasp changes between 2018 and 2023 in fine detail. The four provinces are divided into a total of 593 provincial and 266 national constituencies. (The latter includes three seats of the federal capital.) The ECP will have just 30 days to adjudicate on all the representations it will receive by the deadline of Oct 27.

Even if the ECP simultaneously hears cases related to four different constituencies and works without a day off, it will on average have one hour per constituency! It can complete the task on time without exhausting itself only if it receives fewer representations from fewer constituencies.

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