**Defusing the census controversy**

BY N A S E E R M E M O N 2023-04-28

UNLESS extended again, the first-ever digital census of Pakistan will be concluding at the end of the month, with the results expected soon after. The census has been a chronic source of controversy in Pakistan, at least for the last three decades. The census of 1991 was not carried out and that of 2011 was aborted at the stage of house counting. On both occasions, the data deviated from the previous trend by a wide margin and was deemed unrealistic.

The census exercise is critical to the planning process. The resultant demographic data not only helps governments and the private sector to improve development planning, it also offers useful insights for setting or redefining longterm national priorities in key sectors of human development. In Pakistan, though, the census has been tied with economic and political incentives like the extent of the share in the National Finance Commission Award, allocation of seats in parliament, quotas for government jobs and admission to public-sector universities. This stimulates provinces to compete for a bigger share of the pie.

The NFC share is the biggest attraction among all incentives and is tied to the population share. For years, population was the sole criterion for the horizontal distribution of finances. However, the seventh NFC Award, issued in 2010, departed from past practice and added three other criteria to make the award more inclusive. Nonetheless, population still remained the dominant factor with 82 per cent weightage in the NFC formula. Smaller provinces have been protesting that making population the only or dominant factor favours Punjab that is home to more than half the national population. In the spirit of a just federation, the NFC formula should have been made more balanced by assigning reasonable weightage to other vital indicators, such as backwardness, penury, resource contribution, state of human development and geographic sprawl. It took decades to introduce a minor shift in favour of such indicators. This shift created fiscal space for the smaller provinces and was bolstered by the 18th Constitutional Amendment that abolished the Concurrent List and devolved various functions to the provinces.After the 18th Amendment, a census was conducted in 2011. However, it was terminated at the stage ofhouse counting as the data depicted an abnormal trajectory. Another census was conducted in 2017. This time Sindh rejected the data by challenging the questionable average family size in the province. This prompted a discussion and a decision by the Council of Common Interests to conduct a fresh census within five years as against the normal intercensal span of 10 years.

To make it credible and comprehensive, the then government decided to conduct the census through digital devices rather than archaic paper stacks. Like any digital platform, the census software also encountered technical hiccups at the outset, triggering resentment especially among political parties and civil society in Sindh. Intriguingly, the ruling parties didn`tobject to the digital census while being staunch opponents of digital elections. The data collection process was rattled, mid-course, by the Sindh government. The chief minister and the ruling party chairperson made serious charges and explicitly warned that the data would be trashed if the process were not reset to their satisfaction. Some preliminary data also invited the ire ofcertain quarters.

A pall of apprehension has fallen on the census exercise and it might possibly end up in shelves and the graveyard of cyber data. Since the next general elections require the delimitation of constituencies based on this census, any controversy may jeopardise the electoral process, whose fate is already hanging by a thread.

India averted controversy regarding the censusexercise therebyadoptinganovelapproach.

Initially, population data used for its NFC Award was frozen and kept to 1971 census data.Af ter the census of 2011, Indian states demanded the unlocking of the 1971 population benchmark as the population had considerably increased overfour decades.

In the 15th NFC Award (2021-26), the Finance Commission of India used the 2011 census data for the award. However, two important measures were taken to pre-empt any race to increase the population. One, only 15pc weightage was assigned to population numbers. Second, to deincentivise population growth, a 12.5pc share was allocated to demographic performance.

This allocation actually discourages federating units from increasing fertility rates in order to claim a bigger share of the financial pie, based on population figures. The commission report noted that `we feel that the use of the latest Census data, and sudden change of underlying data, should not unfairly put some States which have performed well on the national objective of demographic management at a disadvantage`. The commission intelligently reined in any propensity to distort the census process through an inflated head count.

Although Pakistan`s political anatomy is far different from India`s and it may not be easy to drastically reduce the population share in Pakistan`s NFC Award, some structural measures are required to gradually deflate the population share in the Award. Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal recently extended a similar suggestion. Pakistan adds sizeable numbers of at least four million to 5m every year to its population.

Amid prolonged spells of a faltering economy and frequent natural disasters, the sustained population growth has dwarfed our meagre economic gains. A population growth rate of 2pc will exert disproportional stress on our resources when our GDP is estimated to grow at only 0.8pc this year, for example. Our current NFC regime not only provokes provinces to fight over census results but also discourages the provinces from arresting the pace of population growth. A paradigm shift is overdue and should not be delayedfurtheriffuture censuses are to be saved from perpetual controversy.  The writer is a civil society professional.

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