**Population and the NFC**

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Tuesday, Oct 17, 2023

According to the 7th Population Census results announced recently, Pakistan’s population has crossed a staggering 241 million as against 208 million in the 2017 census – registering an increase of 33 million in the last six years. Since 1998, when the population was less than 131 million, our population has increased by 2.4 per cent annually – the highest in the region.

Going further back to 1951 (four years after Independence), the population of then West Pakistan (the Pakistan of today) was 33 million. Thus there has been a more than seven-fold increase in the country’s population since Independence. A recent UN report titled ‘World Population Prospects 2022’ has projected Pakistan’s population to cross 366 million people by 2050. It is estimated that nearly 24 million will be unemployed at that time, posing new threats to social stability and security. The UN has designated Pakistan as one of the leading contributors to the overall population growth.

What does this mean to Pakistan?

Pakistan has 5.7 million newborn every year that must be provided food, healthcare, shelter and education among other needs.

Just take education. Providing schooling to them requires building at least 33,000 new schools every year. Nearly 23 million children are already out of school today. To put them into schools would require building tens of thousands of additional schools – a task unlikely to be achieved anytime soon in a country driven by security paranoia instead of welfare and rights of the people.

Climate change and population explosion has threatened food and water security as never before. At the time of Independence, water availability per capita was over 5200 cubic meters. Today it is less than 900 cubic meters. Pakistan is also among the top ten countries with the lowest access to clean water. In fact Pakistan is at 14th among the 17 ‘extremely high water risk countries’ in the world.

Or take the case of housing needs. Nearly 1.4 million new housing units will be needed every year to take care only of the increased population, not to speak of the existing shortage of housing units. More and more agricultural lands and more and more mango orchards will be cut to build the new housing units.

Indeed population explosion has worsened food, health and education crises in the country. In the words of Dr Zeba Sathar, country director of the Population Council, “population trumps all”.

Countries in the region have done far better than Pakistan in controlling population explosion. Bangladesh is a prime example. Ever since its independence in 1971 it embarked on a programme to bring down its population significantly. What ails Pakistan that it has not been able to bring down the rate of population growth?

A number of factors can be identified which if addressed can result in bringing down the population growth rate. Thanks to a broad-based support of the religious scholars in Pakistan to population issues and the decrees of scholars in several Muslim countries, the opposition to population control on grounds of religion is no longer an issue. So what then are the causes?

There are issues like meeting reproductive health needs and expanding and institutionalizing the Lady Health Workers network. There are also issues in maternal mortality, malnutrition and stunted growth which can be addressed by weaving them in the programmes of donor agencies. In 2018 the Council of Common Interest (CCI) mandated a Populated Fund to further expand the coverage of family planning services. Making it operational can also be very helpful.

However, the elephant in the room militating against efforts to check the exploding population is the national political narrative embedded in the National Finance Commission Award.

According to the NFC formula, the federation’s kitty is distributed among the provinces overwhelmingly on the basis of population which has been given 82 per cent weightage. Other indicators are poverty & backwardness (10.3 per cent), revenue generation & collection (5.0 per cent), and inverse population density (2.7 per cent) in the distribution formula.

Thus the national political narrative is ‘increase the population and get 82 per cent share in the overall national kitty’. It is this narrative which has trumped all efforts to control population growth.

No other country in the world distributes finances among its federating units on the basis of population as overwhelmingly as does Pakistan. The revenue sharing formula in Bangladesh introduced in 2011 and locked until 2026 is based on population (60 per cent), area (20 per cent) and backwardness (20 per cent). An internal debate in Bangladesh is going on to further reduce weightage to population. The Finance Commission Award in India (tenure from 2021-2026) envisages population (15 per cent), area (15 per cent), forest and ecology (10 per cent), income distance (45 per cent), tax and fiscal efforts (2.5 per cent) and demographic performance (12.5 per cent).

Instead of incentivizing demographic performance, Pakistan has incentivized population growth in the NFC narrative. Herein lies the rub.

Pakistan has become a majoritarian state where political and economic power is distributed on the basis of population. The largest province (area-wise) Balochistan has only 16 out of 266 general seats in the National Assembly. Thus it is not on the radar of major political parties which give greater attention to larger cities in Sindh and Punjab which have more seats in the National Assembly than the whole of the Balochistan province.

A majoritarian state giving overwhelming weight to the population is courting political unrest. In 1954, the principle of parity was introduced between the then East and West Pakistan because of the objections in the western wing to the distribution of resources on the basis of population alone. Majoritarianism and excessive weight to population now can force the fringe provinces to demand parity as the then West Pakistan province demanded and got in 1954.

Population explosion has imperiled democracy and threatened national security. The threat to national security is not as much from across the borders as it is from a threat within the borders from the exploding population and climate change.

In this election year, political parties need to revisit their manifestoes and devise strategies and practical solutions to control population growth that will soon become unsustainable. Revisiting the NFC Award formula seems to be the first practical step in this direction.

The writer is a former senator.