**The Missing Eight Million?**

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On August 5, 2023, the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) officially released the results of the 7th and first-ever digital Housing and Population Census after approval from the Council of Common Interests (CCI). It counts 241 million inhabitants in Pakistan with an average intercensal annual growth rate of 2.55%. Contrary to expectation, the population growth rate for six years 2017-23 is higher than the previous intercensal growth rates of 2.4% for the earlier 19-year period of 1998-2017. The results are shocking as the growth rate is much higher than anticipated based on other demographic surveys carried out in the last six years. The 2023 Census was expected to produce more acceptable and transparent results, given the setback in the conditional acceptance of the 2017 Census results. And yet the release of population figures has raised many questions related to the accuracy and authenticity of the census results. First and foremost, demographers are raising questions about the downwards adjustment of an additional 8 million people which was reported in the initial announcement by PBS in May 2023. If these individuals were overcounted or counted twice due to ambiguous definitions of usual residents, then how did PBS identify them and adjust the population count? Did PBS carry out any Post Enumeration Survey (PES) or apply some fancy statistical method to adjust the overcounting in the census? If they have done a PES, then what was the timeline? What population proportions were sampled, and above all what are the outcomes? PBS has not given any official and scientific justification for this overcounting or answered the widely circulating burning questions related to the 2023 Census.

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Interestingly, the adjustment of an extra eight million raised more concerns as seven out of eight million people are dropped from a single Province i.e., Balochistan. Why is it so that census quality was compromised overwhelmingly in only one province?

Even before the official release of 2023 census figures, renowned demographers have raised concerns about the quality of census data and asked for a comprehensive evaluation of the 2023 digital census. For instance, Dr G.M. Arif, ex-joint director of PIDE, in a webinar organized by the Population Association of Pakistan (PAP) on June 15th, 2023, has scientifically argued that no significant net internal and definitely not international migration was recorded in any of the demographic sources. Similarly, Dr Zeba Sathar, Country Director Population Council, said that accepting these results of such an increase in population growth rates just in the last five years was not supported by any evidence. It would make the results an outrageous international outlier. The intercensal Pakistan Demographic Survey done by PBS, the same statistical agency that carried out the 7th Housing and Population Census, shows a much lower population growth rate than the census. Experts have also raised the question that why PBS has extended the census deadline five times without any justification and in every deadline the population count surged.

Experts have also raised the objection that the 2023 census was a hasty decision on the part of the government. PBS has not made any effort to evaluate the strengths and shortcomings of the 2017 census and to plan the 2023 census based on the lesson learned from the evaluation exercise. Another issue pertains to the definition related to urban and rural areas. The census figures show that 40% of Pakistan’s population is urban which in reality is much higher. This is particularly highlighted by looking at the rural-urban disaggregation of Islamabad as an example. Islamabad is more rural than urban as areas like Bani Gala, Bahria Town etc. are rural by definition not by infrastructure.

All these issues point to the political motivation of the census exercise rather than an objective exercise on the part of PBS. Demographic disparities affect the allocation of federal resources to the provinces. The Constitution of 1973 made it obligatory for the center to form and convene a National Finance Commission (NFC) at a regular intervals of five years for distributing the federal divisible pool. So far Pakistan has had eight NFC awards. The first six NFC awards the allocation of funds to the provinces was based majorly on the share of the population of each province. Punjab, being the biggest province in terms of population, used to get a major share of funds and Balochistan used to get a meager share of funds mainly due to its small population base.

However, the 7th NFC award brought a shift in the distribution of resources among provinces. The weightage to population share has reduced to 82% and also included multiple other factors while devising the resource sharing formal such as inverse population density, backwardness and local tax revenue generation and collection. Consequently, the share of Punjab in federal resources has declined and the share of Baluchistan has increased to some extent. However, still a major chunk of weightage is given to population factors. If we add the inverse population density to this, 87% weight was allocated to needs-based indicators. Therefore, it is in the interest of provincial governments to have a high share of the population in national statistics. This in turn discourages provinces from investing in health and family planning programs to support fertility reduction, as the costs of doing so may override the potential gains from the NFC award. Census results are extremely precious data, when they serve the purpose of evidence-based policy making and when they are trusted by experts and end users for decision making. The question mark around the Census results calls for an objective evaluation of census quality, this is a prerequisite and a fundamental step towards building the trust of users as well as the reputation of those conducting the Census.

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