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Serious Concerns Remain About Pakistan's First Digital Census

A lack of planning for contingencies and poor enumerator training threatens to derail the legitimacy of Pakistan's first ever digital census



by **Shazia Nizamani** — February 28, 2023 in Analysis, Main Slider



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Pakistan's 7th population and household census is set to commence on 1st March [redacted] essential to policy making for all sectors of government. The results of a census become the basis of resource allocation to provinces, and for representation in the National and Provincial Assemblies, as well as defining the delimitation process that marks constituencies. The last census took place in 2017. This is also the first time that the government plans on conducting a digital census, using technology to improve data collection and aggregation.

As per international standards and our own constitutional requirements, a census should be held every 10 years. The government will be expending approximately Rs 34 billion on this exercise.

I attended a presentation by the Chief Statistician of the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics in Karachi on 8th of February, 2023. Many serious concerns and questions were raised about the technical and political aspects of the design of this "first digital census." However, the Chief Statistician was unable to respond satisfactorily, leaving those present with more questions than answers.

A 40-point questionnaire covering eight important areas' details has been specially designed and will be used for data collection. We were told that the census will collect data from a total of 628 Tehsils from all over the country. The Tehsils will be divided into 185,000 blocks visited by 126,000 enumerators. The enumerators are expected to enter the information directly into a digital tablet linked to a Geographical Information System (GIS).

It is obvious that the digital ecosystem developed by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) has not been subjected to large scale pilot testing. Weaknesses and gaps have not been identified and accuracy has been sacrificed in favor of urgency of implementation. This in itself smells of political manipulation, as there are still 5 years left for conducting a census, as per our constitution.

The digital information system looked confused and faulty. It does not make clear how a layer of security such as a private intranet system can be implemented for data transfer among devices to the data control center. The Chief Statistician was unable to satisfy attendees as to how data security protocols would be followed for safeguarding software dashboards that the digital census will rely upon.

Apparently, the enumerators have been instructed through lectures and presentation only, without a device-tablet to physically practice on, or use to understand the process. The trainees were not shown a sample form during their training. These 2 factors alone will

impede the enumerators' ability to gather data, generating severe data inconsistencies and controversial and tampered results is huge.

NADRA must allocate much more time and resources for the training of enumerators and testing the designed data collection protocols. It must ensure that all enumerators are properly trained, and well informed and equipped to use their devices. NADRA must preemptively address these issues if it wants to gather reliable data, and avoid an utter waste of time and resources. The current state of readiness shows that many trainees will be seriously challenged whilst operating their devices.

Population censuses are generally conducted on a *de jure* or a *de facto* basis. The *de facto* basis is more suitable for Pakistan as there is a lot of movement due to employment opportunities, natural calamities and militancy on the western borders. However, NADRA has chosen the *de jure* basis. This means everyone will be counted on basis of where they have lived in the last six months, and not where they permanently live. This opens the flood gates for internally and externally displaced peoples, and migrants to be counted as residents of an area if they are found there on census day.

Additionally, the requirement to produce a Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC) for verification purposes has been dispensed with. Therefore, alien immigrants – Afghans, Bangladeshis, Kashmiris, Indians, Burmese – will all be counted as residents of a particular province without verification of their citizenship or residency status.

The census has always remained a sensitive and controversial matter in Pakistan; it has become a political rather than a planning tool. The way in which NADRA seeks to conduct the census poses a number of serious threats to the rights of the local permanently resident population in the form of diluting their political representation in the provincial and national assemblies.

Sindh and Balochistan are most at threat as they continue to receive a greater influx of “out-of-province” emigrants. This phenomenon started 75 years ago, and continues to date, constantly changing the demographic composition of both provinces and thereby trampling on the rights of the indigenous populations.

Balochistan and Sindh have also seen a heavy influx of Afghan refugees for over four decades. For example, a large number of illegal immigrants from Afghanistan mix easily with local Pashtuns, thereby increasing their head count in the census, as many of them have even spuriously obtained citizenship documents.

The apprehensions of the people of Sindh and Balochistan must be taken seriously and addressed through legislation. The census basis and process must be made transparent

and credible for wider acceptability.

Pakistan has recently suffered from unprecedented flooding, affecting the lives of 33 million people, and displacing 8 million people. A total of 6,579 km of roads, 246 bridges and almost 1.7 million houses have been damaged. More than 12.4 million people have been affected in Sindh alone.

A loss of household incomes and assets, rising food prices, and disease outbreaks are impacting these most vulnerable groups. Women have suffered notable losses of their livelihoods, particularly those associated with agriculture and livestock. Many croplands and villages still remain inundated with water. To date, a large population still remains displaced and have not yet returned to their villages. Many areas are still inaccessible as basic infrastructure has not been rehabilitated.

Considering all of these factors, it is imperative that the census be delayed, and ideally, not proceed with without proper preparation. Let us not forget that the National Finance Commission Award is a finely calibrated and agreed upon formula of distribution amongst the provinces. It even ascertains federal and provincial job quotas in government.

We need to recognize that the holding of the census has acquired a distinct significance in our political process. The acceptance of census results by all stakeholders is crucial for provincial harmony and the security of the federation. Otherwise, the census result may be rejected yet again, as the possibility of controversial and tampered results is huge.

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Shazia Nizamani

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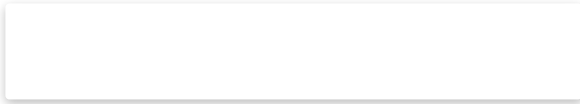
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