

Controversy Over Digital Census Brewing In Sindh

Pakistan's first ever digital census has been bogged down by accusations of data manipulation and political interference in Sindh



by **Shazia Nizamani** — May 3, 2023



Pakistan's first-ever digital population and housing census, which was rolled out on *1 March, 2023* claimed to be transparent, and was supposed to give more accurate data about the country's population, is proving to be an absolute farce riddled with flaws.

On April 28, the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) had extended the date for the fifth time. The deadline for enumeration — the Census which was originally scheduled to be completed by March 30 has been extended for another 15 days to May 15. The exercise was initially extended till April 10, and then again till April 15, then 20 and now the 30th.

PBS claimed in the first week of April that more than 92% of work had been completed in Sindh. However, according to official data released by PBS: "Islamabad and Balochistan trail significantly behind, with 72% and 62% work completed so far, respectively." Not only that, PBS claimed that "the digital census is a huge success and a moment of pride for the nation, so far, 40 million households had been counted and geotagged and 92% of the census work had been successfully completed in Sindh." So technically speaking, PBS completed 92% data in 30 days but needed one and half month to enumerate data for remaining 8% of the count.

What suddenly went wrong that compelled the PBS to keep extending the date for census in urban centers, particularly in Karachi and Hyderabad in Sindh. When initial census figures were released by PBS, MQM started expressing their reservations on census figures of Karachi, soon after Jamaat-e-Islami Karachi also joined the chorus that the population of Karachi was undercounted. MQM wants to get their desired magic figure for Karachi population to be accepted as true; the party has been propagating the over-exaggerated figure with no evidence to substantiate their claim.

This census controversy is the outcome of the myth created by these parties that the population of the Karachi is over 45 million, so extensively spread and popularized in typical Goebbelsian style through elements of these parties through print, electronic and social media that many people have been misled to believe it as fact. To bust this myth, a

robust and scientific approach based on modern demographic research and methodology is the need of the hour to place the facts before the nation. Unfortunately, such myths are very hard to debunk.

According to some sources, the reason of frequent extensions in census date were the MQM-P's threats to resign from their National Assembly seats over the census issue, and announcements that they would part ways with the ruling coalition. Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif directed the Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal to address the reservations of MQM regarding the ongoing population census. Now, practically MQM and JI are influencing the census to manipulate the figures for their vested political interests.

Before the outset of the digital census, members of the Sindhi intelligentsia and nationalist parties in Sindh raised their concerns. They demanded the federal government postpone the census, since many parts of Sindh were still under water and a large population is displaced. A provincial level event titled "*Census 2023, A Sindh Perspective*" was organised by the Sindhi Association of North America (SANA) in collaboration with mainstream and nationalist political parties, and civil society activists in Karachi on February 25.

They put forth their demand that the digital census be postponed, as hundreds of thousands of flood-hit people in Sindh have still not returned to their homes. 1.7 million houses in 23 districts of Sindh were wiped out in the devastating rains and floods of 2022. All the infrastructure of Sindh was destroyed. They also demanded justifications over the urgency to hold the census within five years instead of 10 years against the constitutional requirement and international best practices.

But all the concerns remained unheard and the federal government did not bother to take notice of the apprehensions and concerns of Sindhis on digital census. Now, unfortunately their apprehensions are coming out to be true, as the results of the census are creating controversy, because it lacks transparency and credibility.

Hafiz Naeem-ur-Rahman, in a press conference in Islamabad with Federal Minister Planning and Development Ahsan Iqbal, demanded that the counting process in rural areas of Sindh should be stopped and demanded an extension in the census date for Karachi.

The federal government accepted both demands of Jamaat-e-Islami: the extension in census date and census in rural areas of Sindh with tehsil growth rate of 1.5 percent should

be capped. The census has also been stopped in many parts of Sindh where higher growth rates have been recorded; while the census is continuing in Karachi and Hyderabad.

The census figures of April 15 and April 28 were analyzed, it was found that 2.45 million new people were added in Karachi and Hyderabad divisions, while only 0.62 million new people were counted in the rest of Sindh within two weeks. The manipulation of data for specific areas in Karachi becomes apparent. There are many other discrepancies, where figures have been manipulated to artificially raise the population in some parts of Karachi relative to the actual count. There are areas in Karachi where the population has actually increased, particularly in the suburbs of Malir and Kemari.

The Sindh government has also expressed serious concerns for excluding those parts of the province where “population growth rate has been recorded higher than a certain benchmark” and warned that the province would reject the result if its reservations were not addressed.

The Sindh government raised its concerns by writing [a letter](#) to the Federal Minister Ahsan Iqbal. In his letter, Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah has made it clear that his government would reject the census result if its reservations were not addressed.

The letter stated that it was conveyed to the provincial government that the “census activity will immediately be closed in those *talukas/tehsils* where a population growth rate higher than a certain benchmark has been recorded”.

The objections of CM Sindh are very valid as he said, “it is wrong to judge the population growth of all the districts/talukas against a single universal benchmark. If such a benchmark was universally applicable, [then] there would have been no need to conduct the census at all, as the population growth could have easily been calculated based on that benchmark.” He also added that there are many blocks in almost all districts of Sindh, which have still not been fully counted.

The people of Sindh demand a transparent and credible census, where every individual and house should be counted and data should be factual. Population data should be protected from alteration that seeks to satisfy the desires of some political parties. To influence the population count and alter the results would create political unrest in an environment where political tensions are already running high in the country.

The census should be conducted accurately and impartially, without any interference or

influence from any political party or group. Any attempt to manipulate or blackmail the census process for political gain would be a serious violation of the integrity of the census and could have negative consequences. It is important that the authorities responsible for conducting the census in Sindh province ensure that the process is transparent, impartial, and free from any political pressure or interference.

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