



Sindh And Balochistan Discontent With 2023 Census Results

Allegations of outright fraud and statistical manipulation have meant that the results of the 2023 Census are seen as illegitimate by civil society in Sindh and Balochistan, owing to the headcount in the provinces being systematically underreported.

Shazia Nizamani
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Analysis



The “first-ever digital census” in Pakistan’s history, with its big budget and towering claims of transparency, accuracy and credibility, proved to be a digital fraud.

From the inception, the digital census remained controversial due to multiple reasons; civil society in Sindh raised many questions, concerns, doubts, clarifications before the Chief of the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), but all remained unanswered. The PBS claimed to have conducted a pilot census in July 2022, but its results were never made public. The digital census was conducted after six years as the last census was conducted in 2017; the general standard practice and constitutional requirement for census is ten years.

More importantly, Sindh, Balochistan and parts of KPK were still recovering from the devastating floods, in which 33 million people were affected by flooding in 94 districts. 10 million people were displaced in many parts of Sindh and countless areas were inaccessible due to floodwater. The scale of destruction was so massive that the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres had to visit Sindh and Balochistan, and stated “I have seen many humanitarian disasters in the world, but I have never seen climate carnage on this scale. I have simply no words to describe what I have seen today: a flood area that three times the total area of my own country Portugal.”

During that catastrophic time in Sindh, MQM was exerting pressure on the PDM government led by Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif for the census, as its demand for the census was accepted by the PTI government as one of the conditions to remain in the coalition. On the other hand, Jamaat-e-Islami were worried about local government elections in Karachi.

The digital census started on March 1, 2023. The deadline to complete the census fieldwork was April 1 and April 30 was the deadline for the release of data. In the first week of April, representatives from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) announced that the census was in its final stages, but suddenly the fieldwork completion deadline was extended six times consecutively till May 15. Each time the deadline was extended, a significant number was added in certain parts, particularly in the Central and East districts in Karachi, strongholds of a Karachi based ethnic party. The deadlines were

districts in Karachi, strongholds of a Karachi based ethnic party. The deadlines were extended not for counting in hard to access locales in flood affected areas, where infrastructure was completely destroyed, but it was done for certain areas in Karachi only.

The federal government had formed a 13-member advisory committee in late 2021, which did not have any demographer from Sindh, thought it had one representative each from Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The people of Sindh had been raising concerns over transparency and credibility of the census because of the way the PBC was manipulating and fudging the census data overnight. In certain districts of Karachi, when field operations for digital data collection were closed, the population of Karachi division increased by 1.4 million and another 3.3 million was reduced in the rest of the divisions in Sindh by August 5. These were dramatically different from the results released in May.

The results of the digital census showed an increase of 4.3 million people in Karachi. Of the city's seven districts, the East emerges as the most populous with 3.9 million people, followed by Central with 3.8 million, and Korangi with 3.1 million. The East and Central Karachi are already thickly populated and concentrated areas.

Then Sindh Chief Minister Sindh Syed Murad Ali Shah raised his objections and concerns over anomalies in the data and outright manipulation in the digital census results on various occasions, and declared to reject the results of the census. But suddenly, he too agreed to the August 5 ratification of the digital census by the Council of Common Interests (CCI). The official figures of each block had not been made public, even after approval in the CCI. Why did Murad Ali Shah approve the results of a controversial census when the people of Sindh, civil society, intelligentsia and nationalist parties rejected the controversial results. Murad Ali Shah proceeded to provide lame excuses when he was questioned by journalists.

After Murad Ali Shah gave his consent to the census results in the CCI, his own party's Senator Taj Haider raised strong objections over the census results, but it was too late by that time. He stated in a press release that the "damage wrought by the so-called 'digital census' is evident from the fact that the manipulation of population figures published in the gazette notification of August 7 is far larger than was feared earlier. The notified figures have arbitrarily reduced the household and head count in Sindh by almost 10%."

He said that the “reduction of just one person in the average family size (AFS) results translated into a drop of 18% to 20% in total population of the province. There were only four areas in Sindh, two of them in Karachi, where AFS was shown above 6, while in the rest of the districts, the AFS was less than 6. In sharp contrast, all districts in Punjab (except Lodhran with 5.95 AFS) had an AFS well above 6.”

Generally, average family size is bigger in rural areas than in urban areas, but the element of fraud is evident in this census, where the average family size is lowest in Sindh, particular in rural areas. The average family size in Sindh is only 5.64, while Punjab’s average family size is 6.43, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa’s 6.94 and Baluchistan’s 6.42. Average family size in Badin is 4.89 and Dadu 5.11, and 5.35 in Ghotki - while its adjacent Rahim Yar Khan in Punjab had 6.72 AFS. While a multiple indicator cluster survey conducted by UNICEF found Sindh’s AFS at 6.5.

Naseer Memon, a renowned intellectual and development professional who had closely been monitoring the digital process and analysing the data had stated that in the digital census, 1.2 million people had been added artificially in certain districts in Karachi on the demands of an ethnic party, whereas 3.5 million has been reduced in rest of Sindh. On 16 May, official figures for Sindh were 57.5 million, but on August 5, the population of Sindh was claimed to be 55.69 million.

Rural areas grow more than urban areas by percentage and numbers. According to the census results, the population of Badin and Tharparkar has increased by less than 2%, while in certain districts of Karachi there is increase of more than 5%. As per calculations made by electoral experts, Karachi should gain one provincial seat each in the Central, East and Malir districts. However, Khairpur and Sanghar would lose one seat in each district.

Mr. Memon stated that “if any honest forensic analysis of the census data is conducted through some international experts, it will be proven beyond doubt that digital census was actually a digital handiwork of fiction in the public eye. Another institution has lost its credibility in the public’s eyes.”

According to Barrister Zamir Ghumro, a constitutional expert, political analyst and former Advocate General Sindh, “Sindh’s houses were counted as around 10 million, Punjab’s 190 million and KP 57 million. It has been shown that in Sindh, only 5.62 persons live per house, in Punjab 6.43 and in KP 6.94. This gives a population edge of 20 million to Punjab and 7 million to KP. If Sindh’s ratio of 5.62 per house had been applied

million to Punjab and 7 million to KP. If Sindh's ratio of 5.62 per house had been applied on Punjab; it would lose 22 seats of National Assembly, retaining only 119 seats instead of the present 141. The other three provinces would have 147 Seats in National Assembly. A good thing for the Federation, but the fraud persists.”

A decline in population has also been recorded in the census in Balochistan, and the results have been challenged in the Balochistan High Court. The petition suggests that the digital census results initially reported Balochistan's population at 21.7 million. However, the CCI illicitly slashed the figure by a staggering 7 million.

The Petition has been filed by Supreme Court Bar members to direct the Election Commission of Pakistan to conduct general election within 90 days. The petition has also challenged the approval of the digital census in CCI by caretaker Chief Ministers of Punjab and KPK, who have no statutory or constitutional rights to participate in the CCI meeting on August 5, 2023.

The people of Sindh have rejected the manipulated digital census, as it is widely seen as an attempt to misrepresent the demographics of Sindh through outright fraud. The discontent and genuine concerns of Sindh and Balochistan should be addressed. Only census results obtained through accurate, transparent and credible data compilation should be acceptable to everyone, otherwise this has been a futile exercise.



Shazia Nizamani

