

Pervez Tahir

# Census politics



The census that should have been held in 2008 was finally held in 2017. Not only that, the final results are yet to be notified officially. The regular conduct of the big count is necessary for making information-based plans and policies for socioeconomic wellbeing. This is all the more necessary in countries like Pakistan that fall in the league of overpopulated economies. Allama Iqbal, the architect of the idea of Pakistan, wrote as early as in 1904:

“... Poverty is the source of all crimes. If this great calamity is defeated the world will present a model of paradise .... But under the present circumstances the only way to freedom from the clutches of this evil spirit is a smaller population of the mankind so that the economic resources can support it ....” (p. 210).

“In our country economic resources are limited but the population is growing day by day. Nature cures it by famine and disease. But we should also free ourselves from the limitations placed by the practice of marrying in childhood and the number of wives .... Our only aim here is to have fewer children. The desire to marry is a natural urge, the suppression of which is also not healthy.... This aim can be achieved by marrying late or, in other words, by reducing birth rate and by generally restraining sexual urges” (pp. 212-213).

Politics enters the picture for a number of reasons. First, the census forms the basis for the delimitation of constituencies for elections at federal, provincial and local levels. It was in the context of elections that the Supreme Court had to take suo moto notice of the delays in the holding of the census in 2016. The political class was thus forced to hold it in 2017. Second, population weighs 82 per cent in the horizontal distribution of resources. There is an incentive in overstating the population.

This is not an issue that cannot be resolved. To hold a census may be a political matter but census itself is also a socio-economic exercise. It is not a good idea to ignore issues that involve the people. Other countries have dealt with the problem by freezing the population shares for the purpose of revenue distribution. Third, ethnic divides in Sindh, Balochistan and lately in Punjab add another dimension.

The security situation due to the ongoing war on terror was also cited as a reason for delay. It could be held in areas where security was not that serious an issue, for instance, Punjab, and the other provinces would follow, in the same way as provinces were once not imposing sales tax on services but when Sindh imposed it, other provinces followed suit. Army had to be called to assist in the exercise. While this helped the safe conduct of the census, the strict adherence to the CNIC-based identification may have led to the under-enumeration of the migrant population and

the illegals. In addition to security, let it be noted, the army also filled in the serious institutional gaps on the civilian side.

When the sixth Population and Housing Census 2017 was completed in May, only provisional results were released in August 2017. There was no agreement in the Council of Common Interests, the final approval forum, with Sindh dissenting most vociferously. A Senate panel came out with the proposal for a validation exercise, which should have been undertaken anyway as per the international practice. This was delayed for one excuse or the other with the result that the reasonable time within which a post-enumeration validation exercise can be held was lost.

As late as on February 11, 2020, the federal cabinet constituted a five-member committee to deliberate and make recommendations for approval of final results of Census 2017. The committee recommended to the cabinet the approval of the results without a post enumeration survey for validation. With so much time elapsed since the conduct of the census, the exercise will not have made much sense. Despite opposition by a key ally, the cabinet forwarded the recommendations to the CCI for final approval. On December 23, 2020 the cabinet took the decision to hold the next census as early as possible and well before 2027. A committee has been constituted for recommendation and adoption of best practices.

The terms of reference of the committee are:

- (i) To review the census process, data collection and field operation methodologies used for Census 2017 and recommend modern methodologies being adopted for census in region and globe for conduct of upcoming census
- (ii) To compare the regional/globally adopted census questionnaires and proposals for improvement.
- (iii) To review mode of data collection (manual/electronic) for provision of timely and credible results and remuneration for adoption of innovative tools and technologies for geo referred enumeration up to household level for upcoming census.
- (iv) To review the best practices of field operations, including monitoring/supervisions and data processing to minimise the omissions/errors and complete coverage.
- (v) To devise strategy for confidence building measures of all stakeholders for smooth completion of census operation and increasing reliability and credibility of census results.

The decision to hold a new census sooner than later is sound, but these run off the mill terms of reference dampen the spirit of it. It is hoped that the eminent demographers included in the committee will be able to avoid a repeat of the past, when the actual conduct of the 2017 census significantly deviated from the recommendations of a similar committee.

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<sup>14</sup>Iqbal, Sheikh Muhammad (n.d.) *Ilmul Iqtisad [The Science of Economics]*. Lahore: Khadim-ul-Taleem Steam Press of Paisa Akhbar. First published 1904. 2nd edition (1961), Karachi: Iqbal Academy; Reprinted (1977), Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan; 2nd Reprint (1991), Lahore: Aina-i-Adab. Urdu.