Ongoing census is like going for general medical tests ...

Have you ever asked a tailor to stitch clothes without telling the age, height, weight, and other measurements? Yes, the whole idea sounds absurd. How can one stitch clothes for someone without knowing the basic measurements? The same holds when governments formulate and implement their plans without an updated census.

A delayed census:
Pakistan has been living with this absurdity since 2008. Without knowing the number, age, geographical distribution, ethnic, religious, and gender composition, educational level, income level, employment level and other key indicators of its population, successive governments have been planning and executing policies, ranging from economic, social, political, foreign, environmental to defence. Resultantly, most of the times the plans did not match ground realities and could not achieve the desired outcome. The lack of accurate numbers turned Pakistan into a place where guesstimates take precedence over realities, where sentiments are superior to evidences; and where whimsical decision-making becomes the rule of the game.

It is in this context that the Supreme Court’s direction to hold 6th population census was crucial. Eventually, the 6th population census is taking place after a delay of nine years. The fifth population census also got delayed by seven years and took place in 1998, instead of 1991.

Concerns over census:
The census has started amid reservations from different stakeholders and many of those reservations are quite valid. These include:

- Lack of women enumerators for data collection
- Failure to capture ethnic and religious diversity prevailing in Pakistan by clubbing many of them under “any other” section in the census form
- The concern over not counting the unemployed population, neither the reasons for being unemployed
- Concern over not counting the exact number of people who migrated from other parts of Pakistan.
- Concern over how to capture mortality and fertility trends
- Concern over how to accurately count internally displaced and temporarily displaced persons in KP/FATA, and
- Concern that while respondents may be penalized for providing inaccurate information, there is no such penalty for enumerators if they tamper with the provided information.

There are also concerns by major political parties in Balochistan on counting the number of Afghan Pashtuns living in the province. To them, this may change the ethnic mix of the province, turning the Baloch into a minority.
Funds sharing formula:
The rule of the thumb is that the bigger the population, the bigger the share. The formula for the allocation of funds from the federal divisible pool to provinces gives 82.5 per cent weightage to population, so federating units are also skeptical that the federal government, (or Punjab to them) would try to manipulate the number of persons living in other provinces.
Let us assume that most of the above-mentioned concerns are valid. However, to me the glass is half full. The mere fact that we would have a head count after 19 years is a big step forward to well-informed decision-making.

How to maintain transparency?
In an ideal situation, all procedural and technical flaws in holding census should have been removed. However, census is not taking place in an ideal situation. The federal government was not ready for it and had to conduct this exercise under the Supreme Court's orders.
Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) has tried to ensure transparency through providing the individually bar-coded forms in registers. The forms are not to be detached from the registers. To add further scrutiny, the army official accompanying the enumerator will also note down the total number of persons counted per day.
At the end of the working day, both the civilian enumerators and army personnel tally their counts to identify any discrepancy. This may not be foolproof arrangement. However, my argument is that let us consider PBS innocent until proven guilty. Let us wait for the summary results, which should be released in July 2017.

Post Census Evaluation
There is a provision called Post Census Evaluation (PCE) where data can be verified through random checks after the census. We can make the most of that provision and a parliamentary committee on census or the Executive Committee of National Economic Council (ECNEC) itself may double check the results wherever they have doubts.
Data on transgender and disabled persons is being collected on census forms under the directions of the Supreme Court. However, machine readable forms had only two options under the gender column; 1 was to be encircled for male respondent and 2 was to be encircled for female respondent. Under the court directives, the enumerators would have to manually enter ‘3’, ‘4’, ‘5’ and ‘6’ for transgender, male with disability, female with disability, and transgender with disability on the machine readable form. It would certainly create confusions. The output of these fields will have to be double-checked to ensure that enumerators in peripheries and remote areas were able to follow the directions of the superior courts.
Likewise, lack or absence of women enumerators will have a negative effect in getting answers from female respondents, especially in KP, FATA, Balochistan, and in rural areas of other parts of Pakistan. This again highlights the importance of verifying the results through PCE.
Balochistan on counting the number of Afghan Pashtuns living in the province. To them, this may change the ethnic mix of the province, turning the Baloch into a minority.
Ethnic mix in Balochistan:
As far as the ethnic mix in Balochistan is concerned, my take is that PBS is neither mandated nor equipped to check the originality of citizenship of Pakistani nationals. NADRA is the agency to cancel fake CNICs. PBS’s job is to count everyone living in Balochistan during the reference period of census. The aliens’ headcount will be kept separate so the political leadership may take measures to exclude refugee population while deciding on delimitation of national and provincial assemblies’ constituencies. Through a non-inclusive census, we will not know many demographic features of Pakistan, such as accurate ethnic composition, number of unemployed, accurate number of people who migrated, and accurate number of people with special disabilities. However, we would be better off than having no data at all.

Poverty assessment
In the absence of census, Household Integrated Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2010-11 showed poverty in Pakistan to be 35 per cent based on the estimate that its population was 130 million. The same year, the Economic Survey of Pakistan (ESP) cited Pakistan’s population as 177 million. Forty seven million, here or there, may be nothing among friends. However, when we are talking of human beings, assessing the poverty level in a country, and planning to give relief to them, every single individual matters.

With the type of data which over or under-estimates the population of Pakistan by 47 million, one should not wonder why our performance on the millennium development goals (MDGs) is one of the worst in the region. The confusion persisted in 2016, too, when National Institute of Population Studies estimated Pakistan’s population as 198 million whereas ESP reported it to be 195 million.

Conclusion
To me, the ongoing census is like going for general medical tests. If they don’t help you in absolute diagnosis of a disease, they may point out anomalies on the basis of which specialized tests can be taken and further probing can be done to reach to an accurate diagnosis. So, let us hope there is no anomaly in the first place and be mentally ready to go for specialized tests if an anomaly is found.

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