

## Politics of census

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**IT is an open secret that the census is being delayed to avoid the fresh delimitation of electoral constituencies before the 2018 general polls. The muted opposition of some provinces to the delay suggests that by and large, the politicians are comfortable with it. Delaying the census serves the self-interest of politicians but hurts society — we have no knowledge of the accurate numbers, and planning and policy design are severely impeded without this necessary information.**

Just as the PIA employees are opposed to the privatisation of their airline because it could cost them their jobs, the politicians too are not eager for a census as it could threaten their standing and power. The census would lead

to fresh delimitation of electoral constituencies — a change in the demographics of one may convert an expected electoral win into defeat if the census reveals new numbers.

In fact, as an aside, if politicians are allowed to inflict enormous losses on the country by delaying the census, why quibble over the supposed loss that PIA employees may cause to the national exchequer in a bid to keep their jobs? The high costs of not privatising PIA are nothing when measured against the losses a delayed census would incur on account of flawed planning and policy design.

The pursuit of self-interest can be justified if it benefits society as well. But it cannot be condoned if harm is inflicted on the public.

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### **Citizens stand to lose if the head count is delayed further.**

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While on the one hand, we are fortunate enough to have laws that penalise such behaviour in individuals, regrettably, we do not have enough laws to rein in the similarly self-serving behaviour of governments.

Many laws which have no penal clause to make governments abide by them are weak. For example, the Constitution requires that the census be held once every 10 years, but if the government reneges on that commitment, not much remedy is available to the citizens. It is they who stand to lose.

Digressing a bit, laws regarding the frequency of meetings of the Council of Common Interests and of the national debt limit do not have teeth.

Though the law requires that the CCI be convened every 90 days, its meeting held in February was called after 10 months. Important decisions, including the one on the census, could have been taken six months back had the CCI been convened in time. Constitutionally, citizens cannot do much if the government postpones the convening of the CCI.

Similarly, since the last couple of years, the national debt has been in excess of the limit (60pc of GDP) prescribed by the Fiscal Responsibility Debt Limitation Act. Again,

governments violating the FRDL Act cannot be easily made to mind their fiscal behaviour. The delay in holding the census and violations of other laws are not unique to any one government. The solution lies in introducing penal clauses that would make all governments follow the law.

Coming back to the census, it is more than just a head count. It provides a wealth of information on the profile of a country's population, including age, population density, gender mix, dependency ratio, literacy rate, enrolment ratio, labour force participation, unemployment rate, disabled people, rural/urban proportions etc.

Exploring answers to some questions would help us relate to the utility of population numbers disaggregated in various forms. Though the exodus from the Waziristan area was planned before the forces went in, why did the number of IDPs take us by surprise? Perhaps, we are not aware of the true population of the region.

Now that mass transit is about to take off in a big way in Pakistan, can we effectively plan urban transport and housing without knowing the accurate numbers of urban dwellers? Can we figure out how much electricity would be needed by 2018, if we are unaware of the correct number of people in the country? Can we plan new schools and colleges or frame an effective labour policy, unless we know how many will be admitted to schools and how many would enter the labour market?

The argument regarding the insufficiency of personnel is difficult to buy — if the local bodies elections can be held in phases, why not hold the census in phases. My hunch is that the census exercise would perhaps start when it is no longer possible to undertake fresh delimitation of constituencies before the elections. The reluctance of some provincial governments notwithstanding, elections to the local bodies were held courtesy the intervention of the Supreme Court. Perhaps a repeat of sorts is needed. With the era of suo motus now history, society may have to approach the court on the census issue.

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