

ISAS Insights

No. 464 – 14 September 2017

Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



Pakistan's Population – A Ticking Time Bomb

Shahid Javed Burki and Riaz Hassan¹

Some data from the April-May 2017 census in Pakistan have become available and the picture they paint is very troubling because of the high rate of the population growth. Some commentators have questioned the accuracy of the numbers in the census. In this paper, the authors maintain that this not helpful. Instead, Islamabad's policy makers – and also those in the provinces – should treat the information that has been released seriously and begin to devise policies and programmes that would address the demographic problems the country faces at this time. The authors' main conclusion is that, at this delicate moment in Pakistan's history, serious attention should be given to the country's demographic situation. The authors also propose carrying out follow-up studies as more data become available on various demographic challenges facing Pakistan.

¹ Mr Shahid Javed Burki is Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). During a professional career spanning over half a century, Mr Burki has held a number of senior positions in Pakistan and at the World Bank. He was the Director of China Operations at the World Bank from 1987 to 1994, and the Vice President of Latin America and the Caribbean Region at the World Bank from 1994 to 1999. On leave of absence from the Bank, he was Pakistan's Finance Minister from 1996 to 1997. He can be contacted at sjburki@gmail.com. Professor Riaz Hassan is Visiting Research Professor at ISAS. He can be contacted at isasriaz@nus.edu.sg. The authors acknowledge the assistance provided by Ms Faiza Saleem, Research Assistant at ISAS, for assembling the data for this work. The authors bear full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

Introduction

Some preliminary numbers from Pakistan's census of 2017 conducted in April and May this year were presented to the country's Council of Common Interests (CCI) before being released to the public. It is interesting that the government chose the CCI as the forum for the first discussion on the results of the census. The assumption is that the census data would possibly lead to political and economic disputes among the country's provinces. Under the Constitution, the CCI, with provincial chief ministers as its members, has the mandate to resolve the problems that may emerge among the country's federating units.

History of Censuses in Pakistan

A national census is mandated by the Pakistan Constitution which requires that it should be held every 10 years. This requirement has not been fulfilled. Also, Pakistan has not followed the United Nations' advocated practice of holding population censuses every 10 years, preferably conducting them in the first year of every decade. The country followed this practice for a decade and a half when censuses were held in 1951 and 1961. However, this practice was abandoned mostly for political reasons. The 1971 census was delayed because of the civil war in what was then-East Pakistan. It was conducted in 1982 when Pakistan, having lost its eastern wing which had become the independent state of Bangladesh, was now demographically a very different entity. The census planned for 1991 was delayed by seven years. During the 1988-99 period, the country was attempting to move towards a representative political order based on a one-person-one-vote system. This required proper counting of people in the various jurisdictions of the country but there were apprehensions in the smaller provinces that it would not happen. There was also concern about the status of three to four million people who had moved from Afghanistan to Pakistan to escape from the civil war in the former. Counting them as citizens would have disturbed the distribution of people in favour of the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Karachi, the two destinations for most of the refugees. When the census was held in 1998, it was conducted under the watchful eye of military personnel.

In 1999, Pakistan was back under military rule – no plans were made to carry out another count for as long as the military was in charge. The rule by the military ended in 2008 when

the general elections held that year brought a representative government to power. Plans were drawn up to hold a census in 2011 but they could not be implemented because of differences between those who governed in the provinces of Punjab and Sindh, the country's two most populous provinces. There was apprehension that the Punjab province, which was better represented in the national bureaucratic structure, may be able to pull the population count in its favour.

Table 1: Pakistan Population: 1981-2017

Indicators	1981	1998	2017
Total:			
Total Population (millions)	84.25	132.35	207.77
Change in Population	29.0%	57.09%	56.99%
Average Annual growth rate	-	2.69	2.4
Residence:			
Urban Population (millions)	23.84	43.04	75.58
Average Annual growth rate – Urban	-	3.53	2.70
Rural Population (millions)	60.41	89.31	132.19
Average Annual growth rate – Rural	-	2.33	2.23
Gender:			
Male population (millions)	44.23	68.87	106.45
% of population	52.50%	52.04%	51.23%
Female population (millions)	40.02	63.48	101.31
% of population	47.50%	47.96%	48.76%
Transgender (millions)	-	-	0.01
Region:			
Punjab population (millions)	47.29	73.62	110.01
% of population	56.13%	55.63%	52.95%
Sindh	19.03	30.44	47.89
% of population	22.59%	23.00%	23.05%
Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa	11.06	17.74	30.52
% of population	13.13%	13.40%	14.69%
Balochistan	4.33	6.56	12.34
% of population	5.14%	4.96%	5.94%
Islamabad	0.34	0.81	2.01
% of population	0.40%	0.61%	0.97%

FATA	2.19	3.18	5
% of population	2.60%	2.40%	2.41%

Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics.

Significance of the 2017 Census

The 2017 census data will have significant political and economic consequences for the distribution of power among the provinces. The provincial representation in the National Assembly will be affected as will their shares in the “federal divisible pool” – the revenues collected by the federal government for distribution among the provinces. The provincial share in the total population has been given the largest weightage in the revenue apportionment formula agreed to by the provinces. This is done by the National Finance Commission (NFC) that is supposed to issue its “awards” every five years. The last NFC was constituted in 2014 and issued its award a year later. While these are important matters, the main findings of the census have to be looked at from a broad angle.

Census’ Surprises

There are a number of unexpected findings from the census. The most significant of these is the rate of the population growth. For several years, the government had assumed that Pakistan had followed the pattern of demographic change noticeable in all emerging nations. The type of social and economic change that Pakistan has seen in the last several decades should have resulted in a reduction in the rate of the population growth. The changes that have occurred include a fairly steady increase in income per head of the population, a sharp decline in the incidence of poverty and rapid urbanisation, in particular the growth of large cities. The poor and those living in rural areas tend to have large families than those with higher incomes and living in towns and cities. It is for this reason that Islamabad had assumed that the rate of increase in the population had declined from more than three per cent a year in the 1960s to slightly more than 1.8 per cent in the 2010s. The main reason for this would have been a significant decline in birth rate.

This optimism about the demographic transition has not been borne out by the census of 2017. It is estimated that the rate of growth in the population was one-third higher than what the government had believed. It was 2.4 per cent rather than 1.8 per cent assumed in the Pakistan Economic Survey of 2016-17.

The second surprise from the census's finding is that the sex ratio in Pakistan has not adjusted to what is regarded as the demographic norm. In normal populations, the ratio of women in the total population is slightly higher than that of men. This is largely on the account of the women's longer life expectancy. This has not happened in Pakistan and the reason is the relatively low status of the women in the Pakistani society. As the impressive demographic transition in Bangladesh has shown, improving the women's standing in society has significant consequences for the birth rate.

The main factor accounting for the women's higher social status in Bangladeshi society is the rate of female participation in the labour force. In Bangladesh, the rate of female participation in the labour force, at 43.1 per cent, is almost double that of Pakistan's 24.3 per cent – this is largely due to the employment of women in Bangladesh's large garment-making industry. Another factor is the level of female educational attainment. In Bangladesh, 42 per cent of women aged 25 years and above have some secondary education compared to Pakistan's 26.5 per cent. The sociological consequences arising from these two factors probably explain most of the significant differences in the status of the women in these two countries.

In Pakistan, the parents appear to invest less on their daughters' education because they expect higher labour market rewards for the sons – this is due to the parents' expected dependence on their sons during their old age. This creates discriminatory practices and accounts for the lower school enrolment rates for girls. The empirical evidence from Pakistan, however, shows that the return on education is much higher for females than males, but the portion of the returns on the daughters' education that goes to parents is much lower than in the case of the sons. Another factor that applies to the women in general in Pakistan and elsewhere is time poverty or paucity – this is a consequence of the diverse demands on the women's time. The problem becomes more acute for women in the workforce as they are still expected to continue with their gender-related and culturally-defined domestic roles.

The employment of the women in Bangladesh's large garment industry has made them relatively independent of the men's control. They have a greater say in deciding on the appropriate size of their families. As can be seen from Table 2, Bangladesh performs better in terms of the social development of the women compared to Pakistan. The authors suspect that the effects of Islamic religious prescriptions related to the women are mediated by cultural traditions and practices which vary across Muslim countries.

Table 2: Population and Health Indicators for Muslim Countries

Country	Pop. Million (1998)	Pop. Million (2017)	Average Annual Growth Rate (1998-2017)	2017				
				TFR	Male Life Expectancy	Female Life Expectancy	Sex Ratio	Maternal Mortality Ratio
Indonesia	205.8	263.5	1.3%	2.38	67.36	71.60	1.05	126
Pakistan	132.4	207.8	2.4%	3.42	65.73	67.74	1.087	178
Bangladesh	126.2	164.8	1.4%	2.09	71.43	74.09	1.049	176
Egypt	65.9	95.2	2.0%	3.22	69.52	73.99	1.06	33
Iran	63.6	80.9	1.3%	1.63	74.78	77.02	1.052	25
Turkey	61.3	80.4	1.4%	2.02	72.85	79.20	1.05	16
Sudan	26.7	42.2	2.4%	4.16	62.60	65.76	1.04	311
Algeria	30.3	41.1	1.6%	2.68	73.23	77.90	1.05	140
Iraq	22.2	38.7	3.0%	4.39	67.72	72.22	1.065	50
Morocco	28.2	35.2	1.2%	2.41	73.71	75.87	1.06	121

Source: 2015 World Population Prospects, United Nations

* Sex Ratio is measured at birth: males per female

** Maternal mortality ratio is measured as deaths per 100,000 live births

The third important finding of the census, albeit not a surprise, relates to the differences in the rates of growth in the size of the populations of the various provinces. This is shown in Table 1. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan have seen their populations increase at higher rates than those in Punjab and Sindh. This is not surprising since the latter two are socially and economically more developed than the former two. That said, there has been significant outward migration from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to Punjab and Sindh. Karachi now has a large Pakhtun population. According to some assessments, Karachi is now the world's largest Pakhtun city.

This brings one to the question of the estimation of the country's urban population. It was expected that the census would underestimate the size and, hence, the proportion of the urban population in the total. This is because of the way urban areas are defined. The peripheral

areas of the large cities are treated as rural rather than urban. This is the reason why the population of Karachi comes out to be much smaller than generally assumed. It appears that the geographic space counted as making up the city of Karachi is much smaller than what would be seen as the real city. The census probably did not count the Pakhtun population now located in Karachi as Karachites. This is likely to have serious political consequences as the city will not have as many seats in the National Assembly as its population size would suggest.

This is a preliminary reading of the census of 2017. There will be a better understanding of Pakistan's demographic situation once fuller results become available. However, that said, even these preliminary findings should point to some important policy directions for the administrations in the country. The federal government, as well as the governments at the sub-national levels, should begin to reflect on how to defuse the ticking population bomb.

Public policies to rectify gender differences through parental resource-allocation for their daughters' education will deliver a significant social, economic and demographic dividend. Greater educational attainment will significantly enhance the participation of the women in the labour force and may also help to redefine their domestic roles in the family. The higher employment rates will also result in significant social, economic and family-related benefits. In short, increasing educational opportunities for the women will go a long way to enhancing the status of Pakistani women in society and in delivering significant economic and demographic rewards for the country.

Future Work

More in-depth work is required in a number of areas. These include (a) a more detailed study of the importance of focusing on the need to improve the level of the women's social development so as to bring about the delayed but sustainable demographic transition; (b) use the district-level data to highlight the relationship between urbanisation and political choice; and (c) use the district data to reflect on the influence of demographic changes on the structural transformation of the economy.

.