

The Population Census: A Step Towards Sustainable Democracy

Asst. Prof. Dr. Yasser Ali Haddad

Asst. lecturer Yasser Jaffar Haidar



Ishtarcenter.com

Mail@ishtarcenter.com

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Introduction

One of the principles of sustainable democracy is ensuring opportunities for all members of society, regardless of their diverse components, to benefit from state services such as healthcare and education. In addition, it is essential to provide opportunities for decent employment, secure living areas, and promote peaceful coexistence. According to the dynamic equation of democracy, which aligns with the goals of sustainable development, democracy enhances the quality of life for all people when the public plays a genuine role in shaping their reality and planning for their future, thereby sharing power, not dividing it among a small group.

Sustainable democracy cannot progress towards its goals unless it thoroughly understands the local context of the country and the demographic distribution of its components across residential areas. One of the most crucial factors in studying the local reality of countries is the population census, which is a vital process for sustainable democracy. It provides essential and accurate information that significantly influences the public policy of the state by facilitating resource allocation and social planning, enabling the government to meet its citizens' needs effectively.

Section One: The Census – Simple Concept, Complex Procedures

Globally, evidence-based policies are fundamental to managing economic and social affairs and ensuring good governance. One of the most critical pieces of evidence is the human capital that the state possesses in all its diversity. Therefore, any government must understand the number and type of its human capital in order to comprehend its present reality and plan for the future based on available resources. A government cannot know what its future will look like unless it understands its current situation. The population census is one of the most essential procedures governments can adopt to measure their human capital,

capabilities, and potential, by determining their demographic weight and gathering real data for shaping public policy and allocating appropriate resources.

The concept of the Population Census?

The population census is a process of collecting and classifying comprehensive information about the population, providing demographic, economic, and social data for all citizens of a country within a specific timeframe. It is considered a comprehensive source for obtaining population data to meet various needs and serves as a reference for demographic statistics, becoming a national practice carried out by governments in all their forms.

The concept of the population census dates back to ancient civilizations in Iraq, Egypt, Rome, and China, where it was primarily aimed at strengthening the state militarily and economically. At that time, it focused on men capable of bearing arms, traders, and affluent families for tax purposes and to increase state resources.

However, the importance of the population census has grown significantly as human capital has become crucial in shaping a country's public policy and direction. Leaders realized that understanding domestic affairs was the key to strengthening the state, identifying areas of strength and weakness. International organizations, such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), established in 1969, have made the population census an international matter. The UNFPA works to promote the rights of all citizens to live stable lives with equal opportunities, as well as combat poverty using census data.

After the changes that reshaped the international system, particularly after World War II, which led to forced migration and population displacement, many countries began to experience demographic changes. These countries were then compelled to reassess their realities and engage in strategic planning for their future. This made the population census essential on both the global and national levels, as countries began to use census data to inform their public policies, despite the challenges of conducting it.

Goals of the Population Census

The primary goal of conducting a population census in any country is to develop public policies and improve economic areas such as education, healthcare, and services by creating a comprehensive map with integrated, real data for regions and sectors within the country. It also provides real indicators for medium- and long-term development projects, aligned with population growth rates and the demographic distribution of minorities and majorities in the country.

Governments often use the census to better understand the demographic distribution, especially in countries that have experienced internal displacement or demographic changes due to unstable conditions and internal conflicts that threaten societal peace.

The Population Census in Iraq

The last nationwide population census in Iraq took place in 1987, covering all Iraqi provinces. In 1997, a census was conducted in the southern and central provinces, excluding the northern provinces (currently the Kurdistan Region). It is undeniable that successive governments since the U.S. occupation of Iraq have delayed conducting a population census due to the country's unstable security situation and internal political and social conflicts.

However, with the current security stability in Iraq, the government's decision to conduct the population census is a crucial step in shaping public policy, which has relied on estimated data since 2003. This census will be part of the government's program to ensure citizens' rights to public services, as it plays a significant role in calculating the demographic weight of Iraqi provinces, particularly after the forced displacement caused by ISIS.

The Iraqi Ministry of Planning began implementing the population census process in cooperation with other relevant authorities at the beginning of 2024. Preparations have been completed, including numbering and experimental censuses, training census teams, and establishing data centers and communication operations rooms. However, this process is the largest in over 35 years, and it faces considerable challenges. Many citizens are hesitant to provide accurate

information or cooperate with census takers, particularly after including questions about personal property, which has sparked criticism. Nonetheless, the Ministry of Planning has reassured the public that sharing this information is essential for their strategic development plan for 2022-2025, helping to assess the country's socio-economic layers and pinpoint poverty-stricken areas to ensure the proper implementation of public projects for citizens.

Section Two: The Population Census as a Tool for Serious Democratic Orientation

Building a democracy, according to theorists, requires foundational steps that become more complex and stringent as the system matures. Democracy is not simply about self-governance but involves navigating complex realities that require not only relying on the experiences of others but understanding the social forces and contexts unique to the country.

Since the 2005 Constitution and its success in acting as a transitional document, Iraq's political system has been floating between transition and democratic transformation. Achieving full democratic transformation requires a political elite united in prioritizing democracy as a collective principle for cooperation, not as a strategy for political compromise between social forces. The population census process will provide new insights for understanding the current social dynamics, offering data that may have been overlooked, either intentionally or unintentionally.

The population census will serve as an essential first step in Iraq's political transformation. By studying and analyzing demographic data, the government can address gaps in services and political decision-making, contributing significantly to Iraq's democratic transformation. Understanding the demographic makeup of various groups and regions will positively impact the political process overall.

Electoral Benefits of the Census

Conducting a population census for cities or districts will contribute to the success and transparency of the electoral process. Accurate data helps determine the true number of eligible voters, facilitates the proper distribution of polling stations, and predicts voter turnout. By providing accurate information on the population, the census reduces the possibility of electoral fraud, ensuring the integrity of the voting system.

Many political systems delay conducting a census because it is the first step in revealing the real size of each electoral unit. Without reliable census data, electoral results can be manipulated, with seats and votes being miscalculated. The census will serve as a safeguard for electoral integrity and transparency, ensuring that electoral districts and candidates are fairly represented.

Means of Reading, Diagnosis, and Adjustment

The database acquired by the system through the population census process will serve as the foundation for reading and analyzing the various social forces, their structure, and composition. It will also help identify explanations and solutions for building stronger, more understanding institutions that are tailored to the Iraqi context—one that has undergone significant changes over many years without fully addressing these developments.

According to Jack Knight, the institution in countries undergoing democratic transition is "the result of an ongoing struggle among social forces that are seeking space for themselves. Due to the democratic ceiling and the newly expanded space for freedom," all sub-identities and various affiliations will be activated to serve as the primary driving force for forming the institutions of the system. This struggle is one of negotiation and pressure tactics among social forces, which ultimately transforms the institution into a mirror of these forces. As a result, minorities will gain small institutions or those with limited influence that match their size within society, while large social forces will acquire dominant institutions by their very nature.

This system of quotas and demographic divisions represents a situation that cannot be properly diagnosed or understood without obtaining a comprehensive database, starting with the population census. This census, along with other critical statistics, will provide decision-makers and political partners with the necessary information to understand the true state of institutional distribution. It will also help address the imbalance created by demographic divisions, which can lead to a system that is divided based on demographic factors rather than democratic principles.

The census will also help diagnose many important and critical issues that could arise in society. Specifically, it will allow authorities to monitor cases of "demographic replacement or displacement" caused by migration or forced relocation due to disasters or wars. For instance, Iraqi society has experienced similar circumstances in several provinces. This makes the population census a vital tool for identifying these cases and the negative effects they may cause, such as social tensions between native and new populations. It also highlights shifts in the cultural and social identities of individuals who have relocated, which can result in alienation or isolation for some.

In addition, the population census provides crucial data that helps in understanding and analyzing the class structure within Iraqi society. It allows decision-makers to measure economic and cognitive disparities between individuals and identify the root causes of social conflicts. By doing so, it contributes to achieving the desired justice and equality in society.

The population census acts as a map, guiding decision-makers to areas of social tension and identifying potential crisis points or outbreaks of violence. Understanding the demographic structure on the ground, as it exists continuously and permanently, offers real indicators of the likelihood of a crisis or conflict, whether among different groups or with the regime itself. By analyzing census data from multiple angles, weaknesses in governance or potential areas of neglect can be identified, which could lead to security issues and violations.

Population Census: Planning and Sustainability of Public Policy

The role of the population census in public policy planning can be described as central and essential. It enables governments to make decisions based on accurate

data that meet the needs of the population, promote sustainable development, and ensure the fair distribution of resources. Public policies have always been viewed as "solutions to societal problems, addressing its needs, and achieving its desired goals." Therefore, it is logical that having an accurate and realistic understanding of society and its population count is a fundamental requirement for decision-makers.

However, the policies that emerge from this process must have a genuine and solid direction, one that can leverage all available data to form a true democratic equation embraced by the political elites and their partners in the political process. Establishing a real and sustainable democratic path will compel newcomers to this process to follow this direction and adopt the ideas set by their predecessors, with a conviction in the priority of democracy that will continue to guide the political process. This is a gradual process that requires time, but Iraq has already begun following this path. The recent census sends both internal and external messages about the maturity of Iraq's democratic experience, moving away from one of the most commonly used tools for election manipulation in many Arab systems. This demonstrates Iraq's understanding of the need to acknowledge and measure its social reality, assess various aspects and changes over time, and address issues that have accumulated over decades—issues that previous governments may not have been able to address due to other competing priorities.

Identifying existing problems will help in finding solutions, but democracy is not just a solution. It is a means to reach a resolution that satisfies all parties within a single system and solidifies the idea of cooperation and compromise to reach a common meeting point. This state will not be achieved by the political process without understanding the specificities of the society (its people). Peaceful coexistence is the result of fair and balanced representation, ensuring that all segments of society are treated justly by the government. Even in mixed regions (governorates with diverse populations), tensions will persist if residents do not share a common national identity that embraces all their different groups.

While the population census will not create an Iraqi national identity, it serves as the starting point for a series of other operations such as social surveys, opinion polls, questionnaires, and various other tools for measuring public opinion. These

tools will gauge public responses to critical issues and help solidify the national identity. The government's approach and the completion of the population census give many positive indicators that steps will be taken to complete the government's path, leading us to expect a democratic phase that relies on accurate numbers and data more than ever before. This will then turn into a tool used to achieve equality and fairness, potentially contributing to the sustainability and consolidation of Iraq's democracy.