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Census politics in deeply divided societies

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Population censuses in societies that are deeply divided along ethnic, religious or linguistic lines can be sensitive affairs – particularly where political settlements seek to maintain peace through the proportional sharing of power between groups. This brief sets out some key findings from a research project investigating the relationship between census politics and the design of political institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kenya, Lebanon and Northern Ireland.

The contentious politics of the census in consociational democracies

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In order to better understand the nature of census politics in deeply divided societies, the project breaks down the census process into three phases: the decision to hold a census and the design and preparation of the questionnaire; the process of enumeration; and the processing, publication and use of census results. Each of these phases is characterised by interaction between the state, civil society and international actors and standards.

Planning the census

One of the most contentious aspects of census design concerns decisions about whether and how to ask people about their ethnic identities, religion and language spoken. When Bosnia and Herzegovina's 2013 census was being planned, the first draft of the questionnaire featured 'closed' tick-box responses to questions about ethnicity, religion and language, and these appeared to encourage respondents to identify with the country's three main groups – Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats. Concerned about the dominance of ethnicity in Bosnian politics, a number of civil society groups subsequently lobbied for the questions to be made more open in format, to make it simpler for people to reject ethnic identification and be counted simply as 'Bosnians' instead (Perry, 2013). Their success in having the questionnaire redesigned was in large part thanks to the presence of an International Monitoring Operation, established to ensure compliance of the census with international and European standards.

Lobbying of government to influence census design also occurred in Kenya prior to its 2009 census, when representatives of some smaller and sub-groups threatened to boycott the census should they not be listed amongst the possible responses to the tribe question, rather than being subsumed into larger tribes or an 'other' option (Balaton-Chrimes, 2011). Demands such as these are motivated not only by the perception or reality that power and resources often flow from being categorised by the census, but also a powerful sense that such categorisation confers symbolic recognition on group identities.

In the Lebanese case, by contrast, the link between group size and political representation has meant that no census has been undertaken since 1932. Lebanon's political system is based on a particularly rigid form of 'consociationalism', which is a form of power sharing also employed in different guises in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Northern Ireland. Lebanon's system of consociational power sharing, dating back to 1943, operates on the basis of each religious community having a fixed quota of representatives in parliament. While the quotas were revised somewhat by the 1989 Taif Agreement, they remain based essentially on the population shares from the 1932 census (Faour, 2007).

While Lebanon's religious demography has changed significantly since 1932, the revisions to the power-sharing formula that a new

population count would entail mean that there are today no serious calls for a census to be held. Christian parties would undoubtedly lose from any revision of the quota system, and while Shia and Sunni parties would gain, the complexities of inter-group relations and coalitions have kept the census off the political agenda, however useful census data might be for planning and development purposes.

Enumeration

Once the census has been designed and planned, its most visible phase is the process of enumeration, in which members of a population are either visited by enumerators or complete census forms themselves. In the Bosnian case of 2013, the lead-up to the enumeration was characterised by campaigns associated with each of the country's three main ethnic groups, which sought to encourage their members to answer the questions on ethnic identity, religion and language in a way that identified them clearly as either Bosniak, Serb or Croat (Perry, 2013).

Bosnia and Herzegovina's system of consociationalism guarantees ethnic representation for these three groups, and campaigners were motivated in part by a desire to maximise their share of the population statistics, in order to ensure their continued guaranteed representation. Some campaigners went as far as to encourage Bosnians living overseas to return to the country temporarily so that they would be included in the count. Rumours circulated amongst the diaspora that they stood to lose property rights in their home country if they were not enumerated in the census.

The Bosniak, Serb and Croat ethnic campaigns also faced a rival, 'civic' campaign, however, which encouraged people to reject ethnic identification, and in so doing tried to use the census as an opportunity to demonstrate that many citizens felt unrepresented by ethnic parties. Some members of this civic campaign encouraged people to identify as simply 'Bosnian' in the census as one way of generating pressure to liberalise the country's power-sharing institutions by opening them up to those who do not identify politically as Bosniak, Serb or Croat.

Northern Ireland, by contrast, has not witnessed campaigns to influence census respondents' religious identification, despite the significance of its political divide. In large part, this is likely because power sharing takes a more liberal form in Northern Ireland than in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Rather than pre-determining which groups are represented in political institutions, the Good Friday Agreement established a system of power sharing that leaves the groups to be represented in the executive to the electoral system, which improves the prospects for non-ethnic parties (McCulloch, 2014, p. 70). As a result, there is less to be gained in relation to political representation from maximising a group's share in recorded population statistics in comparison with a case such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, where seats on the country's tripartite presidency, for example, are reserved for a Bosniak, a Serb and a Croat.

Census results

Whereas census results might not matter in determining political representation in Northern Ireland in the way that they do in Bosnia and Herzegovina or Lebanon, census results have been used to explain the outcome of recent elections to its power-sharing institutions. Following the 2017 Northern Ireland Assembly elections, which were the first in which unionist parties had not won a majority, local media revisited the census results in order to explain this outcome by reference to the shifting demographic balance of Northern Ireland, which has seen the Catholic minority slowly grow to almost match the Protestant population.

The main public debate about census results in Northern Ireland, however, has concerned the implications of the figures on religious affiliation for its constitutional status, with discussion often underpinned by an assumption that if and when a Catholic majority emerges, then Irish unification is likely to follow (Anderson and Shuttleworth, 1998). While this debate is not a new one – the borders of Northern Ireland on its establishment were based on the 1911 census results – the provision in the Good Friday Agreement for the holding of a 'border poll' has arguably increased the salience of census results – as has the debate about the implications of Brexit for Northern Ireland.

In other cases, disputes have resulted in the rejection of census results by some groups. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, politicians and the statistics office in the Republika Srpska federal entity have refused to accept the results published by the central statistics agency, arguing that the figures were inflated by people who were persuaded to return to the country to be enumerated by the campaigns that accompanied the census. While the International Monitoring Operation recognises the published results, which confers international recognition on them, the Republika Srpska government has published its own results, and it seems unlikely that this dispute between the entity and the central state will be resolved (Rose, 2016).

Disputes over census results have also occurred in Kenya. Kenya lacks the formal, institutionalised features of power sharing found in the other three cases included in this project, but an important aspect of the country's 2010 constitution has been a process of decentralisation. This has placed greater emphasis on the relative populations of the country's 47 counties, with a proposed revenue-sharing formula giving greatest weight to the population of each county in determining its allocation of resources. Because of disputes

over the results of the 2009 census, which some argue was manipulated in some regions, politicians have argued that it is necessary to wait for the 2019 census to be completed for revenue to be shared fairly (Wainaina, 2019).

Implications for policy

The implications of the design of political institutions such as power-sharing arrangements for the ability to conduct a census are never likely to be central to the negotiation of those institutions, particularly where they are adopted as part of peace agreements. Nonetheless, the ability to conduct a census is important in post-conflict or otherwise divided societies. Not only does the census provide data that is important for post-conflict reconstruction and development, but it also provides the 'backbone' of the broader statistical system, allowing for the construction of a robust sample frame for important surveys. It is therefore necessary to consider how some of the difficulties of conducting a census in these contexts might be mitigated.

As the Lebanese case illustrates, a power-sharing system that relies on rigid quotas derived from population shares is likely to make the holding of a regular census particularly challenging. More liberal power-sharing systems are likely to pose fewer difficulties, since they do not institutionalise such a strong link between population shares and political representation. While quotas might be a necessary element of an agreement to end violent conflict in some contexts, thought needs to go into how they might be updated to reflect demographic shifts over time. One way to do this would be to include provision in the initial power-sharing agreement for revising the quotas in light of census results. Should that not be possible, an alternative might be to separate political representation from population shares by agreeing that future censuses should not include questions about ethnic or religious identities. While this might mean that quotas fail to keep up with changing demographics, as has been the case in Lebanon, it would at least allow for the collection of much-needed socio-economic data.

The Bosnian case, meanwhile, demonstrates the importance of international monitoring of censuses where they are likely to be disputed. While the 2013 Bosnian census was certainly not problem-free, the presence of an International Monitoring Operation did smooth the process of holding the country's first post-war population count. In particular, the IMO played an important role in mediating between civil society, politicians and statisticians in disputes about the design of the questionnaire. Such operations can help civil society hold governments to international standards of census design, and are also potentially important actors in monitoring the enumeration process. In cases where accusations of the manipulation or fabrication of census results have been made, such as with Kenya's 2009 exercise, international monitors can potentially play a role similar to that of the well-established function of electoral observers.

Governments and their statistics agencies, supported by international organisations where necessary, can also do more to inform their citizens about the implications and importance of the census. In the Bosnian case, for example, the official census publicity was drowned out by the ethnic campaigns, and rumours including those about the link between census enumeration and property rights circulated largely unchallenged. Clearer and more prominent official communication can also help individuals and civil society organisations to spot and report irregularities with the census process, which in turn is likely to increase the reliability of results and to improve public confidence in them.

Finally, while comparative research might be able to help us identify ways to reduce contestation around the census, a key insight that the project draws from the wider literature is that it is important not to pathologise post-conflict or deeply divided societies. Because they are linked to questions of who gets what, when and how – Harold Lasswell's definition of politics – censuses are always and everywhere political exercises, not just where they are linked to representation of ethnic groups in conflict.

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Future publications from the project will be listed at https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=ES/N01684X/1.

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