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Indigenous groups miscounted in census?

Authorities must guard against bias in data collection

IF data from the latest population census is to be believed, the Indigenous population in Bangladesh has increased by only 64,000 in the last 11 years. However, in the 2011 census, only 24 communities were considered to be ethnic minorities, whereas the latest census took 50 different communities across the country into account. Given that the number of groups counted has actually doubled, how is it possible that the total population has increased by so little, with many communities even witnessing a decline in numbers?

The situation is troubling on a number of levels. The first is the possibility of a relative decline in the Indigenous population. If true, it is something we should be most concerned about, especially since the census has also found a decrease in religious minorities, and the continued violence against minorities forcing them to move elsewhere has been considered a factor behind this. We only hope the authorities also share our concerns, and will do everything to make Bangladesh a safe country for minorities to live in.

However, according to Indigenous leaders and experts, there has not been a decline in numbers, and the census has actually failed to give an accurate representation of Indigenous minorities. They argued that in many remote areas, data collectors did not make an effort to visit Indigenous villages and households. The inclusion of more ethnic groups, while hailed as a welcome move, has now lost its weight, since some of the most vulnerable members of Indigenous groups have seemingly been excluded.

What was the reason behind this? Inefficiency or oversight is not excusable, especially since the process of collecting census data has been streamlined through the Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) method. Was the underreporting, then, deliberate? Did it stem from systemic flaws, or was it simply apathy? The disappointing response to the current situation from the technical head of the census project points to the latter. He argued that their report is based on facts and figures, whereas what activists are saying are just estimates. However, anyone working in this sector should be familiar with how systemic biases and beliefs can impact data collection, and should engage with the communities surveyed to guard against this. However, reports suggest that community leaders were not involved in this process in any way.

After the recent directive to the media to not use the term "Adivasi" when referring to Indigenous groups, the government should be careful not to give minorities the impression of a policy of considered exclusion when it comes to the census. This is not just for ethnic minorities. The transgender population is also thought to have been massively under-reported. There must be processes in place to ensure that minorities do not experience another kind of oppression by being erased from national statistics.

Preserve Old Dhaka's historic character

Authorities must protect heritage buildings from demolition

IT is literally "going, going, gone" for the heritage buildings in Old Dhaka as it fast loses its historic character, amid a wave of development that threatens to replace them with high-rise residential and commercial buildings. On paper, these historically and aesthetically significant structures are protected by law. Any attempt to demolish them is also in violation of a 2018 High Court directive that asked the authorities to stop changing, modifying or demolishing the 2,200 British-era buildings named in a list of the Urban Study Group (USG), a conservation platform. But they remain under constant threat anyway, thanks to lack of enforcement of relevant laws and the greed of present-day owners.

Merely a month into the demolition of a century-old building named Neelam Ghar, we are shocked to learn of an attempt on another such building in Bangla Bazar. Reportedly, owners of the two-storey building started to demolish it a few days ago, and would have knocked it down if not for the last-minute intervention of police at the behest of USG. Apparently, the demolition process did not have Rajuk's approval either, another violation of the law. The disaster could be averted for now, but any satisfaction may be short-lived as, conservation activists fear, the owners may try to destroy the building again. Past experiences show that owners of such buildings, usually backed by local politicians and businessmen, can go to any length to reach their goal.

A strong network of land-hungry businessmen with the blessings of local political elements has already demolished or compromised the integrity of many heritage buildings. Some were replaced by multi-storey commercial buildings. These people do not realise that any conversion of such real estate at the heart of Dhaka may fetch crores of taka, but the damage done to the intrinsic value and history of this land is irreparable. These buildings are living proof of a past long gone but one which continues to remind us of the journey we have had as a nation through the centuries. They teach and inspire us, and will do the same for posterity, if preserved properly. As such, the question remains, what shall we be left with if all traces of the glorious past of this city are wiped out one by one?

We urge the authorities to strictly enforce the laws and directives related to the conservation of all heritage sites and buildings in the country. No one, however powerful, should be allowed to destroy them or damage their architectural integrity. The authorities must take measures to properly preserve them.

Soft-landing our economy

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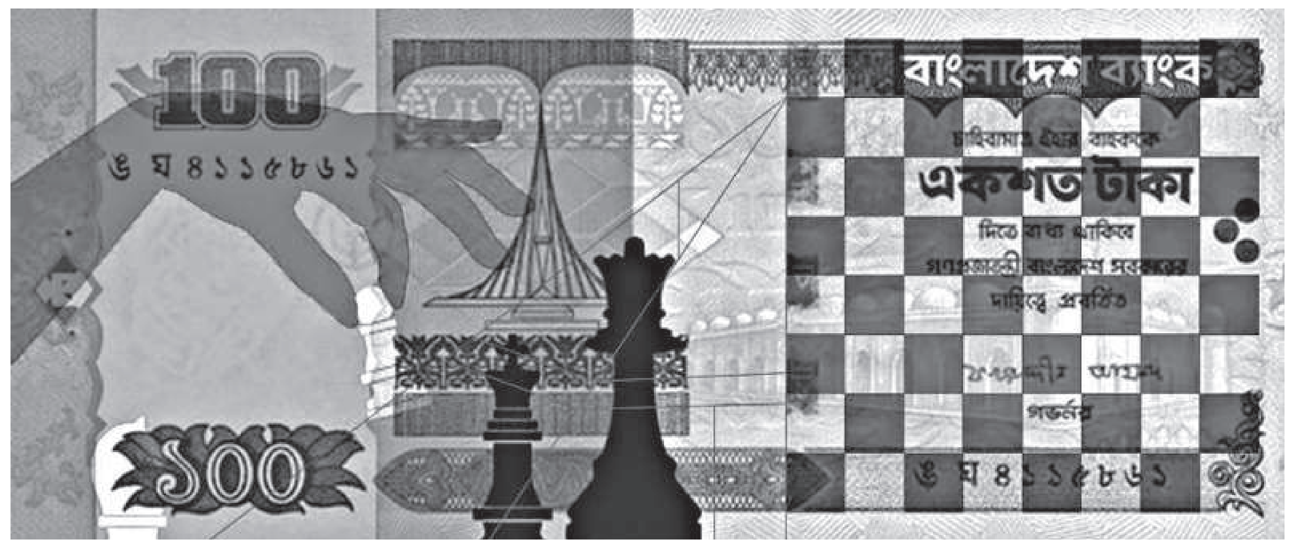
AHMAD AHSAN

ECONOMISTS are fond of drawing analogies from flying. Thus, when economies attain sufficient, sustained growth, they "take off." When external conditions help them grow faster, they are pushed by "tailwinds." Conversely, if unfavourable conditions force them to slow, they face the "headwinds." When economies are unstable, it is "bumpy." When they have to slow down quickly and significantly, we question whether they will have an orderly slowdown, a "soft landing," or a disruptive one, a "hard landing." Or, heavens forbid, a "crash."

In our neighbourhood, the Sri Lankan economy crashed. As recently as in 2018, Sri Lanka's outwardly booming economy attained the World Bank's upper middle-income status.



VISUAL: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

We should stop resting on the laurels of our human development success. The reality is that we have barely scratched the surface of what needs to be done. Compared to our competitors in East Asia, our labour force is far less educated and technically trained. Three national student assessments have revealed that many of our students do not display their grade-level educational competency, i.e. they are not taught well.

However, it accumulated debt over the past decade and became vulnerable. A reckless tax cut that tripled the fiscal deficit in 2020 was the straw that broke the camel's back. Today, it has defaulted on debts and desperately seeks financing for food, fuel, power, medicine, and other necessities.

Also, in our neighbourhood, the Pakistan economy is, optimistically speaking, going for a hard landing, perhaps a crash if they cannot negotiate an IMF programme or get a bailout from one of its strategic allies. Having run up a large current account deficit of USD 19 billion in 2019 along with rising debt payments, the economy had an abrupt slowdown – i.e. a hard landing. Even so, the difficulties persist; Pakistan's currency has depreciated by nearly 25 percent since this January, with inflation rates ranging somewhere between 14 and 24 percent, depending on the measure. Sri Lanka's and Pakistan's economies are now paying for several years of large fiscal and current account deficits and debt.

Further west, the Turkish economy provides another lesson for Bangladesh. It's having a bumpy flight buffeted by a vicious inflation-depreciation cycle that has led to 70 percent inflation rates and a 47 percent currency depreciation in the past year. It's worth noting that these developments are taking place even though Turkey's public debt is relatively moderate at about 40 percent of GDP – the same as Bangladesh. Another unfortunate similarity with Bangladesh is that "Erdoganomics" has compelled the central bank to keep the interest rates low. Turkish President Recep Erdogan fired three central bank governors because they resisted him. Yes, the Turkish capital account is open, and ours is not. But with foreign currency transactions of more than USD 150 billion in the last year, we are not exactly closed either. Having flexible interest rates will be a key instrument to stabilise our economy.

The challenge ahead is to pilot Bangladesh's economy to a soft landing. Like much of the world, Bangladesh's economy is facing strong headwinds and turbulence. To engineer a soft landing for our economy, we need to understand the problems that are afflicting it. Our economy is rattling and shaking as it faces headwinds because of structural weaknesses. By ignoring long-standing issues in the pursuit of growth, suddenly we are back to the era of rolling power cuts, with the taka and the forex reserves under pressure.

Most significantly, it points to an economy that has become less competitive. The big-picture measure of economic competitiveness is a country's export-GDP ratio. If a country's economy can sell proportionately more abroad as it grows, it indicates increasing competitiveness. Bangladesh went into reverse in the last few years. Our export-GDP ratio fell from a peak of 20 percent in 2012 to about 13 percent in 2019 and even less during Covid. In striking contrast, Vietnam's export-GDP ratio rose to over 100 percent during this period. Underlying our decline in competitiveness is the lack of export diversification and sophistication. Despite showing potential, we cannot significantly export higher value products not only in electronics, but also in agricultural processing.

We are even more dependent on ready-made garment (RMG) products and remittances than we were 10 years ago. As the prime minister has rightly pointed out in a recent meeting, this dependence on remittances is undesired. If Bangladeshi workers abroad did not remit close to USD 20 billion per year, we might be in the same situation as Sri Lanka.

There is nothing mysterious about why we are in this predicament. Bangladeshi economists have repeatedly pointed out in detail the following: i) Our revenues, and thus our public expenditures, are too little to sustain high growth. Moreover, our revenues are too dependent on tariffs and supplementary taxes, which make the economy less competitive; ii) Our limited public expenditures need more scrutiny and prioritisation through proper vetting. These would include cutting back uncontrolled and untargeted subsidies and incentives, and egregious payments to private power producers, while providing more significant resources for social protection; iii) Our real exchange rate has been unsustainably appreciating over the past many years, and we should have let it depreciate to encourage exports and remittances instead of using ad-hoc incentives; and iv) Our financial system needed to be unburdened of interest rate caps, strengthened by disciplining loan defaulters and reconstituting bank boards to avoid insider lending and worse.

It has also become glaringly evident that longer-term issues such as exploring potentially large gas reserves were neglected. Equally important is paying attention to other structural issues: the need for well-planned urban development and infrastructure investments, and a focused strategic approach to invite foreign direct investment (FDI) into electronics, pharmaceuticals, leather, shipbuilding, and agro-processing. These are all areas where Bangladesh shows potential, but urgently needs the resources, technology, and market access that FDI will bring. Only in this way can we diversify our economy and increase our export competitiveness.

No less important, we should stop resting on the laurels of our human development success. The reality is that we have barely scratched the surface of what needs to be done. Compared to our competitors in East Asia, our labour force is far less educated and technically trained. Three national student assessments have revealed that many of our students do not display their grade-level educational competency, i.e. they are not taught well. Also, we do not train enough young people in technical and vocational education streams with private and foreign investment participation.

These are not easy tasks, but are urgent and will call for significant institutional reforms. But what of now?

Our government has shown foresight in approaching the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for support before our current difficulties become a crisis. From what we have seen in the press, the proposals discussed with them make eminent sense: they address issues long identified by Bangladeshi economists. With the help of the sufficient expertise that we have, we can work with the IMF to come up with a programme of a smoother, gradual adjustment – and not abrupt, punitive movement in prices – that will shore up our financial position, stabilise prices and the exchange rate, and restore confidence. At the same time, we should develop a robust programme of the necessary, pending reforms. These combined measures will guide our economy towards a soft landing and set the stage for a take-off when external conditions improve.

To read the full article, please visit our website.

Is the US equipped to be a climate leader?

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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SALEEMUL HUQ

THE United States has been historically the biggest emitter of greenhouse gases (GHGs), which has been a major driver of human-induced climate change. And even though China has recently overtaken the US as the biggest emitter at present, the US remains the biggest single cause of the problem since the start of the industrial revolution nearly two centuries ago. Thus, any measure to tackle human-induced climate change at the global level will only succeed if the US plays a leading role.

Let me give a glimpse into the ups and downs in the US' involvement in sometimes being a leader and sometimes a laggard when it comes to climate solutions, and where it stands today.

The global efforts to combat climate change began in the 90s when the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was formed, which was a major achievement. All the countries in the world agreed on a global treaty that ensured that they would take actions to reduce their GHG emissions at the national level. The US, under President George HW Bush, played a positive role at that time and was one of the first countries to ratify the UNFCCC.

A few years later, at the third Conference of Parties (COP3) of the UNFCCC held in Kyoto, Japan, the US under President Bill Clinton again played a positive role in agreeing to the Kyoto Protocol, whereby the developed countries agreed to take on legally binding targets to reduce their emissions, while developing countries were exempted for a period. The US delegation to Kyoto was led by then Vice-President Al Gore, and they agreed to accept a target to reduce their emissions.

However, soon afterwards, the Democratic Party lost the presidential elections, and George W Bush became the president. As soon as he entered the White House, he decided to withdraw the US from the Kyoto Protocol. He tried very hard to get other countries to join him, but was only able to convince Australia under Prime Minister John Howard. The reason given by the Republican Party then was that the Kyoto Protocol was unfair to the US as it did not require China to take on a target to reduce its emissions. This argument has always been the view of the Republican Party and has contributed to the periodic withdrawal of the US from joint global actions.

Unfortunately, the US withdrawal made the Kyoto Protocol less effective, even though it continued without the US for a while.

A few years later, under President Barack Obama, the US played a strong role in achieving the Paris Agreement in 2015. This was by far the pinnacle of US' proactive global leadership on tackling climate change. A very significant aspect of the Paris Agreement was that the US and China, the two biggest emitters, both joined forces to achieve the agreement.

However, when the Republicans won the presidential elections again in 2016, President Donald Trump withdrew the US from the Paris Agreement. This time, he could not get even a single country to join him.

A very important difference between the US withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol and the withdrawal from the Paris Agreement was that this time the rest of the world went ahead without the US and were able to continue to implement the agreement without the US.

Then, a few years later, the Republican party again lost to the Democrats, and Joe Biden became the president. He proclaimed that the US would once again become a global leader in tackling climate change, and he appointed John Kerry, who was one of the architects of the Paris Agreement under President Obama, as his climate envoy.

However, while the US under President Biden and with John Kerry as the global champion has done a lot of talking – most recently at COP26 in Glasgow, Scotland – the US has not been able to pass the necessary legislation to take the actions that it had agreed to take under the Paris Agreement. This was due to resistance from the Republican Party, as well as some Democrat senators.

The good news is that, in the last few days, the Democratic Party has managed to pass the country's largest climate change law, which will enable the US to once again have a valid claim to be a global leader in tackling climate change.

The US' new climate change legislation focuses entirely on domestic actions to reduce GHG emissions, which is indeed a good thing, but it does not address the country's obligation to provide finance to the developing countries, which it had agreed to as well. One could hope that the successful adoption of the domestic climate change bill would clear the way for the US to also fulfil its pledge to provide the funds it promised before the global climate change conference (COP27) due in November.

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