



Objections Surface Over Nigerian Census Results

(April 2007) Provisional results of the 2006 census in Nigeria show that Kano in the north is Nigeria's most populous state (9.4 million), followed by Lagos (9.0 million) in the south. Northern states account for 75 million people, while the southern states are home to 65 million. The total population was 140 million.

Since December, when these provisional results were released, some Nigerians have rejected the numbers, while others have stood by them. A spokesman for a separatist group in the South described the census as “outrageously doctored figures.”¹ The pan-Igbo sociocultural organization Ohanaeze Ndigbo said the census artificially reduced Ndigbo to a minority.

Bola Tinubu, the governor of Lagos state, called for a recount and said the census figures were false.² Nigeria's president Olusegun Obasanjo called those who dispute the results “confusionists,” adding that when they saw the census didn't break the country, they sought to sow confusion. And he washed his hands of the issue: “If you like, use it, [if] you don't like [it], leave it.”³

Census results—especially the distribution between the Muslim north and the Christian south—have often sparked controversy in Nigeria. The provisional numbers released in January are no exception. Like earlier censuses that provoked an outcry, the reaction followed a set pattern. The south, which made up less than half the population, rejected figures, while the north endorsed them.

Explaining his objection to the census results, Tinubu claimed that a parallel census conducted by Lagos in collaboration with the National Population Commission put the state's population at more than 17.5 million, not 9.0 million, as the 2006 census suggested. A population of 17.5 million would translate into a population density of 13,492 people per square mile, close to the 13,044 per square mile in Hudson County, N.J., which is home to Jersey City.

In response to critics, the chairman of the NPC tried to appeal to reason. “We cannot simply sit down and allocate certain figures to ourselves simply because we want to please ourselves,” said Alhaji Sa-mu’ila Danko Makama. Any state that publishes its own census, he pointed out, has committed a breach of the constitution. The NPC is the only body mandated by law to conduct the census in Nigeria.⁴

In a report on the 2006 census process, the chairman observes that even before the census was conducted, highly placed individuals and organizations in several states had already determined to the decimal point the population of a particular area or region. “Almost all these wild guesstimates apparently were based on their perceptions mostly out of ignorance or possibly ulterior motives to suit their agenda,” he notes.⁵

A CHECKERED HISTORY OF CENSUS TAKING

Nigeria has a history of problems with data collection. Results of the first post-independence census conducted in 1962 were withdrawn. The reliability of the 1963 census has been questioned. The results of the 1973 census were discredited and never saw the light of day, and no census was conducted in 1981.⁶ Collecting data in Nigeria can be a challenge. During

the March 2006 census, thousands of enumerators walked off the job, because they hadn't been paid.⁷ Several years ago, Holly Newby, who was the U.S. survey manager for ORC Macro (now Macro International) in Nigeria for the 2003 Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), conducted a survey there. She discovered that rough terrain made her job all the more difficult. Similarly, last year, census enumerators found that some households were not easily accessible by roads. Some were more easily reached by water. But the boats weren't well-built and most Nigerians don't swim, so enumerators were reluctant to go by boat.

Sometimes reaching households isn't the problem. Inaccurate reporting is. The 1991 census was marred by allegations of cheating. On the first page of the census form, there was enough room to list up to nine household members. Oddly enough, data collected from some states in the South showed all households reporting exactly nine people. Some population experts have speculated that state and lower-level officials muddled the data by telling communities to misreport at the household level.

FAIR DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES

Another reason the census results stir up emotions is Nigerians' history of arguing over resource allocation. Census numbers in Nigeria guide political redistricting for each of the country's 36 states, the distribution of federal funds, and even civil service hiring.⁸ However, historically, southerners tend to think resources are not distributed equitably. For instance, more than 90 percent of the country's revenue comes from oil in the south, but the north controls about 55 percent of Nigeria's revenue.⁹ Visitors notice that it takes longer to travel the same distance in the south than in the north, where roads are in much better shape, says Newby, who spent eight months in Nigeria.

A history of data collection problems and one of disputes over resource allocation can be a recipe for discord.

"Put the two together," says Newby, "and it has the making of the perfect storm."

She has noticed that the challenge to the census is often based not on technical issues, but on emotional ones.

“The problem with Nigeria and doing any data collection effort is it could be the god’s honest truth,” says Newby. “You could have the most exact census, and there will always be people who don’t believe it.”

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