

# Myanmar's National Census – Helping or Disrupting Peace?

In March/April 2014 Myanmar will carry out its first population and housing census in more than 30 years. If carried out properly it may provide reliable data to be used not just by the government but also by civil society organizations and political parties, as a basis for negotiating the terms of the country's future peace. However, interviews conducted in Kachin, Shan and Mon States, and among ethnic communities in Yangon, during 2013, have revealed widespread distrust of the government's intentions. This is likely to create difficulties for the collection of data in minority regions. The census could also yield controversial results. The most disputed issue is ethnicity.

This policy brief, which aims to reach stakeholders in Myanmar as well as abroad, analyses the preparations for the census, discusses the risks and challenges, and provides recommendations for how to conduct the census in a conflict-sensitive way.

**Marte Nilsen**

*Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)*

**Stein Tønnesson**

*Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)*

## Introduction

While the history of census taking in Myanmar predates the colonial period, the most systematic censuses were conducted under British rule from the 1870s onward, in ten-year intervals. Due to political conflict and civil war in postcolonial Myanmar, the censuses taken in 1973 and 1983 produced incomplete data. Since 1983, there have not been any censuses conducted at all.

The experiences from 1973 and 1983 have left many people apprehensive of surveys organized by the military government. The most controversial aspect is the question of ethnicity, most notably the numerical strength of the Bamar majority and the other main ethnic groups. Many are convinced that their group has been underrated. While the census does not ask people what language they use, it does ask which ethnic group and to which religion they belong to, and this could stir up controversy.

The lack of confidence in the government's ability to collect reliable data poses a challenge. Many respondents may not believe in the government's guarantees of confidentiality. The census results could be viewed as unreliable or even manipulated. These are the realities that the Department of Population at the Ministry of Immigration and Population, and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) – who conduct the census on behalf of the government – need to tackle.

To reassure the population is a pressing concern, since the results will be made public during the run-up to Myanmar's landmark 2015 elections. The number of people registered as belonging to each *lumyo* (ethnic group or "race") is likely to be contested, and this could contribute to triggering electoral violence. In the worst case, reactions to the census could jeopardize the peace process between the government and the non-state armed groups, and undermine the hope of realizing a general national ceasefire. On the other hand, in places where the census can be negotiated with local ethnic representatives, carried out with their support, and yield results they find useful, it could help the peace process.

While training a great number of interviewers (enumerators) and supervisors in rule-based,

confidential, and culture- and conflict-sensitive data collecting practices, the UNFPA and the government are now carrying out an information campaign. Attempts are also being made to address the concerns of the various ethnic communities including the armed groups, by consulting and involving them in the census.

A successful national census could produce aggregate data (i.e. population by age, sex and locality) that would form an accountability mechanism for the 2015 voter registration process. For those who criticized the 2010 elections for not being free and fair, demographic data could be a useful tool for measuring the level of participation by various groups in the 2015 elections. The data could also help identify economic, social and cultural needs and deficiencies in various parts of the country. An inclusive census process might become a crosscutting activity that could mitigate ethnic conflict and lead to political decisions based on data accepted as fact.

Yet the timing of the census is sensitive. The census comes before there is a comprehensive national ceasefire, and before the government and ethnic leaders have begun a genuine political dialogue. Most ethnic stakeholders have not taken part in deciding which questions should be asked in the census. The wisdom of carrying it out before the 2015 election campaign may also be questioned in view of the fact that the results are not meant to be used for voter registration.

### A *de facto* census

The government's ambitions are high. Despite numerous logistical challenges (like the lack of accurate maps, resources and previous census competence) and the continued armed conflict in several ethnic minority areas, the government is committed to having a census that is in line with international standards. Their aim is to generate reliable data: enabling sound and evidence-based policies.

The census will be carried out over 12 days from 29 March to 10 April 2014. All people who stay within the borders of Myanmar on 29 March will be counted (except for foreign diplomats). It will be a *de facto* census where people are counted in the household or institution where they reside on the day of counting. A *de jure* census, which is common in

developed countries, counts registered citizens in the household where they officially belong. Myanmar's *de facto* census aims to have a 100 per cent headcount. This means that internally displaced people (IDPs) and people in conflict areas will also be counted.

To conduct the census, 100 000 maps will be developed to delineate all the enumeration areas and 120 000, mostly secondary school teachers, will be trained as interviewers (enumerators) and supervisors. To ensure confidentiality, each interviewer shall carry out the questioning alone, although village leaders may be asked to introduce her/him to the household. For every 100 households there will be 5 people verifying that the reports are accurate and have been produced according to the rules. Both households and interviewers have the right to make a complaint if there are irregularities.

The estimated expense is USD 58.5 million, of which the Myanmar government covers USD 15 million while the UN and international donors, such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Norway and Switzerland, pay the rest.

A 41-question form shall be filled out in all of Myanmar's 12 million households; covering 70 districts, 330 townships, 3 051 wards and 64 346 villages and 13 620 village-tracts in all 14 states and regions. The household form will map the gender, age, marital status, religion and ethnicity of each household member, as well as identify disabilities and migration patterns, types of ID-cards, education, labour status and child mortality. It will also map various social and economic factors such as the main source of energy, water supply, toilet facilities and what kind of technical equipment and transportation the household has at its disposal. The form will also identify former household members living abroad and recent deaths in the household.

It is up to each individual to decide her/his ethnic identity but this will be checked against a list of 135 officially recognised ethnic groups, and a few non-native nationalities with large diasporas in Myanmar (i.e. Chinese, Indian, Thai, Bangladeshi). If the respondent names a group that is not on the list (such as Rohingya), then the interviewer will tick "other" and add the ethnic group's name. The intention is then to create new codes for ethnicities found in the "other" category. If

the census is carried out properly in the Rohingya areas, with support of the Rohingya population, then the census results may be used as a basis for claiming recognition, but this will be deeply controversial.

Statistics generated from the census will help to identify various infrastructural, educational, healthcare and development measures needed across the country. The stated aims are to help the ongoing reforms, enable targeted development planning, and ensure good governance.

The national census is purely statistical and individual data cannot be used for purposes such as voter registration, determination of citizenship or issuing of registration cards. However, the news that the census will be held has stirred up fears of abuse and worries about the likely reliability of the data. The question of ethnicity is extremely sensitive, and could affect the fragile peace process.

### Challenges and Risks

Some of the key challenges are:

- Overcoming suspicion
- Counting migrants and refugees
- Counting soldiers and combatants
- Tackling ethnicity

#### Overcoming suspicion

Widespread suspicion is due to several factors: misunderstandings, a general distrust in the government, difficult inter-ethnic relations, and the concerns both of the army (Tatmadaw) and the non-state armed groups for their security. Such groups are wary of giving away sensitive information. There will probably be areas where the census cannot be carried out in a meaningful way, simply because the interviewers (teachers) will not be trusted by respondents belonging to a different ethnic group. This could be the case in parts of Shan, Kayin, Kachin and Rakhine states. In many areas the census will depend on co-operation from local ethnic leaders, and on recruiting interviewers who speak the local language.

A key challenge is to communicate to the people what the census is. Although a pilot study was carried out in March/April 2013 and attempts have been made to inform the

general public, a large proportion of the Myanmar population remain oblivious of what a “de facto” census is, and are unsure about its purpose, scope and content. A risk assessment report commissioned by the UNFPA revealed confusion as to how the national census differs from the better known “household lists”. 90 per cent of the interviewees in the pilot study defined the term ‘census’ (*than gaun sa yin* in Burmese), as “household list” – a list of registered residents that all households are obliged to keep and show to government officials upon request. The “household list” carries many negative connotations. The census will, however, be completely independent of these lists. It shall not build on any existing registry but count all persons who are physically present in a household on the night of 29 March 2014. The interviewers will of course be aware of this, and be under strict instructions not to make use of any pre-existing information but simply register each resident’s replies to the 41 questions. Yet this may be difficult to explain to village leaders and others.

The risk report also revealed uncertainty as to how the census will relate to existing national registration cards. Although the census asks people what kind of registration card they hold, the census will not, as such, be used as a basis for issuing or updating such cards (for example for IDPs). Some may also falsely believe that the census will be used for voter registration. The census has a purely statistical purpose. Individual information will not be disclosed or used in any way. The challenge is to make people trust that this will be the case.

Due to Myanmar’s repressive past, there is a general unease about sharing information with the government, and if the implications of the various types of answers are not clarified, it is likely that people will be reluctant to reply sincerely. To give prescriptive answers – replying what is thought to be expected – or to give strategic answers depending on what is thought to be the most beneficial or least harmful, is not uncommon.

#### Counting migrants and refugees

Many Myanmar citizens reside abroad as migrant workers or refugees in Thailand and other countries. Some of the ethnic minorities have a large diaspora. Several ethnic minority

leaders have demanded that Myanmar citizens living abroad must be counted but these demands are unlikely to be met since this would defy the principle of a *de facto* census.

#### Counting soldiers and combatants

A special questionnaire, with only 12 questions, will be used to register people who reside in institutions such as school dormitories, temples, hospitals or military barracks. A huge problem must be foreseen in the conflict areas, where army commanders and commanders of non-state armed groups are unlikely to provide access to all of their soldiers and reveal their exact number. It is unclear how this will be tackled. A similar problem could be encountered in other institutions if more people live there than are allowed.

#### Tackling ethnicity

Question 7, in the questionnaire, asks the religion of each household resident, and question 8 asks about ethnicity. A problem with question 8 is the type of answers that are not allowed. It will not be possible for the interviewees to identify themselves uniquely with their nation as a whole and say that “I am Myanmar” or “I am Burmese.” “Bamar” will be understood as just the ethnic majority population. It will also not be possible to choose more than one ethnicity. This is perhaps the single, most problematic aspect of the census. There are many people in Myanmar who have a mixed identity and who cannot get this recognized officially. They will be forced to choose and could experience pressure from local communities to tick off “the right ethnicity.” People with mixed identity do not have organizations to speak for them.

The ethnic composition of each state and region is contested and there are highly conflicting, often unrealistic expectations regarding their size. It is likely that some ethnic minorities will be disappointed and question the reliability of the data. There is, in particular, much anticipation regarding the number of ethnic Bamar in the union as a whole and in certain ethnic states. The number of Kachin and Shan in Kachin State is also contested, as is the number of Shan in Shan State, and the number of ethnic Chinese in all the states bordering on China and in city centres.

In light of the recent attacks on Muslim

communities in several parts of Myanmar, it is likely that the count of Muslims may provoke negative reactions. It is likely to be higher than the normal estimate of 5 per cent.

The number of Rakhine and “other” (i.e. Rohingya) in Rakhine State is a particularly sensitive matter that may stir renewed violence. There is widespread concern for the status of citizenship for the Rohingya population. Some will worry that a self-declared status as Rohingya may qualify for deportation, as in the past with the *naga min* campaign following the 1973 census. Others may hope that citing Rohingya status will qualify for a national registration card and citizenship status. Yet others may expect, or fear, that it will have implications for voting rights. Such expectations may influence the outcome of the census in Rakhine State.

The option of leaving out the variable ethnicity in the census was discussed at the preparatory stage. In a society where ethnicity is as divisive as it is in Myanmar, this could have been advantageous.

There are two good reasons for asking about ethnicity. The first is constitutional. The constitution says (§161 (b-c)) that the regional and state parliaments shall consist of representatives “[...] elected from each national race determined by the authorities concerned as having a population which constitutes 0.1 percent and above of the population of the Union, of the remaining national races other than those who have already obtained respective Region/State or a Self-Administered Area in that Region/State”. Thus it is politically important to determine the size of each ethnic group.

The second reason is that many members of the ethnic minorities expect the census to show how many they are. Small minority

groups will mobilize in order to fulfil the 0.1 percent requirement. Many groups are convinced that they have been undercounted in the past. If they are right, then the census may provide the acknowledgment they have sought, and this will in turn strengthen their arguments for political influence or autonomy within their state or self-administered area. The problem is that not all groups can see their aspirations satisfied by an accurate counting. Those who are disappointed are likely to find fault with the census.

### Recommendations

Many ethnic minority leaders have criticized the way the census asks about ethnicity, with 135 pre-defined categories, some of which are defined as sub-groups of other groups. Suggestions have been made that the question about ethnicity should be left out of the census. This should be seriously considered.

Regardless of whether or not ethnicity remains a part of the census we would like to recommend the following:

There is a need for a broad information campaign both in the run-up to the March/April 2014 census and when the results are made known to the public in February 2015. A failure to reach the population with accurate information could contribute to worsening the ethno-political climate in the run-up to the 2015 elections. Information booklets and brochures have been produced in 19 languages, and they are now being distributed to all households.

To provide information is not, however, enough. Thorough and careful training of interviewers and supervisors in rule-based, confidential and culture- and conflict-sensitive practices is essential. This is something that the Ministry of Immigration and Population

has been planning together with the UNFPA. Five day training courses are held for all interviewers. To provide adequate training is a demanding task.

Finally, local communities need to be consulted. It is necessary to respect and value the concerns expressed by representatives of ethnic minorities and reach out to minority groups, involve local communities in the preparation of the census, and let local communities nominate candidates for serving as interviewers. We know from our communication with the UNFPA staff that they are trying to do all of this. The question is if the government, on various levels, will allow it to happen and if local leaders are willing to provide support. The enumerators should be persons with local trust and a good knowledge of the local languages. Local communities should be made aware of how statistical data may be useful for them as grounds for demanding or carrying out social and economic reforms. They must be assured of easy access to the aggregated data that is most useful for them.

Much remains to be done in terms of reaching out to and involving ethnic minority communities. However, the potentially positive impact of the census should not be underestimated. If the government is able to include and involve ethnic minority communities throughout, there is a real possibility that the census can serve as a crosscutting and reconciling national effort that helps unifying the divided country and contributes to building peace. ■

### THE AUTHORS

Marte Nilsen is a historian of religions and a Senior Researcher at PRIO.  
Email: [marte.nilsen@prio.no](mailto:marte.nilsen@prio.no)

Stein Tønnesson is a historian, a Research Professor at PRIO and leader of the East Asian Peace Program at Uppsala University.  
Email: [stein@prio.no](mailto:stein@prio.no)

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