



RESEARCHERS AT THE INSTITUTE OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES SHARE THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 23 Oct 2014

Counting and Being Counted: Ethnicity and Politics in Myanmar's Census

*By Su-Ann Oh**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The conduct of Myanmar's 2014 census illustrates sensitivities that surround a census and the highly ethnicised nature of politics in the country.
- Censuses and statistical data are not conceived and carried out in an apolitical context, and a government's decision on whether to conduct a census depends very much on the political (and other) benefits or disadvantages of possessing and disseminating this information. This may go some way towards explaining why this is the first census to be conducted in Myanmar in thirty years.
- The refusal of the Myanmar government to allow north Rakhine Muslim communities to self-identify as 'Rohingya' highlights the tussle between this community and the state over its right to claim its own ethnic identity, and ultimately citizenship in Myanmar.

- The unexpected number of people who self-identified as 'other' in the ethnic category also questions the validity of the 135 ethnic categories endorsed by the state and opens up questions about how ethnic groupings and the ethnic landscape are perceived by the population at large.
- Certain groups and communities have been safeguarding their interests by not being counted or not revealing information about themselves. In the case of some armed groups, this has manifested in a refusal to answer questions beyond ethnicity and population numbers.
- There was also some apprehension about answering questions about migration amongst Chin households. This could be due to fear of reprisal as the Chin have in the past experienced severe restrictions in movement imposed by the state.
- These various items represent mini tableaus of contestation between the Myanmar people and the state over ethnicity and its far-reaching consequences. In order to redress the imbalance in power, some ethnic group organisations have collected their own data on ethnicity.

* **Su-Ann Oh** is Visiting Fellow at ISEAS; e-mail: suannoh@iseas.edu.sg

INTRODUCTION

Myanmar's 2014 census provides a fascinating case for examining sensitivities surrounding the conduct of a census particularly in a society where ethnicity is highly politicised. Prior to the commencement of the census, critics, civil society groups and international organisations had already begun to express concerns over the validity and reliability of the ethnic classifications to be used in the census. Using accounts and anecdotes about how the census was conducted, this article describes disagreements over ethnic classifications and labels, and considers the politics of counting and being counted in ethnically-charged Myanmar.

Despite objections about the timing of the census and criticisms about the ethnic categories employed, it appears that the general population of Myanmar was positive about the census and did in fact want to be counted. According to the report written by the independent Census Observation Mission¹, the response rate was almost universal, with up to 99.6 per cent of households willingly agreeing to be interviewed and responding to all questions. Some interviewees had even prepared notes beforehand. Moreover, members of the Mission rated the overall quality of the enumeration as 7.5/10, with a few citing it as one of the best enumeration exercises they had ever observed.

Preliminary results of the census released at the end of August show that the total population of Myanmar is 51.4 million. This number includes 50,213,067 persons counted during the census and an estimated 1,206,353 persons in parts of northern Rakhine, Kachin and Kayin States who were not counted. This number is much smaller than the previous estimate of 60 million provided by the Myanmar government. Given the discrepancy, it begs the question, "Why has there not been a census between 1983 and 2014, and why is counting the population and mapping its characteristics a pressing issue now?"

Moreover, one has to ask what the reasons were for the government to not count those in the Rakhine, Kachin and Kayin States. Conversely, one should query what is at stake when being counted, not being counted or being incorrectly counted in the census.

TO COUNT OR NOT TO COUNT?

The census is an established exercise in Myanmar, and dates back to as early as 500 BC. However, the modern-day census has its origins in the population census conducted as part of the Indian census, by the British administration in the lower part of Myanmar in 1872. Between 1881 and 1941, censuses were taken every decade. After independence, such exercises taken up again in 1973 and 1983. Thus, the 2014 census is the first in thirty years.

¹ *The 2014 Population and Housing Census of Myanmar. Findings of the Census Observation Mission: An*

While the lapse between 1941 and 1973 can be attributed to the exigencies of civil war and nation-building, the second gap in census-taking is more likely due to practical and political reasons. For a long time, the combination of a weak state, armed conflict, and a lack of infrastructure and capacity has made it difficult for government officials to gain access to different parts of the country, much less obtain reliable and accurate information about the population. Moreover, due to a patronage system of government, it is possible that reliable statistics were not perceived as being key to creating and implementing suitable policies. Finally, given the sectarian nature of politics and conflict in the country, accurate figures on the number of people belonging to certain ethnic groups would have been sensitive and might have threatened the political status quo.

In this, Myanmar was not alone. The last official census in Lebanon, for example, was conducted in 1932 by the French Mandate government and there is enormous resistance today against conducting an up-to-date census. In a country deeply divided and characterised by religion, the 'real' proportion of Christians to Muslims may threaten current Christian hegemony over the state. Given the increase in the influx of Muslim migrants, there have been politically motivated policies to increase the Christian population and to obfuscate the actual numbers of the various religious communities. This has resulted in consistent exclusion of stateless persons and resident non-citizens who are Muslim, and the favouring of Christian over Muslim applicants for Lebanese citizenship.

In the case of Myanmar, the decision to conduct a census at this time may be attributed to the economic and political changes that have been occurring since 2011. Officially, the report on the provisional results states that:

Censuses are the main source of demographic and socio-economic information in developing countries. Such information is critical to determine levels and changes in the size, distribution, socio-economic characteristics of the population and households over time. In a country like Myanmar, reliable, accurate and timely data is vital for effective development planning, evidence-based decision-making, the peace process and transition to democracy, investment decisions and research. It is therefore important that the data used to assess such changes is accurate and updated regularly.²

These are valid reasons and indubitably, the opening up of the economy and the transition to a democratic political system have underscored the importance of accurate data for planning and policy implementation. However, it is important to remember that the census is a device of the state, a tool with which makes the population legible. That is, to paraphrase James Scott, it 'arrange[s] the population in ways that simplify [...] the

² Ministry of Immigration and Population. *Population and Housing Census of Myanmar, 2014, Provisional Results Census Report Volume 1*. Nay Pyi Taw: Department of Population, Ministry of Immigration and Population, 2014, p.1.

classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and prevention of rebellion'.³ In fact, the census has long been used by ancient and modern polities to inventory property for taxation, identify persons fit for military service, and reshape social reality in a way that allows for easy categorisation, classification and control. Ethnic categorisation in a census may serve to create and foster a sense of national or group identity, but may also legitimise exclusion and discrimination. Given these stakes, it becomes apparent that some communities will benefit more from being counted than others. In addition, groups with the authority to create and impose ethnic categories and to decide who fits into these categories wield considerable power over less dominant ones.

'THE NAMING PROBLEM': RELIGION, ETHNICITY AND CITIZENSHIP

Myanmar's latest census was pronounced by the Observation Mission to have adhered to international standards, except in Rakhine, where almost all communities wanting to self-identify as "Rohingya" were not counted. This issue was referred to as "the naming problem" by Myint Kyaing, director-general of the population department of the Ministry of Immigration and Population.⁴

The Mission reported that no household refused to be enumerated. However, three courses of action were taken by enumerators who interviewed Muslim populations in north Rakhine. First, the enumerators would begin by asking the ethnicity of the respondent, but would leave if he or she self-identified as "Rohingya". Second, the interview would follow the standard format and sequence up to the question on ethnicity after which the interview was stopped if the respondent self-identified as "Rohingya". Third, the enumerator skipped the question on ethnicity altogether but completed the rest of the questions.

The residents in northern Rakhine who were not enumerated were estimated to number 1.1 million based on maps made before the census was taken. Residents in southern Rakhine are mostly Buddhists, and those who were enumerated amounted to 2.1 million. This means that one third of the population of the Rakhine state was not enumerated, and thus the census must be said to be glaringly inaccurate in its enumeration of this ethnic community and its religion.

³ Scott, James C. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998, p.2.

⁴ Census awaits data on 800, 000 people, official says. *Eleven*. 28 August 2014
http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7361:census-awaits-data-on-800-000-people-official-says&catid=44:national&Itemid=384 (accessed on 27 September 2014)

The way in which the census was conducted with this community, ostensibly to prevent further communal violence, speaks volumes about the politics of ethnicity and labelling in Myanmar. The Myanmar government wants to classify this community as 'Bengali' because this will identify them as migrants or descendents of migrants and therefore ineligible to claim citizenship rights. This community, however, maintains that it is an indigenous ethnic group called 'Rohingya' and is therefore entitled to rights as citizens, a status they are currently denied. The Rohingya's refusal to be labelled "Bengali" highlights their acute awareness of the politics of labelling and is a way of resisting state-imposed definitions and manipulations of ethnicity, and hence criteria of belonging.

ETHNICITY: STATE-DEFINED OR PEOPLE-DEFINED?

The rest of the population, apart from the Rohingya, was allowed to self-identify their ethnicity. Interestingly, what has emerged is an unexpectedly large number of people choosing not to identify as one of the 135 set ethnic groups on the questionnaire. Instead, these selected the 'other' category and provided their own ethnic appellation, which created a delay in the processing of the data on ethnicity and religion, according to Daw Khaing Khaing Soe, director of the Ministry of Immigration and Population's census technical team.⁵

This is more than just an amusing anecdote about the census. The classification of ethnicity in a census may be inaccurate or even arbitrary but it is not accidental. The 'official' 135 categories construct a reality that enables the state to slot people neatly into state-defined groupings for its own purposes. This, however, has been subverted by the unexpected numbers of people rejecting state-defined categories and applying their own categories instead. This demonstrates that the 135 categories of ethnicity endorsed by the government do not fit the classifications that the Myanmar population apply to themselves. It will be interesting to see how self-reported ethnic groupings will be treated in the census results and how they will be used by the government. As things stand, the data on ethnicity and religion will not be ready for release until after the general elections.

Will the results bring surprises? Will the government change its 135 ethnic classifications to reflect the self-reported ethnic groups? Further, what will this information tell us about Myanmar people's notions of ethnic boundaries?

⁵ Census ethnicity data release delayed until after election. Fiona MacGregor. *Myanmar Times*. 4 August 2014
<http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/11263-census-ethnicity-data-release-delayed-until-after-election.html> (accessed on 27 September 2014)

MISTRUST: ARMED ETHNIC GROUPS AND RETICENCE

An estimated 97 villages situated in Kachin Independence Organisation-controlled (KIO) areas were not enumerated in Kachin State as the KIO did not allow enumerators to count people in villages situated in its area.⁶ Preliminary results peg this uncounted number at 46,600 based on the demographics of surrounding villages.

This was also the case in parts of Hpa Pun Township in Kayin (Karen) State, where only the total number of households and population by sex were submitted to the Census Office. The census could not be conducted in some villages situated close to the headquarters of Brigade Five of the Karen National Union (KNU). Instead, they provided the total number of households and population by sex for each of these villages, which provided the census officials with an estimate of almost 70,000. However in the rest of Kayin State, the enumeration took place as planned. Some members of the Chin National Front however refused to be counted.⁷

Unlike the situation described in northern Rakhine, the issue here has less to do with contested definitions of ethnicity and more to do with keeping the government at arms' length. The KIO is in armed conflict against the Myanmar army, and Brigade Five of the KNU has had intermittent skirmishes with it too, despite the ceasefire agreement that was signed between the KNU and the Myanmar government in 2012. It would appear that these ethnic armed groups do not want the government to have access to geographical and tactically sensitive information about themselves and their operations. In this case, not being counted works to their advantage.

MIGRATION: CONFLICT, POVERTY AND POLITICAL REPRESSION

The Township Census Officers made arrangements to ensure that the enumeration of the population in special institutions (hotels, hospitals and police/prison cells) was done on the Census Night. While all Myanmar working in embassies abroad and their families were counted, those who were out of the country for other reasons were not included in the figures.

This number should not be dismissed. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) estimates that there are between 2 and 4 million Myanmar migrants in Thailand, between 300,000 and half a million in Malaysia, at least 200,000 in Bangladesh, 100,000 in Singapore and a few thousand in Japan AND South Korea, and unknown numbers in India and China. There are also almost 88,500 who have been resettled as refugees in

⁶ *The 2014 Population and Housing Census of Myanmar. Findings of the Census Observation Mission: An Overview Myanmar 2014*

http://countryoffice.unfpa.org/myanmar/drive/FindingsoftheCensusObservation_ENG.pdf
(accessed on 27 September 2014)

⁷ Ibid.

several countries – mostly in the US, Australia and Canada. Some have been awarded citizenship in these countries. Many have migrated because of the lack of livelihoods and the threat of political repression.

While efforts were made in the census questionnaire to determine the number of household members who had migrated, the extent to which the data are reliable is questionable. In the Chin State, this question discomfited some respondents.⁸ This could be due to the restriction of movement imposed by the Myanmar state on Chin villagers. According to a report published by Human Rights Watch in 2009⁹, Chin villagers were required to obtain permission and pay the authorities before being allowed to travel outside their village. Additional arbitrary charges on cross-border traders were also imposed by Myanmar army soldiers, and failure to comply could result in arrest. Moreover, the government at that time required all Chin households to maintain registration lists so that their movement could be monitored. Those who did not comply were often subjected to physical abuse.

These restrictions on freedom of movement were aimed at isolating the Chin from each other and limiting inter-community contacts and associations. If this is the context surrounding movement outside the village and across the border, it is no wonder that some respondents were apprehensive about revealing the number of household members who were abroad. For these populations, not being counted is a strategy against unwanted and potentially perilous scrutiny.

⁸ *The 2014 Population and Housing Census of Myanmar. Findings of the Census Observation Mission: An Overview Myanmar 2014*
http://countryoffice.unfpa.org/myanmar/drive/FindingsoftheCensusObservation_ENG.pdf
(accessed on 27 September 2014)

⁹ Human Rights Watch. "We Are Like Forgotten People" The Chin People of Burma: Unsafe in Burma, Unprotected in India. New York: Human Rights Watch, 2009.

CONCLUSION

The various incidents described above represent mini tableaux of contestation between the certain segments of the people and the state. The clamour to be counted, the tussles over being labelled 'correctly' and the insistence on withholding information are forms of everyday resistance against the state's power to define ethnicity, to construct the 'official' ethnic landscape and to include or exclude membership in these categories.

Some ethnic group organisations have pushed this resistance further by taking things into their own hands. Way before the census began, ethnic Shan, Mon and Kayin organisations began collecting their own data, and campaigned to raise awareness amongst their communities about accurately listing their ethnic identities in the government census.

The census is just one episode of the snarled yarn of power, ethnicity and identity in Myanmar. Nevertheless, the stakes are high. Already in the report providing preliminary results, the population figures being used in the tables exclude those who have not been enumerated. While this is not a major problem for the Kachin (the margin of error being about 3%) and the Kayin (4%), it certainly is a huge proportion for residents in Rakhine, one third of whom were not enumerated. For this group, being counted marks the difference between belonging and persecution.

ISEAS Perspective is
published electronically by
the Institute of Southeast Asian
Studies, Singapore.

Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
30, Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Pasir Panjang, Singapore 119614
Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955
Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735

Homepage: www.iseas.edu.sg

ISEAS accepts no responsibility
for facts presented and views
expressed. Responsibility rests
exclusively with the individual
author or authors. No part of this
publication may be reproduced
in any form without permission.

Comments are welcomed and
may be sent to the author(s).

© Copyright is held by the
author or authors of each article.

Editorial Chairman: Tan Chin Tiong

Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng

Production Editors: Benjamin Loh,
Su-Ann Oh and Lee Poh Onn

Editorial Committee: Terence
Chong, Francis E. Hutchinson
and Daljit Singh