

Census taking outside of the US  
Posted On:December 31, 1969

A major tool of modern life is gathering, publishing, and using information that can help a government to do its job. In the US, we are accustomed to providing census-takers with information about ourselves every decade as mandated in our constitution. We need to know how many of us live here (citizens or not), their ages, and general and special needs. Our numbers determine how many representatives will be warranted in the House of Representatives. Democracy depends on it. The Senate does not need such numbers. No matter how big or small a state is, they get two senators in Washington. This system was designed to prevent a majority (sheer numbers) from overwhelming power, sometimes becoming populism. The Senate gives states with rural or smaller populations a voice they might otherwise not have.

The modern world also depends upon surveys, systems of gathering information (voluntarily) by government agencies, private companies, and political pollsters. We are accustomed to answering questions from strangers with little fear, an indication of our relative security within our country.

Some years ago, I was involved with a training program that involved US high-tech industries, our government, and the Iranian Air Force (a program soon closed down by the Iranian Revolution.) American sociologists were involved in providing surveys that the Iranian students were asked to fill out: surveys about how many people lived in their homes, how many had indoor plumbing, and a number of other questions that could help the trainers to assess the needed level of instruction for the program. The students had already been tested for English language level, which indicated that they would need more.

The students were immediately suspicious and refused to provide such private information. Iranians have had the historic experience of governments, their own and potential enemies, not having their best interests at heart. These students knew only authoritarian rule, which, although mostly benevolent, did have secret police there to keep revolution (or anarchy) at bay. Their history had taught them that they could trust only family, and sometimes not even them. They were astonished when I told them that our gathering of data was benign and that we were not afraid to answer such surveys honestly. They reluctantly filled out the survey and I made sure that copies were not provided to the secret police stooge among them.

The United Nations is an American-created body that promotes institutions that are modern, although many of its member states are not. The representatives of totalitarian states vote in the UN, although their citizens have nothing like participatory government. The global institutions that the UN hosts depend upon accurate data, just as any modern state does. The problem is that such information is provided by the nation states. The developed world countries take accurate censuses and surveys; the authoritarian and lesser-developed also provide numbers, but the numbers are cooked up, not the result of surveys or census taking.

Modern dictatorships may have a way of getting accurate data (fear), but they pick and choose the numbers they release to the world. Muslim countries (almost all are authoritarian) have a problem with taking a census or survey. The population does not trust them, and the culture of secrecy in authoritarian families rejects answering such questions as how many people live in the home, how many wives, how many children, and how many concubines and servants. When asking a pious man how many children he has is often answered with a lie, exaggerating the number or only counting the boys.

Most blatant of all are the demographics provided to the UN from governments with an agenda. During the first Gulf War, our newspapers printed population figures provided by the combatants: Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Every few days, the population numbers of both countries would grow by millions, a curious phenomenon. Because the numbers were attributed to the United Nations, I called and asked where they got their demographics. "From the host governments," they told me. Indeed! Keep in mind that the community of nations does not yet have one set of values.

678 words

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of God's Law or Man's Law. You may contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.net.