

## Counting Muslims in South Africa.

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Population figures for Muslims are extremely irregular: some say half a million, others say a million. The accompanying table and graph represent the official statistics as taken by the previous colonial and apartheid governments of South Africa. The most recent *Census 1996* figures have not been published, but it would be interesting to keep these figures in mind as we wait for the results.

The various ethnic groups have also been given as per the official statistics. Whether we like it or not, Islam has a particular Indian and Coloured critical mass which is identifiable in the overwhelming statistics. But more than the statistics, we also know this from the food we eat, the clothes we wear and the jokes we share.

The most significant indication in the table is the dip in Muslim population from 1980 to 1991. Two possible reasons come to mind. This may be an indication that fewer Muslims were prepared to answer racial questions in 1991, particularly in the Western Cape where the decrease is particularly pronounced. After a decade of anti-apartheid struggle, such a rejection of ethnic categorization was revealed in the statistics. If this interpretation is correct, though, it also shows how most Muslims continue to regard themselves as White, Coloured, Indian or Africans.

On the other hand, the decrease in the number of Muslims may be a reflection of a secularization that we are reluctant to admit. Is it possible that fewer people in South Africa identify themselves as Muslims, again particularly in the Western Cape. The census, in this scenario, may be picking up a trend belied by over-flowing mosques, rallies and eat-n-treats.

The numbers seem very low, and have been rightly questioned by Muslims. We hope that the 1996 figures will be more accurate. One should remember, though, that we often experience numbers in a much more qualitative manner than is given by a table. Hence, most Muslims live in highly urbanized areas within the old apartheid ghettos. Often, the adhan is within earshot, and a Muslim neighbour is not very far. These concentrated Muslim pockets create a feeling of population density which is not reflected in census figures. In this regard, the Census reminds us of our both are real strengths and weaknesses.

Year	Total Muslims	White	Coloured	Indians	Africans
1946	110,392	169	43,890	61,405	4,928
1951	146,829	200	63,216	78,787	4,626
1960	197,037	240	92,130	99,068	5,599
1970	269,915	945	134,087	125,987	8,896
1980	352,993	1,697	176,406	165,842	9,048
1991	338,142	1,756	157,815	166,585	11,986

Sources:

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