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South Korea: Time to Reconsider the Notion of ‘Ethnic Homogeneity’

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In a globalising world in which multi-culturalism has become a by-product, South Korea has remained one of the few ethnically homogeneous countries. However, globalisation has also started an influx of foreigners and immigrants into South Korean society, which poses massive challenges to the state as well as the individual South Korean citizen.

The Curious Case of Bonojit Hussain

Bonojit Hussain is an Indian national who is working as a research professor at Sungkonghoe University in Seoul. On 10 July 2009, while on the bus with a female Korean friend, Hussain was verbally abused by one “Mr. Park”, who threw racial and sexist comments at him and his female friend. Fortunately, the bus driver complied with their request to be driven to the nearest police station, where Mr. Park was consequently apprehended. This incident caught the attention of not only the mainstream media, but more importantly, the South Korean prosecutors.

On 28 August, in the landmark development, the prosecutors indicted Mr. Park on a charge of criminal insult. Subsequently, Mr. Park was sentenced to a fine of 1 million Korean Won. More importantly, this case highlighted not only the age-old racial prejudices that permeates South Korean society, but also exposed the gaps in the legal infrastructure in dealing with racial offences.

Influx of Foreigners into South Korea

The influx of foreign labour into South Korea began in the wake of its remarkably rapid economic development since the 1960s. Having attained the status of one of the four ‘Asian Tigers’, South Koreans began to shun away from the so-called 3D (difficult, dirty, and dangerous) labour. Consequently, the South Korean government and businesses began to look outwards to fill the shortage of 3D labour and foreign workers started to arrive to fill this gap. Many of these workers hailed from the poorer parts of Asia and typically stayed for a few years on a contract basis.

However, an interesting and more permanent form of foreign immigration arrived in the form of

foreign women. These women, who were usually Chinese and Vietnamese, became the foreign brides of South Korean men in the rural regions who found it increasingly difficult to find a local partner due to urban migration. A third and more modern type of foreign immigrant can be found in the increasing number of foreign professionals and students who typically work and reside in the urban centres.

Ethnic Homogeneity and Immigration in South Korea

South Korea – a nation of 49 million people – does not have a tradition of incorporating immigrants into society. Although foreign residents have increased to 1.2 million, this figure represents only 2 percent of the entire South Korean population. Given such demographics, it is easy to see why the establishment of laws and policies *vis-a-vis* foreigners has never been a priority. This point is amply illustrated by the fact that there is currently no specific law against racial discrimination in South Korea; the closest being that of criminal insult as in the case of Mr. Park.

The strength and homogeneity of Korean culture unfortunately translates to the lack of political imperative to enact rights and protection for non-Koreans. However, this status quo is increasingly being challenged due to the importance of foreigners to the Korean economy. As corporate giants such as Samsung and Hyundai compete in the globalised world economy, it has become increasingly recognised that the cheap influx of foreign labour is vital to keep the domestic economy running.

South Korea is a country that is not only ethnically homogenous, but also built upon an exceptionally strong sense of nationalism. This can be explained from a historical perspective, as a result of: i) enduring brutal Japanese colonisation from 1910 to 1945; and ii) the policies of president Park Jung-Hee in the immediate aftermath of the Korean War. President Park emphasised the importance of collective effort of South Koreans in reconstructing the country. It is notable that the reconstruction was largely carried out by the blood and sweat of the South Koreans without the input of foreign labour.

In retrospect, it is undeniable that this culture of strong collectivism enabled rapid economic and social development in South Korea. However, on the other hand, it has also cultivated a sense of xenophobia and insularity which resonates till today.

Implications for South Korean Immigration Policy

Immigration policy has been taken seriously only recently as most of the immigrants come for a short-term purpose, mainly providing labour, with plans to eventually return to their home country. For this reason, South Korean immigration policy has been short-term oriented. This explains the absence of a solid legal basis which addresses the issue of racial discrimination and lack of social infrastructure suited for foreigners. Nonetheless, the increasing influx of foreigners brought about by globalisation would lead to increase in persons wanting to reside on a long-term or permanent basis. In this connection, there have been reports of foreigners submitting applications to acquire South Korean citizenship.

If such a trend continues, it is likely that South Korean society would have to shed its insular fabric and the concept of ‘ethnic homogeneity’ would have to necessarily evolve. The recent measures introduced by the government seem to indicate a recognition of the need to accommodate and integrate foreigners into the society. For example, the Employment Permit System was implemented in 2004 to protect the rights of migrant workers. Additionally, Democratic Party representative Jun Byung-Hun expressed his intention to introduce a bill against racial discrimination in the National Assembly after Hussain’s case was reported.

Indeed, South Korea seems to have realised that maintaining ‘ethnic homogeneity’ is no longer feasible in a globalised world and – very much like Singapore – that it is crucial to assimilate its

immigrants into the society in order to boost national competitiveness. However, while the government initiatives and efforts to integrate immigrants into the society are certainly laudable, the greater challenge lies in gradually eroding the prejudices of the average South Korean citizen, such as a certain “Mr. Park”.

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