

South Korean Muslims

South Korea is an island country which is at the south of Korean Peninsula in Eastern Asia and neighbors Japan and China. According to data for 2013, there are 150,000 Muslims including 45,000 Korean Muslims living in the country which has an overall population of 49,115,196 people. 97% of the South Korean population consists of Korean people and 3% consists of other ethnic communities. In terms of religious belief, atheists represent 43.3%, Christians represent 31.6%, Buddhists represent 24.2%, Muslims represents 0.3% and other religions represent 0.6% of the population.

Arrival of Islam in the Region

Islam arrived in the Korean Peninsula by means of Farsi and Arab traders who settled in the region in the 7th century. However, the region's distance from other Muslim countries due to its geographical location made it difficult for Islam to spread there. Many Islamic sources written by around 18 Muslim scholars, including Farsi explorer and geographer İbn Hurdâzbih, Süleyman el-Tacir and Mesudî, state that the Korean people's first direct interaction with Muslims in the Korean Peninsula occurred between the 9th and 16th centuries. Especially according to records in *Kitab el-Memalik Vel Mesalik* written by İbn Hurdâzbih, most of the Muslim traders settled in Korea permanently and established Muslim villages there. The settlement of Arab traders in the region and their marriages to Korean women had created a Muslim community in Korea, but the traces of Islam in the country were almost destroyed by the Joseon Dynasty in the 14th century.

Process of Islamization starting with World War II

The spread of Islam in Korea in the modern era started after World War II. During that period, the occupation of the northern part of the Korean Peninsula, which had already been under the occupation of Japan, by Soviet Russia and the southern part by the USA turned the place into two opposite poles on which those two competing countries imposed their own governing structures. The Korean Peninsula had been split into two by the borderline drawn across the 38th latitude. The winds of war started to blow in the region where two superpowers came head to head and as a result of the occupation of the southern lands by the northern part supported by China, the Korean War started in 1950 and continued for three years. In this period where a new era started for the Korean people, Turkey's participation in the Korean War with a battalion of 4,500 soldiers under the UN led to the reintroduction of Islam in the country after centuries, as well as political consequences. The Koreans' interest in the Turks and in Islam increased as they saw Turkish soldiers protecting them at the cost of their own lives and starving with them in those days where starvation was rife. During the war which continued for three years, the number of soldiers posted to South Korea from Turkey reached 15,000. Turkish soldiers also continued to stay in the country as part of the UN peace force after the war. The spread of Islam in Korea coincides with the post-war period. Abdulgafur Karaismailoğlu, who was assigned as imam to the Turkish troops in South Korea in 1955, tried to teach the Koreans coming to the Turkish military camp and later all Koreans through public conferences about Islam. The imam's proselytizing activities made Koreans interested in Islam and had their first success with the conversion of three Koreans who took up the names Abdullah Kim Yu-Do, Umar Kim Jin-Kyu and Muhammad Yoon Doo-Young.

The Koreans who converted to Islam in September 1955 established the Korean Muslims Society and started a period of actively proselytizing, inviting scholar Abdulgafur Hodja to the Islamic conferences they organized every week. The establishment of Chung Jin Madrasah in 1956 at the military post to provide poor children who could not go to school with secondary education and lessons in Islam was an important step in these activities. Zübeyir Koç, who was assigned to South Korea as an imam in 1956, took over the duty of proselytizing Islam from Karaismailoğlu who completed his duty there and continued to teach the Koreans about Islam by means of a translator assigned to him with the order to the troop's commander. In this way, more than 200 Koreans converted to Islam in one year, and a mosque was built in cooperation out of a hut for those who needed it.

With relations starting to be established with Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia and Pakistan from 1960-1976, South Korea became a new base in the Islamization process. The Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman and President of the Pakistan Quran Society Mevlana Seyyid Muhammed Cemil started to provide every kind of support and initiative to build a mosque and Islamic center in Seoul.

Consequently, as a result of the increase in the number of Muslims in the country in 1967, the organization whose former name was the Korean Muslims Society gained official status under the name of the Korean Muslims Federation (KMF). South Korea provided the KMF with an area of 1,500 square meters for the construction of a mosque and Islamic Center in 1969. Seoul Central Mosque, which was completed in 1976 with the financial support of Arab states, became the first mosque in the country and only mosque in Seoul.

As of the mid-1970s, the rise of South Korea's economic relationships with Arab and Muslim countries and the open doors of these countries for Korean Muslims accelerated the spread of Islam in Korea. Besides this, the return of Koreans who had gone to Saudi Arabia for work and converted to Islam there also increased the number of Muslims in South Korea as well.

Islamic Life and Problems Encountered in South Korea[\[*\]](#)

The opening of the mosque and culture center in Seoul was a milestone for Korean Muslims and contributed to the rapid development of Islam in the country. In the last 20 years, the flow of migrants to South Korea from such regions as South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa increased the number of Muslims in Korea fivefold, especially between 2001-2011. It can be said that one of the major determinants of this increase was the incident of 9/11. In this period, a curiosity about Islam arose in South Korea contrary to the Islamophobia arising in Europe and USA.

Although there is no restriction on Muslims worshiping in the country, being a Muslim in South Korea brings about some problems in terms of collective prayer due to the insufficient number of mosques. Currently, there are only 15 mosques and just over 60 masjids in South Korea. On the other hand, although it does not concern religion, Koreans have an obsession with skin color and this situation leads to discrimination against black people coming from Africa, independent of their religion.

Even though there is no discrimination by the state or people's general practices against Muslims in South Korea, which treats all religions equally as part of its government structure, Christians try to prevent Islam from spreading in the country as they see Islam as a threat. South Korea, supported by the USA against the communist government in the north supported by Russia after 1947, exhibited a positive attitude towards Christianity as an ideological defense shield. The Christian population, which had made up 2% of the overall population before 1945, increased rapidly after this time, especially with the election of the first Christian president for the period of 1947-1953, which can be dubbed the American domination period. Although the government structure had been secularized, the active role of Christians in the government and economic vulnerability of people created an area of development for missionaries. Buddhist religious functionaries and the people express their discomfort with the discriminatory acts of Christians, who are brought to the presidency level and assigned to higher levels of government than members of their own religion, and this situation causes tensions between Christians and Buddhists. Although Protestant and Catholic sects in the country have historical tensions and disputes among themselves, their ability to meet on a common ground when Islam is in question comes to the forefront as a striking fact.

Christians supported by European countries and the USA continue their activities in many areas today thanks to the churches they have popularized throughout the country, the educational institutions and hospitals they have established and even the media organs they possess and their representative power in parliament. Today, there are many political pressure groups formed by Christians in South Korea. Apart from the lack of a school belonging to Muslims in Korea, the fact that almost all schools excluding state schools were established by Christian organizations is a serious problem for Muslims. In the country where churches are built continuously, the construction of mosques is prevented by Christians. Although Islamophobic approaches observed in Europe and other Western countries are not dominant in the Korean Peninsula due to its geographical distance, the Christian media organizations try to impose such an emotion on the people. At this point, it may be asserted that the only people exhibiting Islamophobia in the country are Christians. Although Islamophobic approaches are not seen among young Christians, they are observed relatively more frequently among older people. Despite Muslims being allowed to work in schools, hospitals and similar institutions established by Christians, Muslim women face problems regarding their hijabs. Koreans who are born into Christian families but then choose to become Muslim frequently face the problem of being rejected by their families.

The KMF organizes various programs to prevent such an Islamophobic atmosphere from being created in the country and to explain that Islam is a peaceful religion, arranging lessons in Islam and Arab language

classes for Muslims, as well as non-Muslims. On the other hand, the South Korean government carries out some works to officially inform people that all Muslims should not be associated with terrorist acts. In this regard, various platforms are established to create environments where any section of society, academics and journalists can exchange opinions with Muslims on historical, cultural and religious questions. Opportunities are created for people to access universal Islamic resources by providing the translation of the Quran and other Islamic sources into the Korean language. In addition to the KMF, such smaller scale organizations as Salam Nuri and the Korean Muslim Students Association also carry out activities to promote Islam through the programs they organize.

The Rising Interest in Islam in the Country

The Malaysian government provides its own citizens with educational scholarship opportunities in South Korea in order to spread Islam in the country. Such educational programs highly demanded mostly by the Malay students at the beginning have since been supported by the Gulf countries and Saudi Arabia. A large number of Korean students have been educated at Saudi universities thanks to the scholarships provided by Saudi Arabia for Muslim South Korean citizens. In South Korea, where there is a paid education system, students show interest in commercial education institutions similar to the private teaching institutions we had in Turkey in the past. Full scholarship opportunities in Saudi universities provided by Saudi Arabia have contributed to the spread of Islam among students of university age in South Korea, where the only way to get a scholarship is hard work. However, there are some doubts about the sincerity of this increase. In recent years, Islamization in Korea has occurred through the religious conversion of Korean women who have married foreign Muslims coming from South Asia and Middle Eastern countries to work and settle in Korea. But in fact the marriage between foreign Muslims who come to the country as workers and Korean citizens has been used by many as an attempt to gain South Korean citizenship.

In the country where there are major problems in terms of halal food, Muslims have established markets and restaurants in line with their needs in the regions they live, but it is still quite difficult to find halal food outside of these regions. Although a butcher was established to sell halal meat in Seoul in 1983, this single site cannot be sufficient to cover the needs of the entire Muslim community. Upon the remark in trade meetings held by the President of South Korea with Dubai Emir of United Arab Emirates in 2014 that there were problems in finding halal food in the country, the President of South Korea promised to carry out works on this issue. Following this point, halal food gained enormous popularity among large companies. Whereas the KMF issues halal certificates to companies, the inability to track halal food continuously and to inform companies about the particulars of halal food has an effect on the reliability of new products. Additionally, Muslim people go to rural areas and villages in order to honor their sacrificial ritual during Eid-al-Adha.

The lack of a cemetery belonging to Muslims has been one of the problems encountered by Muslim people in the country. It was a major problem that Muslims did not have even one cemetery due to economic reasons, whereas Christians had cemetery areas for themselves. In 2002, the Qatar government, under the initiative of the ambassador of Qatar, provided financial support for the allocation of a cemetery area for Muslims in Korea. The KMF purchased an area of 3,800 square meters in Choongju province and created a cemetery in 2006. However, according to the laws of South Korea, this cemetery area allocated is rented only for 60 years, therefore it will be necessary to clean this area or burn the bones 60 years later in 2066. This implementation is not specific to Muslims; it is applicable to believers of other religions as well. The KMF is currently carrying out works to find a permanent place.

Conflict between Islam and Korean Culture

In a country with deep-rooted traditions like Korea, the religious conversion of people who are interested in Islam is a difficult process as it means leaving all traditions and Korean lifestyle behind completely. In this country's culture where obedience to parents is the most important social rule and young people bend in front of family elders as an indication of respect, many Koreans who become Muslim practice their religion in secret due to the fear of refusal by their families. The status of alcohol as an indirect factor enabling communication between people within Korean social structure also poses a problem for Muslims. As a matter of fact, refusing the drink offered in friend or family gatherings can cause Muslims to lose their job or to be considered disrespectful by their friends or family members. At this point, the only thing a Muslim Korean can do is to completely remove themselves from their former environment or migrate to a Muslim country. Those who chose Islam add a Muslim name to their names as an unofficial nickname instead of changing their full name.

Conclusion

Muslim people in South Korea who have no political representative power and constitute a small minority group are trying to continue worshipping their faith with the limited support coming from Muslim countries. The slow spread of Islam among the people of South Korea who adopted Islam by themselves without any force in the 1950s is an example of the inadequacy of proselytizing activities in the Islamic world. The inability of Muslims of the country to expand their area of influence in spite of the 60-year history of Islam in the country and the lack of greatly needed Islamic education centers are the issues that should be addressed as the problems of today and the future for South Korean Muslims. The fact that the Muslims in the country do not constitute a unity and Korean Muslims and foreign Muslims form groups within their own communities may also be stated as the source of this problem. In order to provide progress in terms of Islam, it is necessary to first create a religious structure capable of gathering Muslims in the country under a single roof as soon as possible. The key problem that should be solved by Muslims in the country is taking cooperative steps to making the KMF more effective at this point.

[*] This section mostly uses interviews conducted with the KMF (Korean Muslims Federation) and Salam Nuri (education and Islam proselytizing society) during fieldwork in South Korea.