Japanese Muslims

Japan is an East Asian country consisting of four islands (Kyushu, Honshu, Shikoku, and Hokkaido) located in the Pacific Ocean. Japan has no land border but has sea borders with Russia, Korea (South and North) and China. This geographical position of Japan had been a major determinant in the formation of its modern history. Demographically, the population of the country (127,103,388) consists of 98.5% Japanese, 0.5% Korean, 0.4% Chinese and 0.6% other ethnic groups. Even though the national religion of the country is Shinto, Buddhism also gained a different tone due to its long-standing relations with China and the strong influence of Chinese culture, and a new form of religious belief combining Shinto [1] and Buddhism arose. A series of political, cultural and other revolutions and reforms, known as the Meiji Restoration, that took place in Japan between 1866-1869, also brought along some changes in terms of religion. The Shinto-Buddhist belief which had been a unity until that time was disintegrated and pure Shinto was accepted as the official religion of Japan as it entered the modern era. However, the people continued to adopt the common understanding of two religions in practice. Therefore, the Japanese mostly do not consider themselves as the member of a single religion and believe that they are born Shinto and die Buddhist. In 1946, after the end of World War II, Japan made some reforms and revoked Shinto's status as the official religion, adopting a constitution that treated every region equally.

Japan's Introduction to Islam

Although the history of Muslims in Japan extends back only a century, the Japanese first came into contact with Islam through the Arabs and Chinese (Hui) Muslims who arrived on trading ships in the 14th century. At the end of the 1870s, a book entitled *The Life of Hz. Muhammad* was translated into Japanese and Islam started to spread in the country. The Muslim population gained its place within the country's demographics after Muslim Kazan Tatars fleeing from their home country during the Bolshevik Revolution came to settle in Japan.

While Japan has an entire population of 127 million, 13 million people live in Tokyo. Even though Japanese officials do not provide a certain figure about the number of Muslims in Japan, Muslim organizations in the country state that it is around 100,000. Nevertheless, the Japanese population and social security experts assert that the Muslim population is around 70,000.

These Turkic migrants were the first Muslim community to settle in Japan permanently. Then, during the 1960s, when the Japanese "balloon economy" was at its height, many people came to the country for work from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Iran. Today, Japan hosts 20 different Japanese communities, 60 Muslim communities, and 40 foreign communities. Mosques have a central importance for all of these Muslim communities in the country. The first of Japan's 50 mosques were built in Kobe by Indian Muslims in 1935 and the second in Tokyo by Tatar Muslims who fled from Kazan during the Russian Revolution and found asylum in Japan. Tokyo Mosque is now the biggest mosque in the city. It can be said that the renovation of Tokyo Mosque in 2000 led to an increase in mosque constructions in the city and particularly in the eastern regions of the country. There are five Japanese imams in Japan, including Tokyo Mosque's Imam Abdullah Taqy Takazawa. Abdullah Taqy, who is probably the only local Japanese imam in Tokyo, gave his lecture entitled "Islam in Japan: Past, Present and Future" at a great number of conferences in London and Oxford in 2011. Translation of the lecture from Japanese to English has seen to have led to an increase in the number of Muslims settling in Japan.

Period of Strategic Islamism

The military administration in Japan supported organizations and research centers working on Islam and the Islamic world for strategic reasons during World War II, and this laid the ground for an "Islamic expansion" in the country. It is stated that more than 100 books and magazines on Islam were published during the said period in Japan. However, such organizations and research centers were in no way controlled or used by Muslims for Islamic propaganda. Many organizations controlled by China and Japan in Southeast Asia were created in the said period. The sole purpose of these organizations was to collect information on Muslim communities in occupied regions. Consequentially, such organizations and research centers started to disappear rapidly with the end of the war in 1945.

Another "Islamic expansion" in the country was a movement which occurred under the shadow of "Arabic

expansion" after the 1973 oil crisis. When it was understood that these countries had a major importance to the Japanese economy, the Japanese press started to give coverage to the Muslim world in general and the Arabic world in particular. Many Japanese people, who had had no awareness of Islam until that time, were suddenly seeing images of Muslim pilgrims in Mecca and hearing the sound of the call to prayer and the chanting of the Quran. There are many Japanese Muslims who converted to Islam in that period. However, it is also known that thousands of Japanese Muslims returned to their former beliefs after the oil crisis lost its influence on the world stage.

Islamic NGOs and Education

Today, there are 14 organizations working for Muslims in Japan. These are: Islamic Center Japan, Japan Muslim Association, Japan Muslim Peace Federation, Japan Islamic Trust, Islamic Circle of Japan, Tokyo Mosque, Kobe Muslim Mosque, Nagoya Mosque, Kanazawa Muslim Society, Tsukuba Muslim Resident Association, Mie Masjid-Mie Islamic Culture Center, Islamic Culture Center Sendai, Muslim Association of Kitakyushu, and Tohoku University Muslim Cultural Association.

These centers or large mosques organize activities and education for Muslims in Japan. Halal food centers are being opened in the country for Muslims and works are carried out in schools to provide Muslim students with access to halal food.

Having a Social Life as a Muslim

There is no different implementation for Muslim people in Japan than there is for other ethnic and religious groups in the country. The most problematic area for Muslim people in Japanese society is working life. Japanese employers generally have negative and strict attitudes when it comes to Muslim employees' prayer breaks and fasting. They claim that this attitude is nothing against Islamic beliefs, but about the fact that time spent for worship is a loss of time and work. Unlike Western countries, in Japan, the legal system does not allow one to claim rights on such issues as freedom of belief, and thus the only way for Muslims to work at Japanese companies is to give up their five daily prayers. In this regard, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the people who are exposed to peer pressure the most in Japan are Muslim Japanese due to their religion.

Many Japanese people who are honoring Islam are forced to abandon their beliefs, especially by their families, and to continue dressing according to their own culture. It is also said that Muslim people with a Japanese ethnic identity are exposed to more pressure than other foreign Muslims in the companies in which they work.

Whereas there are many Islamic schools in Western countries which have higher Muslim populations, there is not even one primary or middle school serving Japan in an Islamic sense. Although officials of Otsuka Mosque in Toshima Ward asked Japanese authorities for permission to open an educational institution, they have only just managed to open a kindergarten, and this kindergarten has no official statute.

It is estimated that the number of Muslims with Japanese ethnic identity is somewhere in the range of 10,000. The Japan Muslim Association states that there are 7,000-10,000 Muslim Japanese people registered in the country. A significant portion of Japanese Muslims consists of women married to Pakistani or Bangladeshi men who came to Japan for work in the 1980s. Asian Muslims see Japanese Muslims as people who perform good deeds but do not care about other people's opinions that much.

Conclusion

Although Japanese people consider Islam as a very distant religion, the presence of a large Muslim community in Asian countries proves the opposite. Today, the number of Muslims working in Japan as business professionals, computer engineers and traders is steadily increasing.

[1] The history of Shinto dates back to the 7th century B.C. In Shintoism, it is believed that the “sky” representing the father god and the “earth” representing the mother god created all elements of nature and that these elements created their specific nature gods.