

Ugly refugee phobia of South Korea - Yemenis Refugees and Racism

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The historical candlelight movement of 2016-17 finally turned South Korea from one of the most reactionary anti-communist regimes into a normal democracy. However, the recent debate over Yemenis refugees revealed the naked face of deep-seated racism of many Koreans.

Refugees in Jeju Island

When 492 Yemenis arrived in Jeju Island late April, many of Koreans were shocked by sudden appearance of unfamiliar faces. These civil-war ridden Yemenis could find a safe haven because of the special visa-free regulation of Jeju Island, an internationally known tourist site.

The initial response from some extremist Koreans was quite shocking, for these extreme racists held rallies, demanding to deport Yemenis refugees immediately, and spread a long series of fake-news about refugees through internet and social media. Also some sensationalist mainstream media joined this racist fuse, inciting anti-refugee sentiment even further.

Even some self-claimed feminists expressed their fear over dangers from Yemenis Muslim males, while others mentioned the danger of Muslim terrorism. Though these fears have no reasonable or factual grounds, refugee phobia rapidly spread through internet and social media. And even some human rights activists were threatened to life.



Anti-Yemenis Placards in front of Jeju Provincial Office

Refugees and South Korea

South Korea has shown a extremely poor record on the refugee issue. Though South Korea joined

the Refugee Convention in 1992, which was imposed with South Korea joining OECD, the first refugee was recognised in 2001. However, only 792 people out of more than 30,000 applicants have been recognised since 1994.

Actually, in 2017, while 9,942 applications were filed, the recognition rate is mere 1.51 percent. This extremely low figure is in stark contrast with international average of 40 to 60 percent.

However, these refugees are hardly visible to many Koreans, who are mostly ignorant of the existence of refugee neighbours and their terrible conditions.

Poor system well below the international standard

Basically, South Korean government's refugee policy is quite disappointing. The refugee examination system is poorly run, and also lack of personnel makes the situation even worse. Actually, just 38 examination officials deal with over 9,000 cases a year. Furthermore, these officials and interviewers mostly lack human rights awareness and gender sensitivity, thus sometimes verbally abusing refugees and even threatening them.

And the higher level expert commission was convened 6 times in 2017 to deal with 4,542 cases, and this means the commission examined 757 cases per session on average.

Also, in the course of examining process, a number of abuses are happening, humiliating vulnerable refugees. Even interviews with refugee applicants are poorly translated and improperly reported. Even some immigration officers and translators are involved in fabricating reports.

Not a few cases of forcible deportation from the airport were reported repeatedly. And the system to help refugee applicants is also poor, covering less than 5 percent of them, who are not eligible for jobs before getting residence permit. And thus, very backward system and other inadequate factors makes the refugee recognition almost impossible, and encroaching basic rights of refugees in South Korea.

Response from the civil society

In this very ominous atmosphere, NGOs and human rights groups began to respond, advocating the fundamental rights of refugees and criticising refugee-phobia of some extremists. And they demanded the government to take immediate actions to protect refugees and help their survival in hostile surroundings.

In early July, a coalition for refugee rights organised small counter-protests in face of the Islamophobia protests, and is trying hard to fight back horrendous Islamophobia and racial discrimination. However, appeal to human conscience and cautious approach toward public sentiment doesn't seem enough to protect refugees and fight back racism.



Pro-refugee protest against poor performance of the South Korean government on June 20.

Ugly face of deep-seated racism

So far, one of the most ominous phenomena is the result of a public survey on the Yemenis refugees. Over 70 percent were opposed to refugees and supported their deportation, while less than 30 percent support the rights of refugees to stay.

Koreans pride themselves in being ethnically homogenous, firmly believing that Korea is a single nation. And, this obsession to one nation breeds inherent racism, ignoring the complex reality of Korean society's transition to multi-cultural society.

However, ironically, the extremists have a double standard in that they are overly generous toward white foreigners, mostly from imperialist countries. On the other hand, they ignore or despise coloured or black foreigners from the global south.

And in a series of counter-mobilisations against the impeachment of former president Park Geunhye and her trials in late 2016 and 2017, these right-wing Korean Flag protesters waved the Stars and Stripes, the flag of United States, and some Christian fundamentalists unfurled Israeli flags. Their outrageous behaviours were widely ridiculed by the absolute majority of people.

However, in face of Yemenis refugees, not a few democratically-minded citizens express their worries on Yemenis Muslims on differing fictional grounds. This is serious and dangerous for South Korea's recently recovered democracy, which needs to take a further step toward recognition of basic rights of social minorities and harmonious coexistence with refugees.

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International Forum in Korea
