

South Korea's Racism Exposed, Fuelling Cultural Colonization in Southeast Asia

A concert in Kuala Lumpur at the end of January sparked a digital clash between Southeast Asian and South Korean netizens. It all started with a camera lens and escalated into cross-country jabs within the same region. What began as a trivial argument over concert etiquette in Kuala Lumpur, turned into a massive internet brawl. The trouble started when a South Korean "master fansite" showed up with professional camera gear that's strictly banned at the venue.

When Malaysian security and local fans tried to enforce the rule, the Korean attendees argued that such behavior is allowed in Korea. Instead of respecting local regulations, some Korean netizens lashed out. They reportedly hurled racist stereotypes at Malaysian fans, mocking Southeast Asians as "poor" and criticizing their skin color. Some K-netizens even shamelessly compared Southeast Asians to a bunch of monkeys. Naturally, this ignited a fire in an already gasoline-soaked digital room.

Southeast Asian netizens then united under the "SEAblings" front against South Korean netizens, pushing tensions to an all-time high. The current digital battlefield is filled with sharp comments about plastic surgery, money, and cultural pride. The result has easily become one of the hottest online shouting matches in recent social media history.

Southeast Asia Market Hegemony

For years, "Hallyu" or the Korean Wave has swept through Southeast Asia, fostering deep love for K-pop and K-dramas. However, as reported by IB Times journalist Daniel Joshua Flores, that cultural bridge burned to the ground in mid-February.

Southeast Asia is a vital and high-potential K-pop market, with Indonesia consistently ranking in the global Top 3 largest markets in 2025. Driven by massive digital consumption (YouTube/Spotify) and fervent fandom loyalty, the region is a prime destination for concerts (e.g., ICE BSD) and merchandise sales. This latest data comes from K-Pop Radar, which analyzed YouTube views for K-pop artists from January 1 to December 31, 2025.

For a long time, many experts have described South Korea's pop culture invasion as a form of cultural imperialism. This cultural expansion succeeds because South Korea has adeptly repackaged Western cultural essence in an Eastern wrapper for Asia's vast youth population. Over nearly three decades, South Korea has become the new pop culture mecca with an Eastern aesthetic—yet it exploits visuals and even women's modesty as commodities, just like the West. Cultural imperialism is an inseparable part of political ideology and globalization, where foreign cultures invade and even replace local ones. This happens through the global popular culture industry, fuelled by boundless information flows and hyper-connectivity.

Cultural colonization serves as soft power to entrench Western hegemonic interests in Muslim countries. Muslim youth generations are easily weakened by values injected through the popular culture industry. Liberal, consumerist, escapist, emotional, individualistic, and hedonistic traits are just some of the impacts clinging to the current spread of the popular culture industry.

South Korean Racism and Cultural Colonialism

A closer look at the digital word wars reveals an acute racism syndrome among Korean netizens (KNetz). Most of their negative comments target the physical appearance of Southeast Asians, who naturally have darker skin than East Asians.

This points to a sociological crisis in South Korean society known as racism. Data from a 2020 survey by South Korea's National Human Rights Commission shows that nearly 90% of citizens acknowledge racism exists within Korean society. Similarly, over 68% of migrants living there agree.

This racism issue is so deeply rooted that it has become a structural problem in the country, which shyly supports Israel's Zionism. This is evident in the stalled discussion of anti-discrimination legislation—a key recommendation from the UN Human Rights Committee for South Korea—that has been stuck for 20 years. Even liberal political parties hesitate to push this agenda due to significant political risks from public backlash.

Racism and colonialism are closely intertwined, with colonial expansion often relying on racist ideology to justify domination and exploitation. Colonialism, especially from the 15th century onward, spurred modern racism as European powers rationalized their conquests and enslavement of non-European peoples. The belief in white European superiority has apparently inspired Koreans, whose arrogance about their culture and skin color has been cultivated for nearly three decades.

However, Southeast Asian netizens are now starting to see the rot of this racist virus, which boosts cultural hegemony in pop culture among youth—including Muslim youth in Southeast Asia.

Absence of Vision in Muslim Nations' Culture

This fandom war between KNetz and SEAbings raises a key question: Where is the voice of Muslim governments in Southeast Asia, like Indonesia and Malaysia, when their citizens face racist bullying? Or are they more worried about disrupting the market ecosystem and economic growth?

The absence of a political stance from these Muslim authorities reveals a serious problem in Islamic nation-building. Instead of protecting national values and culture as core identity, these countries lack vision in nurturing local cultural pride. What emerges instead is an inferiority complex afflicting many Muslim youth, dazzled by their K-pop idols.

The capitalist spirit underpinning policies in Muslim nations allows numerous digital OTT platforms—enablers of Korean cultural products—to operate freely under the guise of modernity and economic growth. They also facilitate K-pop concerts in dozens of major Muslim cities, driving citizen engagement—especially among youth—in the K-pop consumer market.

Meanwhile, they combat what they label "Islamic radicalism," seen as a threat to national identity, through massive religious moderation projects. This is blatant hypocrisy: nationalism is only invoked to fight Islam. Double standards treat Islam as a foreign entity threatening national sovereignty or even terrorism, while the mass idolization of Korean stars is freely allowed to infiltrate Muslim lands and possess the souls of their youth.

This stands in stark contrast to Islam's golden age, when Islamic civilization boasted superior leadership quality, dignified societal culture, and human resources embodying Islamic personality. The Caliphs demonstrated brilliant cultural strategies: they did not isolate themselves from foreign cultures but pursued selective assimilation. They adopted the "vessels" of progress from other nations while filling them with Islamic values. For instance, the Abbasid Caliphate era is renowned for its massive translation movement. Despite openness to Greek, Indian, and Persian knowledge, the Caliphs maintained cultural boundaries. The steps taken were:

1. Adopted knowledge was value-neutral and practical (mathematics, astronomy, medicine).
2. Knowledge and cultural products conflicting with Islamic Aqeedah (doctrine)—such as Greek theology, myths, and metaphysics opposing tawhid—were filtered or intellectually refuted.
3. Cultural products (madaniyah) contradicting Islamic Shariah were censored by the state, such as naked women in art, public obscene culture, and moral standards promoting unrestrained lust.

This revisiting of Islam's golden age is not meant for historical romanticization but as a valuable lesson for Southeast Asian Muslim rulers as we need to seek an alternative vision for safeguarding Muslim nations' culture. As the existing rulers fail to actively shield (junnah) culture and the integrity of Islamic Aqeedah, instead idolizing modernity through shallow nationalist fanaticism, they remain silent on racist treatment against their people while willingly sacrificing their own cultural sovereignty.

May Allah soon open the eyes and hearts of Muslim youth to embrace Islam as their true identity, and may Allah protect young Muslim generations from becoming objects of market exploitation and cultural hegemony by Western and Eastern capitalists.

﴿رَبَّنَا لَا تَجْعَلْنَا فِتْنَةً لِّلْقَوْمِ الظَّالِمِينَ * وَنَجِّنَا بِرَحْمَتِكَ مِّنَ الْقَوْمِ الْكَافِرِينَ﴾

“Our Lord, do not make us a trial for the wrongdoing people, and save us by Your mercy from the disbelieving people.” [Quran, Yunus: 85-86].

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