

SOUTH KOREA

# South Korea's struggle with cultural diversity

Many in South Korea have complained about what they perceive as growing intolerance against foreigners, pointing to Korean-only bars. DW takes a look at the reasons behind this development.



"When I asked in Korean, not in English, whether I could get in if I spoke the language, I was told I still wasn't allowed." These are the words of 24-year-old Megan Stuckey talking to *The Korea Herald* about her recent experience of being denied entry into a bar in Hongdae, a popular multicultural area in the country's capital Seoul.

Stuckey told the English language newspaper that she wasn't allowed in because she was a foreigner. In fact, a sign at the entrance read: "Only Koreans are allowed in because our employees cannot communicate in English."

Cases like these are, however, not uncommon in South Korea.

In 2014, African expatriates in South Korea were denied entry into a pub in Itaewon, an area in Seoul popular amongst young people. A sign outside the establishment at the time read: "We apologize but due to the Ebola virus, we are not accepting Africans at the moment."



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The sign sparked an outcry from both Koreans and non-Koreans on social media.

## No legal consequences

Examples like these highlight the problems faced by foreigners in South Korea, with many of them complaining about a rise in anti-foreigner sentiment among some ethnic Koreans in recent years.

Experts say one of the reasons for such incidents is a lack of anti-discrimination laws in the country.

Discriminatory behaviors often don't draw any legal consequences, says Dr. Katharine H.S. Moon, Chair of Korea Studies at the Washington-based Brookings Institution, adding that this has led to crimes going unpunished. Moreover, she noted, public awareness on discrimination in the country is mostly absent.

And efforts to push legislation on this front have so far failed.

In a report published by the Brookings Institute, Moon cites the case of an Indian researcher, Bonojit Hussain, who claimed to have been racially accosted by an ethnic-Korean man in 2009.

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Although the case - which garnered public attention - was considered a milestone, it was ultimately dropped, as were other anti-discrimination cases of the time, following pressure from hostile groups, including right-wing Christian groups.

These groups even threatened politicians who had supported anti-discrimination legislation.

### More foreigners

Some blame the South Korean government for the lack of anti-discrimination legislation, but analyst Moon says the problem doesn't rest solely on the government.

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She stresses that the government has made efforts to fight discrimination and "has been more progressive than one might assume," pointing to the loosening up of the country's immigration policy in recent years.

While the East Asian nation hosted only around 50,000 foreigners - or only 0.1 percent of the total population - in 1990, Moon projected in her report that the number would increase to over two million by 2020.

This rise, she contended, would lead to South Koreans becoming more accustomed to cultural differences. "Relative ethno-national and linguistic homogeneity has been the norm for a long time," which Moon says is hard for Koreans to "peel off."

And this phenomenon is also evident in the nation's institutions like the media, say observers. Nevertheless, Moon told DW that the country's media has been much more open-minded when it comes to informing the public about the problems of racism and discrimination.

This view is shared by John Skrentny, Professor of Sociology at the University of California in San Diego. He believes Korean media outlets are "quite pro-migrant, and really (do) promote the idea of Korea as a multicultural place."

'Politely curious'

Despite the efforts, analysts like Sven Schwersensky, a Resident Representative of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), say a variety of factors are contributing to xenophobia in the country. These include strongly nationalistic politics as well as fears of social exclusion especially amongst the younger generations, among other issues, the expert told DW.

But Schwersensky, who has been living in Seoul since April 2014, cautions that it is wrong to label South Korean society as intolerant. The expat said he hasn't experienced any acts of intolerance against him, and that he has always found the Korean people "very welcoming and politely curious about me as a foreigner."