

# South Korea

## *Ethnicity in South Korea*

### *Power relations*

South Korea has a population of 49 million (<sup>3230</sup>; <sup>3231</sup>). It is racially, ethnically and linguistically very homogenous, with the absolute majority of the population being of Korean ethnicity (<sup>3232</sup>; <sup>3233</sup>; <sup>3234</sup>; <sup>3235</sup>). There are no sizeable populations of ethnic minorities (<sup>3236</sup>; <sup>3237</sup>; <sup>3238</sup>), only a small Chinese minority of approx. 20,000 people (unclear if refers to naturalized citizens or ethnic Chinese foreign residents) (<sup>3239</sup>; <sup>3240</sup>; <sup>3241</sup>) and some more recent migrant groups (<sup>3242</sup>). In 2007, the number of foreign citizens for the first time passed the million mark: ca. 440,000 from China, of whom more than half are ethnic Koreans of Chinese citizenship (locally known as Joseonjok) (<sup>3243</sup>; <sup>3244</sup>; <sup>3245</sup> estimates vary). The attainment of Korean citizenship is extremely difficult: “except in cases of naturalization, citizenship is based on parentage, not place of birth, and persons must show their family genealogy as proof of citizenship” (<sup>3246</sup>). As such, even ethnic Chinese born and resident in Korea obtain citizenship only with great difficulty (<sup>3247</sup>); Joseonjoks require a visa (<sup>3248</sup>).

Chinese immigration to Korea has a long history (<sup>3249</sup>). Regarding the Chinese minority, they were subjected to strong socio-economic discrimination especially during General Park Chung Hee’s rule of the 1960s and 1970s, when he implemented currency reforms and property restrictions which harmed the interests of the Chinese community, as a result of which at least 10,000 emigrated by 1992 (<sup>3250</sup>; <sup>3251</sup>; <sup>3252</sup>; <sup>3253</sup>; estimates vary). During the 1990s, however, the number of Chinese in Korea increased again to surpass the previous population counts (<sup>3254</sup>). Regarding the Joseonjok: “the South Korean government treats ethnic Koreans from the US and Japan as part of the same race, but it treats Joseonjoks like aliens. But we’re a minority in China too; we’re treated as foreigners in both countries” (<sup>3255</sup>).

Regarding the political situation, during the first few decades, South Korea was ruled autocratically, initially by its first president and then by military leaders who had taken over via military coups. Some relaxation occurred after a coup in 1961, when General Park took up the leadership of the country, only to increase his powers through constitutional changes in 1972. Following his assassination in 1979, a series of student demonstrations for political change in

<sup>3230</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2014]

<sup>3231</sup> [CIA, 2014]

<sup>3232</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2014]

<sup>3233</sup> [US Department of State, 2014]

<sup>3234</sup> [CIA, 2014]

<sup>3249</sup> [Wikipedia, 2014a]

<sup>3250</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2014]

<sup>3251</sup> [US Department of State, 2014]

<sup>3252</sup> [Wikipedia, 2014a]

<sup>3253</sup> [Wikipedia, 2014b]

1980, and another dictatorship until 1987, South Korea began to shift slowly towards democracy, with free elections being held for the first time in 1992 (<sup>3256</sup>). In 2011, Jasmine Lee, a naturalized Korean of Philippine origin and Cho Myung-chul, a North Korean defector, were elected to parliament, prompting a debate over multiculturalism in the country (<sup>3257</sup>; <sup>3258</sup>). 2008 (and probably before) – 2011, there were no minorities in the National Assembly (<sup>3259</sup>). There are no ethnically-based political pressure groups (<sup>3260</sup>), and no indications of the Chinese minority being organized politically.

As South Korea became increasingly democratic, the legal context for minorities greatly improved (<sup>3261</sup>). The South Korean constitution and law forbid discrimination on the basis of, inter alia, religion, regional origin, national origin, ethnic origin and race (<sup>3262</sup>). This has generally been respected (<sup>3263</sup>) and most religious and other minorities, with the exception of migrant workers and the Chinese minority, are considered to be generally well protected. The Chinese minority, including the Joesonjok, is still subjected to legal and societal discrimination, especially in the areas of employment (<sup>3264</sup>; <sup>3265</sup>; <sup>3266</sup>), in part because of the difficulties involved in the South Korean naturalization process, or even acquiring permanent residency (<sup>3267</sup>; <sup>3268</sup>; <sup>3269</sup>). Here Borowiec (<sup>3270</sup>; see also <sup>3271</sup>) notes “South Korea’s struggles to integrate outsiders are often attributed to anxiety about their ethnic purity, but as the case of the Joseonjok shows, even members of the Korean race can be unwelcome”. Nevertheless, in 2010, in view of the projected growth in ethnic minorities, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family and the Ministry of Employment and Labor initiated various programs to increase public awareness of cultural diversity and to assist foreign workers and multicultural families (<sup>3272</sup>).

Given the current ethno-political situation in South Korea, the existing coding ‘irrelevant in national politics’ is extended until 2013. As regards the Chinese minority, they are not explicitly coded as ‘discriminated’ due to the fact that the restrictive citizenship requirements are not systematically directed at this group, but rather affect foreigners in general.

<sup>3256</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2014]

<sup>3257</sup> [US Department of State, 2014]

<sup>3258</sup> [Borowiec, 2012]

<sup>3259</sup> [US Department of State, 2014]

<sup>3260</sup> [CIA, 2014]

<sup>3261</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2014]

<sup>3262</sup> [US Department of State, 2014]

<sup>3263</sup> [US Department of State, 2014]

<sup>3264</sup> [Minority Rights Group International, 2014]

<sup>3265</sup> [US Department of State, 2014]

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## *Political status of ethnic groups in South Korea*

*From 1949 until 2013*

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Koreans	1.0	IRRELEVANT



Figure 687: Political status of ethnic groups in South Korea during 1949-2013.

## *Conflicts in South Korea*

*Starting on 1949-05-31*

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of North Korea	Government of South Korea		1949-05-31			