

Korea's Jasmine Revolution : A View from the Philippines

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The election of Philippine-born Jasmine Lee to South Korea's parliament has recently sowed tension in Korean society. As a naturalized Korean citizen owing to her marriage to her Korean husband, Lee's election did not sit well with key sectors of the East Asian country who take pride in its supposed ethnic homogeneity. Within days of Lee's victory due to her party (Saenuri Party) gaining the majority in the proportional representation system, social media was abuzz with racial slurs directed at Lee. The netizens angrily vented their ire at Lee who for them symbolizes migrants 'robbing' them of jobs and social welfare benefits. Racial slurs were obviously directed not only at Lee but to all migrants living in South Korea. In an increasingly globalizing world and like other countries, South Korea is host to migrants from all over the world. While at the surface it may seem that the country is slowly embracing multiculturalism to its fold, the societal debate sparked by Lee's entry to politics strike at the heart of South Korea's readiness for tolerance and acceptance. Like the more than 200 million around the world, migrants contribute to the economy in more ways than one, most often occupying low-level jobs that are no longer taken by Koreans themselves. Moreover, lest these Jasmine Lee-haters forget, South Korea once exported its labor before its economy skyrocketed and thus arrested the exodus of its workers. But even today, the presence of thousands of South Koreans are also increasingly felt in other countries. Most migrate no longer for jobs but to study and primarily to learn English. In the Philippines, many English-language schools and restaurants specifically catering to Korean migrants have been sprouting all over the country. Compared to reactions over Lee's ascension to Korean politics, the presence of Koreans in the Philippines has been met with friendliness and hospitality that Filipinos are world-renowned for. K-pop

is also very much a hit with young people. There has been no known case of discrimination or any racial tension at least as far as traditional or social media coverage is concerned.

In the Philippines, Lee's election was met with much pride and enthusiasm. No less than Vice President Jejomar Binay who concurrently serves as the Presidential Adviser for Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) Concerns, hailed Lee's victory as a triumph not only for Filipino migrants but also for millions like her around the world, during a visit to the Filipino community in Seoul recently. Her election also landed in the front pages of Manila's top dailies and was widely covered in television primetime news. It was in fact a welcome respite from news reports of Filipinos being repatriated from war-torn Syria where tens of thousands of Filipinos, most of them undocumented women migrants working as domestic workers. In 2011 alone, the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) has been very busy in its repatriation efforts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region where tensions have been running high due to the political crises that rocked some countries in the area last year. Indeed, Lee represents a happy episode to the Philippines' labor export journey that has often been fraught with tragic news of OFW deaths and sad stories. In 1995, a Filipino domestic worker was hanged in Singapore for the death of her young ward and a fellow Filipino maid. This sparked public outrage especially with witnesses coming out vouching for Contemplacion's innocence days before her hanging. From then on, labor-out migration has become a highly political issue and magnet for media coverage.

It is easy to see why. The Philippines has more than nine million of its people in more than 200 countries around the world. Half of them are permanent migrants mostly located in North America and Europe, half are temporary contract workers while a small but significant percent of them are undocumented. Filipino emigrants in South Korea alone, according to the Philippines' Commission on Filipinos Overseas are estimated to be nearly 8,000 making the country one of the top ten countries of destination of permanent migrants. This is not to mention temporary contract labor annually deployed to South Korea. Last year, migrants remitted an estimated total of 20 billion dollars, making remittances a key contributor to the Philippine economy. Even the country's economic managers acknowledge that the counter-cyclical nature of migrant remittances has saved the Philippine economy from suffering the adverse effects of the global financial crisis. Also, remittance-recipient families unburden the government of scarce resources for social welfare as they usually spend for education and housing needs. Because of their contributions, Filipino migrants have been hailed as 'modern-day heroes' often abused and maltreated just to fend for their families. This discursive narrative of self-sacrificing migrants toiling abroad and battling loneliness away from their loved ones has been the quintessential image of OFWs. Indeed, migration runs deep in Filipino society and the heroic discourse is very much a part of it. But Lee's election and especially its coverage in Philippine

media bucks the heroic discourse. In contrast to reports of abuse and exploitation of women migrants especially marriage migrants to which Lee could be categorized, her victory shows the unique agency of women migrants and the extent to which they could make a difference in their host societies if given a chance. A strong proof of this is Lee's Global Resource Center which has been staunchly supportive of foreign wives in Korea who need special attention in their journey to a different culture. Another key issue here is also the case of unregistered children urgently needing assistance. Needless to say, Lee's advocacy for marriage migrants is probably borne by her experiences as a foreign wife herself. Turning her own experience into something positive by helping others is a great way to change. For this reason, I am very certain that Lee will be a force to reckon with in Korean politics and society. She is also obviously somebody who knows what public service is all about. It will be a great shame for Koreans not to be able to see through this.

South Korea must change and shed off its racial hatred against migrants if it is to remain a vibrant and genuine democracy worth its international stature.

[Editor's note] On May 30th, Jasmine Bacurnay Lee, a Filipino-Korean actress and social worker, will take office as South Korea's first non-ethnic Korean lawmaker. While her election symbolizes a bold move to embrace multi-culturalism in the historically mono-ethnic country, it has also generated heated online debates among her supporters and her critics and even research on their tweets. In this issue, Prof. Jean Franco of the University of the Philippines Diliman offers her take on Jasmine Lee's election and the ensuing debates. For the analysis of Jasmine Lee-related tweets, see The Hankyoreh's editorial: http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_editorial/529244.html If you would like to respond to Prof. Franco's essay, please send your e-mail to ihan@jpi.or.kr.

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