

## The challenges of multiculturalism in the Republic of South Korea

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### Abstract

**Objectives** This article focuses on Korean multiculturalism—its evolution, results, challenges, and effectiveness. This article aims to understand whether the Korean government's multicultural strategy is effective and whether there is a way to make it more efficient.

**Methods** This article is focused on the study of statistical data concerning the number, flow, and prospecting of multicultural tourists, immigrants, and families. In addition, studies of academic articles and pools concerning the notion of multiculturalism and interculturalism and the effects of South Korean multicultural measures.

**Conclusions** This article is focused on the study of statistical data concerning the number, flow, and prospecting of multicultural tourists, immigrants, and families. In addition, studies of academic articles and pools concerning the notion of multiculturalism and interculturalism and the effects of South Korean multicultural measures

**Keywords** Multiculturalism, Interculturalism, South Korea, Nation, Identity, Diversity, Korean society

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<https://www.ijkculture.com>, DOI: [doi.org/10.23159/IJKC.2024.10.312.005](https://doi.org/10.23159/IJKC.2024.10.312.005)

Received: Sep. 20. 2024 ; Reviewed: Oct. 10. 2024 ; Accepted: Oct. 15. 2024

pISSN 2951-2808 eISSN 2951-2883

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## 1. Introduction

In 2022, according to the International Migration Statistics, the number of incoming migrations of foreigners<sup>1</sup> amounted to 53,000 individuals. This is more than four times the number of incoming migrations of foreigners in 2000.

Still, “in 2022, the number of Koreans residing in South Korea was 49.94 million persons (96.6% of the total population), which decreased by 0.3% (-148 thousand persons) from 2021. The number of foreigners residing in South Korea recorded 1.75 million persons (3.4% of the total population), which increased by 6.2% (102 thousand persons) from 2021”.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> By status of permanent residence, marriage, immigration...

<sup>2</sup> According to the 2022 Population and Housing Census published by Statistic Korea on July 27, 2023 by press release.

This data, coupled with KOSIS statistical data concerning the determinants of future population change, indicates that the annual net<sup>3</sup> immigration share is estimated at between 65,000 and 66,000 individuals for the period 2025-2040.

The current situation and demographic forecasts show that in the future, South Korea's population will become multicultural. The country seems to be embarking on a major identity and political/social turning point. This idea is reinforced by the increase in government and cultural measures tending towards acceptance of “multiculturalism”.

Originating from Canada, political multiculturalism saw the light in 1971 with Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau's policy of recognizing cultural and linguistic “ethnopluralism” in Canada. In 2007, Tariq Modood described Canadian multiculturalism as a state project, an integral part of a national construction project.

But how can multiculturalism be defined and understood beyond Canada's borders?

Multiculturalism can be defined and analyzed in several ways. Multiculturalism can be described as the coexistence within a given space of different cultural communities living side by side with a strict minimum of interaction. Michelle Labelle defines it as a political philosophy of recognizing diversity through legal and political institutional means.

In this article, we will define multiculturalism as a set of institutional arrangements that promote ethno-cultural plurality within a given space, but which can also lead to a dynamic of intercommunity duality. This definition of multiculturalism will be contrasted with the one of interculturalism, which can be described as a set of institutional arrangements promoting cultural ethnic-plurality within a common space through the implementation of harmonization and integration practices.

In this paper, I will try to explain the historical and demographic context of the ROK then the key challenges of multiculturalism, and finally, I'll discuss its future

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3 Net migration is the net total of migrants during the period, that is, the number of immigrants minus the number of emigrants, including both citizens and noncitizens. (from the World Bank Group) Glossary | DataBank (worldbank.org)

outlook.

## 2. Historical and Demographic Context

### 2.1. South Korea's demographic evolutions

Korean multiculturalism emerged in the middle of the 20th century. It emerged as a result of two particular events: the wars and external threats of the late 19th and 20th centuries and the birth of mixed-race children from these wars.

The wars and external threats affecting the Korean peninsula, particularly those caused by Japanese imperialism, led to the construction of Korean nationalism. Following the Korean War and the separation of the peninsula, it was strengthened and led to evolution.

This nationalism enabled Koreans to identify themselves as a single people with distinct cultural and ethnic elements.

The conflicts that have affected Korea have not only led to the emergence of a national doctrine, but also to the appearance of mixed-race children. The majority of them were born between 1910 and 1950 to a Korean and Japanese parent, then after 1950 to a Korean and American parent, and today to a Korean parent and a parent of non-Korean nationality.

The number of mixed-race children was 44,258 in 2007 and 207,693 in 2015. This represents an increase of 163,435 individuals in 8 years. Such an ethnic-demographic change in less than a decade in a country that has known a certain ethnic homogeneity since the time of the Three Kingdoms leads to a conflict of national identity representation. The growing number of mixed-race people who have become visible in a society where, in the past, members of the Korean nation were not ethnically distinct from one another, has led to the development of multiculturalism policies. In addition, since the 90s, another demographic issue has become part of Korean government policy: that of overseas Koreans. The increase in their numbers since the

end of the war has been crystallized at 7.7 million in 2021.

## 2.2. Government multiculturalist measures

From the end of the 90s, the government began to take measures in favor of the assimilation of overseas Koreans and immigrant foreigners present or not on Korean territory. On October 30, 1997, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs established the Overseas Koreans Foundation by the Overseas Koreans Foundation Acts. It intends “to help overseas Koreans around the world keep their Korean identity and live as exemplary members in countries of residence.”<sup>4</sup> This measure demonstrates the weight of ethnicity in the Korean conception of its Nation, as well as the necessity for overseas Koreans and immigrant foreigners to assimilate the national cultural-identitarian elements to live within Korean society.

In 2004, the government revised the law on nationality<sup>5</sup> to facilitate the nationalization of children of so-called “multicultural” mixes. The following year, the Multicultural Family Support Centers were established. These centers “are organizations established to help married immigrants and their families enjoy a stable life in Korea. They help multicultural families adapt faster to Korean society and build a more stable family life”<sup>6</sup>.

Still, in 2008, the government launched the 1st Master Plan for Immigration Policy for 4 years. The vision of this first plan was to “make Korea a leader in embracing foreigners”. Then, in 2013, the 2nd Master Plan for Immigration Policy was established and implemented from 2013 to 2017. The vision of this plan was a “vibrant Korea growing with immigrants”. Finally, in 2018, the 3rd Master Plan for Immigration Policy

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4 NATIONAL LIBRARY OF KOREA. “국립중앙도서관.” Nl.go.kr, 2024, <https://www.nl.go.kr/EN/contents/EN34401000000.do>.

5 THE LAW LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, GLOBAL LEGAL RESEARCH DIRECTORATE. “South Korea: Citizenship .” South Korea: Citizenship , Jan. 2004, [tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/llglrd/2021700361/2021700361.pdf](http://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/llglrd/2021700361/2021700361.pdf).

6 경상북도 경북도청. “Province of Gyeongsangbuk-do.” <https://gb.go.kr>

was established and implemented until 2022<sup>7</sup>. The vision of this plan was “Warmhearted people, respect for diversity, human rights, and the rule of law are treasured Korean values”<sup>8</sup>. The plan was structured around 5 main pillars: integration, human rights, cooperation, safety and coexistence. The creation of all these plans was initially aimed to improve social integration and to protect the human rights of foreigners living in South Korea.

Then, against a backdrop of increasing tourist and immigrant arrivals and demographic decline, the government expanded the spheres of action of these plans to include “Openness”<sup>9</sup>; “Public Safety”<sup>10</sup>, and “Cooperation”<sup>11</sup>. This evolution indicates that the Korean government is aware of the obstacles and challenges posed by the recent opening-up of the country and the implementation of multicultural measures in a record time.

### 3. Key Challenges of Multiculturalism

#### 3.1. Government measures under attack

Nevertheless, even if the government has put in place measures in favor of multiculturalism, it faces several challenges. The first is the communication of these measures.

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7 MINISTRY OF JUSTICE. “The 3rd Master Plan for Immigration Policy.” Moj.go.kr, 2024, viewer.moj.go.kr/skin/doc.html?rs=/result/bbs/230&fn=1546653430035101

8 KOREA IMMIGRATION SERVICE . “경기도 과천시 관문로 위치. 전자민원, 준법 운동, 여성포럼, 인권 광장.” 경기도 과천시 관문로 위치. 전자민원, 준법 운동, 여성포럼, 인권 광장., 2024, immigration.go.kr/immigration\_eng/1847/subview.do

9 “Support economic stimulus and attract human resources from overseas”, “The 3rd Master Plan for Immigration Policy” in the II part: Evaluation of Immigration Policy over the Last 10 Years.

10 “Ensure a safe society for Koreans and Non-Koreans alike”, “The 3rd Master Plan for Immigration Policy” in the II part: Evaluation of Immigration Policy over the Last 10 Years.

11 “Promote co-prosperity with the International Community”, “The 3rd Master Plan for Immigration Policy” in the II part: Evaluation of Immigration Policy over the Last 10 Years.

Taking the example of multicultural families, in 2018, 10 years after the creation of Multicultural Family Support Centers, only 55.1% of women in multicultural families were aware of these centers and utilized their services. It is an evolution of only 14.4% compared to 2012<sup>12</sup>. In 2011, multicultural families also faced the problem of “fully integrating” their children into the educational sphere. Indeed, “due to discrimination, poorer language proficiency, and limited school support, they are facing below national average dropout rates of 20 percent in middle school and 40 percent in high school.”<sup>13</sup> Thirteen years after this observation, Mo Young-min, vice chairman for research at the Korean Education Development Institute, stressed the need for policy attention and a support system for young people from multicultural backgrounds, pointing out that current multicultural policies focus mainly on young children. The experts back up are underlining the need to give priority to bilingual education. They advocate an approach that respects and integrates the culture and language of the country of their non-Korean parents.<sup>14</sup>

Life in a multicultural family in South Korea can also be difficult for a partner who has immigrated. According to the National Survey of Multicultural Families (2012-2018), the share of migrants in multicultural families who are satisfied with life in the ROK was just over 50% in 2012 and just under 55% in 2018. The main issues these families faced in 2018 were financial<sup>15</sup>, psychological<sup>16</sup>, linguistic<sup>17</sup>, life adjustment<sup>18</sup>, educationa

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12 LEE TAEHOON. Migration Data and Marriage Migrants in the Republic of Korea.

13 LIM FAUSTINO JOHN. “Korea’s Multicultural Future?” The Diplomat, 18 Aug. 2020, [thediplomat.com/2011/07/south-koreas-multiethnic-future/](http://thediplomat.com/2011/07/south-koreas-multiethnic-future/) .

14 JUNG DA-HYUN. “Shift in Korea’s Multicultural Demographics Calls for New Support Policies.” Koreatimes, The koreatimes Times, 25 June 2024, [www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/06/281\\_377369.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/06/281_377369.html)

15 According to the National Survey of Multicultural Families (2012-2018), 26% of migrants in multicultural families faced financial difficulties.

16 According to the National Survey of Multicultural Families (2012-2018), 20,5% of migrants in multicultural families faced psychological difficulties.

17 According to the National Survey of Multicultural Families (2012-2018), 19% of migrants in multicultural families faced linguistic difficulties.

18 According to the National Survey of Multicultural Families (2012-2018), 16,5% of migrants in multicultural families faced life’s adjustment difficulties in the ROK.

1<sup>19</sup>, and finally discriminatory<sup>20</sup>. Taken together, these results highlight the difficulties faced by multicultural families and, more broadly, immigrants in their integration process into Korean society.

In fact, in 2020, 39.1% of respondents expressed a preference for a monoethnic and monocultural country. This is a 2% increase on 2010. This increase does not indicate a significant change in Korean preference for multiculturalism. However, if one compares the 2010 and 2020 results for “a multi-ethnic and multicultural South Korea”, one sees a significant drop in percentages. In 2010, 60.6% of participants responded favorably to this proposition, but 10 years later only 44.4% of them saw themselves in a multi-ethnic and multicultural country. That's a drop of 16.6%.

If one looks at the participants who preferred to answer “I don't know”, their number increased 4.5-fold, from 2.4% to 13.1%. Taken together, these results express the reluctance of some Korean citizens to a profound change in the identity of the South Korean nation.

### 3.2. Multiculturalism and National Identity

But what about Korean citizens' reactions to the rise of “Multiculturalism” in Korean society?

According to the South Korean Identity Survey on preferences for multiculturalism conducted between 2010 and 2020, respondents were asked to choose whether they preferred a “monoethnic, monocultural country”, a “multiethnic, multicultural country” or were undecided. Over this ten-year period, Koreans' preference for a multi-ethnic, multicultural society declined.

In fact, in 2020, 39.1% of respondents expressed a preference for a monoethnic, monocultural country. This represents a 2% increase from 2010. This increase does not

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19 According to the National Survey of Multicultural Families (2025–2018), 14,75% of migrants in multicultural families faced child care and education difficulties.

20 According to the National Survey of Multicultural Families (2025–2018), 8% of migrants in multicultural families faced discriminatory difficulties.

indicate a significant change in Korean preference for multiculturalism. However, if one compares the 2010 and 2020 results for “a multi-ethnic and multicultural South Korea”, one sees a significant drop in percentages. Indeed, in 2010, 60.6% of participants responded favorably to this proposition, but 10 years later only 44.4% of them saw themselves in a multi-ethnic and multicultural country. That's a drop of 16.6%.

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## 4. Implications and Future Outlook

### 4.1. Impact of Multiculturalism on Social Cohesion and National Identity

The fear of a loss of social cohesion and national identity, coupled with the drift of projections onto others, is leading some Koreans to resist the transition from a mono-ethnic and cultural nation to a multicultural and multiethnic one. Despite the government's promotion of multiculturalism and the influx of international tourists since the 2000s<sup>21</sup>, a certain level of discrimination persists, affecting tourists as well as citizens and foreign residents from ethnic minorities. This resistance can be explained by the fact that, while the demographic and ethnic identity of the South Korean nation has been diversified in the space of two decades, national self-representation takes longer to evolve.

Herein lies South Korea's risk: the distortion between the new national demographic reality and the crystallization of the Korean national narrative in its self-representation.

To stem this rejection, the Korean government needs to work towards decompartmentalizing intercommunity silos and invest in the full inclusion of

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<sup>21</sup> In 2018, South Korea recorded 15.34 million inbound tourists

multicultural children and immigrants, while promoting pluralism and multicultural acceptability. Otherwise, the harmony and social cohesion of his country will be jeopardized.

## 4.2. Recommendations for Policy and Practices

In 2024, Jasmine Lee, president of the Korean Organization for Cultural Diversity, said that “the biggest problem with current immigration policies is that they are scattered among several ministries. The government needs a control tower to formulate integrated plans”. Taking immigration as an example, we see that Korean immigration services do not have their own ministry, but are attached to the Ministry of Justice. One solution to this problem seems to be the creation of a fully-fledged Immigration Ministry.

Another way to improve current government policies would be to invest in educational institutions to implement inclusive and integrative measures for so-called “multicultural children”. This investment has already begun in 2017 through the implementation by the Ministry of Education’s (MOE) the “17 Support Plan for Multicultural Education”. “It aims to help students from multicultural backgrounds become talented individuals in society and improve multicultural understanding among all students”<sup>22</sup>.

Léo-Thomas Brylowski advocates systemic reforms of the education system as a prerequisite for social inclusion. He also advocates the implementation of mandatory diversity training measures for all educators. In his view, educational reforms should focus on creating classroom environments conducive to the formation of new shared values and a new common Korean identity among the new generation.

Thus, a shift from “assimilation policies” to “inclusion policies” could ease the pressure to conform to the dominant Korean culture. This could be the key to unlocking the potential of multi-ethnic students to participate in South Korea's long-term

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<sup>22</sup> MINISTRY OF EDUCATION. “Redirect Notice.” Google.com, 8 Feb. 2017, Ministry of Education (moe.go.kr)

prosperity.<sup>23</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

South Korea has been a state subject in recent years to heavy tourist and immigration flows as well as to the demographic need to "mix" its population. Thus, since the end of the 90s, the government has put in place a plurality of measures and reforms working towards the implementation of an effective multicultural policy.

Nevertheless, despite these efforts, this policy faces significant obstacles.

The first being the implementation of a truly effective policy with regard to "multicultural families" and immigrants. Indeed, South Korea's multicultural policy seems to have reached its limit in the late 2000s.

Immigrants and mixed-race people are no longer perceived as "expectations", and despite this, they are not integrated and included in society. Hence a need to put in place inclusive measures that allow immigrants and mixed-race children to retain their cultural particularities while being fully included in Korean society.

The second challenge of multiculturalism is the evolution of Korean self-representation of its nation towards a rewriting of its social-national identity. This conceptual evolution would allow the standardization and inclusion of the multicultural components of the Nation. This would ensure South Korea's harmony, social cohesion, and long-term prosperity.

To face these challenges, the government could evolve its multicultural policy towards an interculturalist policy, supporting the implementation of inclusive measures and practices of harmonization and social integration.

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<sup>23</sup> BRYLOWSKI LEO-THOMAS. "Multicultural Policy in South Korea and Its Implications for Social Inclusion of Multiethnic Youth | Asia Pacific Memo." *Apm.iar.ubc.ca*, 25 Jan. 2017, [apm.iar.ubc.ca/multicultural-policy-south-korea-multiethnic-youth/](http://apm.iar.ubc.ca/multicultural-policy-south-korea-multiethnic-youth/) .

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## 대한민국의 다문화주의의 도전

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### 한국어 요약

**연구 목적** 이 논문은 한국 다문화주의의 발전, 결과, 도전, 효과에 초점을 맞추고 있다. 본 연구는 한국 정부의 다문화 전략이 효과적인지, 그리고 이를 더 효율적으로 만들 수 있는 방법이 있는지를 알아보는 것을 목표로 한다

**연구 방법** 이 글은 다문화 관광객, 이민자, 가족의 수, 흐름, 전망에 관한 통계 자료에 관한 연구에 중점을 두고 있다. 또한 다문화주의의 상호문화주의의 개념과 한국 다문화 대책에 효과에 관한 학술 논문 등에 대한 연구를 참고하여 분석하였다.

**결론** 한국의 다문화주의는 주로 이민자, 다문화 가정, 다문화 아동을 동화시키기 위해 고안된 조치로 자체적으로 제한적이며, 새롭고 포용적인 계획의 실행은 소홀히 하고 있다. 그 결과 다문화 가정과 이민자의 수가 증가함에 따라 한국은 민족 인구학적 현실과 한국 국가에 대한 자기표상 사이의 왜곡에 직면하게 되었다.

**핵심어** 다문화주의, 상호문화주의, 한국, 국가, 정체성, 다양성, 한국 사회

이 논문은 2024년 9월 20일에 투고 완료 되어,  
2024년 9월 25일부터 2024년 10월 10일까지 심사위원이 심사하고,  
2024년 10월 15일에 심사위원 및 편집위원 회의에서 게재 결정된 논문임.

