Islamic Educational Provisions in South Korea and Indonesia: A Comparison

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Abstract

This essay seeks to uncover, examine and analyse the provision of Islamic education in both Indonesia and South Korea. Comparisons were made in respect of infrastructure, curriculum, scope and reach, professionalism, funding and other areas, and potential for improvements identified. By examining existing research, publications, newspaper articles, journal publications, statistics and other data and information sources, it is apparent that Korea is severely lacking in Islamic education provisions, whereas this is not generally the case in Indonesia. This is primarily owing to demographic, historical and social reasons. However, with the declining population of Korea, and a birth-rate unable to reach even a stable replacement-rate, Korea will be forced to meet labour needs by way of immigration. Accordingly, with the arrival of more Muslim workers, and a higher number of Muslim students, the Muslim of population is likely to significantly increase, as will the rate of Korean Muslims by way of conversion to Islam.

Keywords: Islam in Korea, Korean Muslims, Indonesian Muslims, Islamic education

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is, by far, the world’s most populous country of Muslims, whereas South Korea has a negligible Muslim population. Indonesia’s Muslim population outstrips that of Korea by over 273 million. Accordingly, it is pertinent to draw comparisons and analysis from the largest Muslim country to a country that has a miniscule Muslim population.

Idris et al. (2012) examined the importance of education, particularly with respect to the need to transmit invaluable ideology to students. Education is the basis upon which minds are shaped and formed, with a pressing need for socially appropriate and moral behaviours to be transmitted. Cultivating a new generation of individuals who are minded to be well-behaved, hard-working, morally upstanding and beneficent members of society is a key role of education. In the context of this article, it is abundantly clear that with regards to the provision of Islamic education, a positive sense of self-assurance, strong faith in Allah (god) and the Muslim identity, along with abiding by Islamic ethics, is of utmost importance.
Nik (2013) held that religion plays a key role in ensuring good behaviour, both in respect of society, and also in a religious sense. Thus, social, spiritual and also the emotional needs of the individual and society can be met. Moreover, Hahn & Truman (2015) adumbrated that education is (both in formal and informal contexts “a process and a product”. Education has numerous benefits, ranging from health to financial stability. This includes being able to meet social, political, emotional, economic and religious needs, and the requirements to live a good life where one resides (Sidat, 2018).

As per Al-Otaibi & Rashid (1997), Islam has always honoured and valued education. Accordingly, it is necessary for Islamic education to be imparted to the believers. Furthermore, The Quran itself (20:144) exhorts the pursuit of knowledge. Numerous other verses show the need for Islamic education, and the Prophet Muhammed himself was an avid teacher and transmitted knowledge to others at every available opportunity. Al-Otaibi & Rashid (1997) further averred that the Prophet’s Mosque in Madinah was the first school of Islam and the Islamic State, and was “the first public school on the Arabian peninsula”, and it sought to disseminate knowledge far and wide. By way of this example, it is manifest that there is an obligation to transmit knowledge, particularly Islamic instruction. Accordingly, the need for Islamic educational provision is clear. Furthermore, Ashari & Anwar (2022) detailed that modelling good moral behaviour is significant. This is something that Islamic education providers are well placed to do, in all contexts.

BACKGROUND

Indonesia is a huge country, with a population of around 274 million (World Bank, 2021). Conversely, South Korea has a population several times smaller, with approximately 52 million residents (World Bank, 2022). Indonesia is the largest country of Muslims in the world, with about 230 million Muslims (Smith, 2018). Conversely, the Korea Times (2022) states that there are under 200,000 Muslims in Korea, the overwhelming majority (80%+) are foreigners or are of foreign origin, and are either students (primarily on Government scholarships, but some privately funded), or workers in factories or in the technology sector, with the remainder consisting mostly of a modest number of businessmen.

Methodology

This research utilizes qualitative research methodology. The objective of this study is to analyze and compare the school leadership found in Indonesia and Malaysia. The research is designed using data collection techniques through literature or library studies. This article is composed using critically and comprehensively reviewed literature studies. With regard to the various sources reviewed and examined by the research team, two primary reference sources were used: previous scientific works and published scientific articles with high credibility indexes, as well as secondary reference sources in the form of textbooks. Literature studies can be used as a tool to construct a framework for solving problems. The literature study method itself can also be used as a
foundation for discovering new theories. The research data were obtained through literature studies related to quality improvement in a developing country. This study was conducted solely based on written works, whether they were from published or unpublished research. This literature study research does not require a researcher to physically interact with respondents in the field.

The data needed for the research were obtained through literacy or reading. Zed (2014) stated that in literacy research and literature review, the purpose is not only to initiate the preparation of the research concept, but also to utilize existing reading sources in online or offline libraries to obtain research data. The preparation for literature study research is similar to other qualitative research, with the only difference lying in the sources and data collection methods. Literature reviews are techniques used by researchers in conducting this research. Literature reviews can be conducted by utilizing reference books or previous research that may have a similar theme to the focus of the researcher (Ulfatin, 2013). Literature reviews can draw from various sources such as books, journals, e-books, magazines, newspapers, and regulations or policies. Comparative studies are a type of science used to compare the similarities and differences between two or more researched objects in order to establish a new framework of thinking. In line with Pfefler's opinion (2015), comparative studies are a concept used to measure quality and equality that can be used to study relationships among obtained results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

ISLAM IN INDONESIA: HISTORY

Islam is the religion of the majority of Indonesia. Islam originally came to Indonesia in the 9th century, by businessmen coming from Gujarat, India. From the 13th century, the spread of Islam took hold, and grew rapidly owing to trade routes and business dealings (Smith, 2018). Contrary to the ideas of many, Islam was spread through trade and personal contacts, not by ‘the sword’. Notwithstanding the overwhelming majority of the population being Muslim, Indonesia is still a democratic country.

Von Der Mehden (1995) postulated that Islam did not come to Indonesia in a destructive fashion, and was entirely benevolent with respect to the culture, customs and beliefs of others. So long as they were not flagrantly offensive to Muslim sensibilities, they were accepted. Moreover, in some instances, there is evidence of syncretism, which has implications even in the present day (between those who are nominally “Muslim” but are secular/ westernised, and those who are literalists and traditionalists).

From the start of the 1900s, during the time of Indonesia being colonised by both the VOC (Dutch East-Indies Company) and then the Dutch State, Islam started to take on a more political dimension, and come to the fore. Of the fierce Islamic support for self-determination, and providing the impetus to throw off the shackles of Dutch colonialism, Martin (2004) wrote that “Islam became a rallying banner to resist
colonialism”. Islam has become ever important in Indonesian society, particularly since the inception of the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Indonesian Ulama Council) in 1975 (MUI, 2019). Accordingly, the importance of Islam in relation to Indonesian history cannot be underestimated.

ISLAM IN KOREA: HISTORY

Islam initially came to Korea in the 7th century, primarily through Arab and Persian interactions with China. The initial settling of Muslims took place in the 9th century, albeit in isolated circumstances and in low numbers (Lee, 1991). Notwithstanding the small number of Muslims in Korea at this time, they still had an established presence in both China and modern-day Korea. Regrettably, King Sejong sought to socially and culturally erase the resident Muslim population, either through slaughter, exile, or enacting decrees (such as the one promulgated in 1427) to prohibit Muslim worship, close places of worship, and ban Islamic clothing (Lee et al., 1997; Baker, 2006).

Until the mid-to late 1950s, there was no genuine Muslim community in the Korean Peninsula whatsoever. The arrival of Turkish Muslim troops on Korean soil heralded a tangible Muslim presence in Korea in the early 1950s, but were separate from the ordinary civilian population. 14,936 Turkish troops were stationed in Korea, with 721 of them being killed, and over 2,100 being wounded. In 1966, the Turks left Korea, albeit with one relatively modest company behind (Ministry of Patriots and Veteran Affairs: Republic of Korea, n.d.).

In 1967, the Korea Muslim Federation (KMF) was established, and land was set aside for the construction of Seoul Central Mosque in Itaewon [finished and opened in 1976], primarily due to political expediencies. There was the desire to form a closer bond with Arab/ Muslim countries, a small Muslim population in Korea of about 3000, and the Korean construction workers who had returned from the Middle East (Azad, 2015).

Considering the small number of Muslims through the history of Korea, to the modestly larger number in the present day, it is evident that significant progress has been made. A prime example of international co-operation in respect of establishing the Muslim community in Korea is the minbar/ pulpit of Seoul Central Mosque. Inscribed on it is the fact that it was a gift from King Hassan II of Morocco, who donated it and dedicated it to the Muslim community of Korea. This affirms both the role of the King of Morocco as a leader of the Muslim Ummah/ Community and the true ‘amīr al-mu’minīn’ [Commander of the Faithful] (Allison, 2021) and the need for Muslims in Korea to receive external assistance.

ISLAMIC EDUCATIONAL PROVISIONS IN KOREA

As stated above, the Muslim population of Korea is extremely low, especially when compared with a behemoth of a county such as Indonesia. There are exceptionally few mosques, and places of Islamic worship. In addition to the small number of large
mosques, there are far more prayer rooms (often called a “Musallah”), either run by universities, places of work, and small community groups. A good example of mosques in Korea (other than the Seoul Central Mosque) is the Islamic Center of Daejeon (ICD/Daejeon Mosque), which is a relatively large Mosque of several floors, occupying a converted residential building, or the purpose-built grand Busan Al-Fatah Mosque. Conversely, numerous small musallah exist, such as the Masjid Baburrahmah (occupying the second floor of a residential/mixed-use building in the southern city of Ulsan), and the IMNIDA Masjid An-Noor in Daejeon. Both musallah are miniscule grassroots community projects, accommodating less than 100 people at a time, borne from and catering to the religious, social and spiritual needs of the Indonesian Muslim community resident in Korea. This shows the dedication, desire and need for the Indonesian community to have their spiritual, social and religious education needs met in Korea.

At the Seoul Central Mosque, owned and operated by the KMF, there is the Prince Sultan School, which is the largest Islamic school in Korea. It was opened in 2009, and funded partially by overseas donations, such as the $50,000 provided by the Saudi Embassy (Park, 2008). Park (2008), writing for the Korea Times, outlined the reality of the situation of educational provision for Muslims, and Islamic educational provisions: “Korean society has failed to offer adequate social infrastructure, particularly in education”. There is also schooling facilities attached to the Busan Al-Fatah Mosque.

Given the lack of dedicated infrastructure, and the necessity for educational provisions, these are taking place on a more ad-hoc basis, at musallah and in mosque buildings: wherever space is available. Examples of this include the main prayer halls of the Islamic Center of Daejeon and Incheon Mosque (Incheon Islamic Center, 2023). Accordingly, infrastructure, curriculum, scope and reach, professionalism, funding and other areas are impacted. Infrastructure and curriculum are ad-hoc, scope and reach are somewhat limited (particularly given the low number of mosques and other Islamic institutions, and small Muslim population/lack of demand), professionalism is difficult to ascertain (due to low number and no criteria being set for qualifications of Islamic teachers informally [although the institutions mentioned above have particularly well qualified Islamic leadership]), and funding is dependent on donations, private payments, the KMF, and overseas funds.

Umayyatun (2018) accepts both the relatively low number of Muslims in Korea, the lack of solid infrastructural development both in general and with respect to educational provision, and also broaches to other areas. However, Umayyatun (2018) heaps unwarranted praise upon the Korean government with respect to its dealings with Muslims, although is likely to be correct in that the motivations are primarily economic and diplomatic in nature, as opposed to arising from benevolence or care for Muslims and/or the Islamic faith.

A general lack of legal restraint does little further to aid Muslims in Korea. Halal food is somewhat difficult to obtain outside of certain districts of Seoul, Busan, Daegu
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and other large cities. Although open discrimination is relatively rare, instances of discrimination do happen, such as hundreds of thousands of Islamophobic signatures on petitions to the Korean Government, and pig’s heads being left outside the site of a mosque under construction (and vociferous protests in Daegu) (FirstPost, 2022; Chaigne, 2023).

Also, the forceful repudiation of halal food (particularly that marked as halal) is of serious consequence (Eum, 2019). Even though foods may be halal, industry and lobby groups have successfully ensured that “halal” food labelling remains off products found in Korea. A good example is the popular Samyang Buldak spicy chicken ramen - marked as halal on the international market, but the label is noticeably absent in Korea, due to the need for products destined for the Korean market not to be labelled as Halal. Cho (2018) averred that Muslims have been targeted by deep-rooted Islamophobia and fearmongering, in that food products marked as halal have been subject to rumours that the profits made support terrorism, which has led to boycotts, and reduced the feasibility of products being marked as halal within Korea.

The fact remains that Korea is a robustly racist and xenophobic society, based on notions of Korean social, cultural, linguistic and even spiritual/ religious superiority (Mulyaman & Ismail, 2021). This needs to be combated to facilitate increased Muslim participation in wider society, particularly in the fields of education, and for Islamic education provisions to be enhanced. Accepting and facing these issues head-on will help to facilitate better provision of Islamic education in Korea.

ISLAMIC EDUCATIONAL PROVISIONS IN INDONESIA

As highlighted above, Indonesia is a Muslim-majority country. Therefore, it is logical that Islam and the Muslim belief system forms an element of the Indonesian education system. Muslim schools and Islamic education form a key element of the provision of education in Indonesia, and in many areas, is the backbone of the schooling system (Zuhdi, 2018).

Islamic education in Indonesia pre-dates Indonesian independence, unlike Islamic educational provision in Korea. The curricula of Islamic schools have helped Indonesia to become a modern, pluralistic and moderate society, strong in Islamic belief, but also respectful and tolerant towards the views of others. Some changes in curricula have been reactionary and introduced to shape opinions and perspectives, but there is evidently a reciprocal relationship between political and social needs, and the provision of Islamic education. Sekolah Islam (Muslim Schools), Madrasah (Islamic Schools), and Pesantren (Islamic Boarding Schools) form the three main types of Islamic education institutions in Indonesia (Zuhdi, 2006).

Yunus (1996) adumbrates the various Islamic education institutions in Indonesia, and the historical importance of each, and the struggle for them to be acknowledged as formal education settings. Islamic educational provision has deep and widespread penetration, and has generally been accessible to all strata of society (unlike higher/ tertiary education). Like Korea, there is a degree of informal educational
provision—such as peer-learning, learning directly on a one-to-one basis with a more experienced and knowledge person such as a sheikh or imam (which is often the case with adults). However, the bulk of Islamic education is imparted to students and youths by way of those mentioned above.

Pesantren and Madrasah are highly prevalent throughout the Muslim-majority areas of Indonesia, and are supplemented by Sekolah Islam (Islamic schools), which are very similar to regular secular schools in that the regular Ministry of Education curriculum is used, but it is bolstered by a self-formulated Islamic education curriculum. Zuhdi (2018) was keen to state that all of the above education providers furnish both secular education such as science, math and citizenship, unlike Madrasah in other countries, such as Pakistan. The infrastructure of Indonesian Islamic educational provision may not be as financially supported as it ought to be, it is deeply rooted in Indonesian society, has a wide reach, has established curricula, and for the most part, employs a degree of professionalism (even if there is a lack of qualified teachers). Accordingly, this has been reflected in the institution of several State Islamic Universities, to continue the beneficial impact of Islamic educational provision (Daulay, 2017).

A COMPARISON BETWEEN KOREAN AND INDONESIAN ISLAMIC EDUCATIONAL PROVISION

It is abundantly clear that both Islamic educational provision in Korea and in Indonesia have issues and problems that ought to be faced. The first of which is funding. Korean Islamic education is chronically underfunded, receives no state funding, and is reliant on donations from mosque congregants, and funding from foreign states and institutions. The Indonesian system is reliant on the state for its funding, curriculum, credence and credibility, and to a lesser extent, parental contributions.

In the first instance, the Indonesian education system has formalised Islamic instruction to a greater extent. In any case, the state, society and Islamic education providers are mutually dependent. However, in Korea, the provision of Islamic education is entirely informal. This means that there is no real oversight, which may be problematic in several areas (ranging from content, professionalism of teachers, criminal record checks, safeguarding, and the propagation of material contrary to Islam and the public good).

Islamic educational provision existed prior to the advent of modern-day Indonesia. Therefore, Indonesia has a long history of Islamic education. It has been an integral part of the Indonesian education system since the Independence of Indonesia (Daulay, 2017). The same cannot be said with respect to Korea, which does not have a long relationship with Islam or Muslims. Islamic educational provision is negligible in Korea, and it certainly forms no integral part of Korean society.

Indonesia is not substantially more advanced in many areas, but the provision of Islamic education is certainly one of them. Korea has a lot to learn from Indonesia in this realm. The infrastructure of schools, set curricula, qualified teachers, coupled with
social awareness and societal support means that the two countries are worlds apart in this endeavour. Korea is only in the embryonic phase. Additionally, Islamic education enjoys wide support in Indonesia, but faces a bastion of xenophobic hatred in Korea, coupled with rumours that it (and Muslims) are terrorists, and that even food marked as halal supports and actively funds terrorism.

A chronic shortage of funding is common for Islamic education providers in both Indonesia and Korea. Indonesia requires on funding from the state and/ or parents, whereby the state, lacking in funds itself to perform its own functions well, are unable to pump the necessary funds into the education system (including Islamic educational provision). Korea has a similar issue, and Islamic education providers are not subsidised by the state, therefore, the onus falls on service users and Islamic organisations, the governments of Muslim countries, and others, to meet funding obligations. The financial viability of Muslim institutions, particularly those that provide education services, needs to be assured.

It is apparent that there is still scope for improvement for both Korean and Indonesian Islamic educational provision.

FUTURE PROJECTIONS

Korea has significant demographic problems, particularly in respect of a low birth-rate and a rapidly aging population. Yun et al. (2022) states that “the birth rate is declining at an alarming pace”, which is like to give rise to profound social ramifications, socioeconomic problems, and further population decline. Jeon (n.d.) outlines the exigent need for Korea to recruit foreign workers. They are typically from Muslim-majority countries such as Indonesia, Bangladesh or Pakistan, [which do not suffer from population decline] or India and China. Accordingly, it is evident that the population of Muslims in Korea is set to rise significantly. Even on a pragmatic basis, with an aging population, foreign labourers will need to be recruited to fulfil necessary work, even if it is primarily blue-collar workers. Thus, even given the current Islamic educational infrastructure, the impetus is likely to exist to widen the scope of Muslim endeavours, educational facilities, build more mosques, and establish a more significant Muslim community and overt presence in Korea. Jeon (n.d.) also shows that there has been a tremendous rise in foreign students. This also means that it is to be expected that more Muslim students will study in Korea and cause for the Muslim population of Korea to rise. A rise in Islamic education may also be helpful in ensuring a more harmonious, ethical and civilised society (Aini & Fitria, 2021).

Further, as indicated above, Indonesia has a birth-rate above that of simple replacement. It is anticipated that the Indonesian population will continue to grow, albeit more modestly than previous years (World Bank, 2021). Accordingly, there will be the continuing need for Islamic educational provision, and the need to expand the scope of existing provisions, to meet the increase in demand. With Indonesia developing, there is the need to ensure sustainable growth, and for social, political, religious and educational needs to be met (Irwansyah, 2022). Growth and development
is likely to come with enhanced educational provision, and more diversified and appropriate curricula, to meet ever-changing needs. Muttaqin (2018) highlights the fact that increased development and a wealthier Indonesian society means that the future trajectory is likely to be one where more children are in education for a longer period of time, and has the potential for “human, social, economic, political and infrastructural” development. This is particularly true of Islamic educational providers, particularly given that Sekolah Islam, Madrasah, and Pesantren provide both religious and secular, scientific, mathematical and civic-based instruction and education. This will deepen their role in Indonesian society, and are likely to remain perennially present in Indonesian society.

CONCLUSION

In light of the above, it is apparent that the provision of Islamic education is of exceptional importance both on an individual level, and also on a societal level. Indonesia has hundreds of years of experience more than Korea does in relation to the provision of Islamic education, which is exceptionally apparent in the infrastructure and other facets of Islamic educational provision in Korea. Despite this, Indonesia does have weaknesses, and must also keep up with modern developments and technologies, particularly considering the demands of the post-COVID era, the rapidly globalised nature of Indonesian society, population increase, as well as political and social expediencies. Korean Islamic educational provision is still in an embryonic stage of development, however, there is scope for substantially wider proliferation both in respect of expatriate communities, as well as the actual and potential conversion of native Korean citizens to Islam. With Islam as the fastest growing religion in the world (Fardila et al., 2020), there is no reason to doubt why this cannot be extended to Korea, and why Korean Muslims cannot rapidly increase in number. Further, with the declining birth-rate and population of Korea, and the increasing demand for foreign workers, the likelihood of Islam taking root in Korea in the next few decades is high. Accordingly, the provision of Islamic education is likely to improve commensurately.

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