

The Dark Side of K-Pop:

The Machine of Market Exploitation against Muslim Youth in Asia

News:

Early December 2022, The Diplomat published an article about the dark side of K-Pop; that beneath the glittering surface image of K-pop idols lies the Dorian Grey-like heart of an industry that abuses and discards its trainees and stars. While the K-Wave draws attention to South Korea and offers a global position of cultural influence, this attention does come tinted with tragedy. Mistreatment, suicide, slave labour contracts, gruelling training schedules, “no dating” clauses, sexual assault, and sexualization of minors by K-pop agencies cannot go unnoticed.

Scandals are frequent in K-pop, with this last November alone witnessing popular artist Lee Seung-gi discovering his agency Hook Entertainment withheld all profits for digital streams and downloads of his songs over a 20-year period. Omega X, a boy band made of 11 second-chance stars, was recorded receiving a violent dressing down by management. It was later charged that the agency made the group perform while testing positive for COVID-19.

Hallyu, or the K-Wave, is at the forefront of a revolution in soft power of South Korea and it is often paired with compulsion. Soft power, or the power of cultural attraction and influence, is a dangerous and complicated tool to wield. For more than two decades, South Korea has been actively supporting its entertainment industry as an engine of “soft power” and economic growth. Yet, when it comes to its duty to protect Human Rights, it has failed to deliver. The industry only sees profit in extending its influence on the Middle East, China, or even North America.

Comment:

What's darker than the exploitation scandals of K-Pop artists is precisely the exploitation of the fandom as markets - of which there are millions. Sadly, many of them are Muslim youths as victims. The dark side of this one seems to often escape K-Pop industry observers. For example, in November, K-pop band - NCT 127 was forced to end their first concert in Indonesia early after 30 girls fainted in a crush. The concert had been going for two hours when fans started surging forward to get closer to the stage.

The danger of K-Pop as a soft power is the harm of values and lifestyles, because K-Pop has succeeded in marketing liberal, hedonic values and Western-style idol worship with eastern Korean cultural packaging. Moreover, the rabid K-pop fandoms are usually built on pathological dedication, where they are filled with millions of fans who suffer from delusions and excessive adoration. And this has a more direct impact to Muslims as many Muslims countries counted as largest market for K-Pop industry which its youth exploited as fans and fandom for their songs and movies. Based on Twitter report on January 2022, Indonesia tops the list for the greatest number of K-pop Tweets for the second consecutive year. Meanwhile, Malaysia is on the 8th position which is into the top 10.

Korean boyband agency companies do not even hesitate to carry out what is called market exploitation. BTS Army, the global fan base of the K-pop sensation, early this year has expressed its anger with the entertainment firm for its aggressive expansion. Many fans are complaining that the agency is bent on making money by selling fan merchandise at inflated prices. The price of the products created an uproar: A two-piece pyjama set and a pillow are priced at 119,000 Won (\$99.70) and 69,000 Won, respectively.

Likewise with K-Pop music concert tours that take place across countries, the fan market is very large. Over 2.85 million people are projected to attend K-pop concerts in other countries in 2022, as the world seeks to transition from a pandemic to an endemic, according to Hyundai Motor Securities. These concerts even gave rise to a phenomenon known as the 'Ticket war'. The large number of K-pop concert schedules in Indonesia, which will be in Jakarta in 2022, has made ticket sales highly contested by young people. Black Pink's concert, which is only scheduled for 2023, has started to be contested over tickets a few months ago. So far, the prices for K-pop concert tickets that are sold range from USD 50-350, not a cheap price for Indonesian teenagers' pockets.

The direct impact of K-Pop as a popular culture industry is the ruin and weakening of the future Muslim generation. Young Muslims became a generation of *imma'ah* who don't have a stand, and who tend to follow trends of hedonic lifestyle. *Imma'ah* is a labil soul that goes with the flow trends and the majority. It has no principles, having identity crisis and follower mentality. From Hudzaifah said: Rasulullah (saw) said: «لَا تَكُونُوا إِمْعَةً، تَقُولُونَ: إِنَّ أَحْسَنَ النَّاسِ أَحْسَنًا، وَإِنْ ظَلَمُوا ظَلَمْنَا، وَلَكِنْ وَطِنُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ، إِنَّ أَحْسَنَ النَّاسِ أَنْ تُحْسِنُوا، «**Do not be Imma'ah; you say: if people are good, we are also good. And if they are corrupt, we will be corrupt too. But prepare yourselves (to receive truth and goodness); If people are good, you have to be good and if they are corrupt, you don't become corrupt.**” (Narrated by Tirmidhi).

As a result, K-Pop is nothing more than a tool of Western colonialism under the guise of an eastern face. Intangible colonialism, which took place more subtly, exploited the youth's mental instability, drained their pockets, and made them have pathological loyalty to their idols. This is a colonial model with a 'soft power' approach which is more dangerous because it is latent and plays a lot in 'syubhat' [Shub'ha] areas that are vague, obscure, or unclear. They are accompanied by the flow of secular pluralism values, such as religious moderation and deradicalization program which continues to be campaigned amongst Muslims students. Muslim youth are finally becoming easy prey for Capitalism!

Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by

Dr. Fika Komara

Member of the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir