

Interview – Hurricane Kimchi and Ali Zahoor

Written by E-International Relations

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Hurricane Kimchi is Co-founder and Chief Organiser of Seoul Drag Parade, also known as Heezy Yang. She is a Seoul-born Korean queer artist and activist and is actively participating in Seoul pride (officially known as the Seoul Queer Culture Festival), since 2011. She has also performed at Korea's regional pride parades in Daegu, Jeju, Kyungnam, and Incheon. She has experience hosting shows and performing overseas, in New York, London, Oslo, and Copenhagen. In 2018, she featured on the Forbes 30 Under 30 Asia list as an artist. Ali Zahoor is Co-founder and Supervisor of the Seoul Drag Parade. He is a freelancer, specialising in marketing, translation, and events organisation. He has spent many years in South Korea and attended Korea and Yonsei Universities, where he completed a postgraduate degree that focused on queer migration. He has proficiency in English, Korean, Chinese, and German, and has performance experience while working in the K-pop industry for several years and acting in British dramas, including EastEnders. He has been a long-time activist, actively participating in Queer Culture Festivals and other human rights movements across the UK and South Korea.

At present, both Ali and Hurricane Kimchi are working on the Seoul Drag Parade 2021, an annual LGBTQ event they organize and host.

Where do you see the most exciting debates in South Korean LGBTQ+ politics?

Hurricane Kimchi and Ali: In recent years, LGBTQ+ issues have been brought to the fore in South Korean politics due to the prominence of the Seoul Queer Culture Festival held at Seoul Plaza every year and transgender issues with mandatory military service. The 2017 Presidential Election and the 2021 Seoul Mayoral Election were particularly notable because LGBTQ+ issues were brought up during the live television debates. In 2017 President Moon Jae-in, despite being a human rights lawyer and a more liberal candidate, said "I don't like [homosexuality]". Hong Joon-yo, a candidate from the conservative Liberty Korea Party, claimed homosexuality in the military would undermine South Korea's ability to fight North Korea. Rather than exciting, these debates were depressing for the LGBTQ+ community, activists and allies. However, LGBTQ+ people and activists were thankful that at least the issue was being brought up. In the past, many figureheads in Korean politics denied the existence of homosexuality in Korea outright. But candidates from smaller political parties in Korea, like the Justice Party, Green Party and Mirae Party, have voiced support for the queer community.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Ali: Growing up, I always wanted to make some change. I believed the way to do so was through art or science, creating or inventing something that could help people. Activism never crossed my mind until I met Hurricane Kimchi and other great activists when I moved back to Korea in 2017. I was motivated by them due to the discrimination I faced as the only openly queer person in my graduate school and the person with the darkest skin colour. When it came to discrimination in the past, particularly living in the UK, I always had some faith in institutions and someone else stepping in to deal with the situation, but when faced with institutional discrimination, I began to believe in the power of the individual and the marginalised. I could see before my eyes that by being present, speaking at events, organising, and performing, I was able to make a difference and I believe I can make a difference. Although I won't speak for other people, I believe that I have a duty to make the world a more accommodating place for more people,

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which I do through Seoul Drag Parade by providing a safe space for queer people to enjoy themselves. As most queer events are limited to bars and clubs, we organize the drag shows for the minors to attend. Heezy and I try our best to raise awareness of queer issues in South Korea through platforms like social media, talks and interviews, like this. So even after returning to the UK, I continued my activism despite previously thinking “things aren’t that bad, so activism isn’t something that concerns me”.

Could you tell us about the origins of Drag art in South Korea? How has it evolved over time?

Hurricane Kimchi and Ali: Like many cultures, Korea also has historical examples of cross-dressing in theatre and art long before the idea of drag was labelled or queered as it is today. Talchum is a masked performance predating the Joseon dynasty (1392-1897) that featured male actors taking on usually comedic female roles. This sort of roleplay has continued. There is no shortage of men dressed as women appearing in Korean media, whether K-pop idols queerbaiting or comedians mocking women. It’s up to an individual whether they see this misogynistic performance as drag or not, since the performance is not by queer people. Drag, as it is more commonly known today, began in the underground queer scene in Itaewon several decades ago, the remains of which are visible at bars such as Trance, where older queens perform more camp, comedic, cabaret-like routines. Over time, particularly in the past five years or so, with the popularity of drag increasing and RuPaul’s Drag Race coming to Netflix Korea, there is a considerable shift in prioritizing visuals over performance wherein cisgender male drag queens try to mirror beautiful cisgender females as closely as possible. This type of drag is often performed in spaces that discriminate against AFAB (assigned female at birth) and transgender people in terms of entry fee, so drag is frequently attacked by feminist groups in Korea. Many gay bars in Seoul where drag is performed do not allow women or they are charged with high entrance fee (usually 10,000 won for men and 50,000 won for women). The gay bars typically decide this by the gender on someone’s ID which is impossible for trans people to change unless they have certain surgeries.

Simultaneously, more gender expressive drag has also come about, often performed in spaces catering to more English speakers and foreigners. This includes gender non-conforming non-binary performers and drag kings, with a prominent community of the latter holding an annual Drag King Contest. International influence on the drag community is undeniable with the popularity of RuPaul’s Drag Race, which could be an explanation for the most famous drag artists among Koreans being the aforementioned hyper-feminine drag queens. We started Seoul Drag Parade in 2018 as a reaction to the growth in popularity of the art form and our first event saw around 1,000 attendees, making it Asia’s largest drag parade. We aim to honour all forms of drag. I’d say now there are well over 100 drag artists in Korea, many of whom don’t perform live.

Can you give us a brief snapshot of Drag in Seoul at the moment? Especially during the pandemic?

Hurricane Kimchi and Ali: It’s all on hold at the moment as venues are still very restricted. Queer venues in Itaewon got hit particularly hard after a witch-hunt that blamed them for a small outbreak in COVID-19 cases. This attracted huge media attention despite being much smaller than any of the outbreaks in churches. It is a dark time as many drag performers have continued to post on social media, but with no income from live shows. Seoul Drag Parade collaborated with the student union at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London) to put together an online show, featuring a few drag artists from Korea. Currently, we are fundraising to organise a bilingual online show with a more diverse cast for Seoul Drag Parade 2021 which we hope to conduct in June. I expect things to return to relative normality after the restrictions ease. Some performers, including Hurricane Kimchi and Hososoma have participated in several online shows organised abroad.

What do you consider the role of Drag to be in relation to gender performance?

Hurricane Kimchi: Drag essentially is gender performance. I believe that’s what differentiates it from theatrical cross-dressing, for example. Through makeup, outfits, and expression, drag artists are performing gender. We’ve come across loads of young queer people who don’t just do drag because they want to perform in bars but because they are able to express their gender identity through drag and dress in a way they wouldn’t be able to usually because of work, school or society. A lot of people don’t do drag because they want to lip-sync or make money, it’s more for the sake of gender expression – a personal thing.

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What are some similarities or differences between South Korean and Western Drag cultures?

Hurricane Kimchi and Ali: It's hard to compare because there is a huge difference even between British and American drag. Hence, defining Western drag culture is a struggle on its own. I guess with drag in Seoul only just coming out of its nascent phase, it's hard to compare the culture with somewhere like London where there are established venues, performers, and shows. But even compared to other Asian cities like Hong Kong, Bangkok, or Kuala Lumpur, Seoul drag culture differs quite a lot. From the drag I've seen in these cities, there seems to be more local cultural influence. Drag performances in Seoul borrow a lot from American culture, whether they perform in English or Korean, like K-pop which also borrows a lot from American culture. Wherever you go in the world, you'll probably end up seeing a young drag queen lip-syncing to the latest Ariana Grande release. Other drag artists enjoy cultural or historical references and make them queer through drag.

I think for some queer people who have been discriminated against by Korean society, drag is a sort of escapist way to distance themselves from the Korean patriarchy by leaning into foreign drag cultures. Since there is no anti-discrimination law, coming out could mean loss of job, getting kicked out by a landlord, etc. There are cases of this happening when people become outcasts. An actor called Hong Seokcheon came out in 2000 and got exiled by the industry for almost eight years, so people are frightened of being outed or coming out. Due to the patriarchy and Confucianism, what is expected of men and women is very different, how they should dress, act, behave etc., so drag can be a form of rebellion against this. Homosexual acts are also illegal for soldiers despite mandatory service for all men. Even if people are not fired or removed for being gay, discrimination would most likely occur as there is generally negative sentiment towards queer people – as evidenced at many regional pride parades, where protestors outnumber attendees'.

There is also huge stigmatism of gay men relating to HIV/AIDS and the insufficient awareness around HIV/AIDS and what it is. Many large media houses and Christian groups run fear-mongering campaigns against gay people claiming that, for example, the legalization of same-sex marriage or an anti-discrimination law will cause a health crisis due to increasing rates of HIV and that many people will become gay or transgender, leading to an even lower birth rate. Thus, it is challenging to be queer, or even an ally, in this kind of society.

What role does South Korean LGBTQ+ activism play in international LGBTQ+ politics?

Hurricane Kimchi and Ali: Naturally, LGBTQ+ activists around the world inspire each other and affect international LGBTQ+ politics. For example, the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Taiwan gave many queer activists in South Korea hope and since both countries are socioeconomically similar, this ruling provided another reason to justify these demands in South Korea. Unfortunately, with no anti-discrimination law in place, South Korea does not have adequate rights for LGBTQ+ people. So, rather than Korean queer activism playing a role in international queer politics, it's more the other way around. The LGBTQ+ rights movement around the world, particularly in the USA and South Korea's neighbours, influences internal queer politics here. South Korea should catch up with the rest of the world in terms of recognising queer relationships and introducing an anti-discrimination law.

How did you get into Drag?

Hurricane Kimchi: I started to get active in Seoul's LGBTQ+ scene as an artist in the early 2010s. I did a lot of things; illustrating, photographing, exhibiting, performing (but not in drag), etc. Then I met some people who do drag, such as Kuciia Diamant and Vita Mikju, and became friends with them. I probably had my first in-person experience of drag through them. I was fascinated by their attire and passionate performance and, in 2014, decided to give it a try. Initially, I only used to dress up and put on makeup but didn't perform on stage. I thought it was going to be a one-time thing. However, I realised that through drag, I was able to express what I could not otherwise, but also, I experience different sensations and, well – experiences. While I'm an introvert, for the most part, I do have my extroverted side and I need to be an exhibitionist from time to time, to tell my stories and express what I am usually keeping to myself. Drag was just perfect for that. I started more as an activist queen who would join rallies or protests, but then I got into developing skills and qualities as a stage performing queen. Unlike in Western countries such as the US or the UK, live singing isn't a thing here – in Seoul (and in Korea), but I'm a singer-songwriter. I have

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been releasing singles and music videos while also performing my original songs along with covers on stage. I still try my best to get involved in activism as much as possible and use my drag to advocate for and add power to it.

Ali: I perform but I don't call it drag. I got more into drag and supporting the art form after meeting Heezy and seeing how powerful it is as a tool for activism.

How is your art and political activism linked? What's the role of Drag in creating queer political spaces in South Korea?

Hurricane Kimchi and Ali: Drag naturally gains attention as an art form blurring the lines of gender. While cross-dressing is not an uncommon sight for South Koreans, the queering of it is. That helps in the fight for visibility. Many people say drag artists are the pioneers or the frontline of the queer community. When we have events like Seoul Drag Parade that takes place in the daytime for the public to see, drag artists gain attention and have been an important part of getting rid of the old saying "there are no gays in Korea".

Whether you like it or not, drag itself is very political, because it involves performing gender and redefining gender norms (and many other things). Even without the intention of getting political, by doing drag you make statements and express yourself, your thoughts, and opinions for others to see, and that affects people – first people around you, and eventually people in politics. What I like about drag is that there's more to it than fighting and getting political. There's art and entertainment in it, and the power of art and entertainment is mighty. Since the latter has more political power and influence that is often exclusive to mainstream politics, unquestionably it leads to creating spaces for drag, art, discussion, and eventually political stuff, too.

What is the most important piece of advice that you would give to young people/LGBTQ+ activists?

Hurricane Kimchi: I think it's necessary to do your research and be clued up on history, the law, politics, and theories. Take your time and work out what change you want and how you want to go about it. From there, you can find like-minded people through groups and organisations. Try not to step on any toes, especially if you aren't part of the group of people whose rights you're fighting for, instead offer your support, and understand what your role can be. Of course, be enthusiastic and passionate about your activism. Art and literature are great mediums to get your message across.