

THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF ISLAM IN ASIA

By Douglas P. Sjoquist



A sensible beginning point for the study of Islam in Asia is a demographic analysis of Asia's Muslim population. Granted, there is always a risk involved in examining population statistics—especially religious ones—but certain useful and enlightening generalizations can be drawn from such an examination. What countries in Asia with substantial Muslim populations have the highest and lowest literacy rates or life expectancy rates? Which predominantly Muslim countries in Asia have the highest and lowest per capita incomes or the highest and lowest natural growth rate? These preliminary questions have the power to generate classroom discussion and facilitate critical thinking skills. Knowledge of some of the basic demographic features of Islam in Asia is a necessary first step in perceiving relationships, making comparisons, and constructing predictions.

Asia is the birthplace of Islam (as well as the mother continent of all the world's other major religions including Christianity). Since the sixth century CE, Asia has hosted the world's largest population of Muslims. Today, there are almost 870 million Muslims living in the five geographical regions of Asia: South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia. Of the approximately 1.2 billion Muslims in the world, 70 percent live in Asian countries. Islam now has more adherents than any other religion in Asia.

THE DISTRIBUTION OF ASIA'S MUSLIM POPULATION

There are fifteen countries in Asia where the Muslim population is over 90 percent of each country's total population: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Maldives, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. The estimated Muslim population in these fifteen countries is about 427 million, slightly less than half of the total Muslim population in Asia. The majority of these countries are in West Asia.

Asian countries where the Muslim population makes up between 80 and 89 percent are Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kuwait, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The Muslim population in these five countries makes up approximately 41 percent of the total Muslim population of Asia. Of particular interest is Indonesia, which has the largest population of Muslims of any Asian country. In fact, it has the largest Muslim population of any country in the world, more than 209 million, which is more than the entire combined Muslim population of Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, Yemen, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Lebanon. Almost a quarter of all Asian Muslims live in Indonesia.

Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, and Oman are Asian countries where the Muslim populations range between 70 and 79 percent of their respective total populations. These approximately 8.6 million Muslims number more than the Muslim populations of North America and Latin America combined.

Only two Asian countries' Muslim populace ranges between 60 and 69 percent: Brunei with about 68 percent, and Malaysia with

about 60 percent. After Malaysia, the percentage of Muslim populations in Asian countries drops dramatically. Kazakhstan has the highest Muslim minority population, about 47 percent, and from there the percentages decrease substantially. Cyprus has the next largest percentage at about 18 percent. Three countries—Georgia, India, and Israel—each have Muslim populations that range between 11 and 15 percent. Of these three, India is noteworthy. Although only 12 percent of its population is Muslim, the actual number of Muslims in the country is high at 127 million because India's population is more than a billion. Sri Lanka, Nepal, and the Philippines have a less than 10 percent Muslim population. Japan, Laos, Bhutan, Armenia, and North Korea have virtually no Muslims. China's Muslim population is difficult to determine as their numbers are not readily available. We know, however, that Islam is prevalent in two of China's largest ethnic groups: the Uighur (who live mostly in Xinjiang Province) and the Hui. The combined population of these two Muslim minority groups is an estimated 18 million. It's probably safe to say, therefore, that the Muslim population in China is less than 2 percent.

TEACHING STRATEGIES USING DEMOGRAPHICS

While analyzing how the Muslim population is distributed in Asia can be a purposeful classroom exercise, evaluating other demographic features can lead students to valuable insights about the religion of Islam itself. For example, the majority of those fifteen countries identified above that have Muslim populations more than 90 percent have relatively high literacy rates. Almost three-quarters of the fifteen countries have a literacy rate above 77 percent. Four of these fifteen countries—Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Maldives, and Jordan—have a 90 percent or above literacy rate. Is there a relationship between the high literacy rates in these Muslim countries and Islam?

What does literacy mean in the context of Islam (as well as in the field of demography)? Does the fact that Pakistan—another predominantly Muslim country—has a literacy rate of 46 percent suggest that factors other than Islam are at work? If so, what are they? These are relevant questions. Students could be assigned to investigate the role of education in Islamic history and explore what factors other than

religion might have an influence on literacy rates in Asia's Muslim countries. For comparison, students could also be asked how these literacy rates in predominantly Muslim countries compare with those countries in Asia that have been strongly influenced by Confucianism. The possibilities for a critical and comparative analysis of literacy rates between the Muslim countries of Asia and between predominantly Muslim and non-Muslim countries in Asia are fascinating.

Other demographic features of Islam in Asia can be just as engaging for students. For instance, these same fifteen countries have high population growth rates; two-thirds have rates higher than 2.0. (Yemen's population growth rate of 3.4 is one of the highest in the world.) Is there a relationship between high population growth rates and the religion of Islam? What views do Muslims hold with regard to contraception and abortion? How do the rates in these predominantly Muslim countries compare with the non-Muslim countries of East Asia such as South Korea or Japan? What patterns emerge in the comparative analysis of population growth rates and literacy rates for the fifteen Islamic countries? What does the fact that Azerbaijan has a low population growth rate (1.0) and a high literacy rate (100 percent) seem to suggest? What role, if any, do Islamic religious beliefs and attitudes play in Azerbaijan's statistics? These kinds of questions can stimulate energetic classroom discussion and provide teachers with some direction in assigning research papers or other projects.

SOURCES FOR INFORMATION


A demographical examination of the countries in Asia where Muslims constitute a majority of the population holds considerable potential for any history, social science, world religions, or humanities class where Islam in Asia is employed as a topic. The possibilities for exciting lesson plans, fruitful discussions, and enthusiastic research are enormous when a teacher is courageous enough to utilize demographics in the classroom. There's a risk involved, however, when making use of statistical information—especially when the information is about religious adherents. The statistical information is rarely unanimous when it comes to demography. It makes good sense, then, to use several sources for information to get a reasonably accurate picture. *The World Almanac and Book of Facts* for the current year is always a wonderful starting point. It relies on sources such as the International Data Base from the US Census Bureau, the CIA World Fact Book, the UN Demographic Yearbook, and the UN Statistical Yearbook. The *East, Southeast Asia, and the Western Pacific* and *The Middle East and South Asia* editions from The World Today Series published by Stryker-Post are also valuable. These works are annually updated and published in August. A third reliable source for information is the Global Studies volumes from the Dushkin/McGraw-Hill Publishing Company. *Japan and the Pacific Rim*, *China, India and South Asia*, and *The Middle East* are volumes of particular interest to Asian studies. For quick reference, the Population Reference Bureau annually publishes a World Population Data Sheet that contains demographic information and estimates for the countries and regions of the world. All of these sources are readily available and inexpensive for teachers and students. ■

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