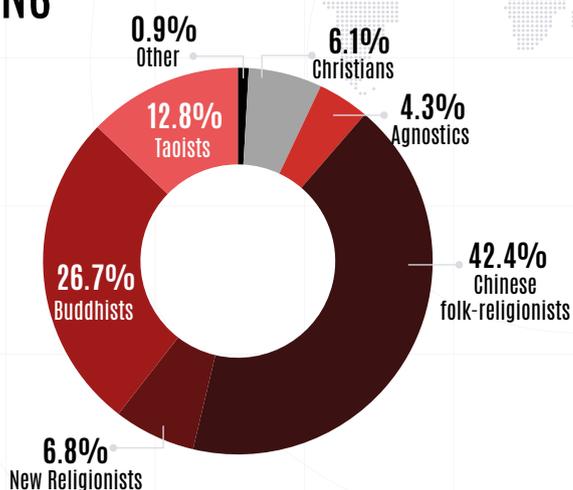




TAIWAN

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

Taiwan, officially known as the Republic of China, enjoys a higher degree of religious freedom than the People's Republic of China. The democratisation of its government institutions and political life during the presidency (1988-2000) of Lee Teng-hui, a Presbyterian, has led to genuine religious freedom.¹

Religious freedom is enshrined in the constitution, which upholds freedom of worship and equal treatment of all religions. All religious activities are considered legal as long as they do not interfere with fundamental freedoms and do not jeopardise public welfare and the social order.² Both the constitution and Taiwanese law guarantee full freedom of religion, and this is generally upheld by the authorities and respected in society.

Although no religious tensions have been reported between religious groups or organisations, Taiwan's labour laws have had an impact on religious practice. Existing legislation does not address the issues of migrant workers (who come mostly from the Philippines and Indonesia) and their right to observe their religious practices, attend services, and celebrate holidays.³ The absence of legal guarantees or protections leaves many migrant workers vulnerable to potential abuses in their workplace.

Taiwan is home to many dynamic religions, including Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity. The Falun Gong movement has also found a place in Taiwan where its success is an important indicator of the country's respect for religious freedom. Falun Gong's popularity in mainland China in the 1990s frightened Chinese authorities and led to an extreme crackdown. Falun Gong was banned and thousands of its followers were imprisoned, tortured, and executed.⁴ By contrast, in Taiwan, the local Falun Gong Society has experienced significant growth and has tried to inform Chinese tourists about their movement and the repression it has endured in mainland China.⁵

Recently, Taiwanese authorities have improved the religious freedoms enjoyed by Muslims by building prayer rooms in train stations, libraries, and tourist sites. The authorities have also held Eid al-Fitr celebrations and have increased "the number of restaurants and hotels" that "cater to Muslims' dietary requirements."⁶ Such efforts are a strong indication of the government's commitment to religious freedom for all of the country's citizens and residents.

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

During the period under review, there were no significant incidents or developments concerning the state of religious

freedom in Taiwan. For its part, the government has become increasingly supportive of efforts to promote religious freedom on a global level.

In a meeting with Pope Francis in October 2018, Vice President Chen Chien-jen stated, “As a beacon of religious freedom and tolerance, Taiwan is committed to further strengthening ties with the Holy See via substantive initiatives spanning democracy, religious freedom and human rights.”⁷

Even more significantly, in response to similar initiatives in other countries, President Tsai Ing-wen in March 2019 appointed Pusin Tali, president of the Yu-Shan Theological College and Seminary, as the country’s first ambassador-at-large for religious freedom. According to the official statement of the Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Ambassador Tali will be tasked with representing the Taiwan government in working with like-minded countries and civic groups worldwide to strengthen international links and cooperation for religious freedom.”⁸

In that same month, the Taiwan Ministry of Foreign Affairs joined with the US State Department in sponsoring A Civil Society Dialogue on Securing Religious Freedom in the Indo-Pacific Region. The event was held in Taipei with some 80 participants from more than 10 countries, and featured discussions on how to promote religious liberty in the Indo-Pacific region.⁹

On 21st January 2020, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen appealed to Pope Francis in a letter in which she describes China’s

“aggression and persecution of religion as ‘obstacles to peace,’” and details “the Communist regime’s ‘abuses of power.’”¹⁰ The president’s letter went on to highlight China’s treatment of Hong Kong protesters and “the persecution of religious believers seeking to follow their conscience.”¹¹ President Tsai’s efforts to promote peace and open dialogue and her rejection of the “exclusion and manipulation” of religious groups are further indications of Taiwan’s political and geopolitical goals and commitments to religious freedom.¹²

The US Department of State excluded Taiwan from its 27-country Religious Freedom Alliance.¹³ Beijing was responsible for putting “pressure on multiple countries involved [. . .] to make sure Taiwan was not included.” Despite the exclusion from full membership, Taiwan was invited to join the US-led alliance as an observer.¹⁴ Why Taiwan was excluded from formal membership in the Alliance remains unclear.¹⁵

PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Given Taiwan’s encouraging trajectory towards greater democratisation and respect for the rights of its citizens, the overall prospects for religious freedom in the coming years are positive. Furthermore, the country appears poised to exercise greater international influence in the near future both through its own example as well as through its recently created ambassadorship for religious freedom, and its formal adoption of religious liberty as a foreign policy priority.

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