

TAIWAN 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religious belief. Domestic service workers and caretakers are not covered under the labor standards law and are therefore not legally guaranteed a weekly rest day. Due to this exclusion, many domestic workers were not able to attend religious services. In February some nongovernmental organization (NGO) representatives expressed concern that cross-Strait considerations resulted in several exiled Tibetan Buddhist and Uighur Muslim community representatives being unable to obtain visas to attend an international religious freedom forum in Taoyuan. Authorities said no political calculations factored into their handling of visa applications.

In December students at a private high school in Hsinchu organized a Nazi-themed parade. The Presidential Office and Ministry of Education denounced the event and launched an investigation; the school's principal resigned and apologized for the incident.

Staff of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) regularly met with authorities, religious leaders, and representatives of faith-based social service organizations as part of its efforts to promote religious freedom and tolerance. AIT officers consulted with officials and lawmakers, including on the issue of labor rights as they affect domestic service workers' ability to attend religious services. Taiwan authorities continued to view this as a labor issue rather than a religious freedom issue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 23.4 million (July 2016 estimate). Based on a comprehensive study conducted in 2005, the Religious Affairs Section of the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) estimates 35 percent of the population considers itself to be Buddhist and 33 percent Taoist. Although the MOI has not tracked population data on religious groups since the 2005 study, it states this estimate remains largely unchanged. While the majority of religious adherents categorize themselves as either Buddhist or Taoist, many adherents consider themselves both Buddhist and Taoist, and many others incorporate the religious practices of other faiths into their religious beliefs.

In addition to organized religious groups, many people also practice traditional Chinese folk religions, which include some aspects of shamanism, ancestor worship, and animism. Researchers and academics estimate as much as 80 percent of the population believes in some form of traditional folk religion. Such folk religions frequently overlap with an individual's belief in Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, or other traditional Chinese religions. Some practitioners of Buddhism, Taoism, and other traditional Chinese religions also practice Falun Gong, a self-described spiritual discipline. According to the Falun Gong Society of Taiwan, Falun Gong membership exceeds one million in more than 1,000 branches island-wide and continues to grow.

Religious groups that total less than 5 percent of the population include I Kuan Tao, Tien Ti Chiao (Heaven Emperor Religion), Tien Te Chiao (Heaven Virtue Religion), Li-ism, Hsuan Yuan Chiao (Yellow Emperor Religion), Tian Li Chiao (Tenrikyo), Universe Maitreya Emperor Religion, Hai Tze Tao, Zhonghua Sheng Chiao (Chinese Holy Religion), Da Yi Chiao (Great Changes Religion), Pre-cosmic Salvationism, Huang Chung Chiao (Yellow Middle Religion), Roman Catholicism, Islam, the Church of Scientology, the Bahai Faith, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mahikari Religion, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and the Unification, Presbyterian, True Jesus, Baptist, Lutheran, Seventh-day Adventist, and Episcopal Churches. According to Ministry of Labor (MOL) statistics and conversations with religious leaders, the majority of the indigenous population of 551,000 is Protestant or Roman Catholic. Followers of Judaism number about 300 persons and are predominately foreign residents. Some 606,000 foreign workers, primarily from Southeast Asia, differ in religious adherence from the general population. The largest single group of foreign workers is from Indonesia, with a population of approximately 239,000 persons who are largely Muslim. Workers from the Philippines – numbering approximately 134,000 persons – are predominately Roman Catholic.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the free exercise and equal treatment under the law of all religions, which “shall not be restricted by law” except as necessary for reasons of protecting the freedoms of others, imminent danger, social order, or public welfare.

Religious organizations may register voluntarily with the MOI. Registration requires organizations to have real estate in at least seven administrative regions valued at 25 million New Taiwan Dollars (NT\$) (\$771,580) or more and possess at least NT\$5 million (\$154,315) in cash. Alternatively, the organization may register if it possesses cash assets in excess of NT\$30 million (\$925,900). Registered religious organizations operate on a tax-free basis and must submit annual reports on their financial operations. Nonregistered groups are not eligible for the tax advantages available to registered religious organizations.

Religious organizations representing more than 20 faiths have registered with the MOI's Religious Affairs Section. Religious organizations may register through their island-wide associations. While individual places of worship may register with local authorities and may receive local benefits, many choose not to and operate as the personal property of their leaders. The Falun Gong is registered as a sports organization and not as a religious organization.

Religious organizations are permitted to operate private schools. Compulsory religious instruction is not permitted in any Ministry of Education (MOE) accredited public or private elementary, middle, or high school. High schools accredited by the MOE may provide elective courses in religious studies, provided such courses do not promote certain religious beliefs over others.

Because of its unique status, Taiwan is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), but it enacted a domestic law in 2009 to adhere voluntarily to the ICCPR.

Government Practices

Religious leaders continued to raise concerns that the law did not guarantee a day off for domestic workers and caregivers, and thus limited their ability to attend religious services. This problem was particularly salient among the island's 231,000 foreign caregivers and household workers, predominately from Indonesia and the Philippines, who include a number of Muslims and Catholics who want to or believe they must attend religious services on a certain day of the week.

MOI and city- and county-level authorities were responsible for accepting complaints from workers who believed that their rights and interests were damaged for religious reasons. The MOI said it did not receive any complaints of religious discrimination from workers.

Activists and NGO organizers of a February forum on religious freedom in Taoyuan expressed concern about what they said was authorities' request that Lobsang Sangay, an official of the exiled Tibetan Buddhist community, and Rebiya Kadeer, a Uighur Muslim activist, not apply for visas to attend the forum because their presence might negatively affect Taiwan's relations with China. According to news reports, another Uighur Muslim activist, Dolkun Isa, told the forum he was "disheartened when I learned that my inability to take part in the forum was likely because of pressure from the Chinese government on the Taiwanese." Taiwan authorities said no political calculations factored into their handling of visa applications and only Kadeer approached a Taiwan representative office to request a visa. The authorities said that if a visa applicant is a mainland Chinese citizen, Taiwan regulations require the Taiwan-based sponsor to apply for approval before the overseas office can issue a visa. According to Taiwan authorities, however, forum organizers did not submit an application for Kadeer.

Leading up to and during the month of Ramadan, tourism authorities waived visa requirements, installed prayer rooms at freeway service areas and in hotels, and opened more halal restaurants to welcome Muslim visitors.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In December a high school parade in Hsinchu featured students wearing Nazi uniform costumes, carrying swastika banners, and performing the Nazi salute. Teachers reportedly advised against the Nazi Germany theme, but ultimately decided to respect the students' decision. The private school's principal, Cheng Hsiao-ming, resigned and apologized for the incident. Cheng said the school would hold all administrators involved responsible and educate students on the seriousness of Nazi Germany's history, victims, and symbols, including screening films on the Holocaust. The Presidential Office said the parade was "extremely disrespectful to the Jewish people" and the Ministry of Education called for an investigation and said it would consider cutting government subsidies for the school.

Many Falun Gong practitioners freely protested China's treatment of the Falun Gong at many sites in Taiwan that are popular with mainland tourists. In October, however, a Falun Gong practitioner reported organizations that receive funding from mainland China continuously harassed Falun Gong protesters and proselytizers, who set up informational sites at public venues. Falun Gong members reported members of these organizations followed them home and to their places of business and threatened to get them fired if they continued to

promote Falun Gong in public. Falun Gong members reported that police refused to investigate these incidents after being notified.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

AIT staff consulted with lawmakers, the Religious Affairs Section of the MOI Department of Civil Affairs, and the MOL on the issue of labor rights as they affect domestic service workers, including the issue of time off to attend religious services.

AIT officers met with leaders of various religious faiths to hear their observations on religious freedom in Taiwan. Officers from AIT encouraged NGOs, religious leaders, and faith-based social service organizations to continue advocacy for freedom of religion and promotion of interfaith religious tolerance, and monitored the media for any reports of discrimination based on religious beliefs.