

TAIWAN 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religious belief. In October a parliamentary committee suspended consideration of a new law on “religious autonomy” after criticism it would put religions above the law. 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 are not able to attend religious services. Authorities continued to state they viewed the domestic service workers’ inability to attend religious services as a religious freedom issue that is part of a broader labor issue. Tibetan Buddhist monks reported they continued to be unable to obtain resident visas for religious work, which authorities said was due to general rules governing foreigners who use travel permits instead of passports. A Muslim association objected to the relocation of remains from a Muslim cemetery in Kaohsiung, which Kaohsiung City authorities developed into a park. The association said Kaohsiung City authorities did not follow Islamic practices during the relocation of the remains. Kaohsiung City authorities stated they worked with the imam of the Kaohsiung Mosque and relocated the remains in accordance with Islamic tenets. City authorities also stated the majority of the Muslim community agreed to the move.

A Tibetan Buddhist group said a local Buddhist organization, which reportedly was Chinese-funded and which stated Tibetans were not true Buddhists, had yet to publish an apology as directed by the Supreme Court.

Staff of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) regularly met with authorities as part of its efforts to promote religious freedom and tolerance. AIT representatives consulted with Taiwan authorities and lawmakers, including on the issues of Tibetan Buddhist practitioners and labor rights, as they affect domestic service workers’ ability to attend religious services. AIT representatives also met with religious leaders and representatives of faith-based social service organizations to promote religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates Taiwan’s total population at 23.5 million (July 2018 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 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 individuals 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 leadership of the Falun Gong Society of Taiwan, estimates of Falun Gong practitioners number in the hundreds of thousands.

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), Pre-cosmic Salvationism, Roman Catholicism, Islam, the Church of Scientology, the Baha'i Faith, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mahikari Religion, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), and the Presbyterian, True Jesus, Baptist, Lutheran, Seventh-day Adventist, and Episcopal Churches.

According to recent statistics of the Ministry of Labor, the Council of Indigenous Peoples, and conversations with religious leaders, the majority of the indigenous population of 563,000 is Protestant or Roman Catholic. There are an estimated 1,000 Jews, approximately half of whom are foreign residents. An estimated 696,000 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 262,000 persons, who are largely Muslim. Workers from the Philippines – numbering approximately 153,000 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 voluntarily obtain an establishment permit from the MOI. The permit requires organizations to have real estate in at least seven administrative regions valued at 25 million new Taiwan dollars (NT\$) (\$817,000) or more and possess at least NT\$5 million (\$163,000) in cash. Alternatively, the organization may register if it possesses cash in excess of NT\$30 million (\$981,000). The organization may also apply for an establishment permit from local authorities to receive local benefits, which have lower requirements than the island-wide level.

More than 20 religious organizations have establishment permits from Taiwan authorities. An organization may register with the courts once it obtains the establishment permit. The organization must provide an organizational charter, list of assets, and other administrative documents to register. Registered religious organizations operate on an income tax-free basis, receive case-by-case exemptions from building taxes, and must submit annual reports on their financial operations. Nonregistered groups are not eligible for the tax advantages available to registered religious organizations.

Many individual places of worship choose not to register and instead operate as the personal property of their leaders. The Falun Gong is registered as a sports organization and not as a religious organization.

Authorities permit religious organizations to operate private schools. Authorities do not permit compulsory religious instruction in any Ministry of Education-accredited public or private elementary, middle, or high school. High schools accredited by the ministry 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, but it enacted a domestic law in 2009 to adhere voluntarily to the covenant.

Government Practices

In October a legislative committee suspended consideration of a new law on religious freedom. According to press reports, under the draft bill, religious groups would have “religious autonomy,” which would have exempted them from oversight in a variety of areas ranging from land use and education to financial and personnel management. It would have also banned courts from interfering with religious groups’ doctrines and personnel appointments. Critics reportedly said passing the law could lead to corruption, environmental degradation, religious discrimination, and other human rights violations in the name of religion. The Gender Equality Education Platform, established in June to raise public awareness of gender equality education, said the bill would allow religious groups to refuse to hire nonbelievers or those who do not conform to their doctrines, including lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender persons or women who have had abortions. The bill’s sponsor withdrew the bill and many lawmakers withdrew their endorsements.

The labor law does not guarantee a day off for domestic workers and caregivers, which continued to limit their ability to attend religious services. This problem continued to be particularly salient among the island’s 253,600 foreign caregivers and household workers, predominately from Indonesia and the Philippines, who include a number of Muslims and Catholics wanting to attend religious services on a certain day of the week. Authorities viewed the domestic service workers’ inability to attend religious services as a religious freedom issue that is part of a broader labor issue. Amendments to the labor law during the year did not address the issue of domestic service workers’ ability to attend religious services, and religious leaders said they were skeptical Taiwan would amend labor laws to resolve this issue in the near future.

The Chinese-Muslim Association objected to the relocation of remains from a Muslim cemetery in Kaohsiung, which Kaohsiung City authorities developed into a park. The association said the Kaohsiung government in 2014 agreed the land could house both a cemetery and a park, but ultimately decided to move the cemetery. According to the association, the Kaohsiung government also did not move the remains in accordance with Islamic tenets requiring that only Muslims may handle Muslim remains. The association stated it was worried that the Kaohsiung government’s actions could set a precedent. The Kaohsiung City government said it held two public hearings and actively communicated with the Muslim community in Kaohsiung and stated the majority agreed to the move. The Kaohsiung government said it exhumed graves and moved the remains in accordance with Islamic tenets. To prepare for the relocation, the heads of Kaohsiung City Government’s Civil Affairs Bureau and the Mortuary Services Office led a delegation to Malaysia in June 2017 to learn how to relocate properly

Islamic cemeteries. The Kaohsiung government said the imam of the Kaohsiung Mosque also helped with the relocation.

The Tibet Religious Foundation reported Tibetan Buddhist monks continued to be unable to obtain resident visas for religious work it said the authorities typically granted to other religious practitioners. The monks had to fly to Thailand every two months to renew their visas. The monks did not have passports and instead traveled using Indian Identity Certificates (ICs) issued to Tibetans who reside in India but do not have Indian citizenship and reportedly were valid for travel to all countries. The foundation stated the authorities continued to deny resident visas in accordance with Taiwan's visa regulations. Taiwan authorities said they issued temporary religious visas to IC holders. They said a comprehensive evaluation on a case-by-case basis, using rules established by multiple ministries, determined the validity period and the period of stay. Authorities said they denied religious residence visas to IC holders based on general rules governing foreigners who use travel permits, which are not attributable to the religious purpose of the IC holders' applications.

The Chinese-Muslim Association said authorities were making significant progress in improving rights for Muslims. The number of halal-certified restaurants and hotels increased from 120 to 160 during the year. Local authorities in Taoyuan, Taichung, Yunlin, Chiayi, and Yilan held Eid al-Fitr commemorations. Authorities built new prayer rooms at train stations, libraries, and tourist destinations.

MOI and city- and county-level governments were responsible for accepting complaints from workers who believed government or individuals violated their rights and interests for religious reasons. The MOI again said it did not receive any complaints of religious discrimination from workers.

Vice President Chen Chien-jen attended the canonization of Pope Paul VI and six other Catholic figures at St. Peter's Basilica during a trip to the Vatican in October. Chen said, "As a beacon of religious freedom and tolerance, Taiwan is committed to further strengthening ties with the Holy See via substantive cooperative initiatives spanning democracy, religious freedom, and human rights."

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Tibet Religious Foundation reported harassment from a local Buddhist organization, the True Enlightenment Practitioners Association. The foundation

said the organization received funding from China and spread the message that “Tibetan Buddhism is not real Buddhism,” using publications and billboards. The True Enlightenment Practitioners Association denied being Chinese-funded and said the association “has never criticized Tibetan Buddhism, other than its tenets, nor has it harassed them in any way.” The foundation reported it had sued the True Enlightenment Practitioners Association for libel and the case reached the Supreme Court. In November the court ordered the association to publish an apology as a settlement, but by year’s end it had not done so. Taiwan authorities stated all cases involving the Tibet Religious Foundation had been closed, and the Supreme Court could not hear libel cases.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

AIT staff and a visiting Department of State Deputy Assistant Secretary consulted with lawmakers, the Religious Affairs Section of the MOI Department of Civil Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Labor on the rights of Tibetan Buddhist practitioners and domestic service workers. AIT raised the issues of harassment of Tibetan Buddhist monks by other Buddhist religious groups, denial of religious visas, and time off for domestic service workers to attend religious services. AIT utilized social media channels to promote the value of religious freedom.

AIT representatives met with leaders of various religious faiths, including the Chinese Muslim Association and the Tibet Religious Foundation, to listen to their observations on religious freedom in Taiwan. AIT representatives encouraged nongovernmental organizations, religious leaders, and faith-based social service organizations to continue advocacy for interfaith equity.

AIT utilized social media channels to promote the value of religious freedom, including posts that highlighted Religious Freedom Day and the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom hosted by the United States in July.