

# **TAIWAN 2019 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 are not able to attend religious services. Tibetan Buddhist monks again 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. Government authorities took initiatives to accommodate Muslims, including building new prayer rooms at public places such as train stations, libraries, and tourist destinations. The Taipei City government sought to improve the accommodation of Muslims in the city's hospitals.

A Tibetan Buddhist group continued to accuse a local Buddhist organization it said was Chinese-funded of disseminating messages that Tibetans were not true Buddhists. The Buddhist organization denied it was Chinese-funded, and published a "clarification statement" as directed by the Supreme Court, but indicated it was not an apology to the Tibetan group. In October some parents raised concerns that volunteers from a life education organization used school recess time to teach courses they said were religious in nature to elementary and junior high school students. Lawmakers and city councilors called on the Ministry of Education (MOE) to address the issue, citing the Educational Fundamental Act, which forbids public schools from promoting any specific religious belief.

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 the effect of labor laws on 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 23.6 million (midyear 2019 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. The rest of the population consists of I-Kuan Tao (3.5 percent), Protestants (2.6 percent), Catholics (1.3 percent), World Maitreya Great Tao (1 percent), Sunni Islam (0.2 percent), and other religions, including but not limited to 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, 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 (4 percent), with the remaining population being nonidentifying or nonreligious (20 percent). 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. The MOI statistics indicate a total of 953,599 followers registered with 12,305 temples and 2,839 churches of all religions as of 2018.

In addition to organized religious groups, many individuals also practice traditional 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 religions. Some practitioners of Buddhism, Taoism, and other traditional religions also practice Falun Gong, a self-described spiritual discipline. According to the leadership of the Falun Gong Society of Taiwan, Falun Gong practitioners number in the hundreds of thousands.

According to recent statistics of the Ministry of Labor (MOL), the Council of Indigenous Peoples, and conversations with religious leaders, the majority of the indigenous population of 570,000 is Protestant or Roman Catholic. There are an estimated 1,000 Jews, approximately half of whom are foreign residents. There are an estimated 711,000 foreign workers, primarily from Southeast Asia. The largest single group of foreign workers is from Indonesia, consisting of approximately 271,500 persons, who are predominantly Muslim. Workers from the Philippines – numbering approximately 155,500 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\$) (\$835,000) or more and possess at least NT\$5 million (\$167,000) in cash. Alternatively, the organization may register if it possesses cash in excess of NT\$30 million (\$1 million). 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 groups have establishment permits from Taiwan authorities. A group may register with the courts once it obtains the establishment permit. The group must provide an organizational charter, list of assets, and other administrative documents to register. Registered religious groups 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 MOE-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

The labor law does not guarantee a weekly day off for domestic workers and caregivers, which continued to limit their ability to attend religious services. This problem was particularly salient among the island's 258,500 foreign caregivers and household workers, predominately from Indonesia and the Philippines, who include Muslims and Catholics wanting to attend weekly religious services. Authorities said they viewed the domestic service workers' inability to attend religious services as a part of a broader labor issue. Despite making another set of amendments to the labor law during the year, the Legislative Yuan once again did not address the issue of domestic service workers' ability to attend religious services. Religious leaders, who said they had not expected the Legislative Yuan to resolve this issue anytime soon, had no reaction to the lack of progress. According to an MOL press release, the MOL made efforts to improve the situation, including by asking employers to respect foreign workers' religion and allowing them to attend religious services and events.

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); these certificates are 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 based on general rules governing foreigners who use travel permits and that denying resident visas was not for religious reasons.

Secretary General of the Chinese-Muslim Association Salahuddin Ma Chao-yen said as a way of explaining Taiwan's increasing popularity for tourism by Muslims, "Taiwan has been continuing to improve the Muslim travel environment by increasing trainings, Muslim-friendly hotels, and halal restaurants by 20 percent annually." Local authorities in Taoyuan, Taichung, Yunlin, Chiayi, and Yilan held Eid al-Fitr commemorations. Authorities continued to build new prayer rooms at public places such as train stations, libraries, and tourist destinations. In addition, Taiwan Adventist Hospital, became the first hospital certified as halal, as part of a collaboration with the Taipei City government seeking to boost medical tourism by making hospitals in the city more accommodating to Muslim visitors. In May the MOL issued a public reminder asking employers to allow flexible work arrangements for workers who observed Ramadan as their stamina might be reduced because of fasting.

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.

In March President Tsai Ing-wen appointed Pusin Tali, Principal of the Yu-Shan Theological College and Seminary and a member of the indigenous Atayal tribe, as Taiwan's first Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

The Tibet Religious Foundation continued to report 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 continued to deny that it received Chinese funding. The High Court in December 2017 ruled that the association should publish a “clarification statement” in national newspapers, and the Supreme Court arrived at the same verdict in October 2018, the latest case to date, after another appeal by the association. In December 2018, the association published the ordered clarification statements, while also stressing that the statements were not apologies to the Tibet Religious Foundation.

The Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, in collaboration with other organizations, hosted the Taiwan International Religious Freedom Forum from May 30 to June 1. President Tsai Ing-wen delivered the opening remarks, stating that Taiwan's religious freedom sets the standard in the Indo-Pacific region.

In October several legislators and city councilors called on the MOE to address concerns raised by some parents that volunteers from the Rainbow Family Life Education Association were using recess to teach elementary and junior high school students life education courses that were religious in nature. Lawmakers cited the Educational Fundamental Act, which forbids public schools from engaging in promotional or other activities for any specific religious belief. The Rainbow Family Life Education Association denied that the courses were religiously oriented. The MOE reiterated its commitment to the Educational Fundamental Act, calling on schools to observe impartiality.

### **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 MOL 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, including Facebook and Instagram, 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 cohosted “A Civil Society Dialogue on Securing Religious Freedom in the Indo-Pacific Region” with the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy in March, the first of its kind in Asia. The U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom delivered a keynote speech at the forum, in which he remarked, “With the full participation of all individuals, including religious minorities, societies can much better fulfill their potential and advance human dignity that strengthens peace, security, and prosperity, like it has here in Taiwan.” In May the AIT director attended the Taiwan International Religious Freedom Forum and noted the contributions Taiwan’s religious groups had made in terms of maintaining democracy, alleviating poverty, and providing humanitarian aid, noting also Taiwan’s legal protections for freedom of religion.