

TAIWAN 2020 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 continued to be unable to attend religious services. The Ministry of Labor (MOL) stated foreign caregivers and household workers whose employers denied them a weekly rest day to attend religious services could report their cases to the ministry. According to Pusin Tali, Taiwan's Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom, in most cases it was brokers rather than employers who were prohibiting migrant domestic workers from attending religious services. Ambassador Tali suggested this problem might be ameliorated if workers used brokerage services provided by Taiwan authorities. Taiwan authorities continued to expand accommodations for Muslims, including building new prayer rooms in public places such as train stations, libraries, and tourist destinations. In August, Taipei Beitou Health Management Hospital became the second halal-certified medical facility in Taiwan. In March, the Ministry of Education (MOE) issued an order prohibiting the Rainbow Family Life Education Association from teaching courses in public schools. In 2019, several legislators and city councilors had called on the MOE to address concerns raised by some parents that volunteers from the association were using school recess time to teach courses that were religious in nature, in violation of the Educational Fundamental Act that forbids public schools from promoting any specific religious belief. In February, then Vice President-elect William Lai visited Washington, D.C. as a private citizen and attended the National Prayer Breakfast.

In June, the Institute for National Policy Research hosted a conference focused on what panelists said was the Chinese government's increased efforts to use Taiwan temples as a vehicle to interfere with domestic elections. Panelists called for legislation that would better regulate temple registration and property management and require religious organizations to disclose their financial statements.

American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) representatives engaged with legislators and ministries, as well as Ambassador Tali. AIT representatives encouraged religious leaders, nongovernmental organizations, and representatives of faith-based social service organizations to continue promoting religious freedom in Taiwan as well as overseas. The AIT Director spoke about the importance of religious freedom at

public outreach events, and AIT used social media to engage the public on religious freedom issues.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 23.6 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to a survey by the Academia Sinica's Institute of Sociology released in 2019, 49.3 percent of the population practices exclusively traditional folk religions, 14 percent practices Buddhism, and 12.4 percent practices Taoism, with 13.2 percent identifying as nonbelievers. The rest of the population mainly consists of Protestants (5.5 percent), I-Kuan Tao (2.1 percent), Catholics (1.3 percent), and other religious groups, including Sunni Muslims, 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, and the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church).

Some studies found that as many as 80 percent of religious practitioners combine multiple faith traditions. Many adherents consider themselves both Buddhist and Taoist, and many individuals also incorporate some aspects of traditional folk religions, such as shamanism, ancestor worship, and animism, into their belief in Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, or other religions. Some practitioners of Buddhism, Taoism, and other 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 MOL statistics, the Council of Indigenous Peoples, and religious leaders, the majority of the indigenous population of 575,000 is Protestant or Roman Catholic. There are an estimated 1,000 Jews, approximately half of whom are foreign residents. There are an estimated 699,000 foreign workers, primarily from Southeast Asia. The largest single group of foreign workers is from Indonesia, consisting of approximately 267,000 persons, who are predominantly 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.

Male citizens born after January 1, 1994 are subject to four months of compulsory military service. The Enforcement Statute for Substitute Services provides for six months of alternative military service for conscientious objectors who oppose military service on the basis of their religious belief.

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\$) (\$891,000) or more and possess at least NT\$5 million (\$178,000) in cash. Alternatively, the organization may register if it possesses cash in excess of NT\$30 million (\$1.07 million). The organization may also apply for an establishment permit from local authorities, who have lower requirements than the island-wide level authorities, to receive local benefits.

A religious group may register with the courts once it obtains an 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. As of the end of 2019, there were more than 15,000 registered religious groups representing more than 20 religions. Many groups choose not to register individual places of worship and instead operate them as the personal property of the group’s leaders.

The Falun Gong Society is registered as a sports organization and not as a religious organization.

The 1929 Act of Supervising Temples provides that temples are under the management of a trustee monk or nun. The act states, however, “They cannot take charge as trustee monk/nun if they are not citizens of the Republic of China.” The act does not apply to temples that are administered by Taiwan authorities, local public organizations, or private persons. In 2004, the Grand Justices declared several articles of the act unconstitutional for imposing strict restrictions on how religious organizations transfer their properties.

The MOI separates religious and charitable organizations based on an organization's articles of association. The MOI stated that there is no law or policy that oversees a religious organization's use of donations made to that organization, whether for religious or charitable activities, or that requires a religious organization to establish a separate charitable entity to conduct charitable activities. The law, however, prohibits charitable foundations from using donations for noncharitable purposes. Some religious organizations establish separate charitable foundations to promote their charitable activities, according to the MOI. An organization whose primary objective is philanthropy is not eligible to register 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.

The MOI and city- and county-level governments are responsible for accepting complaints from workers who believe the government or individuals have violated their rights and interests for religious reasons.

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 continued to not guarantee a weekly day off for domestic workers and caregivers, which limited their ability to attend religious services. As in years past, this problem was particularly salient among the island's approximately 253,000 foreign caregivers and household workers, predominately from Indonesia and the Philippines, including 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. The MOL stated that foreign caregivers and household workers whose employers denied them a weekly rest day to attend religious services could report their case to the ministry. Representatives of the Presbyterian Church said that since the labor standards law was insufficient to guarantee a weekly rest day, the Church encouraged employers to permit domestic workers to attend religious services on

Sundays. A representative of the Taipei-based Chinese Muslim Association said the authorities should not demand that employers permit domestic workers to attend religious services, since this was a matter of private contracts. According to Ambassador Tali, in most cases, brokers rather than employers prohibited migrant domestic workers from attending religious services. Ambassador Tali said some problems affecting immigrant workers, including obtaining a weekly rest day to attend religious services, could be ameliorated if the workers used brokerage services provided by the authorities.

The Legislative Yuan, Taiwan's unicameral parliament, in 2018 drafted but failed to pass legislation – entitled the Religious Groups Law – to better regulate temple registration and property management and to require temples to disclose their financial statements. While many legislators remained concerned about these issues, no new bill was introduced in 2020.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, many local authorities canceled public Eid al-Fitr commemorations, although the Taipei city government hosted a virtual concert in May to commemorate the holiday. Authorities continued to expand accommodations for Muslims by building new prayer rooms in public places, such as train stations, libraries, and tourist destinations. In August, Taipei Beitou Health Management Hospital became the second halal-certified medical facility in Taiwan, with accommodations for Muslims, such as halal showers, meals, and prayer rooms. The certification was part of a collaboration between the hospital and the Taipei city government, which sought to boost medical tourism by making hospitals in the city more accommodating to Muslim visitors.

One religious leader stated that authorities should allow charitable foundations run by religious entities to use donations for religious activities. Another religious leader stated that maintaining separate religious and charitable organizations made financial record keeping cumbersome and time consuming.

In March, the MOE issued an order prohibiting the Rainbow Family Life Education Association from teaching courses at public schools. In 2019, several legislators and city councilors had called on the MOE to address concerns raised by some parents that volunteers from the association were using recess to teach elementary and junior high school students life education courses that the parents said were religious in nature, in violation of the Educational Fundamental Act, which forbids public schools from engaging in activities promoting any specific religious belief. The association denied that the courses were religiously oriented.

According to the MOL, there were no reports of complaints of religious discrimination from workers during the year.

Ambassador Tali attended the virtual 2020 Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief in November. In a prerecorded message to attendees, Foreign Minister Joseph Wu called for continued international efforts to safeguard religious freedom from authoritarianism and announced that in 2021, the island would host a regional forum on defending religious freedom.

In February, then Vice President-elect William Lai visited Washington, D.C. as a private citizen and attended the National Prayer Breakfast. Lai spoke about religious freedom in Taiwan at the International Religious Freedom Roundtable, which was attended by approximately 300 people from more than 20 countries, saying religious freedom was one of the most important contributions that Taiwan has made to the international community, and that Taiwan was dedicated to making the world free from religious persecution, in collaboration with the United States and other countries.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In June, the Institute for National Policy Research hosted a conference focused on what panelists said was the Chinese government's growing influence on Taiwan temples. The panel, composed of religious leaders, an academic, and legislators, alleged that in addition to sponsoring temples to publish booklets in opposition to specific candidates during election seasons, Beijing had "infiltrated" local temples throughout Taiwan with assistance from local "collaborators," such as the Chinese Unification Promotion Party, with the aim of using temples as a vehicle to interfere with local elections. One panelist stated that "taking into account that there is no religious freedom in China, all Chinese religious organizations could be Beijing's agents who are working to infiltrate Taiwan's local temples." The panelists also stated that it was challenging for authorities to investigate the amount of Chinese donations to temples, since temples were not required to file tax returns. Noting that two articles of the Act of Supervising Temples were declared unconstitutional by the Grand Justices in 2004 for imposing strict restrictions on how religious organizations transferred their properties, panelists called for legislation to better regulate temple registration and property management and to require religious organizations to disclose their financial statements.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

AIT representatives engaged with legislators and ministries, such as the MOI and MOL, as well as with Taiwan's Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom, on issues such as the rights of domestic workers and caregivers and the relationship between religious organizations and the authorities.

AIT representatives continued to increase outreach to religious groups and scholars throughout the country, including in Taipei, Hsinchu, New Taipei, and Taoyuan. They met with scholars and leaders of various religious faiths, including the Chinese Muslim Association, the Tibet Religious Foundation, and the YMCA to discuss religious freedom in Taiwan. In August, AIT representatives met with a Catholic Church-affiliated organization providing shelter services to migrant workers in Taoyuan. AIT representatives encouraged Taiwan's nongovernmental organizations, religious leaders, and representatives of faith-based social service organizations to continue promoting religious freedom and religious harmony.

The AIT Director incorporated the promotion of religious freedom into his public speeches at numerous official engagements throughout the year, including the opening of an exhibition entitled "U.S.-Taiwan Relations Since 1979" in March, the Hsieh Nien Fan Dinner hosted by the American Chamber of Commerce in Taiwan in August, the Forum on Supply Chain Restructuring in September, and the capstone session of the 2020 U.S.-Taiwan Consultations on Democratic Governance in October.

AIT continued to highlight religious freedom issues through social media, including Facebook and Instagram. For example, AIT reposted a statement by the U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom on International Religious Freedom Day in October that the United States would not tolerate religious oppression. The message reached more than 66,800 viewers and prompted thousands of supportive responses. Local media emphasized AIT's stance in support of religious freedom.