

TAIWAN 2015 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.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

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, scholars, and lawmakers, including on the issue domestic service workers benefitting from a day off for religious observance. Taiwan authorities 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 2015 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 to be 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 persons 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. The authorities do not track Falun

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Gong membership statistics, and the Falun Gong Society has acknowledged difficulty in accurately estimating membership within its loose coalition of adherents.

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 statistics and conversations with religious leaders, the majority of the indigenous population of 545,000 is Protestant or Roman Catholic. Followers of Judaism number about 200 persons and are predominately foreign residents. Some 582,000 migrant workers, primarily from Southeast Asia, differ in religious adherence from the general population. The largest single group of migrant workers is from Indonesia, with a population of approximately 236,000 persons who are largely Muslim. Migrant workers from the Philippines – numbering approximately 121,000 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 can register voluntarily with the authorities. Registration requires organizations must either be active in more than seven of the nine administrative regions and possess real estate assets in excess of 5 million New Taiwan Dollars (NT) (\$152,100), or must possess total non-real estate assets in excess of NT\$30 million (\$912,600). Registered religious organizations operate on a tax-free basis and must submit annual reports on their financial operations.

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Non-registered 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 island-wide associations. While individual places of worship may register with local authorities, 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.

Government Practices

Religious leaders continued to raise concerns that the law does not guarantee a day off for the approximately 225,000 domestic workers and caregivers, and thus limited their ability to attend religious services. This problem was particularly salient among migrant workers, many of whom are engaged as domestic workers and caregivers.

The Ministry of Interior (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.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

AIT staff consulted with scholars and lawmakers on the issue of a day off for domestic services workers.

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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. An AIT representative gave a speech at Taiwan's Religion and Peace Conference in August supporting respect for religious freedom.