



Taiwan

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2009

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Taiwan authorities generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by Taiwan authorities during the reporting period.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) discusses religious freedom with the authorities as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

Taiwan has an area of 13,800 square miles and a population of 23 million. According to the 2006 Government Information Office Yearbook, the Religious Affairs Section of the Ministry of the Interior (MOI) estimated that 35 percent of the population considers itself Buddhist and 33 percent Taoist. While the overwhelming majority of religious adherents are categorized as either Buddhist or Taoist, many adherents consider themselves to be both Buddhist and Taoist.

In addition to organized religions, many persons also believe in traditional Chinese folk religions, which include some aspects of shamanism, ancestor worship, and animism. Researchers and academics estimate that as much as 80 percent of the population believes in some form of traditional folk religion. Such folk religions may overlap with an individual's belief in Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, or other traditional Chinese religions.

Traditional Chinese religions with adherents constituting 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, and Huang Chung Chiao (Yellow Middle Religion).

There also may be an overlap between practitioners of Buddhism, Taoism, and other traditional Chinese religions and Falun Gong practitioners. Falun Gong is registered as a civic, rather than a religious, organization. According to an academic source, Falun Gong membership exceeds 600,000 and continues to grow.

Small percentages of the population consider themselves Protestant, Roman Catholic, or Sunni Muslim. The Church of Scientology, Baha'i Faith, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mahikari Religion, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Unification Church are registered. Other Christian denominations present include Presbyterians, the True Jesus Church, Baptists, Lutherans, Seventh-day Adventists, and Episcopalians. The majority of the indigenous

population of 496,086 Aborigines is Protestant or Catholic. There are also a small number of adherents of Judaism, although they are predominately expatriates.

While the authorities do not collect or independently verify statistics on religious affiliation, they maintain registration statistics reported voluntarily by religious organizations. The MOI Religious Affairs Section believes that these statistics significantly understate the number of religious believers. The MOI Religious Affairs Section estimates that approximately 50 percent of the population regularly participates in some form of organized religious practice, as distinguished from activities connected with traditional Chinese folk religions.

Religious beliefs cross political and geographical lines. Members of the political leadership practice a variety of faiths.

Section II. Status of Official Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The authorities at all levels sought to protect this right in full, and did not tolerate its abuse, either by official authorities or private actors. There is no official religion.

Although registration is voluntary, 27 religious organizations have registered with the MOI's Religious Affairs Section. Religious organizations may register with the central authorities through their island-wide associations under the Temple Management Law, the Civic Organizations Law, or the chapter of the Civil Code that governs foundations and associations. While individual places of worship may register with local authorities, many choose not to do so and operate as the personal property of their leaders. Registered religious organizations operate on a tax-free basis and are required to submit annual reports on their financial operations. The only ramification for nonregistration is the forfeiture of the tax advantages that are available for registered religious organizations. There were no reports that the authorities sought to deny registration to new religious groups during the reporting period.

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

Universities and research institutions may have religious studies departments. There are many private theological institutes. The MOE has accredited the Dharma Drum Mountain Community University established by the late Buddhist Master Sheng Yen, the School of Theology, Chang Jung Christian University, College of Buddhism, Huafan University, College of Buddhist Studies, and Fo Guang University. According to the MOE, there were ten additional university-level religion departments or theological institutes under review for accreditation.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Taiwan authorities generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Taiwan authorities during the reporting period.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In 2008, the MOI made it easier for religious groups to obtain subsidies for social welfare projects and activities to promote religious tolerance by simplifying the application process. On October 13, 2008, the MOI held its annual ceremony to honor more than 200 religious groups, which included Catholic, Protestant, and Buddhist groups, for their contributions to public service, social welfare, and social harmony.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom. For example, the Taiwan Council for Religion and Peace, the China Religious Believers Association, and the Taiwan Religious Association are private organizations that promote greater understanding and tolerance among adherents of different religions. These associations and various other religious groups sponsor symposiums to promote mutual understanding.

The interfaith Taiwan Conference on Religion and Peace sponsors summer seminars every year to help college students understand the practices of major religions. The 2008 seminar was entitled, "Open up a New World for Volunteer Workers," and it was hosted by the I Kuan Tao and was held in Puli Township in Nantou County from September 5 to 8. A total of 450 students and religious workers, representing 13 religious groups, participated in the seminar.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The AIT discusses religious freedom with the Taiwan authorities as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.