



## Religion

## Population

## Area

- Chinese Folk Religionists : **42.6%**
- Buddhists : **26.6%**
- Daoists : **12.7%**
- New Religionists : **6.8%**
- Christians : **6.1%**
- Agnostics : **4.3%**
- Others : **0.9%**

23,396,000

36,000 Km<sup>2</sup>

## Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Although the Republic of China, to give Taiwan's official name, is only separated from the People's Republic of China by the narrow Taiwan Strait, it is certainly far from the mainland in terms of respect for freedom of religion. Thanks to the democratisation of its government institutions and political life, which began under President Lee Teng-hui, a Presbyterian Christian<sup>[1]</sup>(in power from 1988 to 2000), Taiwan now enjoys genuine freedom of religion. Both the constitution and Taiwanese law guarantee the 23 million Taiwanese full freedom of religion and this is generally upheld by the authorities.<sup>[2]</sup> No religious tensions have been reported, either involving religious organisations or groups.

Taiwan is now experiencing a large influx of visitors from the People's Republic of China, who often have an opportunity to see for themselves how a Chinese country can experience actual religious freedom. This point can be illustrated by the experience of the Falun Gong movement in Taiwan. A form of *qigong* drawing on Buddhist tradition, Falun Gong became popular in China in the 1990s, with tens of thousands of followers. In 1999, frightened by the movement's success, Chinese authorities decided to crack down: Falun Gong was banned and thousands of its followers imprisoned, tortured and executed. By contrast, in Taiwan, where the movement continues to be active, the Falun Gong Society of Taiwan boasts 1 million members in more than 1,000 chapters. Although these figures should be treated with caution, the various efforts by Taiwanese members of Falun Gong to inform Chinese tourists visiting the island about their movement and the repression it has endured in mainland China, testify to the high degree of freedom of religion in Taiwan.<sup>[3]</sup>

From a legislative point of view, one area that deserves noting is the situation of domestic workers under Taiwan's labour laws. There are about 231,000 workers,<sup>[4]</sup> coming mostly from the Philippines or Indonesia. Their work contracts usually do not include a weekly day of rest – limiting their ability to visit a place of worship to take part in corporate religious acts.<sup>[5]</sup> It seems that, at the moment, the Taiwanese authorities have no plans to amend this legislation.

This consideration aside, religious freedom is enshrined in the constitution, which upholds freedom of worship and equal treatment of all religions. All religious activities are considered legal as long as they do not interfere with fundamental freedoms and do not jeopardise public welfare and the social order.

In Taiwan, religions are acknowledged in everyday life and the country is home to many new religious movements that flourish and develop, often out of Buddhism, Taoism, or Confucianism, such as Yiguandao which grew out of the latter.

Another significant movement that shows the flourishing of religious organisations in Taiwan is Tzu Chi. Founded in 1966, the movement was born following the meeting of a Buddhist nun with three Catholic sisters from the Ursuline order. The Buddhist nun, Cheng Yen, went on to found Tzu Chi which carries out extensive social outreach and charity work. The movement now runs several monasteries, two universities, two television channels, vegetarian restaurants, various training centres and six hospitals. It is established in no less than 96 countries,<sup>[6]</sup> and has 10,000 employees and 2 million volunteers.

## | Incidents

No major incident has been reported in the past two years in relation to the exercise of religious freedom.

In July 2017, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), a cabinet-level executive agency, announced plans to limit the use of incense in the temples in large cities.<sup>[7]</sup> The EPA explained that its decision was aimed at reducing air pollution caused by burning incense. Peaceful demonstrations took place in front of the Presidential Office Building in Taipei, with members of religious communities claiming that the smoke of incense was nothing compared to the pollution caused by industrial activity and transportation. In response, the Executive Yuan (Taiwan's cabinet) released pictures of President Tsai Ing-wen and then Prime Minister Lin Chuan holding incense sticks whilst praying in a temple, to show that the controversy was "a misunderstanding" and that the "EPA never wants to ban any practice of religion." Nevertheless, the agency insisted that the measure was needed to continue the efforts at improving the air quality of Taiwan's cities<sup>[8]</sup>

The possible legalisation of same-sex marriage in Taiwan has been a sensitive issue. The Alliance of Religious Groups for the Protection of the Family, a body set up in 2013 by the Catholic Church and some Buddhist groups, particularly opposes the lexical changes in the draft bill, such as the proposal to replace the words "husband and wife" in existing legislation with "spouses" or "companions". President Tsai Ing-wen, who during her presidential campaign openly supported "a plurality of types of family", chose to delay the bill, stating that, on this issue, a national consensus should be found first.<sup>[9]</sup> However, no violation of the rights of religious groups has been recorded in connection with this issue.

## | Prospects for freedom of religion

Over the coming years, one can expect that the ongoing democratisation of national institutions and political life, which has taken root in the country, will prevent any curbs to the exercise of freedom of religion. Religions have a significant presence in the life of the island.

## | Endnotes / Sources

[1] New York Press, 2008), p. 13.

[2] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, International Religious Freedom Report for 2014: Taiwan Part, American Institute in Taiwan, <https://www.ait.org.tw/international-religious-freedom-report-2014-taiwan-part/>, (accessed 21st February 2018).

[3] Cheng Yuyan, 'Taiwan: Thousands of Falun Gong Practitioners Hold Chinese New Year Celebration in Appreciation of

Master Li', Falun Dafa Minghui.org, 15th February 2015, <http://en.minghui.org/html/articles/2015/2/15/148410.html>, (accessed 21st February 2018).

[4] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Taiwan 2016 International Religious Freedom Report, U.S. State Department, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organisation/269012.pdf>, (accessed 21st February 2018).

[5] Joe Henley, 'Domestic slavery, Maid in Taiwan', Taipei Times, 17th February 2015 <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2015/02/17/2003611746>, (accessed 21st February 2018).

[6] 'La fondation bouddhiste Tzu Chi inaugure ses nouveaux locaux', Le Nouvelliste, 16th January 2018, [http://www.lenouvelliste.com/article/181888/La%20fondation%20bouddhiste%20Tzu%20Chi%20inaugure%20ses%20nouveaux%](http://www.lenouvelliste.com/article/181888/La%20fondation%20bouddhiste%20Tzu%20Chi%20inaugure%20ses%20nouveaux%20locaux) (accessed 21st February 2018).

[7] This is a common practice in Chinese folk religion with believers gathering in temples to burn large quantities of incense.

[8] 'Religious leaders incensed over rumored incense ban', Taiwan News, 21st July 2017 <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3215774>, (accessed 21st February 2018).

[9] 'Les chrétiens mobilisés pour bloquer la légalisation du mariage homosexuel', Églises d'Asie, 23 November 2016 <http://eglasie.mepasie.org/asia-du-nord-est/taiwan/2016-11-23-les-chretiens-mobilises-pour-bloquer-la-legalisation-du-mariage-homosexuel>, (accessed 21st February 2018).