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## **TAIWAN: China's infiltration strategy into Taiwan's religious organizations**

### **TAIWAN: China's infiltration strategy into Taiwan's religious organizations**

By Zsuzsa-Anna Ferenczy reporting from Taiwan for *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (02.06.2023) – The complexity of the relationship between Taiwan (ROC) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) has impacted both their shared religious and cultural traditions,

and their divergent political paths in particular following Taiwan's democratization.

With Taiwan developing a distinct political identity over the past three decades, distancing itself from the PRC by being rooted in democracy, human rights and the rule of law, the Chinese leadership has gradually strengthened efforts to pull Taiwan closer. Chinese economic statecraft over the decades has included both positive and negative statecraft, with Beijing using economic tools to achieve political goals. Beijing has sought to cultivate a group of collaborators whose interests would be permanently linked to China's growing prosperity.

The Chinese state has also targeted civil society, including faith communities, with Taiwanese leaders and faith communities becoming the main targets of China's influence campaigns for political ends.

At the same time, the effectiveness of these methods remains questioned by many. Taiwan has become a robust democracy with a consolidated identity, regarded as a like-minded partner by democracies across the globe. As a result of the growing threat from China, the people of Taiwan have not shown more interest in the PRC, on the contrary, debates have intensified on how to diversify away from China.

Taiwan remains a polarized society, with divergent views and heated debates on public affairs. External influence attempts remain an important tool for Beijing to seek to shape the public sentiment in Taiwan on China, to influence the

political thinking and debate across the island. This has included the spread of disinformation, or information manipulation in order to undermine the government and the trust of the people in their government and to interfere in any way possible that serves their interest. This has affected cultural and religious affairs and continues to do so to this day.

Over the decades, there have been robust exchanges between the temples and religious organizations of China and Taiwan. Religious exchanges also served as a platform for cross-strait interaction. As such, pilgrimages for Mazu ceremonies (the sea goddess of Mazu) to the Mazu Ancestral Temple on Meizhou Island in China attracted many believers, including Taiwanese. In fact, according to some, Meizhou emerged as a mecca for Taiwan's believers. The local government of Meizhou Island has shaped the religious community, appointing officials as leaders. Therefore, experts claim that the Mazu Ancestral Temple's board of trustees continues to further its role as the state's facilitator in cross-strait relations. In fact, in 2006, the PRC legalized the Chinese Mazu Cultural Exchange Association, which included representatives from Taiwan's temples, becoming a channel to build personal connections with PRC officials.

According to research, there have been attempts of infiltration by Chinese state-backed entities inside Taiwan in particular targeting traditional folk religions. With the management of temples in the hands of local community leaders, Taiwan's democratization allowed them to gain greater political space – which Beijing has sought to exploit. Religious leaders were keen on exchanges with their Chinese counterparts; since the 1980s Taiwan's temples have organized tours for worshippers to visits places in China from which

their deities originated. Reports show that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has used brokers to fund the construction of small temples, or that members of pro-CCP groups acted as administrators of local temples.

Considering this threat from the perspective of cognitive warfare, such infiltration allows the CCP to spread its messages across the local community, and to change political attitudes. Interpersonal relationships are particularly valuable for the CCP to help disseminate propaganda. The reality is that the way China's infiltration works through religious exchanges has an impact on political debates across Taiwan, therefore on Taiwan's politics. This poses a significant challenge for the authorities in Taiwan, committed to freedom of religion and non-interference in the religious affairs across the island, in sharp contrast to the PRC's denial of essentially all fundamental political freedoms – not just religious freedom. Going forward, it is clear that transparency must remain at the core of any legislation concerning the management of religious affairs in Taiwan, in line with its strong commitment to this principle.

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