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## **TAIWAN: Interview with Pusin Tali, Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom**

*Taiwanese Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom, Mr Pusin Tali*

### **TAIWAN: Interview with Pusin Tali, Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom**

*From an indigenous group to the top of the hierarchy of the state*

By Zsuzsa-Anna Ferenczy from Taipei for Human Rights Without



**Q: In 2019 President of Taiwan Tsai Ing-wen offered you the opportunity to be Taiwan's first ever Ambassador for Freedom of Religion or Belief of Taiwan, which you accepted. But first, before you talk about your role, tell us about your personal and professional trajectory prior to being considered for this position.**

**A:** I am a member of the Atayal indigenous group and a Christian in Taiwan, also representing the 5th generation of Christians in my family. I was born and raised in Hsinchu and grew up with a deep love for nature, often spending time in the mountains. As a child, I believed that this was the only education one needed. Regarding my formal education, I initially thought that it would disrupt our traditions and weaken our connection with the environment.

After completing elementary school, I joined the Mustard Seed Mission, a private school in Hualien that welcomed indigenous teenagers. It was during this educational journey that I realized how Christian education could assist me and my community in strengthening our indigenous cultural identity and fostering a sense of belonging. With this in mind, I dedicated myself to studying at Yu-Shan Theological College and Seminary in Hualien, Taiwan, where I pursued theological education for seven years with unwavering determination. Ultimately, I fulfilled my ambition of becoming a pastor.

**Q: Was this the moment you decided to become a pastor?**

**A:** I knew I wanted to become a pastor and, therefore, pursued higher theological studies. I served as a pastor in the Nahuy Church of the Tayal Presbytery in Hsinchu for about 10 years. During this phase, which occurred when I was in my 30s, I continued my Master of Theology at Tainan Theological College and Seminary. After graduating, I began teaching at Yu-Shan

Theological College and Seminary and later pursued a doctoral degree in theology at the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology. In 1998, I spent a year doing further studies at the Pacific School of Religion in the United States.

Since 1992, I have been teaching at Yu-Shan Theological College and Seminary. In 2002, I became the dean of the Seminary. I served as the dean for the following 21 years, making me the longest-serving dean in the history of the Seminary. Additionally, in 2012, I was elected as the Moderator of the 57th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, which provided me with the opportunity to connect with global religious leaders and participate in international cooperation. This experience has been particularly valuable to me as an indigenous Taiwanese person.

**Q: Tell us about the moment you were asked to become FORB Ambassador?**

**A:** In my 17th year as the dean of Yu-Shan Theological College and Seminary in 2019, President Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan approached me and proposed that I become the first Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom of Taiwan. I believe that this opportunity was closely linked to my activities as the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, which provided me with significant international exposure and made me a suitable candidate for the ambassadorship. As the Moderator, I had connections and exchanges with the Christian Conference in Asia and the World Council of Churches, establishing numerous contacts. As an Ambassador, I am able to contribute to the world with the values of religious freedom in Taiwan and portray Taiwan as a country that upholds religious freedom.

**Q: What were the reasons that inspired President Tsai to reach out to you and ask you to focus on freedom of religion in your opinion?**

**A:** Beyond the religious work in which I was deeply involved, I

recognized that this position provided an opportunity to engage not only in religious freedom but also in the realms of human rights and democracy. These two interconnected values hold great significance for the President, for Taiwan, and myself, both as a pastor and as an indigenous Taiwanese. President Tsai Ing-wen has emphasized to me on multiple occasions the importance of showcasing Taiwan's commitment to religious freedom, democracy, and human rights on the global stage. She firmly believes in the universality of human rights, and by establishing this position, she aimed to communicate that Taiwan upholds and promotes universal values.

**Q: Tell us a little more about your activities as an Ambassador? What kind of challenges have you faced and can you also name some achievements?**

**A:** My mandate as Ambassador lasts until the 2024 presidential elections; we will have to see what happens after the elections. Concerning Taiwan, it is a diverse society, with several different religious communities coexisting. At the same time, certain religious groups have faced challenges over the years when practicing their faith. Taiwan has over half a million foreign migrant workers from Southeast Asia, who adhere to religions such as Islam, Catholicism, and Christianity, among others. Some members of their communities often complain that they are unable to attend religious services on weekends due to work obligations. I have raised this issue with the government, and they have taken steps to address it through legal amendments by the Ministry of Labor (Taiwan), aiming to improve the protection of religious freedom. These efforts have allowed foreign workers to practice their religious beliefs and have received proper attention. However, this remains an ongoing issue that requires continued attention in Taiwan.

**Q: Taiwan can pride itself for having a strong record in freedom of religion. Have there been attempts from China, a country where fundamental values face serious threats in**

**particular freedom of religion, to influence Taiwan through religion?**

**A:** For decades China has been trying to use religion to infiltrate Taiwan, to use it as a tool to influence people's minds, the political system, overall to undermine democracy. As Ambassador, I have expressed my strong stance on this: no one, not China, or any other country or entity should be allowed to use religion to undermine Taiwan. President Tsai has been very clear on this herself, while she is also supportive of dialogue and peace, of course. But dialogue should not come at the expense of our sovereignty or freedom.

**Q: Any other challenges related to freedom of religion inside Taiwan?**

**A:** There is also a tax law issue in Taiwan. In principle, religion is tax exempt in Taiwan, and religious institutions are not allowed to profit from their religious activities. However, due to the unclear and ambiguous nature of the law, activities that count as charitable work were taxed in the past, according to the law. Tai Ji Men, a religious group in Taiwan, has also faced similar problems. In my capacity as an ambassador, I have made efforts to understand the legal challenges faced by this issue and have voiced support for ensuring religious freedom in Taiwan. After a ruling by the Supreme Court in 2007, it was determined that Tai Ji Men did not violate tax regulations and their innocence was finally restored. Therefore, donations related to religious activities, if used for charitable purposes, are no longer to be considered as income and are not subject to taxation. However, we must emphasize the importance of religion in terms of democratic human rights, as well as its contribution to a society of peace, harmony, and social justice.

**Q: What is the significance of that decision in your view?**

**A:** I firmly believe that this decision is also a commitment to

aligning with and fulfilling the obligations of international religious freedom. Domestically, it creates more transparency, which is important for Taiwan's democracy going forward. Internationally, it is also important because it sends a message to those organization that are interested in coming to Taiwan and conducting charity work or other similar activities, that they will face no tax problems. So, overall, I consider this decision quite positive.

**Q: In closing, any highlights you might wish to share with us concerning your work as an advocate for freedom of religion in Taiwan?**

**A:** As an indigenous Taiwanese, I firmly believe that safeguarding religious freedom in Taiwan goes hand in hand with protecting and promoting democratic human rights. In other words, these aspects are interconnected, and without religious freedom, there can be no democratic human rights in the country. This is also a crucial foundation for upholding the rights of indigenous peoples in Taiwan. It is the driving force behind my role as an ambassador and holds great significance as a Christian. It was beyond my imagination when I was young that one day I could have this opportunity and privilege to pursue freedom of religion for the people of Taiwan. Taiwan might be only a small member of the international community, but it is strong, and this strength stems from its belief in values and fundamental freedoms. Lastly, and most importantly, as Taiwan's Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom, it is a great responsibility to establish a common homeland for religions in the global promotion of freedom, democracy, and human rights.

**Q:** Thank you for your time and for sharing with our readers your experience. Through your work, you let us see a side of Taiwan that is little known to the outside world.

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### **(\*) Footnote by Willy Fautré**

*In April, I had the honor and the pleasure to meet Ambassador at Large Pusin Tali in Taiwan. During our discussions, I was impressed by his humility and his life trajectory. Having no time to interview him because of a busy schedule, I asked Dr Zsuzsa-Anna Ferenczy currently living in Taipei to meet him and interview him for Human Rights Without Frontiers. I warmly thank her for her precious contribution highlighting the opportunities of social advancement in Taiwan and reflecting the image of a country open to religious diversity.*

**Further reading about FORB in Taiwan on HRWF website**

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