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No anti-cult activity, no religious intolerance: the example of Taiwan

Are European states in a position to teach lessons to other countries about religious inclusion and religious tolerance? Taiwan might be.

By Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers



*Visit of the headquarters of a minority religion in Taiwan, Jehovah's Witnesses
(Credit: HRWF)*

HRWF (21.08.2023) - Taiwan is home to a wide range of religious or belief communities, either theistic or non-theistic, and [no societal or state intolerance](#) is reported in this

country, including towards so-called new religious movements, while this is not the case in Europe. Why?

During two trips to Taiwan this year, I took a close look at this culture of tolerance and inclusiveness and I wondered why in Europe a number of states with a dominant Christian religion in their history had developed a culture of intolerance, suspicion and stigmatization about new religious movements. Some short reflections on this issue.

Religious intolerance in Europe

One of the factors fueling religious intolerance on the European continent is the activity of former members of non-traditional religious or belief communities who have left them in the midst of a conflict and who are driven by a spirit of revenge. Groups of apostates have thus formed out of common hostility to various movements, which they have designated as dangerous and harmful cults, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishna, Mormons, the Unification Church, Scientology and others.

The dynamics of the apostates' groups in Europe especially developed at the time of massacres and collective suicides perpetrated within some marginal religious groups in the 1990s on the American and European continents. They found allies in the media, who were looking for "juicy" stories, and they quite often fed them with unfounded accusations, distorted information and fabricated cases, creating hereby a climate of social anxiety and hostility. The word "cult", systematically attributed to new religious or belief movements, became a signal of distrust, threat and danger. Many European governments surfed on this media wave of stigmatization, demonization and hostility. Intolerance and discrimination followed and continue to this day, in particular through their so-called "cult observatories" in some countries.

This climate of intolerance was clearly denounced by USCIRF (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom) in its recent report (24 July 2023) titled "[Religious Freedom Concerns about Religious Freedom in the European Union](#)" in which a section was devoted to the anti-cult issue and was stressing that "Several governments in the EU have supported or facilitated the propagation of harmful information about certain religious groups."

The context of Taiwan's religious tolerance

Taiwan does not have a dominant religion, unlike most European countries, as a survey by the Academia Sinica's Institute of Sociology released in 2021 shows.

27.9 percent of the population exclusively practices traditional folk religions, 19.8 percent Buddhism, and 18.7 percent Taoism, with 23.9 percent identifying as nonbelievers. The rest of the population consists mainly of Protestants (5.5 percent), I-Kuan Tao (2.2 percent), Catholics (1.4 percent).

Members of other religious groups include Jews, Sunni Muslims, the Baha'i Faith, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mahikari, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Church of Scientology and the Unification Church.

Some studies find that as many as 80 percent of religious practitioners combine multiple faith traditions. The concept of heresy or normative religious orthodoxy is therefore not prevalent.

As of the end of 2019, there were more than 15,000 registered religious groups representing over 20 religions.

Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons or Scientologists, just to name a few, are "unloved" religious movements in Europe where they are the targets of derogatory statements, defamatory campaigns, distorted news and false information. In the late 1990s, France and Belgium had respectively investigated 172 and 187 religious or belief movements suspected of being dangerous or harmful cults. Both countries still have a very active state cult observatory allegedly monitoring their activities and publishing controversial reports that have been successfully challenged in courts.

In Taiwan, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Mahikari followers, Unification Church members or Scientologists for example are treated on an equal footing with other religious groups and without any prejudice or suspicion. They have been welcome after 40 years of a dictatorial regime in the second half of last century.

Jehovah's Witnesses in the 21st century democratic Taiwan

Jehovah's Witnesses in Taiwan have never experienced any difficulty with their usual religious activities as a group in the 21st century.

Proselytizing in the public space has never been a source of serious complaint and has never involved police intervention.

They have seldom faced any opposition by the local authorities or the local population when applying for permission to build or rent a place for worship.

As in any other country Jehovah's Witnesses do not participate in elections, which is their way of remaining politically neutral while respecting their government.

Jehovah's Witnesses are conscientious objectors to military service. In 2000, Taiwan introduced an alternative military service and was hereby the first country in Asia to take such an initiative. Out of 699 candidates opting for this status at that time, 634 were Jehovah's Witnesses.

Concerning their refusal of blood transfusion, they proceed as in other countries. In Taiwan, they have set up five Hospital Liaison Committees (HLC) which are now functioning. After discussions, they always find doctors and hospitals willing to treat them without blood transfusions. There are more and more cooperative doctors, they say, and there were only very few cases to be dealt with in conformity with their beliefs at it can be seen from the few examples hereafter.

In 2019 a 19-year-old Jehovah's Witness was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia (ALL). The surgeon respected the will of the family about blood transfusion and the patient successfully performed his chemotherapy. Four years later he continues to be in remission. This was the first time in Taiwan that a patient with ALL was treated without blood transfusion. The attending physician published a report regarding this landmark case and regularly lectures at international medical seminars about [how to treat patients with ALL without blood transfusions](#).

A seven-year-old girl was involved in a vehicle accident which resulted in severe head trauma and cranial bleeding. The father who is a Jehovah's Witness requested the assistance of a representative of the local Hospital Liaison Committee of Jehovah's Witnesses (HLC) to consult with the physician about treatment options that could be used instead of a blood transfusion. The doctor successfully operated on the patient.

In another case, a young female Jehovah's Witness was diagnosed with a large spinal tumor (Ewing's Sarcoma). She accepted the proposed surgery and chemotherapy,

but without blood transfusion. The surgeon performed the operation without the usual blood transfusion and with hardly half of the usual blood loss.

No anti-cult activity has targeted Jehovah's Witnesses in Taiwan and religious tolerance fares all the better.



Taipei Taiwan Mormon Temple opened in 1984 (Credit: HRWF)



Opening event of the Church of Scientology in Kaohsiung in 2013 (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 Frontiers

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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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.

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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U.S. State Department Report focuses on the change of property of religious real estate assets

HRWF (29.05.2023) - In its last annual report published in May 2023, the U.S. State Department on International Religious Freedom declared that in May 2022, Taiwan's "Legislative Yuan (Parliament) passed a law allowing qualified religious groups to change the registration of real estate assets formerly held in the name of individual members," an issue that had been, unsuccessfully, debated for many years in Taiwan.

"Under the new law", the U.S. Report says, "such assets may be held under the name of the qualified religious foundation, religious corporation, or temple. Officials said the practice of registering temples under individual names had led to conflicts, such as when an owner was ordered to auction off the property or inheritance questions arose."

Religious landscape in Taiwan

According to a survey by Taiwan's national science academy, the Academia Sinica and its Institute of Sociology released in 2021, 27.9 percent of Taiwan's 23.6 million large population exclusively practices traditional folk religions, 19.8 percent Buddhism, and 18.7 percent Taoism, with 23.9 percent identifying as nonbelievers.

Folk religion denotes an [ecosystem](#) of dispersed worship of deities, centered on community temples. The rest of the population consists mainly of Protestants (5.5 percent), Catholics (1.4 percent), and members of other religious groups, including Jews, Sunni Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Church of Scientology, Baha'is, Mormons and the Unification Church, just to name a few.

Some studies find that as many as 80 percent of religious practitioners combine multiple faith traditions. Many adherents consider themselves both Buddhist and Taoist, and many individuals also incorporate some aspects of traditional Chinese folk religions, including but not limited to shamanism, ancestor worship, magic, ghosts and other spirits, and aspects of animism, into their belief in Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, or other mainline religions.

Some practitioners of Buddhism, Taoism, and other religions also practice Falun Gong, a self-described spiritual discipline. The Falun Gong Society of Taiwan states Falun Gong practitioners number in the hundreds of thousands but some scholars say the number is overestimated. Beijing considers Taiwan's spiritual followers as soft [targets](#) to spread its influence, by articulating suitable messaging for each religion.

Registration of religious entities and statistics

The [Constitution](#) of the Republic of China (ROC), Taiwan, provides for freedom of religion. Article 13 stipulates that "the people shall have freedom of religious belief". There is no state religion. While registration is not mandatory, religious organizations may voluntarily obtain an establishment permit from the Ministry of Interior. The permit requires that organizations have real estate in at least seven administrative regions valued at 25 million New Taiwan dollars or more and possess at least NT\$5 million in cash. Alternatively, the organization may register if it possesses in excess of NT\$30 million.

A religious group may register with the courts upon obtaining an establishment permit. Registered religious groups operate on an income-tax-free basis. They receive case-by-case exemptions from building taxes and must submit annual reports on their financial operations. Groups that are not registered are not eligible for the tax advantages. As of the end of 2019, there were more than 15,000 registered religious groups representing more than 20 religions.

According to the Ministry of Interior, in 2015 there were 12,106 registered [temples](#) in Taiwan. Tainan, Kaohsiung and Pingtung County count for 35 percent of the total. Taoist temples are the most populous at 9,485, or 78.35 percent of the total, while Buddhist temples are second at 2,355 or 19.45 percent. With 222 temples or 1.83 percent, I-Kuan Tao temples are third. Churches totaled 3,280, with Protestant being the majority, while Roman Catholic churches were second.

The 1929 Act of Supervising Temples

According to [the 1929 Act of Supervising Temples](#), temples are under the management of a trustee monk or nun. Article 6 says that "ownership of all property and possessions will be retained by the temple and managed by trustee monk/nun". It also adds that the monk/nun cannot take charge "if they are not citizens of the Republic of China", and they "are not to use incomes derived from temple property except for the purpose of giving religious instruction, upholding the commandments and other miscellaneous expenses with proper usage".

In 2004, Taiwan's Judicial Yuan, the judicial branch of the government, found that several articles of the Act were unconstitutional because they impose strict restrictions on how religious organizations transfer their properties. This was considered a landmark religious freedom case, being the first case in which the Court explicitly recognized the constitutionally protected autonomy of religious associations.

The 1929 Act should be seen against the background of the [dynamics](#) of the time. Following a turbulent period, the Kuomintang (KMT) government saw public education as a way to rebuild the nation. Not having sufficient funds to invest in public education however, some leaders considered the idea of a law to nationalize temple property to build up the education system.

Following fierce protests by the Buddhist and Taoist organizations however, **the government did not pass the law on the expropriation-based transfer of wealth from religious entities to the state.** It is in this context that the 1929 Act was passed instead, through which the government still maintained the power to monitor the ways in which owners and occupiers of temple property used and managed it. According to its Article 11, those who would violate the Act would face punishment, including being banished from the temple or be prosecuted in courts.

According to [some](#), the Act can be seen as yet another example of centuries-old Chinese traditions manifesting themselves in contemporary Chinese settings. Nonetheless, with Taiwan's democratization that took off in the late 80s, the state has gradually withdrawn its control over religion.

Brief history of attempts to change the legislation

There were several attempts to change Taiwan's religious groups legislation.

In May 2015, the Ministry of Interior approved a bill governing the organization of religious groups. Previously, a similar [bill](#) was introduced in 2001, with three different versions in 2002, 2005 and 2008.

Under the legislation, the qualified religious facilities and groups can register as religious juristic persons to receive tax benefits such as exemptions on housing and land value taxes, as well as conditional farmland rentals. Furthermore, they are required to submit an annual report to the authorities with financial statements subject to regular audits. Also, details of donations must be disclosed to the public.

In 2018 the Legislative Yuan drafted legislation to improve temple registration and property management and to require temples to disclose their financial statements. The proposed bill, entitled the Religious Groups Law, never passed.

In January 2022, the Executive Yuan [approved](#) a bill to allow religious groups to change the registrations of their real-estate assets.

In light of the new bill, properties owned by religious groups can be regarded as public goods. The bill would also prevent individuals from appropriating the land for their own benefits. Noteworthy is that around 750 hectares of land belonging to 7,500 temples nationwide are registered under the name of natural persons, according to the Ministry of Interior. This is the result of religious groups not having completed their temple registration when they acquired land, of temples being not able to pay land taxes on donated land or the land being used for farming and other reasons.

Two years following the passing of the bill by the legislature, qualified religious groups seeking to change a temple's registration will be able to file an application with the interior ministry.

HRWF's note

Comments about the impact of the new legislation upon the life of Buddhist, Taoist, Catholic, Protestant and other communities will be welcome and will be shared in another article of HRWF.

Bitter Winter goes to Taiwan: Witnessing for Freedom of Religion or Belief

A week of initiatives allowed human rights scholars from different countries and continents to discuss religious liberty throughout the world and in Taiwan.

[Bitter Winter](#) (17.04.2023) - From April 5 to 11, Bitter Winter, its parent organization CESNUR, and the Brussels-based NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers organized a fact-finding tour of Taiwan, where they had decided to organize the 2023 edition of their International Forum on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The delegation included representatives from CESNUR and Bitter Winter (the undersigned and Marco Respinti, our magazine's director-in-charge), Human Rights Without Frontiers (Willy Fautré, co-founder and director), the European Federation for Freedom of Belief (Rosita Sorytè), the European Interreligious Forum for Religious Freedom (Eric Roux), the Forum for Religious Freedom Europe (Peter Zoehrer), the Coordination des associations et des particuliers pour la liberté de conscience (Thierry Valle and Christine Mirre), Soteria International (Camelia Marin), the Fundación para la mejora de la vida, la cultura y la sociedad (Iván Arjona Pelado), the Italian Islamic association As-Salàm (Davide Suleyman Amore), and American scholar Donald Westbrook, from San José State University and the University of Texas at Austin.

The events they participated in were organized in cooperation and with the local support of the Taiwan Human Rights Think Tank, the New School for Democracy, and Citizen Congress Watch.

Taiwan was selected as the location for the Forum to express the scholars and human rights activists' solidarity with the Republic of China at a time when it is the subject of geopolitical threats, and even leaders of Western democracies release ambiguous statements about its future. In these circumstances, as we said, we feel we are all Taiwanese.

The Forum, held on April 9 at National Taiwan University, and initiatives organized to discuss freedom of religion or belief issues at Aletheia University (which had already hosted a CESNUR conference in 2011) and Soochow University, and a seminar I taught at National Chengchi University, were international in scope. Echoing documents from the United Nations and the U.S. Department of State, we presented a global situation where problems of freedom of religion or belief are not getting better but worse.

The topics discussed ranged from the consequences of the war in Ukraine for religious liberty to media hostility to religion and religious minorities in several countries, the improper use of taxes to harass unpopular religious and spiritual movements, and specific problems in Eastern Europe, Russia, China, France, Belgium, Japan, Italy, and other countries. We noted, in particular, that groups stigmatized as “cults” (or “xie jiao,” in Mandarin) are among the most discriminated, slandered by the media, and persecuted. We also discussed, in dialogue with Taiwanese scholars, how different religious traditions such as Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism, and new religious movements approach the problems of freedom of religion or belief.

The purpose of the events was not purely academic. It was advocacy-oriented, as all the organizations represented struggle to improve the situation of freedom of religion or belief throughout the world. And it was also a fact-finding mission, as we wanted to learn about the situation of religious pluralism and religious liberty in Taiwan. We met with representatives and visited temples and churches of several religions and spiritual movements, including the Roman Catholic Church, some of the main Buddhist orders (including the headquarters of Fo Guang Shan), the Muslim community, the Church of Scientology, Weixin Shengjiao, and Tai Ji Men. We also had a very moving visit to the National Human Rights Museum, located in a former military compound where during the White Terror period opponents of the military regime were detained and tortured. We were privileged to have as a tour guide Fred Him-San Chin, a Taiwanese born in Malaysia who was wrongfully imprisoned for twelve years, from 1971 to 1983.

We visited human rights organizations and mainstream media, including the “Taipei Times” where we met with the daily’s editor (interestingly, on the very day when its main editorial quoted Bitter Winter), and the new TV network Mirror TV, and the Presidential Palace.

The two most important visits, however, occurred when we were received at the Legislative Yuan (Taiwan’s Parliament) by its President, Yu Shy-Kun, and visited the Control Yuan (a unique Taiwanese “fourth power” in addition to the legislative, executive, and judiciary, controlling the other three) and met with its President, Chen Chu, her collaborators, members of the Taiwan Human Rights Commission, and Pusin Tali, Taiwan’s Ambassador-at-large for international religious liberty. In both cases, we had exchanges lasting more than one hour on religious freedom issues. These visits were largely covered by the main Taiwanese media.

We reiterated to President Yu and President Chen that we love Taiwan, stand for Taiwan against international threats, and appreciate Taiwan’s effort to prove to the world that Chinese tradition and culture are fully compatible with democracy. On the other hand, we noted that no country is perfect, including our own countries in the West, and unsolved issues of human rights and freedom of religion or belief exist everywhere. If we noted some in Taiwan, it is precisely because we are Taiwan’s friends and care for its international image.

We discussed transitional justice, i.e., the effort to rectify human rights abuses after a transition from authoritarianism to democracy, a problem some of us coming from Eastern Europe or Italy, which also had to move from totalitarian regimes to

democracies, are familiar with. We noted that Taiwanese laws offer measures to rectify abuses of human rights that happened before 1992, but that leaves open the question of violations of human rights after that date, including the politically motivated crackdown that hit several religious and spiritual minorities in 1996.

We told Taiwanese authorities that in most international conferences and events about freedom of religion or belief, including in the United States, while Taiwan is generally praised for its attitude towards religious pluralism, a particular case is invariably discussed, the one of Tai Ji Men. This menpai (similar to a school) of qigong, martial arts, and self-cultivation, whose Shifu (Grand Master), Dr. Hong Tao-Tze we also met, was one of the victims of the 1996 crackdown. It continued to be harassed through ill-founded tax bills even after courts of law, up to the Supreme Court in 2007, had declared that it was not guilty of any crime, including tax evasion.

We found that both President Yu and President Chen were well aware of the Tai Ji Men case, and knew that it is widely discussed internationally. While they emphasized the independence of Taiwan's judiciary, they also assured us that they will operate to find a just, reasonable, and political solution of this long-lasting case. We told them that, as foreign scholars and human rights experts, it would be arrogant for us to tell Taiwanese how to solve a Taiwanese problems. But we put ourselves as their disposal, as friends both of Taiwan and of freedom of religion or belief, to help with suggestions if requested, and participate in a dialogue aimed at solving a case that creates problems for its international image Taiwan certainly does not need in this particular historical moment.

We felt at home in Taiwan, were moved by the warm welcome we received everywhere, and some of us even suggested that Taiwan will become the permanent home of our religious liberty Forums. We were also very much impressed by how many Taiwanese political and cultural leaders are familiar with Bitter Winter, and assured them that we will continue our efforts to provide every-day quality information on issues of freedom of religion or belief.

Photo 1: A session of the forum on April 9.

Photo 2: Willy Fautré speaking at Soochow University.

Photo 3: Some of the Forum participants at the Control Yuan.

Freedom of religion or belief in Taiwan and the Tai Ji Men case



A packed audience at the National University of Taiwan on Sunday 9 April. On the right and the left of the stage, the flags of CESNUR and HRWF, the co-organizers of the conference "Freedom of Religion or Belief, a Global Issue."

HRWF (21.04.2023) - On 9 April, CESNUR (*Center for Studies on New Religions*) and HRWF (*Human Rights Without Frontiers*) organized a conference about religious freedom issues at the prestigious [National University of Taiwan](#).

This conference was part of a one-week program of academic events and networking activities of an international delegation of European and American scholars and human rights advocates.

The delegation, who was headed by Massimo Introvigne (CESNUR) and Willy Fautré (HRWF), had meetings with a wide range of Taiwanese authorities, such as the president of the Parliament [You Si-kun](#) and the president of the [Control Yuan](#) (the supervisory body of the government) [Chu Chen](#), who is also the chairperson of the [National Human Rights Commission](#).

The delegation also visited the [Citizen Congress Watch](#), a major human rights organization in Taiwan created in 2007 and grouping together around 50 NGOs. Discussions were also held with various media outlets, such as [Taipei Times](#). At each meeting, the delegation raised the unsolved case of Tai Ji Men, a Qigong organization wrongly charged with tax evasion, declared innocent by the Supreme Court after ten years of judicial proceedings but still deprived of their property confiscated by the National Taxation Bureau. An unsolved remnant of the transitional justice period following 40 years of dictatorship, known as the White Terror.

HRWF's director presented a paper titled

In search of a solution to the Tai Ji Men case through international diplomacy and soft power

Taiwan, a country with a population of 23.6 million, has a deserved reputation of being a democratic country whose human rights record in general can be said to be one of the best, if not the best, in Asia.

According to a survey by the Academia Sinica's Institute of Sociology released in 2019, 49.3 percent of the population exclusively practices traditional folk religions (shamanism, ancestor worship and animism), 14 percent Buddhism, and 12.4 percent Taoism, with 13.2 percent identifying as nonbelievers. The rest of the population consists mainly of Protestants (5.5 percent), I-Kuan Tao (2.1 percent), Catholics (1.3 percent). There are also hundreds of thousands Falun Gong practitioners according to the Falun Gong Society of Taiwan, about 11-12,000 Jehovah's Witnesses, Sunni Muslims, Baha'is, Mormons and Scientologists.

This paper will cover three issues. First: Taiwan's policies with regard to freedom of religion or belief and the perception thereof by Western democracies. Second: Is the case of Tai Ji Men a freedom of religion case or not? Third: Avenues for a possible solution through international diplomacy.

When you scan the reports of the main international organizations dealing with religious freedom worldwide, you can hardly find any criticism about Taiwan.

Taiwan's policies about freedom of religion or belief

Before elaborating a policy based on international diplomacy and the use of soft power, it is important to portray the perception of the religious freedom situation in Taiwan by foreign and domestic actors as well as religious communities in Taiwan.

In July 2018, the US Department of State held the first Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Taipei, launching the [Potomac Plan of Action](#) that called on participating states to create Ambassador at Large positions for religious freedom. The Potomac Plan of Action as a framework for national and multinational activity then encouraged to draw on the [Plan of Action's provisions](#) when responding to violations and abuses of religious freedom or instances of persecution on account of religion, belief, on non-belief.

The US Department of State also announced the creation of a special fund to which countries can contribute financially for the promotion of religious freedom around the world.

In response to these US initiatives, President Tsai Ing-wen appointed Pusin Tali, President of the Yu-Shan Theological College and Seminary, as Taiwan's first Ambassador at Large for religious freedom.

Ambassador Pusin Tali was tasked with representing the Taiwanese government in its relations with like-minded countries and civic groups worldwide to strengthen international links and cooperation for religious freedom.

Furthermore, the Taiwan government then planned to donate US\$200,000 per year for a period of five years to the Religious Freedom Fund of the Ministerial. Besides the US, European countries such as the Netherlands and Norway then pledged as well to make donations. The five-year donation plan of Taiwan's government to help individuals and groups in need of financial or material assistance was of course hailed by the Ministerial. Unlike quite a number of democratic countries in Europe which only contributed in words to the project of the Ministerial, Taiwan immediately put its words into actions.

The [2021 Report on International Religious Freedom by the US Department of State](#) is also eloquent about religious freedom in Taiwan.

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.

Taiwan categorizes registered religious groups as foundations, temples, or “social groups.” Most churches are registered as religious foundations.

Temples may directly register with local authorities without permission from the Ministry of the Interior (MOI). Taiwan-wide religious social groups and local religious social groups may register with the MOI and local authorities, respectively. There are no minimum financial requirements for registration of temples or religious social groups.

Registered religious groups operate on an income-tax-free basis. Registered religious foundations and temples are also exempt from building and property taxes. Nonregistered groups are not eligible for the tax advantages available to registered religious groups. As of 2020, there were approximately 15,400 registered religious groups, including 1,500 religious foundations, 12,000 temples, and 1,900 religious social groups, representing more than 22 religions. Many groups choose not to register individual places of worship and instead operate them as the personal property of the group’s leaders.

The Falun Gong Society, which is banned as a xie jiao in Communist China, enjoys full freedom in Taiwan where it chose to be registered as a sports organization and not as a religious group.

The [American Institute in Taiwan](#) (AIT), the de facto US embassy in Taiwan, engaged with legislators and ministries, as well as Ambassador Pusin. AIT representatives encouraged religious leaders, nongovernmental organizations, and representatives of faith-based social service organizations throughout Taiwan to continue promoting religious freedom.

[Jehovah’s Witnesses](#) are very happy about the program of the six-month alternative civilian service to military service implemented since 2000 as it allows conscientious objectors to fulfill the four-month national service obligation without violating their conscience. Instead of carrying a military service, they are given the option to work in hospitals, in nursing homes, and in other areas of the public sector. The program has exceeded expectations, benefiting both Taiwan society and conscientious objectors, who no longer face imprisonment because of their neutral stand.

In its 2021 Report on Religious Freedom in the World, the Catholic agency [Aid to the Church in Need](#) stressed that “no religious tensions have been reported between religious groups or organisations” and concluded: “Given Taiwan’s encouraging trajectory towards greater democratisation and respect for the rights of its citizens, the overall prospects for religious freedom in the coming years are positive.”

According to the Taiwanese Ministry of Labor (MOL), there were no reports of complaints of religious discrimination from workers during the year 2021.

The sole negative issue publicly raised in Taiwan is the labor standards law which negatively impact the religious practice of some categories of foreign workers. The legislation needs to be amended because it does not cover domestic service workers and caretakers, who are not legally guaranteed a weekly rest day. Due to this exclusion, many domestic workers continued to be unable to attend religious services. For the moment, the MOL coordinates with the Ministry of Health and Welfare to expand subsidized short-term respite care services for employers, thereby enabling more migrant caregivers to take leave to attend religious services without risking their jobs.

A representative of the Presbyterian Church said the Church continued encouraging employers to allow domestic workers to take a weekly rest day and that it promoted this issue once a year during a Sunday worship service close to International Workers' Day in May.

The Tai Ji Men case, a religious freedom case or not?

In 1996, a crackdown targeting a number of religious institutions hit Tai Ji Men as well. Its leader Dr. Hong Tao-Tze was arrested together with his wife and two disciples. They spent several months in a detention center. They were accused by the tax administration of tax evasion for the years 1991 to 1996. In these years, as in the previous years, Dr Hong had received non-taxable donations from his disciples in "red envelopes," but suddenly the tax administration interpreted these operations as taxable tuition fees for a so-called "cram school," the Qigong Academy. After 10 years of court proceedings, Dr Hong and the other arrested people were declared innocent by the Supreme Court but the tax administration ignored the decision and went on prosecuting Tai Ji Men for the alleged non-payment of taxes, going so far as to confiscate a part of their property as payment.

Some in Taiwan and abroad argue that the Tai Ji Men case is 'just' a domestic conflict between the National Taxation Bureau (NTB) and the Qigong Academy which is not related to freedom of religion and belief or to human rights. Or they maintain that it is a non-intentional miscarriage of justice.

Firstly, the accusations of tax fraud were recognized as unfounded by the Supreme Court in 2007. After 10 years of legal battles in courts, Dr Hong, the shifu of Tai Ji Men was acquitted of all the charges and compensated financially for being illegally detained for several months. It means that the miscarriage of justice was corrected by the judiciary. However, the NTB failed to recognize and correct its 'error', putting itself above the law, but was never sanctioned. Consequently, an essential part of Tai Ji Men's property was illegally confiscated by the tax administration in total impunity and passivity.

For any unjustifiable reason, the redress mechanisms failed to fully serve justice. Even the Control Yuan, Taiwan's top watchdog body investigating and confirming Prosecutor Hou's intentional mismanagement of the Tai Ji Men case. He was not sanctioned either and since then, impunity has been prevailing.

Secondly, abusive taxation of a religious, spiritual or belief group is a violation of freedom of religion or belief because it amputates the right of their believers to practice their faith in their beliefs, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in the case [*Association of Jehovah's Witnesses v. France*](#) on 5 July 2012.

The Association of Jehovah's Witnesses alleged that a 1995 French parliamentary report classifying it as a harmful cult resulted in discrimination against the organization, in particular resulting in a tax audit. When the Association declined to declare donations for the requested years, asking instead for the sort of tax exemption granted to liturgical associations, the automatic taxation procedure was activated against the Association. After failing to prevail in the French courts, the Association brought the matter before the ECtHR, complaining of violation of numerous ECHR provisions.

After 17 years of judicial proceedings, 10 in French courts and seven at the European Court in Strasbourg, the European Court found a violation of Article 9 (right to freedom of religion). It noted that **the manual gifts received by the association represented the main source of its funding and over-taxation of 60% imposed on the association was violating the right of its followers to freely exercise their religion in practical terms.**

By its judgment, the Court held that France was to reimburse the applicant association 4,590,295 euros (EUR) for the taxes unduly paid and EUR 55,000 for costs and expenses. This was some form of official apologies.

Afterwards, three other similar cases of abusive taxation concerning the Evangelical Church of Besançon and two Aumist belief groups benefitted from this pilot judgement.

This international court decision is of utmost importance as it proves that the sudden taxation of gifts received by religious or belief associations was discriminatory and was a violation of religious freedom. The French government also reimbursed the victims.

In the case of Tai Ji Men in Taiwan, it is additionally a case of human rights violation as the Ministry having authority over the tax administration failed to correct their miscarriage of justice, to put an end to their ongoing prosecution against Tai Ji Men and to stop one more illegal measure: the confiscation of a part of their property.

International diplomacy as a possible solution

For many years, the Tai Ji Men case has remained out of the radars of the international community of human rights and religious freedom watchdogs.

Things started to change when Massimo Introvigne, the founder and managing director of the *Center for Studies on New Religions* (CESNUR), an international network of scholars who study new religious movements, visited the group in Taiwan and investigated their case a few years ago.

Along with the Brussels-based *Human Rights Without Frontiers* (HRWF), he started to organize monthly webinars in which an increasing number of foreign scholars, lawyers and human rights activists were involved. Due to the geo-political situation in the region, only friends of Taiwan who exclusively see the good of the country were and are involved in this international awareness campaign. Foes are not allowed.

The legal channels, public demonstrations, protests and petitions have shown their limits. Only a political decision in Taiwan could solve the unresolved Tai Ji Men case, which worriedly tarnishes the image of the country abroad. But there has never been any political will on the part of the Ministry of Finance and the government, even after the final decision of the Supreme Court in favor of Tai Ji Men, and since then either. The only way to activate the necessary political will in Taiwan, to solve the case and hereby to protect Taiwan's image is through the soft power of the main protector of the country, the United States, as well as other democratic countries that are friends of Taiwan.

CESNUR and HRWF must continue to inform the international community but they must complete their information campaign by building up an advocacy coalition of influential institutions and political decision-makers abroad, in the US and other democratic countries, as well as in Taiwan to facilitate the opening of a dialogue between the concerned parties. The American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), the *de facto* US embassy, has the ability and experience to promote religious freedom in Taiwan. They could be the voice and the arm in Taiwan of the US State Department, the US Commission on Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and other influential American institutions.

Last but not least, advocacy actors for a political solution of the Tai Ji Men case should also raise awareness in Taiwan itself among members of the Legislative, Executive and Control Yuans, political parties, think tanks, human rights organizations, foreign embassies and media outlets.

The activation of all these soft power forces both abroad and in Taiwan can awaken political will, nurture dialogue, lead to gestures of goodwill and a solution beneficial to the expectations of both parties.



US, European academics urge human rights talks

DEMOCRATIC PROGRESS: The group of 12 experts held a forum in Taipei and met with officials to discuss religion, freedom, democracy and human rights issues

By Cynthia Chen

[Taipei Times](#) (14.04.2023) - It is well known that transitioning from an authoritarian regime to a democratic one takes time. Taiwan defines its authoritarian period from 1945 to 1992, when martial law was lifted in Kinmen County, despite it ending five years earlier in the other counties.

Nevertheless, authoritarianism has persisted in the judicial and administrative bureaucracies, and it is impossible to suddenly become democratic overnight. Therefore, there are still many cases of human rights violations committed by government officials with authoritarian attitudes that have not been rectified. These cases have drawn the attention of academics and human rights advocates in Europe and the US.

Italian sociologist Massimo Introvigne, who is editor-in-chief of religious magazine Bitter Winter and a world-renowned academic, led a group of international academics and human rights experts to Taiwan.

Among the group is Belgium-based non-governmental organization Human Rights Without Frontiers director and cofounder Willy Fautre.

Every year, these academics select a country and host international forums on human rights and religious freedom. This year, the International Forum on Peace and Human Rights/Freedom of Religion or Belief: A Global Issue was held at the Tsai Lecture Hall at National Taiwan University's College of Law.

The group voiced support and encouragement for Taiwan, saying that Taiwan's efforts and progress toward freedom, democracy and human rights are its most valuable assets.

However, they were concerned about unresolved cases of human rights abuses in the nation's post-authoritarian period, such as the case of the Tai Ji Men Qigong Academy.

Several Taiwanese organizations, including the Taiwan Human Rights Think Tank, the New School for Democracy and Citizen Congress Watch, invited the group of 12 academics and human rights experts from Austria, Belgium, France, Italy, Lithuania, Romania, Spain and the US, as well as editors and journalists from media outlets, to visit government agencies and human rights institutions, so the group could gain a deeper understanding of the values of democracy and freedom in Taiwan.

The academics and experts have close ties with Taiwan.

Italian journalist Marco Respinti, who is a member of the International Federation of Journalists, an essayist, translator and lecturer, as well as director-in-charge of Bitter Winter, was invited to speak at the international public hearing on Uighur issues organized by the legislature's Taiwan Parliamentary Human Rights Commission in 2021.

Fautre received delegates from the Control Yuan in 2009, when they visited Belgium for an exchange program.

In 2019, President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) delivered an opening speech and then-US ambassador at large for international religious freedom Sam Brownback delivered remarks at an international forum at the Howard Hotel on civil society dialogue that focused on defending freedom of religion and belief in the Indo-Pacific region.

Bitter Winter editor-in-chief Massimo Introvigne, deputy editor-in-chief Rosita Soryte and director-in-charge Marco Respinti visited Taiwan to participate in the forum.

On Thursday last week, the group met with Legislative Speaker You Si-kun (游錫?).

"We hope that this day would be an opportunity for all of us to appreciate the religious diversity existing in Taiwan and vibrant religious pluralism seen here," Introvigne said.

"As I mentioned in each part of the world, there are still issues to be resolved, for instance in many international conferences. While Taiwan is generally praised for its attitude for religious liberty, there are sessions about the case about a spiritual group called Tai Ji Men," he said.

"Several American scholars have studied this issue, including professor Westbrook, who is with us today," he said, adding that there are other academics who have studied the Tai Ji Men case, but were unable to visit Taiwan due to personal reasons.

Introvigne said the academics were interested in Taiwanese human rights issues, adding that “you may rest assured that you will find in all of us, and also in our magazine Bitter Winter, true friends and defenders of Taiwan, and it is for this reason that we can assist you in solving some domestic problems. We will humbly cooperate too.”

One of Taiwan’s neighbors likes to use some of the nation’s internal issues to attack Taiwan in the international arena, Introvigne said, adding that “when you are attacked, and when the freedom of Taiwan is threatened, we feel we are all Taiwanese.”

“From my experience, I can only say that in a truly democratic country such as Taiwan, problems are normally always solved through dialogue between all interested parties,” he said.

“We pay attention to domestic problems in Taiwan because we are friends of Taiwan,” he said.

You said that the professor specifically mentioned the Tai Ji Men case, and that he would continue to pay attention to this issue.

The group are from more developed and democratic countries, You said, adding that he welcomes their views on how the government can deal with the issues of the political system, and that he is willing to follow their recommendations while maintaining judicial independence to help Tai Ji Men.

On Saturday last week, the group visited the National Human Rights Museum, where they were given an English-language tour by White Terror era victim Chin Him-san (陳欽生), which provided a deep understanding of the authoritarian period.

Several group members expressed shock and disbelief after the tour.

The group on Tuesday visited the Control Yuan’s National Human Rights Commission, accompanied by Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom Pusin Tali, who was appointed by Tsai in 2019.

International exchanges and cooperation are very important, Citizen Congress Watch chairman Tseng Chien-yuan (曾建元) said, adding that they allow the world to see the progress of Taiwan’s democracy.

He said he hopes that there will be more cooperation with international human rights experts, so Taiwan can catch up with international human rights standards and continue to progress.

After visiting the Control Yuan, the academics concluded their visit.

The group would continue to participate in Taiwan-related conferences on freedom of religious belief, and pay attention to Taiwan’s democracy, freedom and human rights to ensure that Taiwan continues to be a symbol of Asian countries.

The group hopes that by resolving cases of persecution during the post-authoritarian period, Taiwan’s democratic system will be strengthened.

Photo: A group of academics and experts meet with Legislative Speaker You Si-kun, sixth right, in Taipei on Thursday last week. Credits Taipei Times

