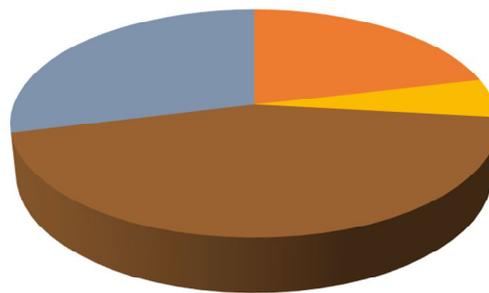


TAIWAN



	Buddhist (21.3%)
	Christian (5.5%)
	Protestants: 4.1%.
	Catholics: 1.4%.
	Ethnoreligionist (44.2%)
	Other (29%)

Area: 36,000 km ²	Population: 23.5 million	Political system: Democracy	Major Language(s): Mandarin
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Legal framework on Freedom of Religion and actual application

Taiwan may only be separated from China by the narrow Straits of Formosa, but it is much further away in terms of attitudes towards religious freedom. The people of Taiwan enjoy a comparatively high degree of religious liberty thanks to a democratisation of political life and institutions initiated by Lee Teng-hui, the country's president from 1988-2000.¹ Both the constitution and the country's legislative framework guarantee full religious freedom to all 23 million Taiwanese citizens and this freedom is respected in practice by the authorities.² Indeed, there are no reports of tensions between the religions, whether at an organisational level or between the faith communities themselves.

Taiwan, officially titled the Republic of China (ROC), is witnessing a large influx of visitors from the Chinese mainland (the People's Republic of China (PRC)), who very often have a chance to see for themselves how a Chinese country can indeed experience genuine religious freedom. One illustration of this is the activity of the Falun Gong movement in Taiwan. Derived from a mixture of *qi gong* and Buddhism, Falun Gong was popularised in China during the 1990s to the point where it had gained tens, if not hundreds of thousands of followers. Frightened by the sheer scale of the movement, in 1999 the Chinese authorities cracked down on it. The Falun Gong was suddenly banned and thousands of its followers were imprisoned, tortured or executed. By contrast, in Taiwan the Falun Gong has continued to develop and the Falun Gong Society of Taiwan today numbers a million members in more than 1,000 different branches. Even if these figures should perhaps be treated with caution, Taiwanese Falun Gong initiatives to inform visitors from China about the repression to which their movement is subjected in the PRC, undoubtedly highlights the degree of religious freedom enjoyed in Taiwan.³

Concerning legislation, there is one point of concern relating to employment law for domestic employees, a high proportion of whom are immigrant workers from the Philippines. Altogether, there are around 216,000 such domestic employees, and their employment contracts do not currently include any obligation on the part of the employer to allow them a day of rest during the week – which, among other things, obviously restricts their ability to attend a place of worship.⁴ It does not however seem, for the time being, that the Taiwanese authorities have any intention of amending the legislation on this particular point.

This concern apart, the presidential and parliamentary elections, which took place on 16th January 2016 in Taiwan, were an opportunity to witness how religion and politics are mixed together in this

young democracy – in effect the only democracy in the Chinese world. On that day, Mrs Tsai Ing-wen and her Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won an overwhelming victory, defeating the former ruling party, the Kuomintang (KMT, the Chinese Nationalist Party).⁵

During the electoral campaign, the competing candidates visited various temples. Such temples – Buddhist, Taoist or one linked to what is commonly known as “Chinese popular religion” – are important places of social interaction. The political parties do not hesitate to appeal to this social network in order to mobilise the electorate. This is particularly the case with the Kuomintang, who have made it something of a speciality. For example, in the city of Taichung, the head of the Dajia Jenn Lann temple – where Mazu (Matsu), the popular goddess of the ocean is honoured – has become well known for campaigning on behalf of the Kuomintang.⁶

During the electoral campaign, Mrs Hung Hsiu-chu, the KMT candidate, posted a picture of herself on Facebook visiting a temple. She wrote that she had come searching for “the benevolence and tranquillity of a *bodhisattva*” and asking the Bodhisattva to “bestow on me the wisdom needed to attain peace of mind”. Her posts sparked much comment on social media.⁷

Her opponent in the DPP was not to be outdone. In fact, a turning point in the campaign came in September 2015 with a comment about Mrs Tsai Ing-wen by the Venerable Hsing Yun, a Buddhist grand master. Although generally considered to be a staunch supporter of the KMT, Hsing Yun compared Mrs Tsai to the goddess Mazu, saying that her destiny was to win the elections of 16th January 2016. The media immediately seized on the words of this monk, who is a widely respected figure within the Buddhist community of Taiwan, seeing his remarks as a sign that the DPP would win.⁸

Nor is Catholicism absent from this colourful scene. On 16th November 2015, two months to the day before the elections, Mrs Tsai Ing-wen, then still the opposition candidate, announced the name of the person she wanted as vice president. The man in question was the scientist and former Minister of Science, Philip Chen Chien-jen, who was introduced by Tsai Ing-wen in these words: “He is a fervent Catholic, a person in whom you can place complete confidence.” This was a significant endorsement given the country’s politicians are often mired in corruption scandals.⁹

This is not the first time in Taiwan, where there are only 300,000 Catholics in a population of 23.5 million, that a Catholic has held a position of high office in government. In fact the outgoing president, Ma Ying-jeou – who was unable to stand for re-election on 16th January 2016 after having already served two consecutive four-year terms – is himself a Catholic. However, unlike Chen Chien-jen, he is not a practising one (a fact he has never attempted to hide, instead simply recalling that as a child he had been baptised in the Catholic faith).

Chen Chien-jen, by contrast, makes no secret of his Catholic faith. Asked by the press for the reasons that moved him to resign from the vice presidency of the prestigious *Academica Sinica* in order to go into politics, Chen replied that his wife and his daughter had prayed for him and had felt that God was calling him to assume this public role. Chen also added that he had consulted the Archbishop John Hung Shan-chuan of Taipei, who had told him that running as a candidate was not an obstacle to defending the Church’s values. The Archbishop himself confirmed, saying: “I reminded [Chen Chien-jen] that the Second Vatican Council had encouraged the involvement of the laity in politics as a way of serving society and instilling Christian values. I also told him that his candidature would be an example for the 270,000 Catholics of Taiwan and would perhaps encourage more Catholics to enter politics.”

The media also interrogated Chen Chien-jen about the political implications of his religious faith. On 18th November 2015, during a press conference organised by the DPP, he was asked about his position on same-sex marriage which is currently not legal but which has been under consideration. Pressure for a change in the law increased in Taiwan after same-sex marriage was legalised in the United States in June 2015.

Chen Chien-jen responded as follows: “God loves everyone, and that’s why he also loves those who are homosexual. Consequently I too believe that gays have the right to seek happiness and that we must respect this right. But given that marriage between two persons of the same sex implies a changing of society, there needs to be profound discussions before any decision is taken in this regard.”

This statement led a number of commentators to predict difficulties if Chen was elected, since Tsai Ing-wen for her part has never concealed the fact that she was favourable to “a plurality of forms of the family”.¹⁰ By contrast, a demonstration in November 2013 in favour of the traditional family, consisting of a man and a woman and their openness to having children had drawn more than 250,000 supporters, a considerable number for Taiwan.¹¹

The Taiwanese press pointed out that it was wise for the DPP to choose a Catholic for the vice presidency.¹² Well-regarded in the Vatican – he was made a Chevalier of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre in 2010 and of the Order of Saint Gregory the Great in 2013 – Chen could carry weight if Beijing puts pressure on the Holy See to break off diplomatic relations with Taipei. The Vatican is in practice the only important sovereign state that still maintains diplomatic relations with Taiwan, and there is no doubt that any breakdown in diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Taipei would be seen by the Taiwanese public as a defeat for the party in power.

Incidents

There were no incidents recorded during the period under review.

Prospects for Religious Freedom

While the Taiwanese enjoy a high degree of religious freedom, the political modernisation and democratisation of institutions over the past 20 years has not been accompanied by a secularisation of political life. More than ever, religion is at the heart of life in the country.

¹ Kuo, Cheng-Tian : *Religion and Democracy in Taiwan* (2008, Albany, New York : State University of New York Press), p. 13.

² American Institute in Taiwan : « *Taiwan 2014 International Religious Freedom Report for 2014* » (<http://www.ait.org.tw/en/officialtext-ot1524.html>)

³ *Falun Dafa - Minghui.org* : « Taiwan: Thousands of Falun Gong Practitioners Hold Chinese New Year Celebration in Appreciation of Master Li », 15 February 2015 (<http://en.minghui.org/html/articles/2015/2/15/148410.html>)

⁴ *Taipei Times* : « Domestic slavery, Maid in Taiwan », 17 February 2015 (<http://www.taipetimes.com/News/feat/archives/2015/02/17/2003611746>)

⁵ *BBC News* : « Tsai Ing-wen elected Taiwan's first female president », 17 February 2016 (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35333647>)

⁶ *YouTube* : « KMT presidential nominee Eric Chu goes south on campaign trail and strikes back at DPP attack », 23 October 2015 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8qUSR0wigc>)

⁷ *Taipei Times* : « Hung deplors sense of defeatism within KMT », 5 September 2015 (<http://www.taipetimes.com/News/front/archives/2015/09/05/2003626970>)

⁸ *YouTube* : « Tsai Ing-wen continues making inroads among groups that typically support the KMT », 17 September 2015 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eg2JC2V107Q>)

⁹ *Eglises d'Asie* : « Le parti d'opposition choisit un catholique pour être candidat à la vice-présidence de la République », 18 November 2015 (<http://eglasiemeepasie.org/asie-du-nord-est/taiwan/2015-11-18-le-parti-d2019opposition-choisit-un-catholique-pour-etre-candidat-a-la-vice-presidence-de-la-republique>)

¹⁰ *Foreign Policy* : « Could Taiwan be first in Asia with marriage equality? », 14 January 2016 (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/14/could-taiwan-be-first-in-asia-with-marriage-equality/>)

¹¹ www.asianews.it/news-en/Taipei-leading-the-way-among-Chinese-in-gay-marriage-29780.html

¹² *Sunday Examiner* : « Worries over Vatican-Taipei relations may be huff and puff », 30 January 2016 (<http://sundayex.catholic.org.hk/node/2432>)