

As Taiwan stands up to big brother China, it deserves the world's support

For the second time in less than three months, Taiwan has hosted a conference on religious freedom, with President Tsai Ing-wen delivering a speech on the issue.

Last week President Tsai told the Taiwan International Religious Freedom Forum that “Taiwan’s religious freedom sets the standard in the Indo-Pacific” as she offered Taiwan’s support to those who are persecuted for their beliefs around the world.

But she also reminded us that Taiwan has not always been free. “Taiwan walked a dark path on the road to religious freedom,” she said. “The freedom we enjoy today is built on the blood, sweat and tears of our predecessors. So we in Taiwan know better than anyone how precious freedom is.”



Tsai Ing-wen. Photo: Taiwan Gov't.

This speech followed her address to a conference in March alongside U.S. ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom Sam Brownback. At the end of that conference, President Tsai appointed Taiwan's first special ambassador for international religious freedom, Pusin Tali, and committed to donate US\$1 million over five years to the U.S. State Department's International Religious Freedom Fund.

These moves appear to be designed to bolster the positioning of Taiwan as a beacon of democracy and human rights in the region. Building on the work of the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy established in 2003 by then president Chen Shui-bian, Tsai's government appears keen to show the world the contrast between free, democratic Taiwan and the increasing repression in mainland China.

On May, 23, Tsai met prominent Chinese activists who had participated in the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in 1989, becoming the first Taiwanese president in three decades to do so. Taiwan marked the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Massacre with a giant inflatable "Tank Man" image.

At the end of last week's conference, a group of religious and civil society leaders announced the formation of the Taiwan International Religious Freedom Roundtable, aimed to bring together voices in Taiwan to defend religious freedom around the world. Radio Taiwan International launched a new channel dedicated to broadcasting on this issue — Voice of International Religious Freedom — and a group was established to lead an initiative to provide health care to victims of persecution.

Vice-President Chen Chien-jen addressed a press conference at which declarations were released on the persecution of the Uyghurs and forced organ harvesting in China. Chen said that what had been presented during the forum had "forced us all out of our comfort zone" and had "pushed us to take action against religious persecution so that religious freedom can take root and grow in all parts of the world."



Taiwanese Vice-President Chen Chien-Jen meeting Pope Francis. Photo: Facebook/Chen Chien-Jen.

Earlier in the conference, a letter from the Dalai Lama was read out. “Religious freedom is a basic human right. Human rights are something we all share, because all of us want to be happy and we are all entitled to be happy,” the letter read. “I am happy to observe that in a robust democracy like Taiwan, the law protects and defends human rights. Everyone on this earth has the freedom to practice or not practice religion as they see fit.”

The Taiwan International Religious Freedom Forum, co-hosted by the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan, Taiwan Association for China Human Rights, the U.S.-based Heritage Foundation and China Aid, featured discussion of religious freedom violations not only in China but also Myanmar, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Nigeria, the Middle East and North Korea.

Moving testimony

Ji Hyeon-A, a North Korean escapee now living in South Korea, delivered a moving testimony, describing how she fled North Korea three times but was

arrested and forcibly repatriated to North Korea by Chinese authorities. On one occasion, North Korean officials forced her to renounce her Christian faith and abort her unborn baby.

Participants in the forum included politicians, civil society activists, academics and religious leaders from around the world, including parliamentarians from Pakistan, Nepal, Mongolia, Lithuania and the European Parliament alongside representatives of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Kenneth Starr, the former U.S. solicitor-general famous for his work as an independent counsel investigating then president Bill Clinton's conduct over the Monica Lewinsky affair, addressed the forum. He presented a declaration to end forced organ harvesting in China, agreed by participants unanimously. The declaration expressed deep concern about "the substantial, credible and growing body of unrefuted evidence that the Communist Party of China has authorized and sanctioned — and continues to carry out — a systematic program of organ harvesting with a horrific and cruel loss of human loss." It called on the public to adhere to a pledge not to "receive or accept, directly or indirectly, any organ transplant from China."

The forum also issued a declaration on the persecution of the Uyghurs, calling on corporations to "end all sales and collaboration with programs of surveillance, racial profiling, religious persecution and mass detention in the Uyghur region" and urging governments to impose export restrictions and sanctions on such transfers or cooperation. It also called on pension funds and charitable foundations to divest their holdings from any company connected to the repression of the Uyghurs, urged scholars to speak out against the persecution and suspend cooperation with China's Ministry of Education as long as Uyghur academics and students continue to be detained.

It urged the World Health Organization, Transplantation Society, Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences and the worldwide medical profession to suspend cooperation with China's transplantation system until China verifiably ends forced organ harvesting. The declaration also called on governments to provide humanitarian relief and refugee resettlement for Uyghurs and urged the International Committee of the Red Cross to seek access to all detention facilities holding Uyghurs and all state facilities holding Uyghur children.

In his remarks at the closing press conference, Vice-President Chen, a practicing Catholic, referred to the social doctrine of the Catholic Church, emphasizing that “we must seek and serve the least of our brothers and sisters with love and virtue.” He reminded us that Pope Francis has urged Catholics to “stand up from behind their walls and not be afraid of getting their hands dirty.” The pope, he added, “asks us all to love, to forgive and to be open-minded.”

Taiwan is clearly stepping up its efforts not only to defend its own freedoms but also to promote democracy and human rights, including religious freedom, around the world. For a small island nation already vulnerable to pressure and intimidation from China, this is a bold move. It deserves support and encouragement in this quest.

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