

## Cross-Strait Religious Influence and United Front Tactics: Insights from Political Economy of Cultural Continuity, and Policy Responses

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### ABSTRACT

Taiwan's religious communities are greatly influenced by traditional Chinese cultural influences, including Buddhism, Taoism, and folk beliefs. Festivals and rituals not only reflect a rich cultural tradition, but also serve as the bases for ancestor worship and the social fiber of society. Religious customs largely correspond with customs practiced in mainland China, and together they serve as important channels for cross-strait communication. However, religion in Taiwan is not simply an extension of culture. It has increasingly become a contested site for politics. The Chinese government has tried to use united front strategies in religion, through measures like funding temple renovations and inviting religious figures to visit the mainland, to try to affect religious communities and the overall context of society. This has raised concerns in the Taiwanese government about the independence and integrity of the religious organizations in Taiwan. In response to these concerns, Taiwan has introduced a draft Religious Organizations Act, which aims to increase scrutiny of religious practices and reduce outside interference. The bill focuses on balancing the protection of religious freedoms and support for cultural pluralism, while ensuring that religion continues as a value-added component to civil society. Balancing respect for the sanctity of belief, and standing up to political interference will be important for the future of Taiwan's religious policy.

**Keywords:** Religion, Politics, United Front, Mainland China, Taiwan

### INTRODUCTION

#### The Origins of Religious United Front Tactics

Religious faiths in Taiwan, especially Buddhism, Taoism, and folk beliefs, have historical ties to the mainland Chinese belief system. This is evident in the deities followed in Taiwan and their connections to Chinese religions, as religious communities and believers in Taiwan often perform pilgrimages back to their ancestral temples located in mainland China, known as su-yuan (溯源 tracing roots). While su-yuan represents a commitment to their spiritual roots in Taiwan, it also carries an implication that Taiwanese and Chinese religions are intertwined. This relationship is underscored by the reverence toward mainland China, as Taiwanese believers search for religious roots and shared religious cultural identity, highlighting historical connections that cross the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan's religious beliefs have been communicated through Chinese traditions.

While Taiwanese religious activities—like procession festivals and sacrificial rituals—culturally evolved into their own variations, they still emphasize the importance of religion in Taiwanese social life. More specifically, the many temples in Taiwan that are dedicated to Guandi(關帝) and Mazu(媽祖) embody deities that have historical and traditional ties to mainland China. These beliefs reinforce, in the believer's mind, that they are venerated in terms of Chinese lineage represented in the stories about Guandi and Mazu. Thus, rituals associated

with Guandi and Mazu allow the adherents to honor their ancestors and history based on traditional beliefs. Conclusively, religions in Taiwan are another avenue where the culturally unique identity of Chinese belief systems are reinforced among the believers, highlighting a cultural identity development from religion.

Nonetheless, the political complexities of cross-strait relations have introduced new facets to this religious dynamic. The Chinese government has increasingly used religion as a tool of united front strategy, employing tactics such as financially supporting temple renovations and preserving religious artifacts in Taiwan, as well as building relationships with religious personnel. Invitations sent to Taiwanese religious leaders to visit the mainland for what is ostensibly cultural exchange may have underlying political intentions as well. These tactics not only enhance cultural connections but also may begin to shape Taiwanese societal values and attitudes toward unification, simultaneously elevating public awareness and political sensitivity.

In turn, the Taiwanese government has proposed the Religious Organizations Act, which will seek to regulate religious activities and funding, while protecting against the potential for political influence from the mainland. This proposed legislation seeks to protect religious autonomy and cultural pluralism, with the objective of assuring that religion continues to play a productive role in civil society. In this context, the government is left to navigate the competing priorities of protecting religious freedom while preventing political intrusion - an equilibrium which will be significant to Taiwan's future of religious governance.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Interplay of State, Religion, And Politics in Taiwan

#### *National Identity in Taiwan*

National identity is a person's identity and sense of belonging to one state or to one nation, a feeling one shares with a group of people, regardless of one's citizenship status. It includes acknowledgement of the history, culture, values political institutions and sovereignty of a country. National identity in Taiwan has been a central factor of individual and collective identities, social cohesion, and political development; particularly during election periods when cross-strait relations ratchet up (Zhang, Xu & Zhang 2023).

After the Kuomintang (KMT) government retreated to Taiwan, ten years of American-sponsored authoritarian leadership followed — initially in the form of a single-party KMT state, maintained under martial law. The end of the ban on opposition parties was the starting point of Taiwan's movement toward multi-party and democratic conditions. Taiwan held its inaugural direct presidential election in 1996. The turning point was perhaps in 2000 when the DPP's, Chen Shui-bian, broke that legacy as Taiwan's first none-KMT party president and Taiwan experienced its first peaceful transition of power from one political party to another. Chen was re-elected in 2004. The KMT regained power in 2008 when Ma Ying-jeou defeated the DPP, marking the beginning of the second alternation of power; Ma was re-elected in 2012 and served until 2016. The third alternation took place in 2016 when DPP candidate Tsai Ing-wen won the presidency, and she won re-election in 2020. In 2024, the DPP won a third successive term with the election of Lai Ching-te as president (Verrall, 2021).

As one of Taiwan's leading political parties, the DPP promotes Taiwan's sovereignty and democratic values by emphasizing the island's status as independent territory. In response, the People's Republic of China (PRC) continues to maintain that Taiwan is a province of China, which has contributed to the ongoing tensions across the Taiwan Strait. The interpretation of Taiwan's political status and sovereignty are among the most contentious issues between Taiwan and China. The PRC has proposed the "One Country, Two Systems" framework as a model for unification, while Taiwan has taken a position of wanting to keep the status quo, maintaining that it is sovereign, while seeking increased international recognition (Copper, 2019).

Furthermore, party alternation in Taiwan is traditionally understood to mean that one ruling party is elected out of power and replaced by another. The two major ruling parties are the Kuomintang (KMT) and the DPP. When the KMT is in power it tends to align its policies closer to the Chinese mainland, including taking an active role in pursuing cross-strait religion exchanges. Conversely, when the DPP is governing, their approach to religious identity has been relatively neutral—neither promoting nor blocking religious engagement—indicating a more open-pluralist attitude. These parties' contrasting positions have impacted the flow of religious exchanges and cross-strait religion and these position also point to the developing, multifaceted nature of Taiwan's political context. In this regard, religion emerges as a highlighted dimension of Taiwan's political culture worth academic inquiry.

Further analysis indicates that the continuation of party alternation has heightened public debate in Taiwan about national identity. This matter remains complicated and sensitive and has been influenced by overlapping political, historical, and cultural developments. Taiwan has changed hands during the twentieth century twice, from Japanese colonialism to the departure of the Republic of China (ROC) for Taiwan after the

end of the Chinese Civil War, and finally the development of a political authority associated with the local state. These historic changes have led to complex questions and competing national identity claims for both "Taiwan" and the "ROC". On the one hand, some portions of the population identify with the ROC as their nation, especially given its detransition to Taiwan after the war, and the symbols, stories, and institutional history associated with the ROC still have value for these individuals, who consider the ROC as the rightful government of Taiwan. On the other hand, a significant aspect of the population acknowledges their identity as Taiwanese, specifically emphasizing the notion of Taiwan as independent or as an autonomous state. This emphasis acknowledges Taiwan's history as distinct and reaffirms local cultural values and norms in the process. Among this population some support additional opportunities for Taiwan to participate in the international community, and some advocate formally for the establishment of a sovereign Taiwanese state (Liu, 2021).

In addition to the two predominant approaches to national identity in Taiwan which are identification to "Taiwan" and identification of the "ROC", there are neutral, vague, and obfuscated positions of identification prevalent in Taiwanese society. For example, significant sections of the population assert to uphold the status quo because they believe too much emphasis of national identification may lead to instability in different forms in society. These different orientations reflect a significant degree of pluralism and complexity surrounding the issue of national identification in Taiwan, resulting in something called a "state of pluralistic coexistence".

More explicitly, "neutral" attitudes are ones that represent either an apathy toward politics, a distaste for ideological conflicts, or because identification to ones nation is no longer salient in daily and everyday life. "Vague" attitudes often come about in terms of hybrids or context related identification, i.e., one may self-identify as simultaneously "Taiwanese" and as a "citizen of the ROC", or one may switch expressions of identity in reference to the moment. The priority for "upholding the status quo" is often used in a manner to compromise a determination of geopolitical risks, a practical approach to on-going cross strait relations, or because they consider social coherence in Taiwan as a priority. It should be clear that the People's Republic of China (PRC) asserts its own determination for sovereignty over Taiwan, and aims to diminish Taiwan's international space through a variety of diplomatic strategies formal and informal. The ongoing diplomatic pressures to limit Taiwan's space has material and concrete influences upon self-determination in The Taiwan national and political identity as well as the greater political and national identity discourse.

In other words, Taiwan national identity is not only a domestic issue, it is an issue that can engage with the dynamics of cross-strait national identity determinations and issues of international politics and identity. As political scientist Tsang (2018) explained, the relationship between both Taiwan and mainland China is multi-faceted and reciprocal in nature, influencing the other in relation to national identity.

### ***Religious Forces in Taiwan***

Religious beliefs in Taiwan are essentially personal and communal, providing spiritual support, moral structures, and connections to subgroups. Democratisation has allowed a shift from state control over religious affairs to a more liberal regulatory environment (Laliberté 2009). While historically the national government regulated religious freedoms, the reforms from 1987 allowed for greater religious freedom and pluralism. Conversely, religion in mainland China is largely subordinated to use by the state and the Chinese Communist Party anticipates that religious organizations will support national development priorities, such as poverty alleviation and social stability (Kuan 2012). The Chinese government engages religious actors to support their religious revival goals, as illustrated by Brown and Cheng (2012), which describes state engagement with religious actors to highlight their initiatives, engagement in cultural diplomacy (e.g., World Buddhist Forum and with Taiwanese religious leaders, etc.) that can demonstrate political intent. Taiwanese religious organizations, mostly Buddhism and Taoism, have engaged in cross-strait exchanges that focus on reform of temples/restorative temples and collaboration on rituals. Most are cautious to avoid politics but focus on cultural and spiritual exchange. Kuo (2013) records the struggles of the evolving religion-state relationship as a mutually checking and balanced effort and describes the role of constitutional reform in creating a competitive "religious marketplace." Along with lobbying efforts in support of political positions on abortion, LGBTQ+ education, and legalized gambling.

In their study of religion and civic engagement, Chang (2016) examines the relationship between religious affiliation, cultural values, and civic engagement, based on data from the Taiwan Social Change Survey. Factor analysis revealed two cultural dimensions of civic engagement: participation based on civic duty and engagement that is participatory-oriented. Notably, Chang found that Buddhism, Taoism, and folk religions are positively related to civic participation based on duty, but Buddhists are more likely to participate in civic engagement that is participatory. Age and education had a considerable impact on patterns of civic engagement, revealing the ways in which cultural, religious, and educational dimensions combine to shape civic engagement. Media use was also a noteworthy consideration in shaping civic attitudes and behaviors. Duty-based civic participation is positively related to accessing political information through newspapers, television, radio, and the internet, but

engaging in participatory forms of civic engagement is negatively related to media use, at least on the internet. Of importance, Chang emphasizes the role of religious belief in forming civic norms, but suggests education is central to participatory forms of civic engagement. The findings provide a multi-dimensional view of civic engagement in Taiwan, demonstrating how cultural, religious, and informational dimensions interact with civic engagement.

Huang (2022) examined the moral and political dimensions of religious belief. Huang found that religious individuals were more likely to vote in the 2016 presidential election than non-religious individuals but there was no difference in commitment to democratic values between religious and non-religious individuals. Religiosity was related to charitable behavior, and religious individuals demonstrated more conservative attitudes toward homosexuality than non-religious individuals, but religiosity did not appear to influence tolerance and friend-making behaviors. In Taiwan, religious diversity is primarily exhibited in the dominant subscription to Taoism, and Buddhism. Both serve as spiritual platforms for individuals too derive meaning and comfort in their everyday lives, but also support shared values. Religious beliefs in Taiwan provide personal psychological benefits and tend to create harmony across communities. Religion plays a role in individuals' lives, but signifies an aspect of shared culture and social structure within Taiwanese society, and contributes to establishing a wider value system. Religion also informs social beliefs during religious festivals, rituals, and interactions between believers that construct a shared sense of community through the development of mutual respect and inclusivity. As a result, religious belief has become a significant element of Taiwan's collective identity and cultural integration, reflecting its importance in both individual experiences and sociocultural contexts.

### ***The Convergence of Politics and Religion in Taiwan***

In modern Taiwan, the interaction between politics and religion has become a complicated and sensitive issue. This relationship has been shaped by socio-cultural structure, political authority, and ideological sympathies throughout its history. With increased visibility in public life, the role of religious organizations has buttressed a complicated and frequently ambiguous interrelationship between religion and politics, especially during periods of DPP (Democratic Progressive Party) governance, or when cross-strait relations hit peaks of tension. In other words, the connection reveals that religious and political life can be entangled, sometimes in a cooperative way, while in other instances the relations are characterized by conflict, depending on the socio-political conditions.

The perceived political attitude toward China shapes Taiwan's religious landscape. During moments of increased tension across the straits, religious exchanges are often interpreted with suspicion and religious organizations become a more prominent feature of public life and political discourse. The involvement of religious organizations in political debate pressures the government to preserve religious rights while being sensitive to issues of national security and in an attempt to maintain a proper balance. This requires purposeful and intentional ways to build policy schemes, and have all relevant stakeholders on-side in order to focus on social harmony and institutional integrity.

One notable reality in the political-religious ecosystem of Taiwan is related to the emergence of a strategic symbiosis. Politicians consistently seek the backing of religious organizations by providing some incentive (e.g., policy, money or some other "benefit"), in order to create votes, and bolster the legitimacy of their relationships with local constituents. Religious organizations, in return, seek to maximize their own social and financial capital to shape political behavior and social policy. The engagement of politicians in ceremonial acts—whether it is participation in temple ceremonies or chanting from scriptures for divine blessing—fits both a mark of cultural respect as well as a performative strategy for expressing commitment to community values. While there might be mutual beneficial outcomes for both the political actors and the religious institutions, ethical and legal questions arise over the perils of political-religious partnerships (Laliberté, 2017).

The relationship between politics and religion in Taiwan has solidified itself in being increasingly complex over time. When political actors rely upon religious organizations and institutions to act on their behalf, or are otherwise supported by religious bodies, there is a possible erosion of the religious organizations and institutions independence or autonomy. In some cases, religious organizations and institutions are pressured to take a specific political stance or position, or to otherwise engage in some political act that would result in influencing the choices or expressions of adherents. The relationship further exacerbates tensions around political and religious power and freedom, including in dramatic and overt ways, which generates societal awareness about political power overtaking religious autonomy.

At the same time, society is beginning to recognize the role and importance of religion in relation to political life and participation—if not absolutely for purpose of general social existence. Religion in the life of the individual matters—it is a major precursor to the way individuals construct and perpetuate social systems and social values. For many Taiwanese individuals, religious belief is a symbol of cultural identity and signifies respect for history and tradition. As the relationship between the political figures and religious organizations grows stronger, the social function of religion grows stronger. However, within the facade of seemingly mutual

relationships lie deeper contradictions and issues. Religious support does not only signify an endorsement of political candidates; it also reflects expectations and demands for policy outcomes. When political actors do not meet these expectations, there can be a "fraying" of trust relationships, especially during electoral cycles, when religious groups may decide to leverage their influence based on how a candidate responded to a specific (or lack thereof) expectation, particularly when there are no other issues at stake for them.

Additionally, governmental oversight over secular-religious relationships has become an important topic. Without direct oversight of the financing and accountability of religious organizations from public funds, resources may be mismanaged and public trust eroded. This mandate calls for political actors to err on the side of caution when liaising with religious groups, to prevent the danger of excessive and inappropriate dependence on them that may challenge their trustworthiness. At the same time, government grants to religious groups need careful regulatory oversight of potential conflicts of interest that may stretch an ethical dilemma.

The relationship of politics and religion will continue to develop in this environment. We need to start changing the way we socialized political-religious intersectionality to be more adaptive and responsive. While we should protect the right to religious freedom, it is equally important to hold organized religions accountable from a governance perspective, allowing specific options for self-government in relationship to political action as well. While networks of trust are important to the endorsement of legitimacy and legitimacy appropriation, it needs to be tugged back and forth to bring greater assurance of oversight mechanism and stability (the reality). This adjustment in relations is to create more social harmony, stability including political decisions being fair and legitimate.

In a word, we are referring to the political-religious intersectionality as a multi-layered issue involving the aspects of power, values, and normative conceptions. In this globalized world, Taiwan's experience is a relevant and exciting example to observe how so-called political religious intersectionality can be managed amid pluralistic cultural and religious relations. As long as society continues to change, the political and social development of Taiwan will continue to add to the fluid and relative nature of political-religious intersectionality. It often holds historically long delays in Taiwanese society that the government delays payments to financial support religious organizations wrapped up in power exclude. Both of these areas partially echo the inability to check the government or funds, or religious organizations remain financially transparent to the public. Both of these indications present general shifting from a stabilized historical interaction to a polarizing and charged behavior in interacts in Taiwan.

The expectation for religious groups to advance political causes can create disengagement, especially in an election year, as religious groups may change their allegiance based upon candidates' performance—this can be problematic for electoral implications. Further, government oversight of religiously based funds is becoming an area of public discourse. The expense report combined with a lack of transparency concerning how funds are allocated and used may create distrust and allegations of political favoritism.

*Local governments, in pursuit of electoral gains, have sometimes refrained from intervening in religious financial irregularities, citing the voluntary nature of donations—often referred to as xiangyou qian (incense money)—as justification.*

A relevant example is a municipal council initiative to audit religious subsidies that created an enormous stir. The project, which was marketed as a prudent exercise in fiscal accountability, produced very mixed results. Supporters claimed that taxpayer resources should be used prudently, while detractors claimed it was an attempt to expose and sanction religious organizations that asserted their religious independence. The media and public frames of the affair created deep divisions between society. At the time, some of the affected religious organizations staged protests, demanded that their independent and autonomous self-definition be respected, and rejected any political contrivance suggesting otherwise. The episode was a testament to the fragile equilibrium between religion and the political institution, and highlighted the need for institutional buffers.

Religious organizations facing turbulent public scrutiny began to act and, in some cases, incorporated new procedures designed to be more transparent about their finances. They published financial reports; they invited members of the congregation to be involved in ongoing program decisions about how donations are spent. In other words, the organizations took steps to restore trust and to eliminate the scrutiny of exposure. The new procedures were mostly viewed positively, tensions decreased, and a level of normality returned. Politicians who took steps to show real respect for specific communities of faith during these controversial events gained support from the electorate, while others suffered backlash from their candidacy.

Ultimately, the evolving relationship between politics and religion in Taiwan reflects much larger questions of governance, legitimacy, and cultural pluralism. As modernization and democratization continue, the state must honor competing values in their obligations to constitutionally protect religious freedom, maintain accountability of religious institutions in a state-supported framework, and maintain political neutrality. The experience in Taiwan offers concrete context in which we can see how democracies and culturally pluralistic societies can navigate the intersections of belief and power. The merging of religious ideology and political behavior are not

solely a domestic problem; instead, the blending spirituality and the political are part of a more global phenomenon impacted by growing historical legacies, preexisting institutions, and global thinking.

## **Religion and Politics in Taiwan: Convergence, Contestation, and Cross-Strait Dynamics**

### ***Political Analysis***

#### ***Political Participations: Religious Leaders and Religious Followers***

The relationship between religion and politics is a prominent aspect of Taiwan's sociocultural context. Religious organizations and their adherents have contributed more or less significantly to political processes, specifically during election phases, for a long time. Certain organizations put their names and resources behind particular political party candidates. Occasionally, individual adherents will select their voting options based on their religious values. In this manner, religious organizations often fulfill the role of a critical social force during election stages of mobilization.

Due to the contentious nature of cross-strait relations, especially in the past decade, religious actors in Taiwan are deliberate about how they engage members of mainland China in the organizational experience. The Chinese government has invited Taiwanese religious leaders to engage with others and organizations they define in a certain way, using them as a "loose framework" as they seek to change attitudes towards cross-strait relations while engaged in political action. Some of these engagements include a range of activities, from visiting temples to collaborative rituals, with the potential to align themselves with, or as opposition to Taiwan's government, particularly during the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) administration. This relationship can be aligned with or at odds with DPP's assertive sovereignty positions regarding unification with the People's Republic of China, with its supporting policies. (Pomfret & Lee, 2023)

Traditionally, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has viewed religion through a Marxist lens, where religion is considered contrary to socialist thought. However, for various political and social reasons, the CCP's united front work function has slowly included space for religion. After the suppression of religious activity during the Cultural Revolution, the reform process has seen a re-emergence of religious institutional life and organization(s) occur in a legalistic way. Despite the CCP's acknowledgement of the role of religion in social development in theory, there is still limited freedom of religious attitudes (Liao, 2010).

More recently Chang (2023) offers an analysis of the relations between cross-strait religious exchanges through an institutional lens focused on exploring the complex relationship between the political economy of the PRC's government system and the endogenous agent of religious communities in Taiwan. The CCP's popular agenda organizes the structural conditions for establishing the legitimacy of religious diplomacy with religious actors. Taiwanese folk religious communities routinely engage, based on internal community norms and community practices, in rituals across the strait, which will normally include pilgrimages and ordination engagements. These engagements often highlight two relational logics: one logic is grounded in the political economy of the PRC and the second is locally based on religious identity of primary communities.

#### ***Political Influence of Religious Organizations***

Taiwan's faith communities play an important role in shaping public opinion, mobilizing the electorate, and fostering civic engagement. Faith communities often have large memberships and broad social ties, which allow them to mobilize religious-based constituencies in ways that range from educating their constituencies about issues, to expressing moral opinions, to actively participating in the political arena. The advocacy of congregations and leaders, at least implicitly, often aligns with their faith-based values and ethical concerns for the congregation or community. This advocacy contributes to the broader public debate about social issues, including but not limited to, abortion, education, and issues of national identity.

China's One Country Two Systems agenda includes an overt effort for cross-strait integration using economic, cultural, and religious approaches. In response, the Taiwanese government has sometimes exerted its prerogative to impose certain restrictions on religious interaction with China, which serves the dual purpose of maintaining sovereignty and social stability. Religious organizations might also cultivate strategic alliances with political parties or civil society groups to further enhance their political influence (Madsen, 2021). More importantly, religious figures or symbols (like Mazu) may be invoked as instances for peace or striving for unity, which serve to frame political debates or shape voter sentiment (Pomfret & Lee, 2023).

#### ***A Political Approach to Religious Influence***

Unlike Taiwan, religion is part of China's united front strategies to mobilize influence in Taiwan. This includes religious exchanges, temple-based collaborations, and clergy visits. Through these exchanges the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seeks to build ties with Taiwanese religious organizations while promoting

(subtly) the Chinese unification agenda in Taiwan. While such an agenda is framed as cultural diplomacy, it challenges Taiwanese autonomy over religious practices and can raise political sensitivities.

Taiwanese politicians engage with religious organizations to further their goals as well. Religious affiliation can enhance the political reputation of a person of interest within a specific faith-based group, but also use participation in temple rituals to attract or respond to voters by signaling respect for local cultural traditions. Again, while these engagements between politicians and faith communities can be beneficial, they can also exacerbate sectarian divisions or politicize religious spaces (Huang, 2022).

*Temples serve as vital civic arenas in Taiwan, with over two-thirds of the population adhering to folk religions, Buddhism, or Taoism. Political figures routinely visit temples during campaign seasons, recognizing their role as hubs of community interaction. For instance, during the previous presidential election, President Tsai Ing-wen visited 43 temples in one month—a record-setting effort that underscored the strategic importance of religious outreach in political communication.*

These developments demonstrate the fragile relationship between religion and political legitimacy. Religious engagement can be beneficial for developing solidarity and cultural resonance; however, it can raise issues of transparency, autonomy, and the use of faith in a strategic manner. As religious organizations affirm their agency and political actors invite religious endorsement, the lines between religious authority and political authority are blurred and contested.

## **Economic Analysis: Strategic Integration and Vulnerabilities in Cross-Strait Religious Engagement**

### ***Economic Assistance as a Tool of Influence***

Economic united front strategies incorporate economic incentives and resource allocation as a means to influence or control targeted groups for political ends. The Chinese government actively utilizes the economic tools to entice Taiwanese religious organizations as a part of its cross-strait engagement. This involves subsidizing religious activities, constructing temples and churches, promoting and subsidizing religious tourism, and sending broader delegations of religious leaders to advocate for cross-strait objectives. Pilgrimage programs and cultural exchanges frame larger cross-strait cooperation and engagement with the goal of mutual understanding but are also vehicles of political soft power.

The funding or economic aid from China—whether it is invested resources, loans with favorable terms, or supply chain infrastructure—also identifies where the Chinese government believes it will have meaningful impact and possibly influence beyond the religious sector when it comes to developing nations and industries. While this cooperation may contribute to economic growth and jobs, it raises concerns over economic overreliance and vulnerability. Taiwan must walk the line over economic growth with national autonomy, as it could now swell into political vulnerability as economic dependency is most likely problematic in a political or multi-national context of broader international development (Schubert, ed., 2016).

Given the backdrop, cultural united front activity bolsters the economic united front strategy. China purposely ties shared religious traditions to Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism and seeks to strengthen religious cross-strait ties. The support of temple construction and religious mission work in mainland China (which takes place with Taiwan organizational leaders or member or support)—is intended to facilitate both cultural and political objectives. For example, Tzu Chi was one organization that was raised as an organization for cross-national engagement with religious organizations that responded to both cultures and the political logic of the organizations (Laliberté, 2022).

### ***Capital Flows***

Economic dimensions of religious united front strategies can be analyzed from a number of perspectives, including the flow of financial resources, the allocation of economic benefits, and the effects on local economies.

### ***Financial Flows and Economic Interests***

The economic dimension of using religious united front strategies can be researched from several dimensions, such as the movement of financial resources, the distribution of economic benefits, and the overall impact on local economies. Large-scale religious exchanges are often evidence of religious united front activity including the regular organization of pilgrimage groups, construction and restoration of temples and many facets of hosting religious or cultural events. These activities typically attract significant financial flows from a variety of sources including individual devout donations made by believers, government appropriated allocation for subsidies, and for-profit donation sponsorships by corporate sponsors.

How the funds are ultimately allocated or utilized has direct implications on local economic development. Religious united front strategies can seek and gain access to these funds in the form of combined subsidies associated with tax advantages to pull in target groups, or potentially foreign partners, into a subtle form of economic dependency. Economic dependency may occur through individual support of specific industries, infrastructure investment in designated industry regions, or job creation for a specific identifiable group.

A clear example of this economic dependency occurs in the context of cross-strait relations between Taiwan and mainland China. While Taiwan's trade and investment has broadened over recent decades, the associated economic dependency is still highly intrusive (Zhang, Xu, & Zhang, 2023). Economic cooperation, in one sense, has provided manifested advantages for both sides, while industrial development and technology transfer have occurred. In other words, political differences and conflict can manifest in trade barriers and rules preventing investments or furthering the situation cost-effectively and without avoidance or increasing conflict. Those elements represent complicated interconnections in ways economic interests are compartmentalized from political interests in the milieu of united front strategies leveraging religion.

### ***Local Economic Impacts***

As social phenomena, religious activities have a large influence on local tourism and the industries that support them, and offer the same potential from an economic perspective to consider. For example, in Taiwan, the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage, which attracts millions of worshipers each year, supports the growth of goods and services, for example hospitality, food, transportation, etc. along the procession route, leading to significant economic benefits. However, based on these seemingly innocent outcomes, whether, or not, it leads to, for instance the appropriation of Economics for political means or economic actors or institutions to further a political agenda, thus establishing latent threat outside of religion to local economies.

In political economy, this could be described as a form of "soft power"; taking advantage or utilizing economic tools to shift political influence. For example, some organizations that are in a belief motivate may use considerable financial funds to implement a political campaign or direct their interests into policies, thus shaping the direction of local governments. More importantly, partners in, or enterprises associated in, religious groups for example through Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) agreement with Taiwan and mainland China, economic rationale becomes dependent on specific regions, which may lead to supporting cultural infiltration, political or economic agendas. This pattern is consistent with the rationale of dependency theory, where economically weak regions or states are generally thought to suffer a loss of sovereignty when relying on dominant states.

One should also consider the potential issue of cultural penetration. Some religious groups perhaps intentionally disseminate certain ideological narratives through cultural exchange programs, religious community schools or other community-based initiatives, creating pathways for local residents to embrace a different set of norms and values. Cultural penetration is often slow and hard to detect, but can have long lasting ramifications. For example, religious communities that own the media apparatus might publish and distribute content favorable to a particular political force or present an idealized version of a specific cultural identity, all the while nudging and, or changing, public opinion in stratified ways.

It is important to consider the positive aspects that religious activities have on local economic development, whilst also being mindful of the possible adverse effects of those activities. With this in mind, the government needs to increase oversight of how religious organizations manage financial assets, making sure the assets are not misused for illicit political purposes. Simultaneously, the state government should agree that cultural pluralism is a positive thing, and work to build public cultural literacy in order to diminish the encroaching ideological threat(s). This will ultimately help Taiwan maintain the sovereignty of local economies, for social diversity, and for the type of sovereignty that is freedoms based.

### ***Economic Incentives and Political Causes***

The religious united front tends to grant economic incentives in order to attract local religious organizations to participate in methods of action. Temple building and funding religious mega events are two particular methods. The economic implications of these benefits are not only instruments of political unity but also impact local communities in myriad ways. For example, sizeable religious gatherings can draw substantial crowds and provide a temporary uptick in activity for local industries such as food and beverage, lodging, and transportation, leading to a healthy local economy. But these benefits tend to last only for a limited time, and once the gathering concludes, the connected industries may see a drop in activity and possibly shrink just as quickly.

In terms of resources, religious entities may channel resource investments into very specific manufacturing sectors (e.g., production of religious paraphernalia) or cultural/creative industries. While this may indeed generate new industrial development and/or growth, the direct impact may also be monopoly-like — displacing competition and providing benefits only to an inequitable structured industry. In a similar vein, some religious entities may decide to invest religious resources into social welfare (for example, schools, hospitals, and elder care institutions), thereby providing enhanced resources to the public sphere. But providing public resources limited to religious groups on its own may diminish government authority and oversight.

What is perhaps more concerning is when religious entities engage in local elections by funding political candidates and/or mobilizing their members to influence an electoral event's political direction. When that

becomes normal practice and lacks consistent political oversight, it risks cementing corruption and weakening important democratic institutions. As such, the economic and political influence of religious united front prodding and activities must be considered over the long term to maintain a sense of stability and legitimacy of institutions in that community and draw implications for other regions in the same country or elsewhere.

Wang Yun (2023) provides additional insights to China's multifaceted influence strategies that happen through Taiwan's religious ecosystem, specifically unpacking how united front strategies, sharp power, and cognitive warfare can be intermixed in hybrid structures to influence local events. The author notes how increasing civil exchanges across the Strait create a fragile form of peace, while also providing more concern amongst Taiwanese society about China's ultimate united front strategies. Religious exchanges have become a contention: supporters argue that religious exchanges facilitate democracy and civil liberties while drawing on China's softer power. Critics argue that exchanges function as mechanisms of China's united front or sharp power strategy. In other words, religious groups may represent a proxy for China's ideation, influenced public perception, affect the outcome of elections, and create a policy decision in Taiwan.

In summary, the economic flows related to religious united front strategies can influence and control in varying facets of local economies, industrial economies, social welfare assistance, and preach political development. We need to think critically about the mechanisms involved and subsequent appropriate policy approaches, to ensure that is in the greater public interest. In addition, China's economic united front strategies — best demonstrated by the “benefiting Taiwan” policies and economic integration strategy — seeks to incentivize a favorable material outcome relevant to its economic preeminence and balance political autonomy. Political factors regarding economic cooperation with China in cross-strait relations (e.g., “Taiwanization” of ideology in Taiwan, Beijing's revised Taiwan policy towards the crisis, etc.) can all be undermined by instability — as emphasized (Zhang, Xu, & Zhang, 2023).

### **Recent Developments: Legal Governance and Law Regulation of Religion in Taiwan**

In recent years, Taiwan has been involved in a sustained discussion over the regulation of religious affairs (Laliberté, 2009). Rising geopolitical tensions, such as the near daily incursions of Chinese military aircraft in Taiwan's air defense identification zone, prompted the Ministry of National Defense to propose the creation of a “Defense Reserve Mobilization Agency,” which may include local, temple-based auxiliary volunteer groups (such as Bah Jia Jiang folk formations) bolstering local disaster-mobilization units. This suggests the growing intersection of formal religious institutions with national security and civil defense mechanisms.

Currently, the regulatory framework of religion in Taiwan relies primarily on the Constitution of the Republic of China and the Temple Supervision Ordinance, which has limited regulatory oversight of Buddhist and Taoist temples, with no enforcement provisions. A draft Religious Organizations Act was introduced to the Legislative Yuan in 2005, but has stalled as diverse religious organizations have expressed sustained opposition and lobbied against it.

If enacted, this legislation would create a formal legal framework for the registration, operation, and oversight of religious organizations. These operating frameworks often include protections for religious freedoms, provisions for legal status and tax administration, and oversight on legitimacy and operational regulations. The goal is to balance public interest with the autonomy of the religious institution, and not conflict with social order and public safety when providing religious freedom. It may also encourage fair and equal treatment of diverse religious communities, contributing to religious pluralism and social inclusivity.

Nonetheless, the draft law raises significant controversy around clauses relating to financial transparency and requirements to report donations. This demonstrates and continues longstanding tensions regarding the balancing of needs for accountability against the need for protection for autonomy. Transparency is necessary to protect institutions from funding from unsavory activities and politics and to maintain the integrity of democracy. However, excessive scrutiny of internal religious practices and events could blur the line between accountability and independence.

In summary, Taiwanese society, through processes of ongoing conversation and a deliberative approach to reforming laws, is reassessing religious legislation, revealing the limits of religious legal frameworks, and adjusts to emerging social norms regarding religious governance and the role of a changing, 'new' civil society. It may be possible to create a legal context that respects the autonomy of religious organizations while pursuing the common good. Legislation to balance the public's right to require accountability for freedom, while giving credibility to a “new” civil society is an ethical and political decision for government, communities of faith, and civil society. Reflections on the Draft Religious Organizations Act:

*The long-delayed Religious Organizations Act—first introduced in 1929 and under legislative review since 1993—has faced persistent opposition from religious groups, particularly regarding provisions on financial transparency and donation reporting.*

The Temple Supervision Ordinance is a product of early Republican-era thinking about religious governance in Taiwan that largely focuses on regulating Buddhist and Taoist temples—probably due to the prominent role

of these two traditions in the provincial landscape at the time. The regulatory focus of this ordinance may not fully meet the demands of Taiwan's growing pluralism around religion, indicating limitations in the legal regime's ability to support religious pluralism. On the other hand, the long-discussed draft Religious Organizations Act has become a point of contention, especially in regards to provisions on donations and financial reporting. The debates reflect a long-standing tension between demands for financial transparency and demands to protect freedom of religion. Financial reporting and disclosures are recognized as simply necessary in terms of addressing foreign interference and ensuring democratic integrity, but too much intrusion into the internal life of religious organizations is a risk to autonomy and independence.

Changes in religious law and surrounding discussions not only reveal stagnant structural limitations of current laws but also reflect changing hopes and expectations for religious governance within society. If the public debate and legislative changes continue to work together, they can be created to balance respect for religious autonomy and the needs of public good. Additionally, the management of this tension is not limited to religion, legislators, and oftentimes, civil society. Instead, it applies to all three parties to adjust, monitor, and facilitate a competent governance approach to regulating religion for the public good and agency for religious organizations.

Opponents of the draft Religious Organizations Act argue that it compromises one or another aspects of freedom of religion and democracy, while proponents frame it as being complementary to anti-infiltration legislation in the face of the tactic of China's united front. As Professor Ku Ming-chun of National Tsing Hua University notes,

*Temples may serve as conduits for political infiltration, and financial transparency is critical to preventing local collaborators from being incentivized by external actors. In this context, the Religious Organizations Act assumes strategic significance—not merely as a regulatory instrument, but as a safeguard against foreign interference in Taiwan's democratic processes. Whether the law can effectively enhance financial transparency and mitigate infiltration risks remains a key question for future policy design.*

The emerging role of temple organizations as prospective pathways for infiltration in the context of a united front must be viewed with consternation. As a foundational concept for enhancing accountability, such as the prevention of foreign interference in our democracy, positive financial transparency is the cornerstone here. When religious organizations are not financially transparent, collaborators may be economically incentivized to allow external influence, thus threatening democratic institutions.

In light of this, the legislative enactment of the Religious Organizations Act has particular importance in its formulation. While it can be viewed as an adjunct to sort through or limit infiltration legislation, it can also serve a purpose beyond regulating religious affairs and function as a bulwark for democratic integrity against encroaching foreign influence. Whether this form and structure of the law can achieve financial transparency within religious organizations, and mitigate the chance of infiltration, is a concern for both future policy design and institutional accountability.

By enhancing financial visibility, the legislation may also improve the trust of the public in religious organizations, and create a foundation for healthy religious belief to flourish. Since this issue relates to numerous interests, a broader societally engaged deliberation is necessary in order to find a viable, just, and detailed resolution between religious freedom, democratic resiliency, and national security.

That is to say, Taiwan's Religious Organizations Act and China's united front strategies understand two separate domains which may, under certain conditions, overlap and influence. The Religious Organizations Act in Taiwan seeks to regulate and have of religious affairs within the territorial bounds of Taiwan. In comparison, the Chinese government may execute political influence over Taiwan's religious sector through united front tactics, acting in the purpose of political or unification objectives. The nature of means of exerting influence can be sponsoring religious activities, cultural exchanges, or trying to encourage specific political perspective from religious leaders.

This form of outreach is genuinely concerning in Taiwan given the scope of religion as well as the implications it may have on public attitude and political opinions. The dimension of politics may very well impact social development and national governance. To consider all of this, Taiwan must be diligent in creating political space and distance to alleviate the concerns of interference from religious organizations and rule of law. Importantly, deterrence to intrusive external interference must be made in order to preserve democratic integrity and validate the operational body of religious organizations apart from politically invasive forms of manipulation.

*A recent investigation by Taiwan's Ministry of the Interior into the "Straits Youth Group" affiliated with the Taiwan Provincial Taoist Association highlights these concerns. The group was suspected of recruiting Taiwanese youth under the guise of religious exchange, potentially serving as a channel for Chinese united front activities. The Ministry pledged to pursue the matter legally and emphasized zero tolerance for political manipulation under the cover of religion.*

The Ministry of the Interior's inquiry into the "Taiwan Province Taoist Association Straits Youth Group" highlights the government's growing concern for political infiltration in religious exchanges. This is fully consistent with a non-compromise, zero-tolerance level of intelligence policing on non-Chinese use of religion

for united front actions and the degree of attention Taiwan places on maintaining a safe, national security for its democratic institutions. In conjunction, however, the Ministry wants to emphasize that cross-strait religious exchanges must take place in acknowledgment of rules that allow the concept of respect (reciprocity) and dignity. These rules not only morally respect the idea of religious freedom but are also intended to create conditions that ensure a fair and respectful level of religious exchange.

This regulation of ideas shows how the government is walking a fine line of the potential for protecting the religious liberty of their citizens while they protect the sovereignty of Taiwan against cross-strait concerns. If done right, these guidelines can limit or stave off hostile influences, while still accomplishing an atmosphere of healthy and transparent levels of religious exchange. However, a very delicate line is at play: if the enforcement turns into someone using this rule or regulation against being hostile or neutral in their religious group, and thereby advancing their own agenda or interference attempts to break down a legitimate functioning religious organization (or civil society). There are necessary signals to err on the side of least disruption while keeping institutions intact.

More controversially, some are suggesting putting temples, on the one hand, into militarized organizations as how they can play a role as an auxiliary armed forces organization on the other, when there is a potential to attack Iraq. This rhetoric can really add to exchange tensions associated with religious affairs across the Taiwan straits. Hong Ming-De and Huang En-Hao, write 2022, appropous, "Examples of the Chinese Communist Party effort to finance sponsorship for Taiwanese citizen travel to mainland China and increase kinship sense with China." There are further identified patterns of influence operations rooted in culture, religious, and political efforts, and discursive interactions with increase ongoing issues of sovereignty and national identity over the religious.

To attempt to understand or evaluate how susceptible Taiwanese religious organizations are to united front strategies, the following matrix illustrates religious identity exchange strength versus national identity frame interactions or weight.

**Table 1.** Religious Exchange and National Identity in Taiwan

<b>Taiwan National Identity</b>	<b>Strong Religious Identity</b>	<b>Weak Religious Identity</b>
Strong	Resistant to infiltration	Moderately resistant
Weak	Highly vulnerable	Most vulnerable

This framework highlights how the association of religious and national identity affects ability to resist political co-option. There are four possibilities for consideration outlined:

1. The identity of the organization is strong religious and strong national: Religious organizations with high degrees of cultural autonomy and some political consciousness are the least likely to experience co-option by the CCP.
2. The identity of the organization is strong religious and weak national: A cultural affiliation is developed through cross-strait engagement, meaning the organization is more likely to experience co-option.
3. The identity of the organization is weak religious and strong national: While the religious authority is limited, a strong ideological identification as a political actor can provide some protection against co-option.
4. The identity of the organization is weak religious and weak national: The organization lacks the cultural or political protection to prevent being co-opted, therefore they are the most susceptible to co-option.

Overall, the emphasis on building the local religious identity and political consciousness of the religious authority is a critical mechanism to resist United Front co-option.

As an illustrative example, Chien-Yuan Sher et al. (2024), presents research when religion can act as a mediator for Chinese influence in electoral politics in Taiwan. More specifically, they examine Mazu temples as instruments for the United Front strategy. The Mazu belief system in Taiwan has deep cultural ties to the mainland, and since 2014, the CCP has engaged more in cross-strait outreach efforts to Mazu temples. The new tie could create a sense of obligation for temple leaders to encourage voting.

Sher et al. finds that the location of voters near Mazu temples, and if there are high densities of voters, can contribute to the electoral support of pro-China candidates. The high density of temples within urban areas had the biggest impact on drive pro-China voting patterns, while the same dynamic in rural villages had little impact. They specifically outline how urban voters that lived near Mazu temples articulated high support for pro-China political parties in the 2018 and 2020 elections. In contrast, they do not find a similar effect in village polling. This suggest that Mazu temples might sway voters in their community through local ideological means of mobilization and provides further empirical evidence for the intersect of religion and politics in Taiwan. Lastly, there are again, three regional dimensions for political and economic religious involvement.

### ***Political-Religious Collaborations:***

Politicians and religious organizations engage in reciprocal relationships. Political actors engage as policy facilitators while religious organizations provide endorsement of voting or participation for a strength in religious. Religious engage in a lower number of resources to sustain their sacred status while enhancing influence on their followers.

#### ***Economic Leverage with Political Strategy.***

The CCP has leveraged the use of monetary incentive such as funding the construction of Mazu temples, even to promote Mazu temple events in hopes of attracting Taiwanese religious organizations by financially supporting their political agenda. Economic incentives that emerge from social situations on temple events or temple renovations in exchange for power are in direct contrast with Taiwan's independence.

#### ***Strategic Economic Integration:***

China outlines plans of inclusion for Taiwan under the economic agenda through trade agreements and cooperation ventures in which their plan to build allegiance to the region. Some economic integration creates, albeit sometimes inadvertently, pathways for cultural and political leverage into Taiwan, which undermines Taiwan's economic autonomy.

In conclusion, the interference of religion, national identity, and the economic strategy is a maze of active engagement with cross-strait status quo. To mitigate against Taiwan's democratic and cultural autonomy, legal governance, civic consciousness, and institutional transparency must be taken as a priority, natural next step of this conversation.

## **ISSUES AND ANALYSIS**

### **Religious United Front Strategies and Taiwan's Democratic Resilience**

Currently, Taiwan is dealing with the heightened impact of China's operations related to the religious united front. These operations raise a whole set of complex issues and analytic perspectives that deserve more rigorous attention.

#### ***Religious United Front Strategy Defined***

Religious united front work involves a strategic use of religion to influence public opinion and political opinion in Taiwan. Tactics involved include financing religious institutions, organized cultural exchanges, and ideological guidance for religious leaders. These actions exhibit the Chinese government's larger agenda of mobilizing religious communities to promote its agenda of cross-strait unification. A critical perspective is warranted regarding the political implications and consequences for social life of religious united front work.

#### ***The Reactions of Taiwanese Religious Organizations***

Taiwanese religious organizations are responding to these outside pressures in a variety of ways depending on the situation. Some groups maintain local religious traditions and reject any engagement with the Chinese, while other religious organizations accept engagement with China based in part on economic support. These actions, and what may appear to be competing responses, are dependent on specific histories of the organizations, particular theological orientations of the groups, and interpretations of social stability. These variables will be analyzed within a context through research around religious identity change and autonomy of organizations.

#### ***Political Responses to Political Actions and Legal Responses***

At the level of the state, Taiwan has responded to these challenges through both. It remains a challenging question whether this legislation can truly protect religious freedom and social pluralism. Policymakers must balance the need for regulation and exercise of this right generally, especially in politicized religious contexts.

#### ***Religion and Electoral Politics***

The relationship between religion and electoral politics further complicates the situation. Taiwanese religious organizations potentially support specific political actors and influence the behavior of voters. Certain studies have demonstrated that particular religious institutions have the functions of political mobilizations as a consequence of faith-based network organized. Therefore, more research is needed to determine the social mechanisms that create interactions between religion and political participation.

The implications of these events can be hypothesized into five frameworks of analysis:

#### ***Changes in Political Power***

Religious organizations are becoming more critical influencers of electoral politics in Taiwan. They will provide access to mobilization networks and resources to create political alliances for candidates. If China finds ways to manipulate and use united front through religious groups, Taiwan area structures of political power and subsequent behavior of voters may be fundamentally altered, potentially threatening democratic viability and institutions, and shifting agendas toward the interests of "others."

### ***Change in Social Values***

United front strategies of religious organizations frequently contain cultural messages that are aimed at changing values at the social systems level. Ritual exchanges, and symbolic association, may lead some believers to consider China to be a positive contribution for the believers' social background, leading to transformation of national identity and political stance. This change in value orientation may be infectious, and become a normalized channel for politicized values that fade beliefs in democratic institutions and disembark on a process of erosion to national identity and integrity of local culture, which likely poses a long-term risk to the unity of the social whole.

### ***Challenge to the Principle of Religious Freedom***

Religious freedom is widely considered to be one of the democratic features of Taiwan. However, foreign funding or guidance of ideologies may lead religious institutions astray from their autonomy, leading to a lack of religious freedom. The risk of moral legitimacy of religion, and trust in the place of religion within the society as a part of the social whole are now also at risk of losing their association, or legitimacy, with the place of religion through possible politicized agendas.

### ***Risk of Economic Dependency***

China's open financial support of religious activity (e.g. support of temple investment and cultural engagement) may lead to economic dependency for those locally dependent on investments, and ultimately reduce the supporting organization to an agent of the co-opted economic organization. Under such situations, the associated local organization may derelict, compromised, or lack independence in the decisions that could impact political processes of decision-making influencing Taiwan's democratic financial social capital, and the democracies sovereignty, through its funding of religious organizations.

### ***Intensified Attention to National Security.***

These aspects triggered an additional awareness of national security issues with religious united front. The Taiwanese government needs to create regulations in its government agency for policy structure or supervision to restrict manipulation, while maintaining religious freedom, and democratic processes. The national security issues posed by united fronts are not only about current issues of policy, but an indicator of institutional capacity, and resilience of governance.

In conclusion, China's religious united front in Taiwan creates multilayered effects including change of political power, change of social beliefs and values, challenge to the principles of religious freedom, risk of economic dependency, and significant attention to national security. The effects observed as interactions of religious organizations on cross-strait issues significantly impact broader democratic structures and constructs of cultural sovereignty on Taiwan. There is a need for greater investigation into the interactions and political agendas with cross-strait religious exchange, but especially in the acknowledgment that all of this research work will be an examination of religion in the public sphere. Research was meant to address religion in the public sphere, but there is a thinking process about agendas, how they have potential or invocations of institutional consequences beyond religion. Thus, the possible or conjectured cause impacts as social problems or imbalance should be considered as a strategy for Taiwan's future policy, and development of democracy in Taiwan.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Navigating the Path of Religious Politicization**

#### ***Conclusion***

Taiwan's political system, religious institutions, and the People's Republic of China work together to create elements that are deeply complex. Changing cross-strait relations also will continue to have a deep impact on Taiwan's sociopolitical and religious environment. To address this, the Taiwanese government has pursued various measures to protect national autonomy, social stability, and religious freedom. While China pursues an authoritarian model towards religion, Taiwan views freedom of religion and belief as a foundational element of democracy. While generally influence by Chinese cultural traditions, Taiwanese religion has developed into its

own local traditions marked by pluralism and spiritual diversity. As new religions have proliferated, the government has maintained a policy of inclusion, which has contributed to an enhanced communal religious ecosystem capable of furthering inter-religious appreciation and social cohesion.

At the same time, through China's united front strategy, China seeks to influence Taiwan not only politically, but culturally, by supporting pro-China religious practices and applying cultural exchange programs to promote more favorable attitudes towards the mainland. These initiatives arguably raise questions about Taiwanese religious rights and place Taiwan's identitarian and cultural integrity at risk. The struggle between political domain and spiritual authority involve inherently tensions. Political systems govern societies through historico-institutional channels of power, while religion claims and converts to belief and moral authority. When these principles interact, either in the form of state encroachment on and interference with religious practice, or through religion heading political decisions, the public may lose faith in government, and In Taiwan's multicultural context, fairness, transparency and respect will ultimately be vital aspects of democratic resilience in both arenas. This study has specifically examined the intertwined relationship between religion and politics from theoretical and empirical perspectives; it has examined case studies, electoral behavior, and the responses from the institutions. The case studies illuminated the cultural and theological impacts religion can and does have, in shaping values, civic responsibilities and national identities. The analyses suggested being proactive and strategic use of governing practices to comply with protecting democracy and public interests by considering the increased pressures of political influence.

### ***Policy and Research Recommendations***

Taiwan must respond to the increasingly complex operation of the religious united front from China by considering how best to increase citizenship protections and safeguards for law, education and international relations. The following recommendations present the need to balance the application of religious freedom with national interests while ensuring that religion can continue to be a positive and constructive contributor to democracy.

#### ***Strengthening Laws and Oversight***

The government should revise its existing religious regulations, especially the regulations around foreign funding. Comprehensive and available financial reports will be the best way to root out political implications in local religious activity and will relieve some concerns about foreign funding or control over local church activity. Local governments will need the resources to enforce these regulations.

#### ***Increasing Transparency in Religious Governance***

Faith-based organizations should open their record-books and share the expenditures and processes around key decision-making for their organizations impact on community decisions. Local institutions can publish upcoming budgets and gathering agendas to ensure some level of future transparency and public trust in faith-based organizations, and potentially defuse political interference fears as well.

#### ***Further Citizenship Education***

Citizenship Education should include new required topics and themes; including but not limited to, cross-strait relations, religious freedoms, and governance/democracy. School resources could promote more interactive education or support programming in public media to foster critical thinking in youth and regard for united front activities; any political manipulations would be unintentional and youth would create awareness of united front actions.

#### ***Strengthen National Identity through Cultural Education***

The relationship between religious belief and national identity is deeply entrenched. Both public and private institutions should seek to elevate the education of the local culture heritage and history, to provide a more robust collective identity. Supporting southern indigenous religious studies and promotion of community or local-based religious faith and practice can further preempt and redirect a sense of co-belonging away from outside ideologies and, build the understanding of the sovereignty of the people of Taiwan.

#### ***Promote Pro-Social Faith-based Action Engagement***

Faith-based organizations should pursue engagement in public service areas like education, healthcare, environmental stewardship, and social welfare. Initiatives to partner with state institutions would enhance social contributions while analyzing steps to be taken to alleviate adverse faith-based influence, political-focus to this engagement aside.

#### ***Identify the Need for Effective Leadership and Capacity Building***

Religious leaders have significant moral and social influence; pertinent training would support local communities to safeguard against political encroachment or outperform civic ideals demanded by religious premises. Focus on ethics training, public governance, and legal norms would empower religious leaders. Furthermore, methodologies using religious dialogue or cases as a pedagogical vehicle to cultivate positive cultures for self-governance would aid in positive agreements on ethical and pastoral principles to orient local practices.

### ***Establish Risk Assessments and Early Warning Indicators***

Taiwan must consider the complex nature of the evolving nature and operation of united front mechanisms by developing risk monitoring frameworks, working with various academics and civil society vital to this risk assessment process. Developing a religious united front risk index, will help situate multiple risk touchpoints and assess possible impacts of united front implications; financial systems (flows or accountability), person exchanges (religious, travel, etc.), discourse penetrations (public transport), in potential the military or NGO type operations and media and social media oversight. The risk index will help in policy analysis and resource allocation.

### ***Advance Engagement with International Community and Solidarity among Democracies***

Taiwan has a unique experience of religious freedom that will contribute to a valuable perspective in dealing with global discourse on upholding or advancing democratization or democracy rights. Faith-based organizations should participate in the international conversation on faith and democracy/human rights/governance, in order to strengthen transnational religious ties; in efforts to work towards sustained ties and efforts in utilizing Taiwan's soft power in promoting democracy.

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