



Ecuador

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2009

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. In October 2008, the new Constitution took effect.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 109,483 square miles and a population of 13.4 million, according to the latest projections. The Episcopal Conference of the Roman Catholic Church estimates that 85 percent of the population identifies itself as Catholic, with 15 percent of the population actively practicing. The Episcopal Conference estimates attendance at mass rose slightly during the reporting period, as was the case during the previous reporting period, due to increased proselytizing by Catholic clergy. Some groups, particularly indigenous persons who live in the mountains, follow a syncretic form of Catholicism, combining indigenous beliefs with orthodox Catholic doctrine. Saints often are venerated in ways similar to indigenous deities. In the Amazon jungle region, Catholic practices often are combined with elements of shamanism.

Estimates of the number of non-Catholic Christians start at one million. Southern Baptists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostals find converts, particularly among indigenous people in the highland provinces of Chimborazo, Bolivar, Cotopaxi, Imbabura, and Pichincha, among persons who practice syncretic religions, as well as in other groups marginalized by society. Evangelical groups include the Assemblies of God, in urban areas, and the Church of the Word of God, which is growing rapidly in indigenous areas. In general, rural indigenous areas tend to be either overwhelmingly Catholic or overwhelmingly Protestant. Protestant organizations were usually divided between predominantly indigenous organizations, such as the Council of Evangelical Indigenous People and Organizations, and mestizo organizations. Many mestizos in the Guayaquil area are Protestant. In large cities, Protestant megachurches, with more than 10,000 members, continued to experience substantial growth. Hundreds of evangelical churches exist, many of which are not affiliated with a particular denomination. Some multid denominational Christian groups, such as the Gospel Missionary Union, now called Avant Ministries, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and Hoy Cristo Jesús Bendice (Today Jesus Christ Blesses), have been active for nearly 70 years.

Many registered religious groups have few members, including Anglicans, Baha'is, Buddhists, Episcopalians, Jews, Lutherans, Muslims, Eastern Orthodox believers, Presbyterians, Unification Church members, and followers of Inti, the traditional Inca sun god.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

In October 2008, the new Constitution took effect, which includes provisions guaranteeing freedom of religion, as did the prior constitution. The Constituent Assembly that drafted the Constitution debated several topics with religious undertones such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and the use of God's name in the Constitution. The name of God is invoked in the preamble to the Constitution, same-sex marriage was not included, and interpretations differ on whether the Constitution allows abortion. The new Constitution continues to grant all citizens and foreigners the right to practice publicly and freely the religion of their choice. The Constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion.

The 1937 Law of Worship requires religious groups to register with the Ministry of Government and Police. To register, a religious organization must possess a charter; have nonprofit status; include all names used by the group to ensure that names of previously registered groups are not used without their permission; and provide signatures of at least 15 members, typically leaders of the organization. In addition, a 2008 presidential decree requires all non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including churches and other religious groups, to register with the Government, identify their members, and comply with unspecified reporting requirements. All nonprofit organizations, including more than 2,200 registered religious groups, would be required to report on the expenditure of any government funding received.

The Government observes Carnival, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, All Souls' Day, and Christmas as national holidays.

The Government does not generally permit religious instruction in public schools. Private schools may provide religious instruction, as may parents in the home.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

Catholics reportedly complained the Government restricted access for ecological reasons to the Galapagos Islands, resulting in difficulties for foreign missionaries and clergy in ministering to the 14,500 resident Catholics.

Additionally, several non-Catholic groups complained that while there was no official state religion, the Catholic Church was the de facto state religion and enjoyed many privileges not available to non-Catholic groups. In 1937, the Government entered into an official legal agreement with the Holy See called the *Modus Vivendi*, which grants the Catholic Church privileges such as official passports for clergy and state funding of churches and schools. Non-Catholic religious groups criticized the use of taxpayer money to fund exclusively Catholic projects because comparable funding was not provided for their organizations.

Religious groups expressed concern over the 2008 presidential decree requiring NGOs to register with the Government. The Government states that the purpose of the decree is to ensure fiscal responsibility with regard to government funding. The Government was planning to convene a roundtable discussion with religious leaders to address their concerns and draft a new Law of Worship differentiating religious groups from NGOs. Some religious groups believed the Government could use the registration process to exert excessive control.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

In 2006, two military officers, Ivan Santi Mucushigua and Cervantes Santamaría Cuji, and a civilian, Lucio Cirilo Dahua, allegedly killed Balti Cadena, a traditional healer (yachak), and injured one of his sons, near the Amazonas Military Fort in Puyo, Pastaza Province. In 2007, the Public Prosecutor in the civilian Pastaza Province Criminal Tribunal ruled it was competent to decide the case, found the men guilty of murder, and imposed a sentence of 16 years on each of them. The defendants appealed the decision before a higher tribunal, the Supreme Court of Justice of Ecuador, which the 2008 Constitution renamed the National Court of Justice. The Court announced it was analyzing the case and would issue a final sentence; at the end of the reporting period the case was pending. The accused men were transferred from a military to a civilian prison.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Many religious groups increased outreach efforts to their counterparts during the reporting period.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom with local and visiting leaders representing a broad spectrum of religious groups.