



Ecuador

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

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 period covered by this report.

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 12.2 million (in 2001). The Catholic Episcopal Conference estimates that 85 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, with 35 percent of Catholics actively practicing. The Episcopal Conference estimates that attendance at Mass increased slightly during the period of this report, as was the case during the previous reporting period. Some groups, particularly indigenous people who live in the mountains, follow a syncretic form of Catholicism that combines indigenous beliefs with orthodox Catholic doctrine. Saints often are venerated in ways similar to indigenous deities. In the Amazon jungle region, Catholic practices are often combined with elements of shamanism.

The Evangelical Missionary Union estimates that there are one million Protestants. Southern Baptists, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Presbyterians, and Pentecostals find converts particularly among indigenous people in the Sierra provinces of Chimborazo, Bolivar, Cotopaxi, Imbabura, and Pichincha, among persons who practice syncretic religions, as well as in groups marginalized by society. Evangelical groups include the Assembly 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 entirely Catholic or entirely Protestant. Protestant organizations were usually divided between predominantly indigenous organizations, such as the Council of Evangelical Indigenous People and Organizations (FEINE), and mestizo organizations. There is a high percentage of mestizo Protestants in the Guayaquil area. In large cities, Protestant megachurches, with more than 10,000 members, continued to grow substantially. Hundreds of evangelical churches exist, and many of them are not affiliated with a particular denomination. Some multidenominational Christian groups, such as the Gospel Missionary Union, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and Hoy Cristo Jesus Bendice, have been active for more than 60 years.

Many religious groups registered with the Government have very small numbers; these include Anglicans, Baha'is, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and the Unification Church. Other groups present in small numbers are Muslims, Jews, adherents of Eastern Orthodox religions, and followers of Inti, the traditional Inca sun god.

Section II. Status of 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. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Constitution grants all citizens and foreigners the right to practice publicly and freely the religion of their choice. The only limits imposed by the Government are "those proscribed by law to protect and respect the diversity, plurality, security, and rights of others." The Constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion. In November 2007 a Constituent Assembly was convened to rewrite the constitution. The final language regarding freedom of religion had not been finalized by the end of the reporting period. It was expected that all provisions guaranteeing freedom of religion would be included in the new constitution. Several topics with religious undertones, including abortion, same-sex marriage, and the use of God's name in the constitution, were hotly debated in the Constituent Assembly.

The Government requires religious groups to be licensed or registered if they engage in proselytizing activity. Religious organizations that do not engage in such activity may still choose to register to obtain a legal identity, which is desirable when entering into contracts. Any religious organization wishing to register with the Government 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. In addition, groups must file a petition with the Ministry of Government, using a licensed attorney, and pay a \$100 registration fee. It was not known whether the Ministry of Government would continue this function if and when the new constitution is adopted.

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 have complete liberty to provide religious instruction, as do 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 period covered by this report. Catholics reportedly complained that the Government restricted access for ecological reasons to the Galapagos Islands, resulting in difficulties for foreign missionaries to minister to the 14,500 resident Catholics.

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

Abuses of Religious Freedom

On August 27, 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. The Public Prosecutor, in a civilian court, charged the two military officers with murder. At the end of the reporting period, the case had not gone to trial.

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 of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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 period covered by this report.

Muslim leaders reported that members of their community occasionally experienced random discrimination

when applying for work or housing. Muslim leaders described this random discrimination as "more cultural, as opposed to religious."

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 staff discussed religious freedom with local and visiting leaders representing the Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim communities, as well as with various Protestant groups.

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