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Ecuador

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

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

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 14.8 million. The Roman Catholic Church estimates 85 percent of the population identifies itself as Catholic, with 15 percent of the population actively practicing. As during the previous reporting period, the Catholic Church estimates that attendance at Mass rose slightly due to increased proselytizing. Some groups, particularly indigenous persons who live in the highlands, follow a syncretic form of Catholicism that combines indigenous beliefs with orthodox Catholic doctrine. 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, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostals find converts among persons who practice syncretic religions, particularly among indigenous people in the highland provinces of Chimborazo, Bolivar, Cotopaxi, Imbabura, and Pichincha, and 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. 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 decades.

Many registered religious groups, 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, have few members.

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.

The constitution took effect in 2008. It includes provisions for freedom of religion, as did the prior constitution. The constitution grants all citizens and foreigners the right to practice publicly and freely the religion of their choice and prohibits discrimination based on religion.

The 1937 Law of Worship requires religious groups to register with the Ministry of Interior. To register, a religious organization must possess a charter; have nonprofit status; include in its application 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, Presidential Decree 982 from 2008 requires all nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including churches and other religious groups, to register with the government. All nonprofit organizations, including more than 2,200 registered religious groups, are required to report on the expenditure of any government funding received. The Ministry of Interior convened discussions with religious leaders to address their concerns about the Law of Worship and the presidential decree.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Carnival, Good Friday, All Souls' Day, and Christmas.

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.

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.

Some religious groups have chosen not to comply with 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. A few religious groups believe the government could use the registration process to exert excessive control, while others find the requirement to list members to be excessive and a violation of a citizen's right to practice freely.

Catholic leaders affirmed that the problem of restricted access to the Galapagos Islands in recent years due to ecological concerns had been resolved.

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Abuses of Religious Freedom

On November 13, 2009, the National Court of Justice upheld the 16-year sentences of three men for the murder of a traditional healer. 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 to a higher tribunal, the National Court of Justice, before 2008 known as the Supreme Court of Justice of Ecuador.

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

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

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.

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.

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