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Ecuador

International Religious Freedom Report 2003

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND LABOR

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of approximately 109,500 square miles, and its population was estimated to be 12,200,000 in 2001, when the last census was conducted. The General Registry of Religious Entities has registered approximately 3,000 different religious groups, churches, societies, Christian fraternities, and foundations.

Together with the military and the Government, the Roman Catholic Church is viewed widely as one of the three pillars of society. The overwhelming majority of the population considers itself to be at least nominally Roman Catholic. Some groups, especially indigenous people who live in the mountains, follow a brand of Catholicism that combines indigenous beliefs with orthodox Catholic doctrine. Saints often are venerated in ways similar to how indigenous deities were venerated.

Some multi-denominational Christian groups, such as the Gospel Missionary Union, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, and Hoy Cristo Jesus Bendice, have been active in the country for many years. Other active Protestant groups include the Evangelical Group, World Vision, and the Summer Institute of Linguistics, which operates in remote areas with the objective of translating the Bible into indigenous languages.

The combination of poverty, neglect, and syncretistic practices in urban and rural areas created conditions that were conducive to the spread of Protestant missionary and Pentecostal evangelical activity. Southern Baptists, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostals have been successful in finding converts in different parts of the country, particularly among indigenous

people in the Sierra provinces of Chimborazo and Pichincha, persons who practice syncretic religions, and groups that are marginalized by society.

The following faiths also are present in the country, but in relatively small numbers: Baha'i, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Rosicrucians, the Unification Church, and the Church of Scientology, as well as Eastern Orthodox and other Christian denominations such as Anglican, Assembly of God, Episcopalian, Lutheran and Presbyterian. Two relatively new groups are the Native American churches of Itzachilatan, whose adherents practice indigenous healing rites and nature worship, and the followers of Inti, the traditional Inca sun god. Atheists also exist.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Constitution grants all citizens and foreigners the right to practice the faith of their choice freely, in public or in private; the only limits are "those proscribed by law to protect and respect the diversity, plurality, security, and rights of others." The Constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion.

The Government does not require religious groups to be licensed or registered unless they engage in commercial activity. Religious organizations that do not engage in commercial activity may still choose to register to obtain a legal identity, which is useful when entering into contracts. Any religious organization wishing to register with the Government must possess a charter and be in 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 35 members. In addition, groups must file a petition with the Ministry of Government using a licensed attorney, and pay a \$40 registration fee.

At the political level, the Government retains strong ties to the Vatican; the Papal Nuncio is the customary dean of the diplomatic corps.

The Government permits missionary activity and religious demonstrations by all religions.

The Government does not permit religious instruction in public schools; private schools have complete liberty to provide religious instruction, as do parents in the home. There are no restrictions on publishing religious materials in any language.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted

States.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Although relations between religious communities generally have been amicable, there have been a few incidents of interreligious or intrareligious tension or violence during periods prior to that covered by this report.

In general religious tensions tend to be intrareligious and largely stem from power struggles and personality differences.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

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