U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Ecuador

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected 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 religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues 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 estimated at 12.2 million in 2001. The Catholic Episcopal Conference estimated that 85 percent of the population was Roman Catholic, with 35 percent of Catholics actively practicing. Some groups, particularly indigenous people who lived in the mountains, followed a syncretic form of Catholicism that combined indigenous beliefs with orthodox Catholic doctrine. Saints often were venerated in ways similar to indigenous deities. In the Amazonian jungle region, Catholic practices were often combined with elements of shamanism.

The Evangelical Missionary Union estimated that there were one million Protestants in the country. While Protestant conversions traditionally have been among the lower classes, there were growing numbers of professionals converting to Protestantism. Southern Baptists, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Presbyterians, and Pentecostals have successfully found converts in different regions, particularly among indigenous people in the Sierra provinces of Chimborazo, Bolivar, Cotopaxi, Imbabura, and Pichincha, especially among persons who practiced syncretic religions, as well as in groups marginalized by society. Other popular evangelical groups included the Assembly of God in urban areas and the Church of the Word of God, which was growing rapidly in indigenous areas. In general, rural indigenous areas tended to be either entirely Catholic or entirely Protestant.

Hundreds of evangelical churches existed, and many of them were not connected 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 sixty years.

Many of the religious groups registered with the Government had very small numbers; these included Anglicans, Baha'is, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and the Unification Church. Other groups present in small numbers were Muslims, Jews, and adherents of Eastern Orthodox religions. There were also followers of Inti, the traditional Inca sun god, and some atheists, but there were no reliable statistics on the size of these smaller groups.

In big cities, Protestant mega-churches, with more than ten thousand members, were a growing phenomenon. There was a high percentage of mestizo Protestants in the Guayaquil area.

Protestant organizations were usually divided between predominantly indigenous organizations, such as the Council of Evangelical Indigenous People and Organizations (FEINE), and mestizo organizations.

Organized foreign missionary groups working in the country included Southern Baptists, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostals. Other missionaries were nondenominational or affiliated with independent churches.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did 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 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 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 fifteen members. In addition, groups must file a petition with the Ministry of Government, using a licensed attorney, and pay a $100 registration fee. During the period covered by this report, the Government worked to standardize the registration process for religious groups.

The Government permits missionary activity and public religious expression by all religious groups.

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. However, there were some schools offering religious instruction that received both private funds from the Catholic Church and public funds from the Ministry of Education.

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

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government and civil society as part of its overall efforts to promote human rights. U.S. embassy staff met with leaders of numerous religious communities, including representatives of the Catholic Church, the Jewish community, and Protestant groups, to monitor the status of religious freedom in the country.

Released on September 15, 2006

International Religious Freedom Report Home Page