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Religious Groups, Ecuadoran Government at Odds Over Proposed Constitution

by LADB Staff
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Ecuador's draft Constitution goes to voters on Sept. 28 in a national referendum (see NotiSur, 2008-08-08). While it appears that the proposed national charter, authored and approved by allies of President Rafael Correa, has broad popular support, a number of Christian religious groups have protested some parts of the document. At issue are reproductive rights and some wording in the preamble that the Christian groups claim privileges indigenous religions over Christian notions of God. Public statements by the critical religious groups and the populist President Correa have led to fighting between his administration and the church groups.

Possibility of abortion, gay marriage bring Catholic opposition

The war of words broke out between President Correa and various Christian organizations regarding a few issues. Even before the passage of the draft Constitution on July 25, clerics were describing the document as "abortiva" (pro-abortion), claiming it could lead to the decriminalization of medical procedures that terminate pregnancies.

The complaint is that the Constitution would not completely and absolutely ban abortions, leaving the door open for women to gain legal access to the procedure. Religious sectors also feared that the document might extend marriage rights to homosexual couples.

The Consejo Ecuatoriano de Laicos Catolicos (CELCA) had announced that it would begin workshops in every parish against the Constitution. The body called for "the name of God" to be privileged in Titulo 1 of the Constitution, for the Constitution to "perceive as imperative 'Christian ethical values,' so that they are promoted and practiced in the statutes of social, political, juridical, and cultural organizations," and for the constitutional definition of marriage to be "a solemn contract between a woman and man who decide to live together to procreate and mutually support each other."

CELCA called for the "consecration of the disposition that obliges the protection of life from conception." It also sought the removal of obligatory voting. Correa lashed back, calling the leadership of the Catholic Church "ultraconservatives" who were aligned with opposition parties. He called for Ecuadorans to read the text of the 444-article draft Constitution so they would see that the document was not pro-abortion.

"I believe the bishops have made a mistake, or maybe they have read a document that was still in preparation, because Article 45 of the new Constitution says that the state will protect life from conception. There is a great error or they are lying. One must have an imagination to say that the door is being opened to abortion. They are looking for the fifth leg on the cat," said Correa. The document says that "the state will recognize and guarantee life, including care and protection from conception, as part of the rights of children."
But the opposition says the comma creates ambiguity in the text without establishing protection from conception. Paccha Mama versus Dios The "name of God" issue flared up around the inclusion of Paccha Mama (Mother Earth) in the text of the Constitution, a mention that precedes mention of God. Catholics and evangelicals attacked the preamble of the document, while indigenous leaders said the groups were misunderstanding indigenous cosmology. In the preamble, among the reasons for which the new Constitution is established, the document states, "We, the sovereign people of Ecuador, celebrating nature, Paccha Mama, of which we are all part and which is vital to our existence...."

Later, in the chapter on the rights of nature, Article 71 says, "Nature or Paccha Mama, where life is reproduced, is entitled to integral respect for its existence...." Evangelical pastor Francisco Loor said, "It worries us that an Inca deity is being invoked, Paccha Mama is a cult, a divinity, there is indigenous worship of Paccha Mama and to be included in the Constitution is like regressing back in time hundreds of years when they worshipped the fire and the air."

Jose Pilamunga, a Constituent Assembly member from indigenous peoples' Pachakutik party, said, "Paccha Mama is the environment where we live, while Pachakamak is our creator, God for the Catholics or Jehovah for the evangelicals." The Federacion de Indigenas Evangelicos del Ecuador (FEINE) said it did not object and saw the inclusion of Paccha Mama as "celebratory and decorative."

Spokesperson Marco Murillo said FEINE did not consider there to be a contradiction between the two concepts, "since the preamble has no legal ambit, but rather is celebratory. In reality, we have not paid much attention to this issue."

**Church leaders claim to receive threats**

Church leaders said Correa's declarations encouraged unidentified groups to threaten the church. Antonio Arregui, head of the Conferencia Episcopal Ecuatoriana (CEE), said on Aug. 4 that there had been "threats" because of the church's decision to undertake a "peaceful" battle against the Constitution.

The Ecuadoran government tried to go over the heads of the nation's prelates, sending a message to Pope Benedict XVI on Aug. 12, showing that the proposed Constitution was not pro-abortion. Minister of Policy Coordination Ricardo Patino reiterated the administration's position that the document would not decriminalize abortion.

Correa "has asked the cardinal to transmit to His Holiness, the pope, the message that, as long as he is the president of the republic...here there will be no decriminalization or no other form of abortion beyond those that are currently considered under Ecuadoran legislation," and which have been in place for many years, said Patino. He referred to therapeutic abortion, permitted when there is risk of the mother dying, among other medical causes.

But the conflict between the CEE and the government continued in subsequent days, according to regional media sources. Maria Isabel Moran of the Movimiento Bolivariano presented a criminal
complaint against Arregui, accusing him of failing to comply with a treaty signed between Ecuador and the Vatican in 1937, in which the church "should abstain from participating in politics."

While the political opposition to Correa is generally weak and unable to gather broad public support, the nation's religious institutions may form a serious political threat to Correa's reform efforts. Sunday sermons were preached against the charter, although Arregui claimed that "every citizen is free to vote," despite his clerics' trying to "form Christian consciences."

Polling firm Informe Confidencial found that "75% of the [Ecuadoran] population trusts the Church, while the credibility of the president has fallen to 59%." But the numbers do not look bleak for the Correa administration. In a poll released on Aug. 26, about 53% of Ecuadorans would vote "Yes" on the draft charter while 23% would vote "No." SP Investigacion y Estudios finished the poll on Aug. 23 after speaking with 4,970 voters in 24 provinces, with a margin of error of 4%. In the referendum, 51% of the valid ballots would have to favor the Constitution for it to be passed into law.

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