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Secularism under attack in Ecuador
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The concept of a secular state (estado laico) transcends the simple notion of separation of church and state because it is a concept that guarantees freedoms, such as the freedom of thought and freedom of conscience, that are essential foundations of the modern state (NotiSur, July 5, 2013). Nevertheless, this precept is being destroyed in Ecuador, not only because the government uses public money to fund the Pope’s visit or because it supports the construction of an Islamic mosque, but because it is making policy on the basis of religious concepts, even as it appears to publicly confront religious authorities and sanctions an opposition television channel for airing a scene of a reality show in which an adolescent is vilified for declaring herself to be an atheist.

Practicing Catholic in power
At the beginning of his presidency, when Rafael Correa announced that he was a “practicing Catholic,” there was little public reaction. This was because Ecuador is considered a profoundly religious country – 81% of Ecuadorans who claim a religious affiliation say they are Catholic (NotiSur, Oct. 23, 2009). The country has the second highest proportion of Catholics in Latin America, surpassed only by Paraguay.

Among Ecuadoran leftists, the president’s profession of faith was also well received since his resume listed voluntary service in the Andean highlands, an activity that brought together Catholics identified with Liberation Theology, the movement that incorporated religion and the gospel as the political grounding for the struggle for social transformation, including armed conflict.

A first sign of what can happen if a government official acts in accordance with his religious beliefs emerged on June 12, 2009, when Correa issued Decree 1780 authorizing the Interior Ministry to sign agreements intended to incorporate the socio-economic and cultural life of all inhabitants of the Amazonian provinces with the Catholic missions, which have historically penetrated the region to evangelize the native population. When he issued this decree, Correa invoked the Modus Vivendi agreement signed by Ecuador and the Holy See on July 24, 1937.

Various sectors of society – including the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana (CONFENIAE) – rejected Decree 1780. The CONFENIAE argued that the government intended to re-evangelize the people of the Amazon and then submit them to the interests of the state and foreign religions, thus contributing to the annihilation of ancestral nationalities and peoples – their identity, existence and self-determination. Despite the opposition, Decree 1780 is still in force.

On many occasions, Correa’s religious convictions have led him to assert that certain things won’t happen while he is president because they are against his religious beliefs. With that argument, he has opposed abortion, even in cases of rape; marriage equality for gays; and the distribution of condoms to adolescents. Likewise, he has promoted sexual abstinence as a way of preventing early pregnancy and the transmission of sexual diseases (NotiSur, April 17, 2015).
In this context, the continuous confrontations with the Catholic leadership, or the penalty the Secretaría Nacional de Comunicación imposed on a television station after an adolescent was vilified on air for saying she was an atheist, are simply ways the government hides its theocratic nature.

“It’s difficult to assimilate these new thoughts that arise from official circles where the leader’s profession of faith dictates state policy,” said Felipe Adolf, president of the Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias (CLAI). Adolf noted that the last time there was an open debate on the meaning and reach of a secular state in Ecuador was in 1995, after the introduction of a bill called the “law of educational freedom for Ecuadoran families.” Ironically, that bill would have established the Catholic religion as the nucleus of the education system. As a result of the debate it provoked, the bill did not become law.

The CLAI and the Plataforma Interamericana de Derechos Humanos are trying to revive this debate through conversations between social organizations and the government, finding it necessary to build political proposals outside the religious context to guarantee the survival of freedoms, dignity and life for everyone.

Other attacks on secularism

One of the central themes of these proposed conversations is the analysis of freedoms in Ecuador in light of the fact that the main goal of a secular state is to recognize the diversity and the legitimacy of political action by all diverse groups. The freedom of religion is one of these liberties, one that cannot be exercised if, within the government, Catholicism is seen as a synonym for the common good.

Milton Luna, a teacher at the Universidad Católica and the national coordinator at the Contrato Social por la Educación en el Ecuador, said that the main danger Ecuador faces as a secular state is the systematic construction of a collective fear that results in a society where freedoms are curtailed, not only by the government, but also by individuals and organizations themselves as they seek to avoid political retaliation or stigmatization.

A government acts as a theocracy when it restricts, for example, freedom of expression or freedom of assembly, two concepts that add up to freedom of conscience. President Correa’s habit of discrediting the thinking of those who do not support his regime, the political persecution and judicial harassment of opposition leaders, the efforts to homogenize education, privileging technical instruction over humanist and multinational training are all examples of how secularism is being dismantled. Any project that seeks the homogenization of society, Luna said, is anti-secular.

In a democracy, respect for others requires an understanding of who these others are and acceptance of their proposals. The disregard for the proposals made by the indigenous communities, for example, is not only racist, but also becomes an element against the secular character of the government as established by the Ecuadoran Constitution. Likewise, contempt for proposals from the women’s movement is another manifestation of a threat to the viability of the secular state.

Is spirituality an answer?

The concept of spirituality shouldn’t necessarily have to be related to a church. It can become an element of social transformation, especially once the notion of the sacred is redefined, as it provides
a way to move from a business-oriented mentality and toward environmentally conscious behavior. (NotiSur, Aug. 29, 2008).

This thinking, according to the academic and political scientist Natalia Sierra, is one of the characteristics of the younger generation. It is, for example, what characterized Yasunidos, a collective mainly of Ecuadorans between the ages of 15 and 25 who fight against exploiting petroleum in the ITT fields, which would cause the disappearance of peoples who live in voluntary isolation in the region (NotiSur, May 16, 2014).

For these young people, what is sacred is the Pachamama (Mother Earth in the Quechua language), and therefore it is what must be protected under this new conceptualization of spirituality that doesn’t require affiliation to official religions.

According to Sierra, this new spirituality is increasingly being discussed at universities. Without becoming dogma, it facilitates understanding and incorporation of new knowledge in the academic world, strengthening the secular spirit that should characterize this community. In this sense, the indigenous cosmic vision, which promotes harmony between humans, the community and nature, can become a social and political guide for new generations while respecting diversity – even including ideas from the neoliberal West that could benefit the community, such as technology to produce clean energy.

The task is difficult, and in Ecuador’s political climate, it would seem impossible. Nevertheless, as social protests grow, the possibilities of reopening the debate over secularism in Ecuador advances as well. In the end, freedoms are at stake.

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