

ECUADOR 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution grants individuals the right to choose, practice, and change religions, and prohibits discrimination based on religion. The government requires religious groups to register with the Ministry of Justice, Human Rights, and Cults, although many smaller groups have not done so. Religious leaders stated municipal governments helped them to navigate the bureaucratic procedures necessary to maintain places of worship. As of the end of the year, a case remained pending before the constitutional court involving a conflict between Jehovah's Witnesses and an indigenous community over the construction of a place of worship and centered on whether the indigenous community's right to self-determination should take precedence over the free practice of religion. In August the government sent a letter of protest to the Vatican, stating the Archbishop of Guayaquil involved himself in the country's internal politics by calling for a credible national dialogue between the government and political opposition. The Episcopal Conference of Ecuador responded the Catholic Church had a moral responsibility to promote a "sincere dialogue and social peace."

The Ecuador Atheist Association presented a case to the government media body over discriminatory comments against an atheist participant on a televised talent show.

U.S. embassy representatives met with government officials and local authorities to promote religious freedom, facilitation of the registration of religious groups, and support for interfaith dialogue. Embassy and consulate officials met with leaders of different religious communities to discuss religious freedom, societal respect for religious diversity, and their relations with the government and other religious communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 15.9 million (July 2015 estimate). According to a 2012 survey by the Ecuadorian National Institute of Statistics and Census, approximately 92 percent of the population professes a religious affiliation or belief. Of those, 80.4 percent is Roman Catholic; 11.3 percent is evangelical Christian, including Pentecostals; and 1.3 percent is Jehovah's Witnesses. Seven percent belong to other religious groups including Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

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(Mormons), Anglicans, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Eastern Orthodox , Presbyterians, members of the Unification Church, Bahais, spiritualists, followers of Inti (the traditional Inca sun god), and indigenous and African faiths.

Some groups, particularly those in the Amazonian jungle and Choco regions, combine indigenous beliefs with Catholicism. Pentecostals draw much of their membership from indigenous people in the highland provinces. Jehovah's Witnesses have members throughout the country, with the highest concentrations in coastal areas. Many evangelical churches are not affiliated with a particular denomination. There are also practitioners of Santeria, primarily resident Cubans.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution grants all individuals the right to practice and profess publicly and freely the religion of their choice, and prohibits discrimination based on religion. It states the government has a responsibility to "protect voluntary religious practice, as well as the expression of those who do not profess any religion, and will favor an atmosphere of plurality and tolerance." Individuals have the right to change their religion.

The law requires religious groups to register with the Ministry of Justice, Human Rights, and Cults. Registration in the Register of Religious Entities provides the religious group with legal and nonprofit status. An officially registered organization is eligible to receive government funding, exemptions from certain taxes, and legal recognition as an organization with permission to operate in the country. To register, a religious group must possess a charter, 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. All nonprofit organizations, including the more than 2,200 registered religious groups, must report on the expenditure of any government funding received.

President Rafael Correa issued a presidential decree on August 4, which reformed an earlier decree regulating civil society organizations (CSOs), including religious groups. Government officials said the new decree introduced changes to make it easier for CSOs to register, such as eliminating the need for an organization to hire legal counsel, removing the obligation an organization have assets of at least

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\$4,000 prior to registration, and standardizing the registration process to bind religious, community, and other social organizations by the same requirements.

The law prohibits public schools from providing religious instruction, but private schools may provide religious instruction. There are no legal restrictions or regulations on which religious groups may establish a school.

Government Practices

As of the end of the year, a case filed by the Jehovah's Witnesses and accepted for review in September 2014 remained pending before the constitutional court. The case involves a conflict between the Jehovah's Witnesses and local residents in the community of Iluman, in the north of the country. The residents had forcibly stopped the Jehovah's Witnesses from building a new assembly hall. Two lower courts in Otavalo and Ibarra previously ruled in favor of the local residents, concluding the right to self-determination was a valid rationale for preventing the practice of religion. Representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses said they hoped to set a legal precedent with the case, which they said would establish that an indigenous community's right to self-determination could not violate individuals' rights to freely practice the religion they chose.

Catholic, Jewish, and Seventh-day Adventist representatives stated the government's standard academic calendar, which applied to private and public schools, made it more difficult for some schools to observe certain religious holidays. For example, the government's decision on September 22 to require schools to operate on some Saturdays because of concerns about El Nino compelled some religious schools to hold classes on holy days and religious holidays. Catholic representatives also stated religious schools received additional scrutiny from the government. Whereas public schools and non-religious private schools were under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education only, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Justice, Human Rights, and Cults conducted visits to religiously affiliated schools and reviewed their curricula. Some religious leaders stated regulatory burdens made it prohibitively difficult to run a private religious school.

Government officials reported they provided public funding to Catholic vicariates in the Amazon region for social projects. Representatives of the Catholic Church noted they collaborated with government institutions on social assistance projects, although they stated the government imposed restrictions on social activities by

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religious groups when the government had a more active role in that particular area. Leaders of other religious groups stated they did not seek government funding for social projects, due to internal policies or because they did not want to be subject to conditions the government might place on them.

Religious leaders stated municipal governments helped them navigate the bureaucratic procedures to obtain land titles, building permits, and other documents necessary to maintain places of worship.

The Ministry of Justice, Human Rights, and Cults provided training to religious groups to help them navigate the registration process. According to the Ministry of Justice, Human Rights, and Cults, roughly 4,000 religious groups operated in the country, although only half were actually registered with the government.

Alexis Mera, the legal advisor to President Rafael Correa, criticized Archbishop of Guayaquil Antonio Arregui on August 26 after the archbishop stated the government's call for national dialogue lacked credibility. The legal advisor called the archbishop an "insolent errand-boy" of right-wing politicians. After the legal advisor's comments, the government sent a letter of complaint to the Vatican's representative in the country, stating the archbishop had inappropriately engaged in political activity. The Episcopal Conference of Ecuador responded that the Catholic Church was not a partisan political actor, but had a moral responsibility to promote "a sincere dialogue and social peace." On September 1, the foreign minister met with the president of the Episcopal Conference to discuss the situation. The foreign minister subsequently announced they agreed "to maintain spaces of dialogue to consolidate the excellent relations between the national government and the Catholic Church."

President Correa tweeted "Heil Hitler" on April 9, in response to a tweet reporting that former president Osvaldo Hurtado had called Correa a "typical fascist" during a speech in Panama. The tweet provoked a series of critical commentaries on Twitter and was strongly condemned by the Simon Wiesenthal Center as showing "a serious lack of sensitivity towards the victims of the Holocaust."

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The judges on the television program *Ecuador Tiene Talento* (Ecuador Has Talent) on September 20 asked a 16-year-old participant about her religious beliefs. When the participant indicated that she did not believe in God, three of the four judges

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made negative references to her religious beliefs. Judge Maria Fernanda Rios told the participant, “Without God we won’t go anywhere. You think that by being self-taught, you will get to the top, [but] you are not going to do that. Do you know why? Because there are things that one cannot see, and that’s where God’s love comes in.” Subsequently, the Ecuadorian Atheist Association filed a complaint with the Superintendence of Information and Communication (Supercom). The complaint stated the program violated the communications law, which prohibits the distribution of discriminatory content. On September 29, Supercom accepted the complaint for review. On November 5, television station Ecuavisa announced that Rios would no longer serve as a judge on *Ecuador Tiene Talento* due to “the position taken [by Rios] during the different spaces of social interaction on the show,” in reference to her exchange with the atheist participant. On November 11, Supercom ruled that the judges’ comments were “discriminatory on the basis of age and religion.” It ordered Ecuavisa to issue a public apology to the atheist participant and the Ecuadorian Atheist Association.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives met with government officials and local authorities to promote religious freedom, facilitation of the registration of religious groups, and support for interfaith dialogue.

Embassy and consulate officials met with leaders of different religious communities to discuss religious freedom, societal respect for religious diversity, and their relations with the government and other religious communities.