

Ecuador Catholic church rejects compromise on new law requiring religious instruction in schools

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador--Ecuador's Roman Catholic church has rejected a proposal by eight former governmental officials that it compromise on a new law which would require two hours of religious teaching in all schools at government expense.

The officials, all former ministers of education, had proposed that the classes be offered in the schools but after normal hours and paid for by parents or interested churches, not the government.

The official's plan came amidst two weeks of street protests by students and union officials which left one student dead and at least 20 injured. Officials closed 14 high schools in Quito to try to quell the disturbances.

Meanwhile, Ecuador's Anglican archbishop Walter Crespo ended a one week hunger strike protesting the law, saying his action has brought attention to how seriously non-Catholics view the issue. And Ecuador's current Minister of Education has delayed implementation of the law for one year, saying the government needs to develop curriculum and train teachers.

Officials of the Front for the Protection of Laity met with Ecuador's newly appointed Cardinal, Monsignor Bernardino Echeverria to ask his influence in having the law annulled.

The law, proposed by the Ecuadorian Episcopal Conference (Roman Catholic) was approved by Ecuador's congress in September, and signed by president Sixto Duran Ballen in October. Challenged by local groups, the law was declared unconstitutional by the Tribunal of Constitutional Guarantees, a governmental watchdog group which carries no legal authority. In December, by a 3-2 vote, the law was declared constitutional by the country's Supreme Court. The two judges voting against the constitutionality were both former Ministers of Education.

The legislation mandates two hours of religious teaching in all public and private elementary and secondary schools in the country at governmental expense. Any of the 400 registered religious bodies in the country may provide teachers.

The conciliatory proposal by former ministers of education was an attempt to calm the controversy which has severely divided the nation. The proposal would have the congress annul the law, and replace it with legislation which would permit local churches to provide teachers in schools as extra-curricular activities at their own expense, or the expense of the parents.

Previous negotiation while the law was under consideration by the congress had permitted parents to remove their children from the required classes if they wish. Under the law, children must

attend the classes (unless exempted), but do not have to earn a passing grade.

Church officials have rejected the new proposal, but say they are still open to dialogue with Protestants and other groups opposed.

Monsignor Antonio Arregui said the proposal had positive aspects because it would be necessary to make certain the law meets the wishes of all parents, regardless of their faith.

The archbishop said it was also positive because it attempted to address the issue legally rather than through civil disobedience. Numerous opposition groups have called for civil disobedience rather than submit to the law.

Episcopal Conference president Jose Mario Ruiz said the former education ministers did not interpret the law correctly. "It remains clear that the Catholic church does not want to impose anything on anybody," he said. He said he was sad that former officials continue to claim that the church forced the law on Ecuador.

Ruiz said the church respected the new proposal, but has no intentions of supporting any annulment of the law.

Monsignor Arregui said he tolerates the right of people to protest, but said there was no reason to convulse the country in violence. "The law was widely discussed. It is a law of consensus," he said.

He rejected the concept that teaching religious classes should be extra-curricular or outside of school classrooms. The church justified its proposal by pointing to a rising crime rate and lower moral standards in the country.

Supporting the former education minister's proposal, Gonzalo Abad, minister of education during the term of president Carlos Julio Arosemena said, "This law must be annulled. If it is applied, it will revive religious differences between Ecuadorians. Lay education never has fought any religious system. For this reason, there is (religious) tolerance in the country."

Abad said that if the controversy continues, there would be struggle not only between students but within society as well.

Protestant groups have also hailed the compromise proposal. Alan Lopez, president of the Pastoral Council of Quito said his group would support the new plan until the Catholic church "has space for evangelicals".

Meanwhile, Carlos Larreategui, an advisor to the president has suggested that the issue be included in a "popular referendum" which will be staged in a few months to ascertain public opinion on several issues related to the rewriting of Ecuador's constitution. He said that such a vote would help to more accurately determine where Ecuadorians stand on the issue.

Opposition groups have called for nation wide demonstrations and marches on January 27 and 28. December 28 is the anniversary of the assassination of president Eloy Alfaro who rewrote the constitution almost 100 years ago removing education from the hands of the Roman Catholic church and giving other groups freedom to exist and work in the country.

The National Executive Committee of the National Union of Educators and the Front for the Defence of Laity have collected 400,000 signatures from citizens opposed to the law. Their goal is one million signatures.

Anglican Archbishop Walter Crespo, meanwhile, ended his hunger strike after one week saying it had accomplished its purpose. Originally the bishop had said he would strike until the law was annulled or he died. He said the fast, which was criticized by some Catholic officials, had drawn sufficient attention to the issue.

Meanwhile, teacher and Protestant church officials are presenting statistics which they say imply the country is not able to implement the law.

Government officials say there is no money currently budgeted to provide teachers for the religion classes. One of the constitutional issues was that the law required the government to obtain and train teachers when there was no budget for the process, a violation of the constitution.

The Ministry of Education says the government will have to designate 5,000 new teachers to conduct the religious classes. The Latin American Council of Churches, whose headquarters is in Quito, says that 6,800 will be needed. Other sources say that up to 8,000 teachers will have to be hired.

Officials say the creation of 5,000 new teaching positions would cost around \$ per year. Nation wide, 1,400 schools are already closed because of insufficient money. School officials say a majority of the 16,936 schools in operation do not have enough classrooms or teachers. 5,477 schools have only one teacher, and 5,492 have only two or three.

Former Education Minister, Rosalia Arteaga, who resigned her position to protest the law when it was signed by the president, said it will be almost impossible to include the required classes in the already crowded school schedule. "In this country there are many schools with only one teacher because there isn't enough money. Meanwhile, the government wants to apply the new law with no financing," she said.

The current Education Minister, Fausto Segovia, agrees. He said the inclusion of the new classes would clash with a reformed curriculum currently being implemented throughout the country.

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