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Ecuador's president: Bishops interfered in politics

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QUITO, Ecuador -- Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa has accused the nation's bishops of interfering in politics after they commented about a May 7 referendum.

Correa said the bishops' statement was a veiled effort to support a "no" vote in the referendum, which had nothing to do with morals, faith or religion.

"What do the bishops have to do with this consultation?" he asked in a televised speech April 2.

The balloting includes two sets of questions. Affirmative answers to five questions would result in changes to the Ecuadorean Constitution. The other five are about legislation unrelated to the constitution.

In a late-March statement, the bishops called for dialogue, saying, "The very principles of the rule of law are at stake: the independence of the branches of government, the organization of the judicial system and enforcement of fundamental rights and freedoms."

The bishops cautioned against moving too quickly to change the constitution, which was rewritten by a constitutional assembly after Correa took office in 2007. The new constitution was approved in a referendum in 2008.

In their statement, the bishops said the government faces two more urgent challenges -- a rise in crime, and conflicts within the government and between the government and civil society.

The five questions that could lead to constitutional changes involve preventive detention and alternatives to prison sentences, changes to the structure of the judiciary, and a prohibition against directors and shareholders of communications or financial enterprises owning other types of companies.

A "yes" vote on the nonconstitutional questions would make it a crime for public officials to elicit enrichment, require all workers who are not self-employed to affiliate with the national social security system, outlaw casinos and bingo parlors, prohibit bullfighting and other blood sports involving animals, and impose controls on the publication or broadcasting of violent, sexually explicit or discriminatory material.

Critics have said the media controls would constitute censorship.

Correa's televised remarks were the second time recently that he has criticized the church. In early March, he spoke publicly about a dispute between the new administrator of the Apostolic Vicariate of San Miguel de Sucumbios, on the border with Colombia, and a group of Catholics in the vicariate.

A group of church workers and members of base ecclesial communities had protested the appointment of Argentine Father Rafael Ibarguren Schindler, a member of the Heralds of the Gospel, saying he is ignoring them and dismantling the vicariate's social ministries.

Father Ibarguren replaced Bishop Gonzalo Lopez Maranon, whose resignation because of age was accepted by the Vatican Oct. 30.

On March 29, the Ecuadorean legislature honored Bishop Lopez for his defense of human rights and commitment to the poor.

Earlier, on March 9, Correa had honored the prelate for his four decades at the head of the Sucumbios vicariate, saying the bishop had "spent his life fighting for those who are poorest and most disenfranchised." The president, who is Catholic, praised the bishop's work and that of other missionaries who have worked in Ecuador, especially during the years after the 1968 conference of Latin American bishops in Medellin, Colombia, which emphasized ministry with the poor.

Correa questioned the appointment of Father Ibarguren, whom he said represented a group characterized by "fundamentalism." The president said an agreement between the Vatican and the Ecuadorean government gave the president veto power of a bishop's appointment.

Archbishop Antonio Arregui Yarza of Guayaquil, president of the Ecuadorean bishops' conference, said that agreement, called a "modus vivendi," did not allow the government to interfere in the naming of bishops.

On March 17, the Vatican appointed Guaranda Bishop Angel Sanchez Loaiza its apostolic delegate for Sucumbios. A church spokesman said Bishop Sanchez was not replacing Father Ibarguren as apostolic administrator, but would represent the Vatican in its official relations with the Ecuadorean government.

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