

Officials downplay impact of constitutional proposals

MEXICO CITY – A proposal by the Mexican bishops to change the country's constitution to allow more clergy participation in political and social activities has drawn criticism, but church officials are downplaying its potential impact.

Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera of Mexico City endorsed the concept of keeping church and state separate in a mid-March message, telling Catholics that “for no reason” can the bishops’ proposal “be thought of as competition for or an intrusion into Caesar’s power.”

Armando Martinez, president of the College of Catholic Lawyers, told Catholic News Service that the proposed reforms would replace “antiquated” laws and bring the Mexican Constitution in line with the U.N.’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In late February, the Mexican bishops called for the constitutional amendments to enshrine the concept of “freedom of religion” in the constitution. Currently, the language guarantees “freedom of worship.”

Bishop Carlos Aguiar Retes of Texcoco, president of the Mexican bishops’ conference, assured people in February that no one wanted a bishop “to be president of the country.”

He added that the government should remain secular, but that the church and state “should move forward together.”

Reaction to the proposal has been mixed, with politicians from the leftist Democratic Revolution Party and a group representing evangelical congregations saying the amendments would violate the concept of separation of church and state, strictly enforced in Mexico for nearly 150 years.

But Bishop Carlos Garfias Merlos of Netzahualcoyotl downplayed fears that the church was making a power play or attempting to gain political posts.

“Catholic officials in no way are looking for public positions ... much less (wanting

to) be candidates in any election,” he said, adding that canon law limits the participation of prelates in electoral politics.

The Mexican government implemented a series of anti-clerical measures after the 1920s’ uprising in Western Mexico known as the Cristero Rebellion.

Mexico re-established relations with the Vatican in 1992 and restrictions on Catholic officials – such as not being allowed to wear clerical garb in public – have been removed. The National Action Party, which has maintained amicable relations with the church, captured the presidency in 2006.

But analysts say that even with an amicable government achieving constitutional changes might not be easy.

Political science professor Aldo Munoz Armenta of Jesuit-run Iberoamerican University in Mexico City expressed doubts that the bishops’ proposals would be approved, since constitutional changes require the support of two-thirds of the members of Congress, where the National Action Party holds only a plurality of the 500 seats. He also questioned whether the public at large would back such proposals, even though census data from 2000 shows 87 percent of Mexico’s population is Catholic.

Ruth Zavaleta, speaker of the lower house of Congress and a member of the Democratic Revolution Party, said prelates were already influencing public policy and politics, and she endorsed their proposal.

“Saying from the pulpit how someone is going to vote, as happened in the last election, wouldn’t have a big impact,” she said.