

Some Ecuadorean priests urge Catholics to vote against constitution

LIMA, Peru - A conflict between Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa and Catholic Church leaders in the country's biggest city has grown more pronounced as a referendum nears on the new constitution.

Priests in the southern city of Guayaquil celebrated Mass outside their churches Sept. 14 to urge Catholics to vote against the new constitution in a referendum scheduled for Sept. 28.

The outdoor Masses were held only in Guayaquil, but priests in other areas of the country and Ecuador's Catholic bishops' conference have been critical of the new 444-article constitution completed in July.

In late August the bishops said gaps in the new constitution could allow for the legalization of abortion and gay marriage. The constitution, for example, refers to "types of families," which the bishops said could be interpreted as an acceptance of same-sex unions.

President Correa, a devout Catholic, blasted this interpretation at a press conference Sept. 12 during a brief visit to Lima, the Peruvian capital.

He said that as president he would never permit abortion and that the bishops were misinterpreting the rewritten constitution. He said the constitution protects life from conception and that the alleged controversial articles refer to family planning, something the church accepts.

President Correa predicted that the constitution, which he demanded be rewritten almost immediately after taking office in early 2007, would be passed by a 3-1 margin by his country's predominantly Catholic electorate.

He blamed the problem squarely on church leaders in Guayaquil, who were not

representative of Ecuador.

“The church in Guayaquil is the last bastion of conservatism in the country. The mayor of Guayaquil has said he would reject the constitution even if it wins, which is a very dangerous attitude that is supported by the church there,” President Correa said.

He compared the opponents in Guayaquil to violent protesters demanding autonomy in Bolivia’s lowland states.

The latest polls show President Correa winning approval of the constitution when Ecuadoreans vote. If it is approved, the constitution would be Ecuador’s 20th since independence in 1822.