

Venezuelan cardinal says new law removes religious ed from schools

CARACAS, Venezuela - An education bill signed into law in mid-August by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez will remove religious education from the nation's schools, said Caracas Cardinal Jorge Urosa Savino.

Government critics called the law's rapid approval process - it was passed by the National Assembly and signed into law in the same week - unconstitutional and said that the government did not consider outside opinions.

One clause of the new law, which covers all levels of education and both public and private institutions, requires education to have a "lay character ... in all circumstances" and leaves religious education to families.

The cardinal said the new law "does not take Urosa's God out of the schools, but takes out religion, a right which is in the constitution."

The Venezuelan Catholic Church operates a system of elementary and high schools for poor children.

"We'll see how we will manage to carry forward education," Cardinal Urosa said. "We are going to ask God to help all Catholics, principally those educational institutions belonging to the church and community parishes."

Jesuit Father Luis Ugalde, rector of the Andres Bello Catholic University in Caracas, said the education law was approved unconstitutionally like "the Cuban model."

In recent years, students of the nation's public and private universities have emerged as the leaders of the opposition to Chavez's policies. In recent weeks, students, journalists and others have staged sometimes-violent protests against the legislation.

The new law also creates neighborhood committees, financed by the government, to "contribute to the integral formation of citizens."

It requires university graduates to work for “the priorities of the nation’s economic and social development plan.”

In addition, the new law prohibits “the diffusion of ideas and doctrines contrary to sovereignty and democratic principles” or critical of the government’s educational and medical programs.

For years Venezuela’s bishops have clashed with Chavez, whom they have accused of amassing unreasonable powers and violating civil rights. Chavez has responded by calling church leaders elitist and accusing them of meddling in politics. Chavez called Cardinal Urosa’s recent comments “ridiculous.”