

The Pope's visit to Mexico deepens assault on the secular state

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Pope Benedict XVI is scheduled to visit Mexico on March 23. His visit coincides with the run-up to the Mexican presidential elections, which will take place on July 1. The visit takes place as the Mexican Senate prepares to vote on constitutional changes that will severely weaken the principle of separation of church and state and the secular character of the Mexican government.

The draft legislation proposes changes in the language of Articles 24 and 40 of the Mexican Constitution, guaranteeing religious instruction in Mexican schools, and allowing the church greater access to mass means of communication, among other things.

Benedict, the former Joseph Ratzinger, is to follow his visit to Mexico with a trip to Cuba.

The Vatican dubiously insists that these travels are purely pastoral and non-political. However, Christopher Pierre, who represents the Vatican in Mexico, confirmed in an interview with Mexico's *Proceso* magazine that the Pope favors constitutional language that would weaken Mexico's secular state institutions and the principle of separation of church and state. Notwithstanding Mexican President Felipe Calderón's insistence that that the Pope's visit has nothing to do with Mexico's presidential elections, the visit has a clear political purpose.

The aging Pope's itinerary is significant. On March 24 he meets with President Calderón in the city of León, in the state of Guanajuato, northwest of the Mexican capital. The city is politically dominated by Calderón's conservative, pro-clerical ruling party, the PAN (National Action Party). He will be bypassing México City—ruled by the bourgeois-nationalist PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution). In addition to the constitutional reform, Vatican spokesperson Héctor Federico Ling, said that the discussions with Calderón would include non-negotiable themes, such as abortion, stem cell research and euthanasia.

Following his stay in Guanajuato, Pope Benedict plans to spend two days in Cuba.

Vatican officials explained that the decision not to visit Mexico City was based on the Pope's fragile health and nothing else; the Catholic leader is 84 years old and has been advised to avoid Mexico City's altitude.

In 2010, Pope Benedict's visit to Spain was the object of mass protests in defense of secularism in Madrid, Barcelona, and other cities. By limiting his visit to the Guanajuato—the Pope's itinerary even avoids Mexico City's International Airport, as well as other major cities—the Vatican undoubtedly hopes to avoid similar protest demonstrations in a country with a strong and long history of anti-clericalism.

The Pope, who built his career as an arch enemy of modernity and liberalism, has a history of political and doctrinal intolerance that has earned him the enmity, not only of atheists and agnostics, but of liberal elements in the Catholic Church, particularly in Latin America, where there is still support for "Liberation Theology," represented by a layer of priests who called for greater involvement with the poor and the oppressed.

The third bourgeois political force in México, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) has sided with the PAN and the church, turning its back on anti-clerical legacy and its support for a secular Mexico. Both PRI and PAN supporters of the constitutional reforms insist that any regulation of church activity is an attack on religious freedom. Following that logic, their changing the Constitution would restore what they now call "full religious freedom" in México for the first time since the Emperor Maximilian was put before a firing squad in 1867.

This argument parrots the position of the Catholic Church, which more and more defines religious freedom, as the unfettered right of the church to do whatever it wants. This means: the freedom to impose religious

doctrines in secular education (freedom of religious education), the freedom to operate and command mass media outlets (freedom to disseminate), and the freedom to openly intervene in politics (freedom of religious association).

Unable to stomach such a turnaround from positions historically associated with the PRI that substantially limited the power of the Catholic Church, some PRI legislators justify their party-line vote by declaring that they are simply codifying already existing practices.

In reality, the Catholic Church has often in the past intervened in Mexican politics. In 2006, the church led a whisper campaign against Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador, then as now, the candidate of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), who lost to Calderon's PAN (National Action Party). In what suggests political payback, Calderón urged PAN members of the national legislature to approve changes in the Constitution to reverse what he called "enormous prejudices and injustices," against the church, while preserving the secular nature of the state.

The lower house of the legislature, the Chamber of Deputies, approved the constitutional reform by a two-thirds majority on December 16. The 199 votes in favor included 20 PRD members, as well as all the PAN and PRI legislators.

Last week a Senate Committee approved the bill with no changes. Voting in favor were members of the PRI, the PAN and the Mexican Green Party (PVEM). Those representing the PRD, the Party of Labor (PT) and the Citizen's Movement, along with one PAN senator, voted against. The full Senate is to vote on this issue this week, ahead of the Pope's visit.

The PRI has openly abandoned its anti-clericalism and defense of the secular state; at the same time, the PRD is fast abandoning the pretense of a defense of secularism in Mexico. During the Senate debate, it presented a "soft" criticism of the constitutional amendment. Its presidential candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, has avoided the subject of the reform and requested a meeting with Pope Benedict.

Once approved by the Senate, the constitutional amendment must still be ratified by the states.

The reform is provoking popular opposition. The Senate vote was received with protests. In Guadalajara, Mexico's second largest city, hundreds representing human rights groups, secular organizations, as well as liberal Catholics and Protestant churches, carried signs that read "no to the inquisition," "treason," and "no to reform."

At the Senate itself in Mexico City, protesters

denounced the PRI-PAN alliance that moved the amendment forward as "traitors to the nation" and the legislation as a "political gift to the Pope." Among the protesters, José Luis López of the Mexican Ecclesiastic Congress warned that the vote by the PRI, PAN and a group of PRD senators was "a step toward the dismantling of the secular state."

The establishment of a secular state in Mexico is the result of more than 160 years of struggle, which at times took on the character of a civil war. Since formal ties were re-established with the Vatican 20 years ago, the church has sought to claw back its former power over Mexican society, often by supporting the most reactionary legislation, e.g., the criminalization of abortion and contraception, and opposition to same-sex marriage.

Article 24 was written into Mexico's Reform Laws and Constitution in the 1860s, guaranteeing freedom of religion and limiting religious practices to the interior of temples and churches. The Constitution of 1917 that followed the Mexican Revolution retained the same language. In addition, the post-revolutionary Constitution prohibited the churches from owning property, prohibited them from participating in the political process and forbade religious education in primary schools. All churches and temples became government property.

In 1994, under the PRI government of President Carlos Salinas, the process of secularization was reversed. Rights were granted for churches to provide non-secular instruction in elementary schools, and the right of churches to own property was restored.

In his visit to México, Pope Benedict XVI has made it clear that there is one thing that he will not do: meet with the victims of sexual abuse by Catholic priests.



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