

Bolivia education minister calls for ban

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LA PAZ, Bolivia - Bolivia's education minister called for an end to religious education in the country's schools, drawing criticism from the Roman Catholic Church which could see its schools affected by the proposed change.

Education Minister Feliz Patzi said at an assembly on education reform that the government aims to make education secular in Bolivia, where Catholicism has been the official religion since the country's founding in 1825.

"Secular means that there is no monopoly on religious teaching," Patzi said. "Secular means that there is no indoctrination."

Reforms drafted by the education assembly in Sucre, about 335 miles south of La Paz, eventually will be submitted to congress for approval. The assembly is made up of representatives from 26 government-linked organizations and has until Friday to develop proposals.

Patzi's statements drew harsh criticism from Catholic leaders, who accused the government of being anti-religion under the guise of instituting the separation of church and state.

Rev. Sebastian Obermaier, a Catholic priest known for his social work, called Monday for Patzi's resignation.

"Every day he comes out with new versions of how to destroy the church, destroy faith, destroy the people's morales," Obermaier told The Associated Press.

Leftist President Evo Morales said recently that he himself was Catholic and would guarantee that religious education would be allowed at Catholic-run schools.

But Patzi said on Monday that private schools in Bolivia should teach the same courses as public schools in order to "decolonize education" and to do away with "caste and race privileges."

Morales took office in January as the country's first Indian president, vowing to reform the government and economy to end centuries of discrimination against Bolivia's Indian majority.

He nationalized the nation's natural gas industry in May and has vowed to rewrite the constitution, including removing the stipulation of Catholicism as the official national religion. He suffered a setback, however, in a July 2 vote when his party failed to win control of the assembly that will rewrite the constitution.

Some 75 percent of Bolivians are Catholic, and church leaders have accused the government of being anti-religion under the guise of separating church and state.

Patzi said religious education is "useless" and suggested that catechism classes now taught in schools could be replaced by a non-denominational course on the history of religion.