

Latino church groups lead rally; Protesters criticize Georgia law, pray for federal solution

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Body

Hundreds of Christian Latinos took to the streets of downtown Atlanta on Sunday in prayer and protest against a new **Georgia law** they say criminalizes undocumented immigrants.

Amid chants and song, they also demanded comprehensive **federal** immigration reform during their **rally** and march from the U.S. Court of Appeals to the state Capitol.

The **protesters** --- many legal residents and most toting Bibles and young children --- came from across **Georgia** to send what they hope will be a powerful, spirit-filled message that a change must come at the **federal** level and not through states and local governments, whose politicians they say are using the immigration issue for political gain.

By doing so, states and municipalities usurp the **federal** government's constitutional authority to shape the nation's immigration policy, critics said.

The Washington-based National Coalition of **Latino** Clergy and **Church** Leaders and the Association of **Latino** Pastors of **Georgia**, its local affiliate, led the prayer **rally**.

The evangelical advocacy organization represents more than 20,000 **churches** in 33 states, according to the Rev. Miguel Rivera, coalition president and founder.

Similar protests have been held across the country amid the national debate on comprehensive immigration reform.

"We're sending a message that we need true immigration reform that addresses the plight of 12 million and their children," said lawyer William Sanchez, a coalition lawyer. "What's happened in **Georgia** is just a reflection of the lack of action by the **federal** government."

The **groups** plan to submit paperwork during next few months challenging the constitutionality of restrictive, state-imposed **laws** that have surfaced in places such as Missouri, Oklahoma, Virginia and **Georgia**.

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Georgia's SB 529 raises the bar on identification requirements in employment, public benefits and pay to contractors. It also prohibits in-state tuition for illegal immigrants and requires jailers to check the legal status of those charged with DUI or a felony and notify **federal** authorities of suspected illegal immigrants.

Critics say **Georgia's law** and others like it make Latinos targets of racial profiling and other acts of discrimination.

"We're hoping to stop 529. The **law** criminalizes every undocumented immigrant," said Antonio Mansogo, association president affiliated with Doraville's Central Pentecostal Ministry. "What you can see is that these people are not criminals. Everybody is holding a Bible, reflecting that they have the same faith and values as the American people."

Living in the United States without proper documentation, Sanchez said, violates civil **laws**, but not criminal ones.

Rivera, coalition president and founder, described **Georgia's new law** frivolous and insulting to Latinos who, he said, pay taxes like everyone else.

Latino pastors and their members, he added, are **fed** up.

Added Rivera: "We cannot tolerate these types of **laws**."

Nearly half the estimated 700,000 Hispanics in **Georgia** are undocumented, experts say.

Graphic

Photo: FRANK NIEMEIR / StaffHolding Bibles, demonstrators chant "viva Jesus, viva Jesus" at the state Capitol on Sunday. "We need true immigration reform," a spokesman said./ImageData*

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