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El Salvador: Arena Proposes Legislation To Crack Down On Government Critics

by Deborah Tyroler

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Last week, President Alfredo Cristiani's government proposed new legislation to crack down on dissidents. The ruling Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) has called the legislation a "law in defense of the democratic process." The legislation is supported by the National Association of Private Enterprise (ANEP). Citing a "very delicate" national situation, the ANEP said it was "appropriate and urgent that legal measures be adopted that might serve to preserve the security and integrity of Salvadoran society." ARENA was scheduled to submit the bill for congressional approval on June 15, but failed to do so. The bill would prohibit a wide variety of activities, including publication of statements by the armed opposition, advocacy of a labor strike, or promotion of "propaganda" by supposed "front groups" of the armed opposition. Next, the legislation would empower the president to ban any group deemed to have committed "an outrage against the sovereignty of the country," and then prohibit publication of the views of such groups "through any medium," including radio, television, or newspapers. The bill would establish fines for the "front groups" that engage in armed actions, sabotage, strikes or public demonstrations that "clog traffic on principal roadways, avenues or streets of the a city, impeding the passage of people or vehicles." On June 16, the Christian Democrat party denounced the legislative proposal as repressive and unconstitutional. Party leaders gave reporters a copy of the proposed law, which executive committee member Ricardo Perdomo called "the preamble to total repression in El Salvador." Fidel Chavez Mena, party secretary general and former presidential nominee, told a news conference the measure was unconstitutional and would "violate the most elemental guarantees and individual rights." Chavez Mena said that if approved, he would challenge the bill's constitutionality in the Supreme Court. The Christian Democrats asserted that one article of the proposed legislation would make it illegal for reporters to send outside the country news or information "destined to upset the constitutional or legal order, the tranquility or security of the country, the economic or monetary regimen." The National Union of Salvadoran Workers (UNTS), the largest grassroots organization in the country, said that the new law's approval would legalize "state terrorism and death squads." Edgar Palacios, a Baptist minister and president of the Permanent Commission of the National Debate for Peace, a group formed last year under the coordination of the Catholic church, said the proposed legislation was "unacceptable and would violate political liberties. The country needs justice, established by law, not more repressive laws that only deepen the violence." On June 18 during his Sunday homily, auxiliary bishop Gregorio Rosa Chavez criticized ARENA's proposal to virtually outlaw criticism against the government. He said the legislation prescribes a "medicine worse than the disease" and could take El Salvador back to the "dark times" of the early 1980s when death squads killed thousands of people considered government critics. Rosa Chavez said the proposal takes a partisan view of the violence in El Salvador because it treats terrorism as something committed only by leftists. Human rights and international organizations say rightist death squads and the military are responsible for the vast majority of civilian deaths in nine years of civil war. Rosa Chavez said terrorism also includes "terrorism of the state." Next, Rosa Chavez said Vice President Dan Quayle, in a meeting

with Roman Catholic Church leaders during his recent visit to El Salvador, "spoke of liberty, of democracy but not of justice...He didn't touch on the problem of injustice." (Basic data from AP, 06/16/89, 06/19/89; Salpress-Notisal, 06/19/89; Boston Globe, 06/18/89; Diario Las Americas, 06/17/89; Diario de Hoy, 06/12/89)

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