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Salvadoran Legislature Approves Penal Code Reforms Applying Heavy Sanctions For Exercising Basic Civil Rights

by Deborah Tyroler

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On Nov. 24, the Salvadoran Legislative Assembly, by a vote of 45 to 0, approved a package of penal code reforms introduced after President Alfredo Cristiani was inaugurated in June, and then dropped, result of a domestic and international uproar over the repressive measures. On Friday, Christian Democrat members of the Assembly abstained from the vote. The National Assembly passed several key articles of the proposed law Thursday and debate continued Friday. No reports of the legislative action appeared in Salvadoran media, which have been heavily censored since the rebels brought the war to the capital two weeks ago. According to the New York Times (11/25/89), the legislation "would make it a crime punishable by a long prison term to possess or distribute information that `subverts the public order.'" [On Nov. 22, one of the nation's most respected sources of independent news reporting, the television program `Al Dia' on Channel 12, announced that it could no longer operate, because of "changed circumstances," a phrase understood to refer to new government pressure on news media.] The legislation would also proscribe many traditional forms of nonviolent protest, including work stoppages, and would prohibit the presence in El Salvador of foreign organizations considered "subversive." The packages includes a penalty of one to four years in prison for anyone who attempts to excuse, verbally or in writing, acts of terrorism. Secretaries, printers, sign painters or others who accept work that is deemed subversive would be subject to six months to two years in prison. Prison sentences of up to 20 years would be possible for those who participate in peaceful sit-ins or takeovers of buildings. People blocking traffic with marches or demonstrations could be jailed for five years. In a revision of another section of the penal code, the proposal would provide prison terms of up to 30 years for murder, kidnapping, armed assault or sabotage "intended to provoke a state of terror." (Basic data from AP, 11/24/89; New York Times, 11/25/89; 11/25/89 report by Washington Office on Latin America)

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