



COLOMBIA: Censorship as Usual

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COLOMBIA Censorship as Usual One of President Gustavo Rojas Pinilla's proudest acts, soon after he came to power two years ago, was to relax the strict press controls administered by his unpopular predecessor, dictatorial President Laureano Gomez. On one occasion, in the presence of a band of visiting foreign newsmen, Rojas Pinilla turned to the government's chief censor with a grin and forthwith abolished all censorship of outgoing news cables. But last week, no longer so proud, no longer so sure of himself, President Rojas cracked down on the press again.

First victims of the new press policy were Colombia's Liberal opposition papers, which were ordered a fortnight ago to submit all copy to army censors before publication. When one paper went to press with blank spaces marked "censored" where stories had been killed, troops confiscated 15,000 copies. A few days later, censorship was extended to pro-government newspapers as well. Then, last week, the government shut down entirely the country's leading Liberal paper, El Tiempo* Reason: El Tiempo's Editor Roberto Garcia-Pena had rejected an army order to print, as his own statement, a rebuttal to criticism he had leveled at the government. When foreign newsmen filed stories about the shutdown of the internationally respected El Tiempo, they were told that their dispatches would again be censored.

Although Rojas claimed that he had clamped down on the press only because it failed to live up to its own "code of honor," Bogota newsmen noted that censorship began on the eve of the President's long-postponed weekend visit to Ecuador, repaying last year's good-will visit to Bogota by President Velasco Ibarra. Just to be on the safe side, President Rojas took with him a huge retinue of 115 Cabinet ministers and officials, including all the friends and foes of consequence who might dream of plotting behind his back. Rojas installed an Acting President (his old army pal, General Gabriel Paris) with a whole new Cabinet for the Saturday-to-Monday absence, and, as a final precaution, ordered all Bogota bars and taverns closed while he was away.

* Which was once, during Colombia's civil war, stoned and burned out by a rioting mob of Conservative partisans (TIME, Sept. 15, 1952).

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