

EL GRITO:
FOUR YEARS OF FEMALE CLANDESTINE JOURNALISM
AGAINST THE MILITARY DICTATORSHIP IN PANAMA
(1968–1972)

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ABSTRACT

Most countries of Latin America lived through long dictatorships before transitioning to democracy in the late twentieth century. Who keeps the spirit of resistance alive during bleak periods of intense repression? Who reaffirms the principles of democracy when they are violated with impunity? In Panama, a clandestine weekly titled *El Grito* (The Cry), published during the first four years of the military dictatorship installed in 1968, became a reliable source of information, a vehicle of protest, and a mouthpiece of democratic education. Never divining that those responsible for the clandestine publication were women, the military regime was unable to stop it. Uncovering unknown details of the weekly, this paper retrieves the effort made by a small group of middle-class women who did not identify with any political party and had no financial support other than their own limited resources. We suggest that attention be paid to the actors—often from relegated social groups—who keep the spirit of protest alive in countries during long periods of political repression. We show that, contrary to general expectations, those occupying subordinate positions in society may have an advantage in carrying out resistance activities against authoritarian regimes.

RESUMEN

La mayoría de los países de América Latina atravesaron largas dictaduras antes de transitar hacia la democracia a fines del siglo XX. ¿Quién mantiene vivo el espíritu de resistencia durante los períodos de intensa represión? ¿Quién reafirma los principios de la democracia cuando se los viola con impunidad? En Panamá, un semanario clandestino titulado *El Grito*, publicado durante los primeros cuatro años de la dictadura militar instalada en 1968, se convirtió en una fuente confiable de información, un vehículo de protesta y un instrumento de educación cívica. Sin nunca advertir que las responsables de su publicación clandestina eran mujeres, el régimen militar fue incapaz de detenerlo. Además de develar detalles desconocidos sobre el semanario, este artículo recupera el esfuerzo hecho por un pequeño grupo de mujeres de clase media que no se identificaban con ningún partido político y carecían de cualquier otro apoyo financiero que sus limitados recursos propios. Sugerimos que debe prestarse atención a los actores – a menudo provenientes de grupos sociales relegados – que mantienen vivo el espíritu de protesta durante largos períodos de represión política. Mostramos que, contra las expectativas generales, aquellos que ocupan posiciones subordinadas en la sociedad pueden tener una ventaja para llevar adelante actividades de resistencia contra los regímenes autoritarios.

Although the 1968 military coup in Panama sparked immediate resistance throughout the country, historians have generally overlooked or given cursory treatment to protests early in the authoritarian period. As elsewhere in Latin America, where at the time the military ruled directly or controlled most of the region's governments, Panamanians opposed dictatorship through both violent and nonviolent protests. Our study recovers for the historical record the most successful of the peaceful protests in the first four years following the coup.

In an epoch when repression was most fierce, a weekly clandestine publication entitled *El Grito* (The Cry) stepped in to fill the gap produced by the military's control of the media. Reporting on events in the national political scenario as well as news about Panama appearing in the foreign media, the publication was also a democratic voice of protest and a mouthpiece of civic education. *El Grito* was put out by a group of middle-class women, who during four years (1968–1972) ran significant risks in their effort to inform the public, censure the country's de facto rulers, and educate the people of Panama through publication of their underground pamphlet.

Our study of *El Grito* unfolds as follows. We begin by presenting a brief review of clandestine media in Latin America. Then, because *El Grito* was published entirely by women, we touch on the difference between “feminist” and “feminine” protest. Next, we present our methodological approach in dealing with this clandestine publication, identifying the main challenges to our undertaking and explaining how we tried to surmount them.

In the following section, we provide the broader domestic political context in which the protest originated: the military coup and the authoritarian regime to which it gave rise. We then address the emergence of the underground paper and highlight its characteristics as an expression of dissent by a specific group of women in terms of class, gender, and status, with special attention to the role of women as citizens. The subsequent sections focus on three main functions served by the clandestine weekly: disseminating information, protesting, and providing civic education. Prior to concluding, we deliver a brief review of the protests against military rule in the 1970s and 1980s that followed *El Grito*. In our conclusion (as elsewhere in the paper) we deal with the clandestine

publication in the theoretical framework provided by James C. Scott's work on resistance to oppression.

CLANDESTINE MEDIA IN LATIN AMERICA

A rich tradition of clandestine publications exists in Latin America. In periods of severe repression, when governments curtailed freedom of information, underground pamphlets emerged to protest abuses and inspire resistance against authoritarianism. Going back to the Spanish domination, every country in the region can lay claim to at least a couple of underground media.

In the final decades of Spanish rule, anonymous satirical pamphlets appeared in many cities to incite rebellion against the metropolis, inform about political events, and provide civic instruction in the tenets of liberal democracy. With the spread of liberalism and the dissemination of revolutionary events worldwide, from the nineteenth century onward more substantial clandestine publications criticized the excesses of authoritarian rule throughout the region. Examples abound in the long history of Latin American underground papers spanning over two centuries. Some experiences—such as *La voz del pueblo cubano*, published in 1852 by Eduardo Facciolo Alba (the “first martyr” of Cuban journalism), which succeeded in publishing only one issue—were short-lived (Monterrey 2003). Others, such as the Clandestine News Agency (Agencia de Noticias Clandestina, or ANCLA)—a branch the *Montonero* resistance in Argentina and alternative source of information in the early years of that country's most recent military dictatorship (1976–1983)—were more sophisticated and encompassing (Vinelli 2002). The objectives of ANCLA according to Vinelli (2002)—criticizing the regime, informing the public, and generating mistrust among the military services—overlap with those of *El Grito* and other Latin American underground papers.

Although scholarship on Latin American clandestine newspapers is scarce, a reading of available scholarly sources reveals certain traits shared by the region's underground media. Publishers were, more often than not, educated individuals trained in the use of language and having access to at least some material means to carry out their pursuits. Not unexpectedly, these characteristics situated them in the middle to upper

levels of society. Barnes (1995) notes how “skills, money, time, and general knowledge,” as well as a clear understanding of national or sectoral interests, are relevant to organizing protests. These resources are more likely found among “well-educated citizens of middle-class backgrounds.”

As manifestations against political oppression, clandestine media may be understood within the framework of resistance to domination proposed by James Scott (1985, 1990). At the most obvious level, Scott’s framework concerns the domain of “infrapolitics”: the protests of subordinate groups within long-standing structures of oppression and exploitation carried out in the process of everyday life. The very act of being dominated by the force of arms, with all civil rights suspended—as is the case under military rule—places a country’s civilian population in a subordinate position in the face of a dominant regime that, frequently, fashions a public transcript comprising overt rationales and justification for its actions (Scott 1990, 2–4). In such settings, underground protests may develop a “hidden transcript” that, because it contests the public transcript of an authoritarian regime, must circulate clandestinely.

By seizing control of the media, arresting members of the opposition, repressing demonstrations, and outlawing all overt forms of dissent, authoritarian regimes drive protest underground. In the early stages of military rule in Panama, for instance, we can document two enduring forms of clandestine resistance. One comprised violent protests—that is, guerrilla warfare—by armed young males of the lower sector. Some were peasant supporters of ousted president Arnulfo Arias who took to the mountains in Chiriquí Province, bordering Costa Rica, to avoid certain arrest by the military. This movement was suppressed by the force of arms and Costa Rican support under President José Figueres (1970–1974), who cut off their safe haven.¹ The other guerrilla group comprised young men of the Panamanian Left, which the military immediately persecuted. Arresting almost forty of its leaders, union organizers, and members of Panama’s Communist Party (Partido del Pueblo), the dictatorship executed several of them while in custody and deported others to Chile. As a result, in 1969 the Partido del Pueblo embraced the military regime (Janson Pérez 1993b, 51–52).

The most enduring nonviolent form of protest involved the small group of middle-class female publishers of *El Grito* who chose peaceful protests in pamphlet form (Janson

Pérez 1993b, 58–66). Publication lasted for four years (1968–1972) under extremely repressive conditions. As we will show, this type of event can be seen as “infrapolitics” in Scott’s framework: forms of disguised, low-profile, undisclosed resistance expressed in everyday life (Scott 1990, 198).

FEMINIST VS. FEMININE PROTESTS

According to what is available in the scholarly record, it appears that editors of Latin American clandestine media were mostly male. This is not unusual. Not only is Latin America a region with male-dominated politics (Paternostro 1998) but, throughout the world, as observed by Barnes (1995), “men participate more in both conventional and protest politics than women.” In this respect, Panama’s *El Grito* stands out because it was published entirely by a group of women, a rare occurrence in the region’s annals of dissent.

Because the case we present is so obviously an expression of dissent by women, references from the relevant literature help elucidate this possibly unique phenomenon in the political history of Panama and the region. When addressing women’s protests, a distinction is often made between *feminist* and *feminine* initiatives. Feminist protests “explicitly challenge conventional gender roles.” Feminine movements, on the other hand, do not aspire to overturn those roles. In societies with male-dominated politics, females “mobilize on the basis of women’s traditional roles in the domestic sphere, usually as mothers and wives” (Baldez 2002, 14–15). Ashe (2007) adds that they may seek redress of grievances related to conventional female concerns, including family security, rights, or integrity. Consequently, feminine protests are strongly embedded in stereotypes of women’s roles as well as gendered narratives and imagery (Ashe 2006).

Most recorded instances of women’s protest classify under the *feminine* label (Ashe 2007). So does *El Grito*, but in ways that must be clarified. Certainly, the women of *El Grito* did not defy the traditional, subordinate role of women in Panamanian society. Their pamphlet promoted a return to constitutional (and male-dominated) government. Thus, theirs was not a feminist protest.

But analysis of the weekly does not reveal overtly feminine content either. In fact, the tone, themes, and images of the publication were gender-neutral to the point that the military regime never guessed that the pamphlet was put out by women. As will later be seen, the texts we study reveal preoccupations shared by advocates of democracy as citizens, regardless of gender. This may be a result of the women's deep ideological convictions but also a strategic ploy. Analysts of clandestine media observe how editors strive to employ language in ways that do not reveal their identities (Vinelli 2002).

In their gender-neutral publication, the women of *El Grito* resemble female activists in human-rights organizations in Chile under the Pinochet dictatorship (1973–1989), who “did not identify themselves in gendered terms” or “frame human rights as a women's issue.” They differ from other well-known initiatives, such as the Argentine Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo or the Salvadoran COMADRES organizations, in that the latter openly emphasized their identity as mothers—and, accordingly, as women (Baldez 2002, 133–34)—while citizenship, irrespective of gender, was the mobilizing rationale of the Panamanian weekly's publishers.

The tactics employed by the Panamanian pamphleteers, however, did exploit negative stereotypes of femininity. As our analysis shows, instead of seeking to overturn those stereotypes, the women of *El Grito* used them to their advantage in furthering their political objectives. The scholarship has identified such uses. Baldez, for example, affirms that “When activists in a particular movement engage in practices associated with women's traditional roles . . . they may in fact be exploiting conventional gender norms in the service of strategic political goals” (Baldez 2002, 16).

METHODOLOGY

This analysis of *El Grito* combines approaches by two Panamanians, one a political scientist and the other an anthropologist. The data consist of material that, as Scott noted, is difficult to obtain because of the “earnest efforts of subordinate groups to conceal their activities and opinions, which might expose them to harm” (Scott 1990, 87). We base our interpretation on content and contextual analysis of 35 issues of *El Grito* published

between December 1968 and May 1970. All but two of the 35 installments we studied are from 1969.²

Ideally, our sample should have included additional installments between 1970 and 1972, when publication ceased. Our inability to procure more issues illustrates the difficulties scholars face when dealing with material secretly published and circulated in periods of severe repression. Possession of such material is so dangerous that it is disposed of promptly and rarely enters the historical record. Indeed, despite the enduring effects of printed protest, dissidents in highly repressive contexts may discard the option of putting out pamphlets because of the risks involved for publishers, distributors, and recipients. For example, pamphlets were not a viable option in the Salvadoran Civil War because the two-thirds of Salvadorans who could read did not want to be caught with guerrilla propaganda in a country where the security forces arrested or “disappeared” people with no explanation (Darling 2007).

In fact, we had access to 35 issues only because one of the distributors mailed copies to a friend in the United States from a post office in the US-controlled Panama Canal Zone. In 2001, the recipient donated this material to the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas, Austin, where it is presently held. Though one complete set of *El Grito* exists, the previous owner of the collection—one of the publishers we interviewed—submitted her copies to Panama’s Truth Commission (Confidential source 2007b). President Mireya Moscoso (1999–2004) established the commission in 2001 to document the human rights abuses committed during the military regime. Her successor, Martín Torrijos (2004–2009) of the Revolutionary Democratic Party (Partido Revolucionario Democrático, or PRD)—the civilian arm of the military dictatorship—did not renew the commission’s mandate, despite the fact that its work was still incomplete.³

Although the commission acknowledged receipt of our source’s copies, an informant formerly employed by that entity was not aware of their whereabouts (Pérez Jaramillo 2007). Other partial collections might exist, but because the PRD won several elections since the fall of the dictatorship and continues to be an important presence in the Panamanian political scenario, fear of reprisals is still alive among some individuals who carried out resistance activities against the military regime. Not without justification,

the surviving publishers refuse to reveal their identity publicly and resist efforts to duplicate their copies of the collection for further study (Arias de Galindo 2006).

In fact, when in power the PRD attempted to obliterate the most negative records of the military dictatorship. President Martín Torrijos (2004–2009), son of the late dictator Omar Torrijos (1968–1981), appointed several former military regime collaborators to sensitive government positions and gained control of the National Human Rights Ombudsman's office (Defensoría del Pueblo) through the appointment of a PRD member and close associate, Ricardo Vargas, as ombudsman. This office has an important role in bringing the human rights abuses of the military regime to light. The policy of appointing dictatorship figures to government positions, especially in areas concerning public security, continued under the administration of President Ricardo Martinelli (2009–2014), who—ironically—campaigns against the PRD (Berrocal 2010; Bethancourt 2005; Delgado and Somarriba Hernández 2006; Flores 2007; Somarriba Hernández 2007).

In addition to examining several issues of the paper, the authors conducted interviews with the leading editor of the *El Grito*, two other publishers, and one distributor. A third source of data comprises research notes by coauthor Janson Pérez, who was a distributor of and occasional contributor to the clandestine publication. Recruited by her mother, who was one of the publishers, Janson Pérez came to know all the members of the small group personally. Some of the editors are now deceased and most of the survivors wish to avoid publicity and remain anonymous, which poses yet another methodological difficulty for the study of *El Grito*. Thus, we were able to interview only three publishers who were willing to speak about their experiences as pamphleteers for democracy during the early stages of the military regime.

THE 1968 MILITARY COUP

On October 11, 1968, Panama's National Guard overthrew the constitutional government of President Arnulfo Arias, who had assumed office eleven days earlier. The coup was the result of a dispute between President Arias, winner of a polarized electoral contest in May 1968, and a group of National Guard officers led by Boris Martínez, the garrison

commander in Chiriquí Province. In the 1968 elections, most of the country's dominant sectors and National Guard officer corps sided with David Samudio, the outgoing administration's candidate. Although these sectors attempted to rig the presidential election, popular mobilization led by Catholic Archbishop Tomás Clavel succeeded in pressuring a reluctant National Guard to recognize Arias's triumph. Tensions escalated after the new president's accession on October 1, leading to Arias's downfall eleven days into his administration (Guevara Mann 1996, 91–95; Ricord 1983, 111–16; Torres Ábrego 2000, 498).

Upon seizing power, the National Guard dissolved the National Assembly, suspended the 1946 Constitution, and appointed a Provisional Government Junta headed by José Pinilla and Bolívar Urrutia, the two top-ranking National Guard officers (Junta Provisional de Gobierno 1968a, 1968b, 1968c). In addition, the National Guard seized control of the media, arresting hundreds of Arias's supporters throughout the country. For the next four years, the military ruled Panama by cabinet decrees. There was no redress against repressive measures because the Provisional Government Junta subordinated the judiciary to its directives and assumed all legislative functions (Janson Pérez 1997, 136, 137; Ricord 1983, 119).

The new military regime shut down the National University in December 1968, the same month that Omar Torrijos—a National Guard lieutenant colonel with close ties to US military intelligence⁴—assumed control of the National Guard with Boris Martínez (the coup's initiator) as his deputy. In March 1969, the junta abolished all political parties and Torrijos ousted Martínez, forcing him to exile in the United States. Torrijos remained Panama's ruler until his death in 1981. Under dictators Rubén Paredes (1982–1983) and Manuel Noriega (1983–1989), the military regime lasted another eight years after Torrijos's death, before a US invasion overthrew the authoritarian system in 1989 (Guevara Mann 1996, 107; Janson Pérez 1997, 172–77; Junta Provisional de Gobierno 1969a, 1969b; Sánchez 2007, 143–45).

Cabinet Decree #341 of October 31, 1969, ostensibly reestablished civil rights, except for the right of assembly in Panama City and Colón, the country's two main urban centers. In two other decrees issued simultaneously, however, the military junta made it immediately clear that it would not allow protests by opponents. Cabinet Decrees #342

and #343 established “subversion of public order” as a crime with sentencing determined by the executive branch. The definition of what constituted “subversion of public order” was very broad, including not only incitation to acts of violence, damage to property, and actual acts of violence but also “insults” or “offenses” against government officials. Prison terms for such “crimes” ranged from 2 months to 15 years. Consequently, though one decree returned constitutional rights, the next two made the exercise of civil and political rights a hazardous endeavor in Panama under military rule (Inter-American Commission 1978; Janson Pérez 1997, 155; Junta Provisional de Gobierno 1969c, 1969d, 1969e).

In addition to the authoritarian measures listed above, other developments contributed to strengthen the military regime. Deposed president Arias, who had sought refuge in the US-controlled Canal Zone, subsequently departed for the United States, leaving Panama’s opposition leaderless. The coalition of political and business sectors that supported the Samudio candidacy in the 1968 elections immediately rallied behind the new regime. After Archbishop Clavel was forced to resign in December 1968, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, the most important of Panama’s civil society organizations, abstained from opposing the new status quo.⁵ The United States, the most powerful external influence on Panamanian politics, recognized the junta on November 13, 1968, and forthwith started to provide the financing and military assistance that the new regime sorely needed (Guevara Mann 1996, 110; Janson Pérez 1993b, 64–66; Koster and Sánchez Borbón 1990, 91–92, 95).

Repressive measures, co-optation, and US support did not succeed in eliminating all opposition to the regime. Resistance movements, adopting both violent and nonviolent tactics, emerged among middle- and lower-income sectors. Urban supporters of the pro-Arias coalition, independent organizations of professionals, teachers and students, and lower-income sectors staged marches and strikes. As noted, pro-Arias and Leftist insurgencies also emerged. The National Guard, however, promptly quashed these protests (*El Grito* #6, February 1969; *El Grito*, no number, February 1969; *El Grito* #9, March 1969; Guevara Mann 1996, 143–50; Inter-American Commission 1978, 19).

THE ADVENT OF *EL GRITO*

Struggling against an environment in which the military regime exercised total control over the media, with a carefully scripted public transcript completely devoted to exalting its leaders and their “good works” to convince the Panamanian people of the benefits of the dictatorship, the publishers of *El Grito* printed approximately 500 copies comprising seven to eight mimeographed pages of each issue. But the number of individuals the weekly reached was far greater. Its avid readers promptly passed it on to others, as urged by the publication, because being caught by the National Guard with a copy of it in one’s possession entailed immediate arrest. In fact, even obtaining mimeograph paper and ink was a risky enterprise, because the military, aware of the weekly’s existence, ordered office supply stores to report any large purchase of these items (Janson Pérez 1993a, 68).

The paper was free, delivered by the publishers who distributed it personally and also conveyed stacks of copies to distributors, trustworthy individuals who passed them on. Though the more timorous distributors handed copies surreptitiously to a small and trusted circle of “clients,” others were wildly opportunistic, dropping copies of *El Grito* from their cars under the cover of night in front of bus stops, cautiously placing them in government and business offices, stores and supermarkets, leaving them on the benches of churches and parks, and even taking advantage of weekend drives to the countryside to disseminate the pamphlet in rural areas. Additionally, heedless of the Provisional Government Junta’s Decree #342 of 1969, which established penalties for subverting “public order,” some distributors mailed copies anonymously from the US-controlled Canal Zone post offices to foreign newspapers, members of the US House of Representatives Subcommittee on the Panama Canal, and the US Department of State (Arias de Galindo 2006; Confidential source 2007b; Janson Pérez 1968–1990; Junta Provisional de Gobierno 1969d).⁶

For those who resented the powerlessness to which the military regime reduced them, distribution of the weekly and information gathering became a mode of exercising power and mocking the repressors, as suggested by Scott (1985, 1990). In fact, using great ingenuity to cover their tracks, they particularly relished placing *El Grito* in the regime’s own domains: at the feet of a policeman busily directing traffic, on a

government minister's desk, even in the lobby of the presidential house! (Arias de Galindo 2006; Janson Perez 1993a, 68–69).

An informant close to the military reported that the National Guard was astonished at the publication's accuracy, believing that it was a gigantic network operating out of the safety of the Canal Zone. But the paper's typically Panamanian usages, its intimate knowledge of the local social and political scene, and its increasingly anti-US stance made this assumption unlikely (Janson Pérez 1993b, 59). Who, then, could its publishers be? G-2, the military's intelligence department, was never able to answer the question.

WOMEN AS CITIZENS

One of *El Grito*'s outstanding features is the fact that it was entirely published by women. As in other settings (Baldez and Montoya Kirk 2006), between 1968 and 1972 in Panama male opposition leaders were unable to initiate or maintain protest movements because those who were not in prison or exile were under strict surveillance. Additionally, as a female distributor of *El Grito* later reminisced, most men limited their activities to formulating plots which were rarely put into action:

The imposition of a government of boots and rifles in 1968 hit our country like an unexpected, devastating, frightening, and confusing storm. But from the very first difficult days, Panamanians' anti-militarist spirit rebelled and very soon after the coup a group of women started printing and distributing a voice of opposition, the little newspaper *El Grito*. We women received it cautiously and thought it over. Though with great fear, many of us became distributors . . . While the men formulated plans of struggle, we did our bit, constantly taking advantage of every occasion, and we learned. Threats, persecution, and exile meant little to us. We demanded the rights of all: democracy, justice, and liberty. We were always there. There came to be lots of us, a willing lot. (Solís de Carles 2006)⁷

This quote suggests that the involvement of women as publishers of a clandestine weekly can be understood based on the notion of "political opportunity." According to Baldez and Montoya Kirk (2006, 135), social action by females may arise when "a failure

of women's male colleagues to take action to resolve a pressing problem moves women to take action themselves." In this particular instance, women stepped into an empty space, vacated by men who were unable or unwilling to play their traditional role in opposition politics.

Although Panamanian women received political rights in the 1940s, politics remained a male-dominated sphere of activity in 1960s' Panama. Though women were successful in their struggle to gain the right to hold public office in 1941 and to vote in 1945, they were still largely ignored by political power brokers, with low levels of accession, just as in most Latin American countries.⁸ The military seizure of the country's government contributed an added dose of *machismo* based on the aggressive exercise of political power by a male-controlled armed force (Rudolf 1999).

The group that published *El Grito* consisted of eight to ten women, numbers that fluctuated because, in the space of four years, some women couldn't take the pressure and bowed out while others joined. Several social factors explain why its members were self-selected, that is to say, why they voluntarily embarked upon a course of action that not only took over their lives but demanded a willingness to assume enormous risks for the sake of their country. In the first place, they were single or widowed and thus able to determine the course of their lives without the involvement of a protective husband.

Second, they were members of the urban middle class. As residents of the densely inhabited capital, Panama City, they were ideally situated to receive information on the actions of the government and its leaders, and their wily caution enabled them to blend in with the rest of the population. Moreover, a stable income provided them with the minimum needed to buy the supplies required for printing the clandestine weekly.

Last, they were highly educated women. The group included a physician, an attorney, and several professors at Panama's National University, shut down by the military junta in December 1968. Additionally, as one publisher—a retired professor at the university who was willing to be interviewed—mentioned, some were members of the National Union of Women Citizens (Unión Nacional de Ciudadanas), an NGO promoting democratic principles and providing civic instruction. This informant's comment that the women "firmly believed in democracy as a way of life" underscores the political beliefs of the publishers of *El Grito*.

Recalling the publication's origins, our informant reminisced that, following the October coup, a group of female friends met in late November or early December 1968. They shared their indignation at the military takeover and their concern about the absence of an opposition leadership. She added that, following their deep democratic convictions, they determined to take action, to fill the political vacuum. There was no conscious reason for the all-female nature of the movement, she said, except that in the repressive, male-dominated context of late 1960s' Panama, men aroused more suspicion than women. She asserted that they were inspired by a firm commitment to democracy and a wish to reestablish constitutional rule in Panama, not by a desire for feminist redress (Confidential source 2007b).

El Grito's publishers astutely took advantage of their subordinate position in society as women and negative gender stereotyping.⁹ Placed suddenly in a situation in which fierce repression obliged political protests to go underground, they opted for existing female strategies of adaptation, including the ability to resort to behind-the-scenes machinations. Scott (1990) notes that subaltern members of society often employ stratagems such as these in pursuit of individual objectives, group interests, or political causes.

These women ingeniously came up with furtive tactics that, based on conventional images of womanhood, were suited to the threatening environment. As observed in the scholarship (Baldez 2002), traditional feminine stereotypes served to cover a mission that became central to the women's existence. They used negative stereotypes of gender and age to their advantage. The publishers—all middle aged or elderly—operated in a society that considered women in that phase of their lives as generally innocuous and deserving of sympathy. It was easy for self-effacing women “of a certain age” to go unnoticed. Rather than attracting attention because they were young and sexually appealing, they were ignored, considered irrelevant and powerless.

Some of the publishers and distributors went out of their way to appear insignificant. In what amounted to deliberate and voluntary self-degradation, they accentuated their age and presumed helplessness by dressing in dowdy clothing, feigning lack of interest in politics, or pretending that what was happening in the political scenario

was above their heads. As a group, they could easily have passed as members of a Ladies' African Violet Society.

To circumvent the telephone tapping in which the secret service engaged—sometimes quite obviously—they used secret codes in conversations that sounded like trivial gossip heard in a beauty parlor or a supermarket. They might advise distributors to collect a new issue by telephoning to invite them to a party given by a nonexistent friend in common or by asking them to visit a fictional relative at a certain place and hour. If secret service agents tapped their telephones or observed interactions such as those described, based on stereotypes of female behavior they were likely to discount them as superficial or otherwise meaningless domestic or social exchanges and, therefore, not threatening to the military regime.

As in other settings, creativity and adaptation to the milieu inspired methods for delivering the clandestine product. In Spain under Franco, for example, Foweraker notes that a distributor of *Mundo Obrero*, the underground organ of the Communist Party, in Sanlúcar de Barrameda, used to stuff the paper in his boots to avoid being caught and summarily sentenced to up to twenty years in prison (Foweraker 1989, 37). Similarly in Panama, the women of *El Grito* delivered stacks of the newspaper to distributors in various ways: wrapped as birthday presents, folded in clothing, put in paper bags under groceries, or—on occasion—innocently and openly.

The leading editor, now deceased, revealed that initially the women met and mimeographed the publication in an apartment. But after two close calls, they feared discovery and arrest because of the noise made by the mimeograph machine until the early morning hours. The editor then tricked a carpenter into making a secret room in her house, blocking the noise of the machine with a wall of bookcases (La Lastra 1990).

These strategies helped the women surmount the grave risks entailed by their clandestine political involvement. Though the regime never identified the publishers, it did detect and arrest several female distributors. One was arrested twice. The first time, in June 1969, three men with machine guns pounded on her door late one evening. They searched the house and questioned the woman all night long, trying to find out how she got her copies of *El Grito*. She told them what she had prepared in the event of arrest: “In the supermarket, hidden among tins.”

In Chiriquí Province, another female distributor, who had her menstrual period when arrested, was forced to walk from jail to the courthouse without any sanitary napkins. This last account, of a woman humiliated, petrified many. So did the threat of being raped—the ultimate revenge of the military on those who opposed it actively—a crime committed with impunity because male or female victims would be too embarrassed to admit having suffered it (Janson Pérez 1968–1990; 1993b, 58–59).

Thus, though they ran enormous risks, the women of *El Grito* exploited two “disadvantages” to the hilt: negative gender and age biases. The regime presumed them to be “innocent” because they were women and thus considered incapable of responding as they did in a situation of severe repression. Having reached “a certain age,” society also assumed them to be impotent. But their presumed innocence, together with their intelligence, determination, and commitment to democracy, contributed to the success of their project.

EL GRITO AS A MIDDLE-CLASS PROTEST

As a political event, *El Grito* was a middle-class phenomenon. Eight or ten women alone could never have encompassed the publication’s breadth. In effect, the distribution chain was a two-way avenue. The same persons who distributed the publication also received news and foreign newspaper clippings from readers that they passed from hand to hand until the information ultimately reached the publishers. Thus, the contents of the weekly were based on facts, anonymous inside tips, and comments on the political scenario provided by hundreds of individuals, some of whom were obviously well-placed but disaffected government employees.

The anonymous nature of the sources made it imperative to scrutinize the information before publishing it. A few months before her death from cancer, the leading editor explained that the publishers met around a table once a week. Extricating from their brassieres and purses the pieces of paper they had accumulated during the week, they put these on a pile on the table, discussing each one. Once a particular item had passed a scrupulous evaluation, the leading editor changed the wording slightly to protect the anonymous contributor. However, though assisted and contributed to by hundreds of

persons, ultimately publication of the clandestine paper was the output of a very small group, because the contributors of information had no control over what went into each issue and did not know who *El Grito*'s publishers were (La Lastra 1990).

The objective requirements for putting out the pamphlet placed it squarely within the sphere of a middle-class protest. As noted by Barnes (1995) in other contexts, a high level of education, communications via the written word, the filtering and organization of data, the printing equipment—rudimentary as it was in comparison to later improvements—as well as the financial means needed to put out such a publication are not within the purview of the lower sector.

The ruthless use of repressive resources by the newly installed military dictatorship made organized political opposition just as perilous for the Panamanian middle class as Scott notes that it was for peasants in late 1970s' Malaysia. In parallel with peasants who resorted to the forms of protest embedded in their daily life because these were available to them as a class (Scott 1985, xv), the women resorted to a clandestine type of protest available to them as members of the educated middle class. This protest, as noted, was nonviolent, written, and strongly ingrained within the ideology of liberal democracy.

EL GRITO AS A VEHICLE OF INFORMATION

Throughout publication in 1968–1972, *El Grito* performed various functions. It served as a reliable information source, a conduit for protest, and an instrument of civic education. As a vehicle of information, *El Grito* deserves careful attention for three reasons. First, it was enormously important as the only continuous printed oppositional response to the de facto government during its first four years, when repression was most severe. Beginning in October 1968, all Panamanian newspapers and TV and radio stations were subjected to official censorship. Later, the media practiced voluntary censorship. Opposition newspapers remained absent from the Panamanian scene until the foundation of the tabloid *YA* in 1979 (Comisión de la Verdad 2002; Editora Panamá América 1995–2007; Inter-American Commission 1978; Janson Pérez 1993b).¹⁰

Second, *El Grito* provides an example of what can happen when people do not believe their country's media. Because the government-controlled mainstream sources engaged in deception, producing a public transcript of propaganda that promoted the adulation of its leaders, many people tuned out the media, especially newspapers. In fact, as a result of military control, newspaper circulation plummeted (Janson Pérez 1993b, 63). With the mainstream media seriously undermined or discounted, *El Grito* filled the gap with trustworthy information, reporting not only on events in the national political scenario from its own sources but also carrying reports on Panama from foreign media such as the *New York Times*, the *Miami Herald*, the *Economist*, *El Tiempo* (Bogotá, Colombia), *La Prensa Libre* (San José, Costa Rica), *Listín Diario* (Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic), as well as *Time* and *Ramparts* magazines. Two sources frequently cited by *El Grito* were the reports on Panama by Bob Berrellez of the Associated Press and by Don Bohning of the *Miami Herald*.

Third, instead of being a vehicle of opposition propaganda, *El Grito* was so dependable that it can be used today as a complement to traditional historical sources. In fact, though a clandestine publication, sometimes it was treated as a bona fide newspaper, for example, when the chief executive officer of the Chase Manhattan Bank in Panama, Luis H. Moreno, resorted to *El Grito* to rectify a government newspaper's distortion of his words (*El Grito* #22, June 1969).

As the only publication able to divulge what was actually going on in the country, *El Grito* acquired significant political importance. "We had a mandate," said its leading editor years later (La Lastra 1990). To a large extent, the paper's mission consisted of exposing the junta's propaganda.

The regime's information campaign determined much of *El Grito*'s content, since the publication responded directly to its themes. *El Grito* combated the junta's propaganda by providing data that negated its arguments and exposed its omissions. For instance, whereas a frequent theme in the dictatorship's discourse was its break with past corruption in the government, the weekly emphasized the corrupt past of the military and their continued venality. In this regard, *El Grito* #33 (August 1969) affirmed:

Recent administrations were characterized by corruption and plundering the National Treasury. But it is also true that the ruling military caste is the

least authorized to assume power, given that its members were the main participants in that corruption and its prime beneficiaries. They managed, among other activities, illegal drug trafficking, the monopoly of the concession of bus and taxi routes, the dirty business of whorehouses and sex trafficking, extortion of industry and commerce, the exploitation of the Coiba penal colony as if it were their personal property, and the profitable business of illegal gambling.¹¹

These accusations coincided with contemporaneous assessments of the National Guard officer corps by US personnel based in Panama. A US National Intelligence Estimate dated November 1968 asserted: “The charges of corruption and favoritism of the Panamanian elite ring true, but are nonetheless remarkable considering that most officers of the Guardia participated in some of the same practices to the extent that they could” (US Central Intelligence Agency 1968). Additionally, in November 1968 Ambassador Charles W. Adair, Jr., cabled to Secretary of State Dean Rusk that while the junta leaders’ “loudest protestations oppose sinecures and politicians’ choice of their friends for government positions, they themselves have used their power repeatedly to place their friends into high positions” (US Department of State 1968).

El Grito continually attacked such nepotism in government, on occasion by naming relatives of junta leaders involved in the dictatorship’s corrupt practices, for instance:

HOW THE TORRIJOS ARE: Flor María López, sister of [former junta minister] Carlos A. López Guevara and wife of dipsomaniac Monchi Torrijos [Omar’s brother], was involved in graft in the Ministry of Education with charges of “mismanagement” and embezzlement of funds obtained through the registration of diplomas. During the corrupt Marco Rifle regime [Marco Robles Administration, 1964–1968] she had a sinecure in IFARHU [the state scholarship fund] and collected three checks from the government. She boasted to her companions of her ability to get easy money. This lady is shown to us frequently in the newspapers and television as a prototype of the “efficiency” and “decency” the revolution has brought. (*El Grito* #21, May 1969)

The paper exposed the numerous arrests of persons suspected to be in the opposition as well as the inhuman treatment of prisoners by named National Guard officers (*El Grito* #20, May 1969). Frequently, the publication came out with scoops. For

example, *El Grito* provided inside information—no doubt obtained from one of the participants at a crucial regime strategy meeting—indicating that the junta would not hold elections as promised immediately after the coup but intended to remain in power indefinitely by rewriting the Constitution.

At night on Tuesday, February 4, the three Electoral Tribunal judges (Manfredo, Quirós, and Lewis) held a meeting at the home of Diógenes de La Rosa, the informal regime spokesman. La Rosa lectured the magistrates on the impossibility of holding elections in the first half of 1970. He said he considered there was not enough time and by then the military junta might still not have popular support. If the junta lost the elections, something worse could come to Panama than what we already have. It would result in another coup. In his opinion, it would be best to call a constituent assembly (he did not say how, by whom, or when) to draft a constitution more in line with the nation's needs. (*El Grito*, no number, February 1969)

El Grito did not confine its efforts to providing information that the military regime did not want to disclose. Its early endeavors to discredit the government's claims to superiority focused on branding it as an illegitimate military dictatorship and showing how it increased its control of the government and the country. After the sixth month of publication *El Grito* voiced increasingly detailed charges, particularly in regard to fiscal mismanagement. For example, the paper divulged that the government was paying its Social Security quotas in bonds and that the National Bank's new lending policies eliminated consultation with the board of directors in decisions involving loans of less than US\$250,000, and it charged that the government was making purchases without bids. In one instance, *El Grito* went so far as to give the names of Torrijos's intimate friends who were profiting handsomely from these undisclosed deals (*El Grito* #23, June 1969).

An important theme was the precarious situation of the government's finances and the collaboration of certain prominent individuals with the junta. A February 1969 issue noted how wealthy supporters of the military regime contributed funds to pay National Guard salaries. A "prosperous backer" of the governing military junta, *El Grito* added, "pays and provides housing for the extra workers who are opening up roads into the mountains. But these are not roads to bring out produce . . . they are to make way for

the mercenaries of the police regime to go into the mountains to liquidate the guerrillas” (*El Grito*, no number, February 1969).

The publishers also revealed the dictatorship’s extortion of private business in efforts to secure funds:

On the morning of Thursday, June 21, a squad of national guardsmen arrived at Cemento Panamá to investigate the firm’s financial affairs. They did the same the previous week at the Bassan shoe store and Sarah Fashions. We have no reports of the investigation. Also on the morning of Friday the 22nd, a National Guard truck arrived at the National Brewery (Cervecería Nacional) and withdrew the firm’s files. The protests of company officers and the general manager were to no avail. This private information is now in the hands of the Guard. The Guard did the same thing some months ago with Nestlé, from which they subsequently extorted \$100,000 to return the documents . . . We warn local businessmen and industrialists. They should realize that under the present regime nobody is safe. (*El Grito* #26, June 1969)

As the military regime began implementing measures in the rural sector in an effort to legitimize its rule, *El Grito* addressed the military’s treatment of the peasantry. The paper referred continuously and persistently to the National Guard’s repression and harassment of peasants in the military campaign against the guerrillas:

A CAMPESINO WRITES TO US: Here what the Guard has done is to cause havoc. With the coup they came to search my *rancho* [traditional peasant dwelling], allegedly seeking arms, but they took my raincoats, my clothes, and the clothes of my wife and my children. They returned later, reportedly seeking guerrillas, and this time they even made off with my machete. I know of a man who had a wooden house where he lived with his ten children and his wife. When Doctor Arias fell, the man was arrested because he was an *Arnulfista* [a supporter of President Arias] and they say he was tortured until he went mad. The truth is that we have not seen him and his family since they disappeared one night. Now the family of a guardsman, who lived before in an adobe house like mine, lives there. They took over the house and the land . . . I will tell you what I think. I think the National Guard is like a colony of army ants who work destroying others’ crops to build their own nest. They make off with everything they want, night and day, everything for them. It is not true—as they say—that we campesinos have benefited from them in anything. They have forced us to run to the mountains like deer; they have stolen our

crops and our clothes; they have killed our people for no reason. (*El Grito* #24, June 1969)

In October 1969, the paper published an itemized report contradicting the official propaganda that Omar Torrijos, the regime's leader, was helping the poor. The report indicated that: 1) The peasants' situation had not improved. 2) The junta had not carried out its grand promises. 3) A government-controlled improvement committee confiscated the funds of a rural housewives club with the excuse that the committee could use them more efficiently. 4) The military forced peasants in a highland village to contribute US\$1 each to the improvement committee. 5) In a region where there was no electricity or running water, there were five police posts and the one road that was underway led to a locality where the Guard had a powerful radio station and was building a jungle survival center. 6) The military intelligence service was arresting and harassing many peasants. 7) Many union leaders were still in prison (*El Grito* #43, October 1969).

Reports such as these served to inform readers about events that the dictatorship concealed from the public. Attacks against members of the dictatorship's high command and their civilian collaborators provided names, cases, and dates. Such specificity, together with the fact that as a clandestine publication *El Grito* was not liable to slander charges, made it a powerful vehicle of public information and social censure, perhaps even more powerful than the media in ordinary times.

***EL GRITO* AS AN EXPRESSION OF NONVIOLENT PROTEST**

El Grito's first editorial asserted that it did not represent a partisan political position or any traditional party. It represented all who sensed the difference between constitutional government and a police state; between liberty and submission, terror, persecution, ignorance, and imposition; between a political system that maintained democratic institutions—though they were oftentimes not respected—and a regime that eliminated all vestiges of democracy. As the editorial explained:

Today we cry out, but it is no longer the cry of anxiety and pain of the first days when we watched, aghast, as the military boot trampled upon

human rights . . . it is today's cry of free men and women who refuse to live subjected to the arbitrariness of a bossy group of military who impose their will by COUPS and whose only law is FORCE. It is the cry of men and women united by a common ideal of solidarity, of a common fatherland where we can all live in justice and liberty. (*El Grito* #1, December 1968, emphasis in original)

El Grito sought to unite opposition to the regime by presenting its objections to the junta from the broadest possible base. Although the publication was a female product, the cornerstone of the ideology expressed in the paper was not any aspect of feminism but the individual human being as the inherent possessor of certain rights. The paper reminded its readers that these rights are spelled out in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Panamanian citizens—both men and women—were entitled to their exercise not only as human beings but also because the state to which they belonged, as a signatory of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948, accepted them and committed itself to ensure universal and effective respect for fundamental rights and liberties (*El Grito*, no number, February 1969).

The editors saw the Panamanian Constitution of 1946, subordinated by the military regime to its 1968 statute that suppressed many rights, as the charter that protected Panamanian citizens' freedom (*El Grito* #19, May 1969). They judged democracy to be the form of government that best safeguarded these rights. As expressed by the paper's publishers, "Democracy is based upon RESPECT FOR THE HUMAN PERSONALITY, PROTECTION OF THE INDIVIDUAL and RESPECT FOR LIFE. Its characteristic trait is the struggle for LIBERTY and HUMAN RIGHTS" (*El Grito* #2, January 1969, emphasis in original).

Apart from protesting against the illegitimate nature of the regime from a liberal-democratic standpoint, the publication also advocated nonviolent forms of political protest that were compatible with an ideology based on respect for human rights. With violence and sabotage rejected for ideological considerations and overt protest made suicidal by the regime's repression, *El Grito* was left with reduced possibilities of protest, all of which had to be anonymous. The paper urged readers to organize into select groups of two or three trusted individuals, admonishing them to be discreet and on the alert against regime spies. Other measures recommended in *El Grito* were individual economic

protests in everyday life where anonymity could be retained. These included withholding the use of spending power and passive resistance in the workplace, strategies identified by Scott (1990) among subaltern groups rejecting domination. Among the recommended economic protests were: “1) boycott collaborating businessmen; 2) decrease purchases; and, 3) do not attend places of entertainment” (*El Grito* #23, June 1969).

El Grito also generated uncertainty within the regime. Just as some distributors took pleasure in penetrating the government’s inner sanctums to show their power, the clandestine publication carried inside reports on events throughout the country and, particularly, activities in the National Guard, the presidency, the cabinet, the Electoral Tribunal, state departments, hospitals, prisons, and other public facilities. No place of government was immune from this infiltration. *El Grito*’s publishers and distributors exercised a power of penetration to indicate that the regime had unknown enemies everywhere.

To undermine the military dictatorship, the paper resorted to ad hominem attacks. The publication made fun of the two members of the initial ruling junta, José Pinilla and Bolívar Urrutia. Though Pinilla was called *El Enano* (the dwarf) on account of his short stature and Urrutia was represented as a secretary chaser, the most common usage was to exploit the marked difference in height, calling them “Mutt and Jeff” (known in Spanish as “Benitín y Eneas”) (*El Grito* #22, June 1969; *El Grito* #39, September 1969).

To sabotage official propaganda portraying Omar Torrijos as the country’s “savior,” *El Grito* included him in the list of the most venal contemporaneous dictators in the region: Somoza, Trujillo, and Duvalier. This was done through labeling—calling Torrijos “Papadoc” (after Haitian dictator François “Papa Doc” Duvalier) or “Generalissimo” (a preferred title of the Dominican Republic’s Rafael Trujillo)—or by noting Torrijos’ actual connections with the Somoza regime in Nicaragua (connections that were later severed) (*El Grito* #11, March 1969; *El Grito* #12, March 1969; *El Grito* #24, June 1969; *El Grito* #39, September 1969; *El Grito* #41, October 1969).

The publication also made attempts to discredit Torrijos personally. He was described as an alcoholic, a womanizer, corrupt, cowardly, and foul-mouthed, in straight reportage, through adjectives in items reporting on Torrijos’ actions and in features that dredged up his past. For instance, *El Grito* asked:

WHERE WAS OMAR TORRIJOS BEFORE 11 OCTOBER? We are tired of opening the newspapers daily to find on each page photographs of policemen doing everything except what they should: protecting the lives, possessions, and rights of Panamanian citizens . . . Omar Torrijos: You are not and will never be any “savior” of the Panamanian people . . . We remember your “bravery” during the Cerro Tute uprising when, with a wound in your seat, you cried like a woman even though you had directed your machine guns against idealistic young men . . . Remember when you were with the National Guard in Chiriquí? We do! You never repaired any roads or had any schools built. You were a lifelong guest at Lalo González’s mansion in Boquete where you spent long nights and days in dissolute partying. Then, as secretary-general of the National Guard in Panama City, you became the right hand of . . . [Commandant Bolívar] Vallarino. There you were the accomplice in all the vices and shady deals traditionally sponsored by the National Guard. Also, in the past elections, you helped put together the fraud promoted by certain sectors of the Robles regime. (*El Grito* #25, June 1969)

El Grito also singled out prominent collaborators of the military, many of whom were members of the country’s traditional dominant class. Printing the name of a collaborating individual was itself an act of censure, a pointed finger aimed at undermining the social prestige of the persons involved. Displaying an extensive knowledge of social networks—another form of symbolic penetration—*El Grito* also exposed the family, friendship, or business connections that motivated these individuals to support the junta, as illustrated in the following item:

THE BIG THREE CAPITULATE: Reliable sources inform us that, perhaps to defend their interests, three oligarchic groups of great national “prestige” recently entered into an agreement with PAPADOC. For this purpose, J. J. Vallarino, Sammy Boyd, Juan B. Arias, and Mario Guardia, together with Mr. Calafate—Carlos Eleta—gave a champagne dinner to the general staff. That’s how patriotic they are! Max Delvalle and his group have done the same and the Chiari brothers [Rodolfo, Ricardo, and Roberto, a former president] have also fallen in line, giving their unconditional support to the “revolution’s postulates” at a meeting at José Isaac Fábrega’s home that was attended by the recently fired López Guevara. (*El Grito* #29, July 1969)

EL GRITO AS AN INSTRUMENT OF CIVIC EDUCATION

A chief characteristic of the paper's style of discourse was its political didactics, that is, its attempts to educate the public. *El Grito* shares this function with other clandestine media that endeavored to provide democratic instruction. Sierra Blas (2006) notes that the main purposes of the underground press in Spain under Franco included providing information, generating unrest, disseminating political views, and educating readers, all of which are "indispensable" in the effort to "transform a passive opposition into active resistance."

El Grito disseminated its political didactics through axioms, quotations, and editorials or inserted them in features. Axioms included sayings such as the following: "The man who kneels before God does not kneel subserviently before the tyrant" (*El Grito* #32, August 1969). This same issue of the paper quoted Argentine statesman Domingo Faustino Sarmiento on education: "To educate is to form free men, free to develop awareness of their situation and thus to elect their own destiny."

The paper's editorials oftentimes contained lessons in civics, for instance:

THE ELIMINATION OF THE JUDICIAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE CIVIL SERVICE: The guaranteed stability in employment of civil servants hired on the basis of their credentials and experience is the goal of all countries that want an efficient civil service, untainted by political influence, nepotism, and corruption. Today, those who say they are building a new and honest government structure began by eliminating the job stability of judicial employees and abrogating the civil service code. The technical and professional personnel of the judiciary cannot be improvised in accelerated courses. Not even practicing lawyers can serve as judges without prior training . . . The regime did away with the public employees' most cherished conquest [the civil service], the most valuable institution a serious government can have. Why did they suspend the job stability of the judiciary and civil service? The answer is simple. They want to hold a threat over all government employees to oblige them to support the dictatorship unconditionally out of fear of losing their jobs, and to get them to accept the regime's arbitrary and absurd measures. In this way they create a caste of reptiles who thrive on intrigue and adulation. "Where the unconditional thrive, legs are not used to walk upright." (*El Grito* #24, June 1969)

The paper also embedded political didactics in small items such as the following:

NEPOTISM: This is one of the words that acquired currency lately with the military junta's purge, after which military officers received appointments in some government agency boards through cabinet decrees. (According to the dictionary, "nepotism" is a "favor enjoyed from certain relatives by their nephews and kin. Fig. Excessive protection given by some politicians or officials to their relatives and friends.") (*El Grito* #1, December 1968).

El Grito's editors entered into the realm of linguistics to subvert the military regime's use of new terminology in its persuasive discourse. Under the heading, "The Dictionary of the Dictatorship," the publication provided some of the regime's most used words but with radically different meanings.

ORDER: Terror

REVOLUTION: Appointment of relatives in the best jobs and with the highest salaries

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS: Monopoly and censorship of the media

ELECTIONS: Promise made in every interview with the foreign press (*El Grito* #28, July 1969)

EUROPEAN MILITARY: Those who defend their country from its enemies

LATIN AMERICAN MILITARY: Those who defend the enemies of their country (*El Grito* #26, July 1969)

These items exemplify the publishers' interest in promoting civic education among their readers. The citations provide models of appropriate conduct or examples of reprehensible behavior, explaining, in concise and straightforward language, the reasons underlying the paper's moral judgments. These reasons were based on a gender-neutral democratic ideology that privileged respect for human rights as the preferred means to ensure the country's wellbeing.

AFTER *EL GRITO*

According to one of its publishers, the women stopped printing the weekly voluntarily in 1972. That year the promulgation of a new Constitution—even though it had been drafted by the military regime and rubber-stamped by a new political structure, the “National Assembly of County Representatives,” of the regime’s own creation—gave them hope that the most stringent controls over the media would be lifted (Confidential source 2007a). But *El Grito* both set a precedent and exemplified the reaction of the Panamanian middle class to censorship and repression.

In the years that followed, the military regime’s policy toward freedom of expression varied. Every time military censorship, repression, and fear curtailed the right to free speech, the middle class responded with clandestine one-page leaflets. Subsequent groups of dissenters in military-controlled Panama resorted to the underground protest strategies employed by the women of *El Grito* against the authoritarian regime in 1968–1972. Janson Pérez (1993a, 1993b) has documented the use of clandestine leaflets and pamphlets as a form of dissent on various occasions, including the 1973 protests by students and the private sector in Chiriquí Province; the protests of the agrarian sector in Chiriquí and political organizations in Panama in December 1975 and January 1976, resulting in the regime’s deportation of ten prominent business and political leaders; the 1973–1977 protests against the Panama Canal Treaties accorded between the United States and Panama; widespread opposition to the government’s Cerro Colorado mining project in 1979; and protests against the murder and decapitation of Dr. Hugo Spadafora in 1985.

In the summer of 1987, when Roberto Díaz—a top-ranking officer of the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF)—defected, he utilized leaflets to reveal his participation in the fraudulent presidential elections of 1984 and in the military’s corrupt businesses. From June 30 to July 27, 1987, when the regime clamped down on popular mobilization by suspending civil rights, the dam broke. Panama was flooded by clandestine leaflets as technological innovations made it impossible for the government to control the outpourings of protest. Guillermo Sánchez Borbón, publisher and editorialist at *La Prensa* (an independent newspaper founded in 1980), captured these

dynamics when he stated that “Everybody in Panama became a journalist” (Correa 1988; Janson Pérez 1993b, 197–201).

Written anonymously, photocopied, and transmitted by fax, the leaflets contained caricatures, exhortations and instructions on how to protest, copies of incriminating government documents, news and commentaries on Panama in the foreign press, gossip, jokes, poetry and the words of protest songs. In these protests, just as with *El Grito*, the reproduction and circulation of clandestine leaflets was largely in the hands of women. As office assistants and secretaries women had full access to photocopiers, computers, and fax machines.

After the military regime’s annulment of the results of the 1989 elections, when repression returned to the level of the first four years after the coup, clandestine leaflets circulated again. But none of these underground productions was as comprehensive, politically sophisticated, or enduring as *El Grito*. It is noteworthy that most of the publishers and distributors of *El Grito* participated in later protests, some of them openly as members of the all-female Independent National Union for Democratic Action (Unión Nacional Independiente de Acción Democrática, or UNIDAD) (Janson Pérez 1993a, 1993b).

CONCLUSION

El Grito did not and could not trigger a massive revolt against military rule or cause radical political change. When publication ceased in 1972, the dictatorship was still in its early stages. Seventeen years elapsed before the United States invaded Panama and the regime crumbled. But, given the oppressive environment prevalent in 1968–1972, the political functions accomplished by *El Grito* had significant importance.

The clandestine weekly’s response in the initial years of the dictatorship established an important precedent. Its publishers managed to put out *El Grito* continuously during four years without being detected and eliminated by a dictatorship bent on nullifying all instances of public opposition. Instead of promoting painful and fratricidal bloodshed at a time when violent resistance by guerrilla insurgencies surfaced in various parts of the country, *El Grito* steered subsequent protests along symbolic,

nonviolent channels by showing that dissent could be expressed even under the most difficult circumstances.

Despite the precedents it set, *El Grito*'s participation in the long, two-decade struggle for a return to a democratic system has received scant recognition from scholars of Panama's politics and history. In a major compilation of twentieth-century events, including the military dictatorship installed by a coup in 1968, Araúz and Pizzurno (1996) mention *El Grito* only in passing. In the press, aside from the work of this paper's coauthors (Guevara Mann 2006b; Janson Pérez 1998), it has been discussed by only two writers, Solís de Carles (2006) and Zúñiga Guardia (2007).

No doubt, the important role played by *El Grito* in the early years of the military dictatorship has been overlooked. Its contributions—keeping the spirit of resistance alive by informing the people of the true nature of the military dictatorship, censuring the country's spurious power holders, and reaffirming the principles of democracy through explicit civic education at a time when they were violated with impunity—were overshadowed by the public and sometimes very dramatic peaceful protests of ensuing years. Additionally, the omission may be due to the difficulties of dealing with clandestine material and to the continued influence of negative stereotyping, that is, unconscious dismissal of the role played by women in the political scenario.

A review of the process of political protest against Panama's military dictatorship shows that when repression was most severe, the most dogged defense of democracy came from the ranks of women who were marginal to—and under-represented in—the political scenario in ordinary times. In Scott's terminology, they were "subordinates" or "subalterns." As subordinated women they did not raise feminist issues, but it would be illogical to expect them to have done so when the country was plunged into a crisis caused by a rupture of constitutional government, profoundly affecting the lives of all Panamanians.

As Scott notes, "infrapolitics may be thought of as the elementary—in the sense of foundational—form of politics. It is the building block for more elaborate institutionalized political action that could not exist without it" (Scott 1990, 201). The experience of *El Grito* corroborates Scott's observation that analysts should not discount long-term and often unexpected outcomes of initiatives by members of subordinate

groups. Similarly, publication of *El Grito* suggests that the most staunch convictions and firmest determination to defend democracy may sometimes be found among the ranks of those sidelined by the political process.

NOTES

¹ Manuel Noriega, then in command of the National Guard in Chiriquí Province, played a notorious role in crushing the insurgency. Noriega eventually assumed the leadership of a reorganized National Guard—the Panamanian Defense Forces (*Fuerzas de Defensa de Panamá*)—in 1983 and retained his hold on the organization until 1989, when he was removed by a US invasion.

² The references section of our paper lists all 35 issues.

³ Mireya Moscoso of Partido Panameñista is the widow of former President Arnulfo Arias, deposed by the military in 1968. Martín Torrijos of PRD is a son of Omar Torrijos, military leader in 1968–1981.

⁴ According to a US National Security Council information memorandum dated October 14, 1977, in 1955 the US Army’s 470th Counterintelligence Corps (CIC) recruited Torrijos as a paid “confidential informant.” In exchange for intelligence information, he continued to receive money and in-kind payments from the CIC through 1970 (US National Security Council 1977).

⁵ Individually, some clergy opposed the dictatorship. The regime also persecuted priests considered a threat to its authoritarian agenda, including Father Héctor Gallego. A young Colombian priest engaged in Liberation Theology, Gallego “disappeared” in the custody of the National Guard after his arrest by members of the G-2 intelligence unit, commanded by Manuel Noriega, in 1971 (Guevara Mann 2006a, 2010; Inter-American Commission 1978).

⁶ Decree #342 established prison terms and fines for those who insulted or offended government officials and distributed material threatening to the public order, including sending such material abroad. But US post offices in the Canal Zone were not subject to scrutiny by the Panamanian military dictatorship. The decree also called for the confiscation of the vehicles used by persons who disseminated “threatening” information.

⁷ All the Spanish-English translations are the authors’.

⁸ Article 61 of the 1941 Constitution, promulgated by Arnulfo Arias during his first administration (1940–1941), gave women the right to hold public office and set the stage for granting citizenship rights to women by law. Article 97 of the 1946 Constitution recognized women’s political rights without exception (Fábrega and Boyd Galindo 1981). Panamanian women voted for the first time in 1945, a development that made Panama the tenth of thirty-five states in the Americas to allow women to vote. Of 255 individuals who served in the National Assembly between 1945 and 1968, 12 (5 percent) were women. A handful of women also served as cabinet ministers beginning in 1949, when during his second administration Arnulfo Arias

appointed María Santo Domingo as minister of Labor, Welfare, and Health (Guevara Mann 2000).

⁹ Paradoxically, although the dictatorship did not consider women—especially middle-aged women—a threat, the stakes for those involved in resistance activities were even higher than those for men. The regime dealt with male protesters with measures such as incarceration under inhuman conditions, torture, confiscation of property, exile, and assassination. But when faced with overt opposition from women, the military invariably subjected them to degradation, torture, and rape (Comisión de la Verdad 2002, 90–94; Janson Pérez 1993b, 65).

¹⁰ *YA*, directed by Miguel Moreno Góngora—previously a journalist with the pro-dictatorship daily *El Matutino*—had an ephemeral existence. The military regime had infiltrated it by September 1979. It ceased publication in 1980 (Janson Pérez 1993b, 112–13).

¹¹ For online access to this editorial see Janson Pérez (1998).

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#21 (May 1969)

#22 (June 1969)

#23 (June 1969)

#24 (June 1969)

#25 (June 1969)

#26 (July 1969)

#27 (July 1969)

#28 (July 1969)

#29 (July 1969)

#30 (July 1969)

#32 (August 1969)

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