

SECRET NO FOREIGN DISSEM

17 January 1973

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Communist Influence in Panamanian Government

1. The Soviet presence in Panama is limited to a TASS stringer who arrived last fall. He has maintained a low profile and a clean record. The Chinese Communists have no official or semi-official representation.
2. The presence and influence of domestic Communists and other radicals in the Torrijos government has caused some concern. The small, pro-Soviet Communist Party, like other established parties, is technically outlawed, but the government allows it to organize and hold meetings. The Torrijos regime, like all previous Panamanian governments, maintains that it needs the Communists' expertise and organizational talent to carry out its programs. In many cases, the Communists, who are able, well-educated and hard working, are employed simply because they are the best qualified.
3. Communist activists have considerable influence in both the agrarian reform commission and the government-subsidized Confederation of Campesino Settlements. The government's revolutionary councils set up in the provinces to mobilize support for government programs are staffed to a considerable extent by party members. Though Torrijos keeps a tight rein on the public media, pro-Communists and extreme nationalists are active in much of the press and radio programming.
4. Although the active membership of the Communist Party numbers only in the hundreds, the party's growing influence and image of respectability have made Torrijos more aware of the need to keep them in check. Uncooperative militants are still harshly repressed and most of the party's senior leaders remain in exile. If the party moved to oppose him on an important issue Torrijos would probably impose tighter restrictions on its activities.

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5. During the past few months, party leaders have complained that they are being "used" and that younger activists have sold out to the government. The leaders also complain about the diminished accessibility of government officials and their inability to influence policy. Even in those areas where the party does have influence--agriculture, labor and among students--party members have been inept in exploiting their opportunities.

6. While Torrijos may from time to time listen to the advice of individual Communists and use the party's organizational resources, he will probably continue to avoid close ties with the party; he is not likely to permit it to challenge his leadership. However, until Torrijos feels he is able to fashion his own political movement without the party's assistance, he will continue to depend on Communist Party members to mobilize popular support and to administer some of his programs.