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Mexican Politics in Transition

The Breakdown of a One-Party-Dominant Regime

Wayne A. Cornelius

Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies
University of California, San Diego

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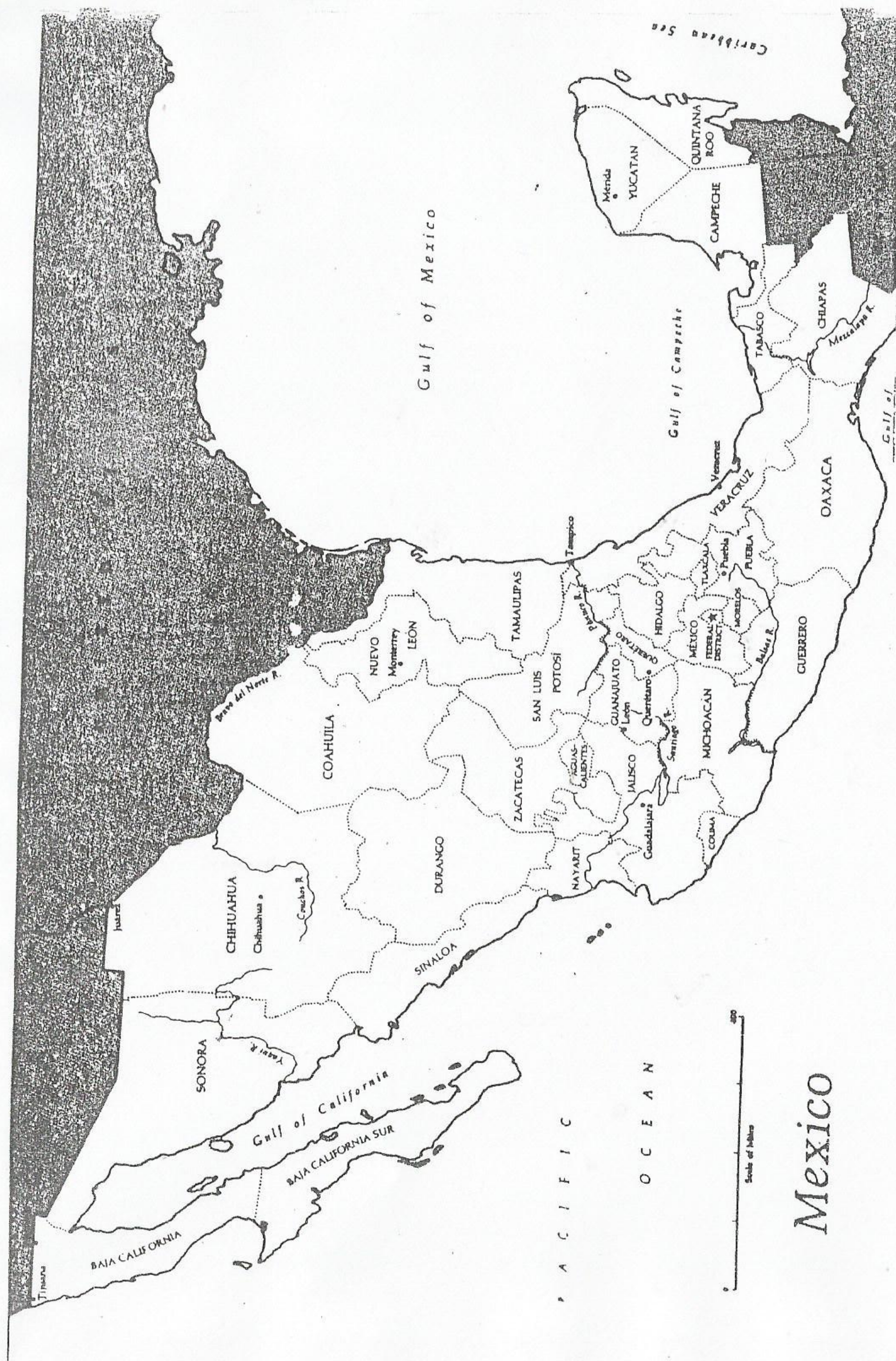

Shattered Illusions: The Breakdown of a One-Party-Dominant Regime

On January 1, 1994, Mexico was supposed to be celebrating the beginning of a new era of dynamic, export-led economic growth and prosperity, as the hard-won North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect. Moreover, Mexico had just become the first developing nation to be permitted to join the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the elite organization of the world's most economically advanced countries.

Carlos Salinas de Gortari, generally recognized as Mexico's strongest president since Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s, was entering his last year in office, with 70 percent performance approval ratings among the Mexican public and international renown as a successful, free-market economic reformer. Salinas had privatized hundreds of heavily subsidized, inefficient state-owned companies, stabilized the macroeconomy, and slashed inflation from about 160 percent in the year before he took office (1988) to less than 8 percent in 1994. Foreign investment, while below the government's highly optimistic projections, was pouring into the country at an impressive clip. Mexico at last seemed poised to make a giant leap from Third World to First World status.

The ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), in power continuously since 1929, had already nominated its presidential candidate for the August 21 elections. While Salinas would be a tough act to follow for any potential successor, the opposition parties seemed to pose no formidable challenge to continued PRI

The author wishes to thank Jeffrey Weldon, John Bailey, Tomás Calvillo, and Juan Molinar Horcasitas for very helpful suggestions and data which have been incorporated into this monograph.

within the national political elite that, as recently as 1988, had threatened to split the ruling party.

As in 1988, the fire was put out—but only temporarily. With a last great exertion of presidential will, Carlos Salinas was able to impose upon the PRI another handpicked successor, economist-technocrat Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León, to replace the slain Colosio. Rapid, skillful responses by Salinas's economic cabinet, strongly backed by the U.S. government, proved sufficient to calm the financial markets. The upsurge in political and drug-related violence that marked 1994 in Mexico even handed the ruling party a potent new issue that it could exploit in the national electoral campaign. Appealing once again to the Mexican public's innate conservatism and fear of violence, the PRI could portray itself as the ultimate guarantor of political stability and nonviolent social change, while frightening voters with visions of the economic and political chaos that would supposedly follow an opposition takeover of the federal government.

The opposition parties to the right and left of the PRI were soundly defeated, in a high-turnout election that was judged by most independent observers to be the cleanest in Mexico's postrevolutionary history. Not only did the PRI retain control of the presidency[1] (albeit with just a plurality of 48.8 percent of the total votes cast); it expanded its majority in the federal Congress. The PRI's intellectual critics were stunned, and the principal leftist opposition party—whose presidential candidate finished a poor third—seemed about to implode. The virtual absence of checks and balances in a political system so dominated by the PRI loomed as the principal obstacle to further democratization, as Mexico approached the end of the century.

The illusion of restored stability created by the ruling party's impressive performance in the August elections was short-lived, however. A militarily insignificant renewal of the Zapatista rebels' activities in Chiapas in December 1994, followed immediately by a sustained speculative attack on the overvalued peso by short-term foreign and domestic investors, opened a Pandora's box of economic and political troubles. Exacerbated by the widespread perception of newly inaugurated President Zedillo as an extraordinarily weak and indecisive leader, what began as a currency and

[1] According to statistics of the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE), Zedillo won 50.17 percent of the *valid* votes, that is, excluding 1,001,058 "spoiled" ballots and write-in votes cast for unregistered candidates. However, if the calculation is based on *total* votes cast (including those annulled by election authorities), Zedillo's share of the vote declines to 48.76 percent. The latter method of figuring is more politically meaningful, because it includes "protest" votes cast by those who deliberately spoiled their ballots, for example, by voting for all the candidates listed or writing in the name of an unregistered candidate—even a long dead historical figure

financial liquidity crisis quickly evolved into a full-blown crisis of confidence in the PRI-dominated regime and its competence to manage the economy. More than $10 billion in investment capital fled Mexico within a week; the peso had to be sharply devalued, eventually losing more than half of its value against the U.S. dollar, and the government came within a few days of insolvency as its foreign currency reserves were depleted. Only a $52 billion international financial bailout action orchestrated by the U.S. government forestalled a complete collapse of the economy. The Zedillo government, desperate to strengthen itself and prevent any additional conflicts of a political nature, began making private deals with the opposition parties, some of which were openly resisted by PRI militants. Ex-President Salinas, who had publicly criticized Zedillo and his economic cabinet for provoking the economic crisis by mishandling the December 1994 devaluation of the peso, was sent by Zedillo into de facto exile in the United States.

Ironically, it was Salinas who had breathed life into the creaking PRI apparatus in the five years following his own disputed election to the presidency. In the July 6, 1988, national elections, the PRI had suffered unprecedented reverses in both the presidential and congressional races. For the first time in history, a Mexican president had been elected with less than half of the votes cast—48.7 percent, and probably much less, if the vote count had been honest.[2] This was more than 20 percentage points below the vote share attributed to PRI presidential candidate Miguel de la Madrid in the 1982 election. Ex-PRIista Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, son of the much-revered former President Lázaro Cárdenas, heading a hastily assembled coalition of minor leftist and nationalist parties, was officially credited with 31.1 percent of the presidential vote—far

[2] If the 695,042 "spoiled" ballots and 14,333 votes cast for nonregistered presidential candidates in the 1988 election are excluded from the percentage base, Salinas's share rises to a bare majority (50.74 percent). The actual extent of irregularities in the 1988 presidential vote tabulation will never be determined. Within a few hours after the polls closed, a "computer crash" in the National Registry of Voters allegedly interrupted the count, and six days would pass before even preliminary results for a majority of the country's polling places were announced. It was not until 1994 that a knowledgeable election official confirmed the widespread suspicion that there had been no "computer crash" on election night in 1988. In fact, higher authorities ordered the computerized count to be suspended after early returns showed Cárdenas leading by a significant margin. There is no evidence from exit surveys of voters leaving polling places in 1988, because the government had denied permission for such surveys. Nevertheless, the official tally for Salinas was within a few percentage points of his showing in several of the most scientifically reliable preelection polls. (See Miguel Basáñez, "Las encuestas y los resultados oficiales, *Perfil de La Jornada*, August 8, 1988.) Based on detailed analyses of the partial, publicly released election results, most analysts have concluded that Salinas probably did win, but that his margin of victory over Cárdenas was much smaller than the 19-point spread indicated by the official results.

more than any previous opposition candidate. A diminished PRI delegation still controlled the Congress, but the president's party had lost the two-thirds majority needed to approve constitutional amendments.

Salinas's brand of strong presidential leadership and his accomplishments—especially the sharp reduction in inflation and the implementation of a new-style "antipoverty" and public works program which greatly increased government responsiveness to lower-class demands—sufficed to rebuild electoral support for the PRI and to paper over the cracks within the ruling political class. The widely predicted open rupture of the elite, possibly leading to the PRI's demise and a fully competitive, democratic political system, did not occur during Salinas's presidency.

After the political and economic shocks of 1994, however, the world's longest-ruling political party once again appeared to be in a state of accelerated decomposition. By early 1995 the system of strong presidential rule was threatened by an unprecedented breakdown of discipline within the PRI and a fully resuscitated conservative opposition party, which would take or retain control of four important state governments in elections held during the year.

Apart from the massive loss of national wealth signified by the mega-devaluation and capital flight of 1994–1995, revelations that serious macroeconomic problems and mismanagement had been concealed from the electorate by the Salinas administration during the run-up to the 1994 elections fueled public anger toward the government. Having returned the PRI to power for another six years—in part because they doubted the ability of the opposition parties to run the country's economy as successfully as PRI technocrats seemingly had done since 1988—Mexicans now faced a long period of negative or anemic economic growth, inflation in the high double-digit range, massive job losses (over 1 million in 1995 alone), sharply increased taxation, austerity budgets, greater financial dependence on the United States, and high political uncertainty.

Middle-class Mexicans, in particular, felt betrayed by a government that had purchased their electoral loyalty with a flood of imported consumer goods (made affordable by the overvalued peso), readily available consumer credit, and inflated promises of rapid, NAFTA-driven economic growth that would raise incomes and keep everyone employed. Instead, they got a shrinking economy, high employment insecurity, and an unmanageable debt burden, as interest rates for auto loans, home mortgages, and credit card balances soared above 80 percent. The number of overdue loans held by private banks rose so rapidly that the solvency of the entire banking system was threatened, and a nationwide movement of middle-class debtors demanded a government-imposed moratorium on loan repayments.

In 1995, for the first time in memory, prominent Mexican intellectuals, media commentators, and politicians openly began discussing the possibility that an elected PRI president might be unable to finish his term. Zedillo, some predicted, would either be forced to resign by a generalized crisis of credibility and governability, or he would be removed in a coup led by old-guard PRI leaders, perhaps in league with military officers frustrated by the seemingly endless rebellion in Chiapas.[3] Neither of these scenarios, nor what Mexican commentators now refer to as "East Europeanization"—uncontrolled societal mobilization causing an abrupt collapse of the PRI regime—seems probable at this juncture. However, divisions within the ruling coalition are deeper than at any time since the mid-1930s, when newly inaugurated, reform-minded President Lázaro Cárdenas forced a confrontation with long-time strongman and former President Plutarco Elías Calles and his conservative allies. Under present circumstances, a slow-motion implosion of the regime, resembling what happened in the Soviet Union in the late Gorbachev era, cannot be ruled out.

Only a decade ago, such drastic changes in the Mexican political system would have seemed unthinkable. This regime had been the most stable in the modern history of Latin America, with a well-earned reputation for resilience, adaptability to new circumstances, a high level of agreement within the ruling elite on basic rules of political competition, and a high capacity to co-opt dissidents, both within and outside of the ruling party. As late as 1990, the celebrated Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa could plausibly describe Mexico's regime as "the perfect dictatorship," combining stability, legitimacy, and durability in a way that even the former Soviet Union and Castro's Cuba had never been able to achieve.[4]

Since 1929, when the "official" party was founded, both political assassination and armed rebellion had been rejected as routes to the presidency by all contenders for power. A handful of disappointed aspirants to the ruling party's presidential nomination mounted candidacies outside the party (in the elections of 1929, 1940, 1946, 1952, and 1988), but even the most broadly

[3]In a national survey of middle- and upper-income Mexicans, conducted by MORI de México during February 24–27, 1995, nearly half of the respondents agreed that a coup d'etat was possible in Mexico, if President Zedillo's handling of the economic and political crisis did not improve; only 38 percent considered such an event impossible (*Este País* [Mexico City] 49 [April 1995], p. 50).

[4]Quoted in Denise Dresser, "Five Scenarios for Mexico," *Journal of Democracy* 5:3 (July 1994), p. 57.

supported of these breakaway movements were successfully contained through government-engineered vote fraud and intimidation.

In the early 1970s concerns had been raised about the stability of the system, after the bloody repression of a student protest movement in Mexico City by President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz on the eve of the 1968 Olympic Games. Many analysts at that time suggested that Mexico was entering a period of institutional crisis, requiring fundamental reforms in both political arrangements and strategy of economic development. But the discovery of massive oil and natural gas resources during the last half of the decade gave the incumbent regime a new lease on life. The continued support of masses and elites could be purchased with an apparently limitless supply of petro-pesos, even without major structural reforms. The government's room for maneuver was abruptly erased by the collapse of the oil boom in August 1982, owing to a combination of adverse international economic circumstances (falling oil prices, rising interest rates, recession in the United States) and fiscally irresponsible domestic policies. Real wages and living standards for the vast majority of Mexicans plummeted, and the government committed itself to a socially painful restructuring of the economy, including a drastic shrinkage of the sector owned and managed by the government itself.

The economic crisis of the 1980s placed enormous stress on Mexico's political system. Indeed, as both Presidents de la Madrid and Salinas argued, the absence of a social explosion throughout the "lost decade" of the 1980s could be taken as evidence of the essential strength of Mexico's political institutions. But the apparent recovery of economic health in the 1989–1993 period did not reverse the decline of the hegemonic one-party regime. The 1988 election results had demonstrated that the political system whose basic elements were put in place by Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s had outlived its usefulness. The strong performance of opposition candidates of both right and left in several of the gubernatorial elections held during the Salinas presidency proved that the 1988 national election was no fluke. In 1989 the PRI's 60-year-old monopoly of state governorships was finally broken, with the overwhelming, officially recognized victory of Ernesto Ruffo, candidate of the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), in Baja California. By May 1995, three additional state governments had been "surrendered" by the PRI to the PAN (in Guanajuato, Chihuahua, and Jalisco). By November 1995, the PAN had made such gains in state and local elections that it governed some 35 million Mexicans—over one-third of the country's population.

These opposition gains, occurring in some of the country's most highly developed states, suggest that Mexican society—increasingly complex, heterogeneous, more urban, better educated, more integrated into the world economy—has simply outgrown the political institutions and patterns of state-society relations largely established in the 1930s. Centralized control of both mass publics and members of the political class has become increasingly difficult to maintain. In 1994, the PRI was miraculously able to pull its feuding factions together sufficiently to win, convincingly, one more national election. But the current economic crisis certainly has the potential to "put an end to the Mexican political system as we know it," as Mexican novelist–political activist Carlos Fuentes has predicted.[5] The main questions now are what set of political structures and arrangements will replace it, and how conflictual the transition process will be.

[5]Quoted in *El Financiero International*, April 3–9, 1995, p. 2.

Historical Perspective

LEGACIES OF COLONIALISM

Long before Hernán Cortés landed in 1519 and began the Spanish conquest of Mexico, its territory was inhabited by numerous Indian civilizations. Of these, the Maya in the Yucatán peninsula and the Toltec on the central plateau had developed the most complex political and economic organization. Both of these civilizations had disintegrated, however, before the Spaniards arrived. Smaller Indian societies were decimated by diseases introduced by the invaders or were vanquished by the sword. Subsequent grants of land and Indian labor by the Spanish Crown to the colonists further isolated the rural Indian population and deepened their exploitation.

The combined effects of attrition, intermarriage, and cultural penetration of Indian regions have drastically reduced the proportion of Mexico's population culturally identified as Indian. By 1990, according to census figures, 7.9 percent of the nation's population spoke an Indian language.[1] The Indian minority has been persistently marginal to the national economy and political system. Today, the indigenous population is heavily concentrated in rural communities that the government classifies as the country's most economically depressed and service-deprived, located primarily in the southeast and the center of the country.[2] They engage in rainfall-dependent subsistence agriculture using traditional methods of cultivation, are seasonally employed as migrant laborers in commercial agriculture, or produce crafts for sale in regional and national markets. The Indian population is an espe-

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[1] This represents an undercount, since the census identifies as Indians only persons over the age of five. Indians of all ages constitute an estimated 15 percent of the total population.

[2] See Jaime Sepúlveda, ed., *La salud de los pueblos indígenas en México* (México, D.F.: Secretaría de Salud and Instituto Nacional Indigenista, September 1993).

cially troubling reminder of the millions of people who have been left behind by uneven development in twentieth-century Mexico.

The importance of Spain's colonies in the New World lay in their ability to provide the Crown with vital resources to fuel the Spanish economy. Mexico's mines provided gold and silver in abundance until the war of independence began in 1810. After independence, Mexico continued to export these ores, supplemented in subsequent eras by hemp, cotton, textiles, oil, and winter vegetables.

The Crown expected the colony to produce enough basic food crops for its own sustenance. Agriculture developed, unevenly, alongside the resource-exporting sectors of the economy. Some farming was small-scale subsistence agriculture. Most large landholdings in the colonial era were farmed through combinations of sharecropping, debt peonage, and large-scale cultivation; they produced basic food grains and livestock for regional markets. Over the nineteenth century, some large landholders made significant capital investments in machinery to process agricultural products (grain mills and textile factories) and in agricultural inputs (land, dams, and improved livestock). These agricultural entrepreneurs produced commercial crops for the national or international market. Today, the relationship between subsistence agriculture on tiny plots (*minifundia*) and large-scale, highly mechanized commercial agriculture is far more complex; but the extreme dualism and the erratic performance that characterize Mexico's agricultural sector are among the most important bottlenecks in the country's economic development.

CHURCH AND STATE

Since the Spanish conquest, the Roman Catholic Church has been an institution of enduring power in Mexico, but the nature of its power has changed notably in the postcolonial era. Priests joined the Spanish invaders in an evangelical mission to promote conversion of the Indians to Catholicism, and individual priests have continued to play important roles in national history. Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla helped launch Mexico's war of independence in 1810, and Father José María Morelos y Pavón replaced Hidalgo as spiritual and military leader of the independence movement when Hidalgo was executed by the Crown in 1811.

During Mexico's postindependence period, institutional antagonisms between church and central government have occasionally flared into open confrontations on such issues as church wealth, educational policy, the content of public school textbooks, and political activism by the church. The constitutions of 1857 and

1917 formally established the separation of church and state and defined their respective domains. Constitutional provisions dramatically reduced the church's power and wealth by nationalizing its property, including large agricultural landholdings. The 1917 constitution also made church-affiliated schools subject to the authority of the federal government, denied priests the right to vote or speak publicly on political issues, and gave the government the right to limit the number of priests who can serve in Mexico.

Government efforts during the 1920s to enforce these constitutional provisions led the church to suspend religious services throughout the country. Church leaders also supported the Cristero rebellion of 1927–1929, as a last stand against the incursions of a centralizing state. Large landholders took advantage of the conflict, inciting devout peasants to take up arms against local dissidents who had begun to petition the government for land reform. Because the church also opposed redistribution of land, the landowners could depict themselves as faithful partners in the holy war against a state that espoused such policies. The rebellion caused 100,000 combatant deaths, uncounted civilian casualties, and economic devastation in a large part of central Mexico. The settlement of the conflict established, once and for all, the church's subordination to the state, in return for which the government relaxed its restrictions on church activities in nonpolitical arenas.

This accord inaugurated a long period of relative tranquility in church-state relations, during which many of the anticlerical provisions of the 1917 constitution (such as the prohibition on church involvement in education) were ignored by both the government and the church. The central church hierarchy—among the most conservative in Latin America—cooperated with the government on a variety of issues, and the church posed no threat to the ruling party's hegemony.

Today, the church retains considerable influence, particularly in Mexico's rural areas and small cities. But even though more than 80 percent of the country's population identify themselves as Catholics in sample surveys, this religious preference does not translate automatically into support for the church's positions on social or political issues. Formal church opposition to birth control, for example, has not prevented widespread adoption of family planning practices in Mexico since the government launched a birth control program in the mid-1970s. Nevertheless, the government respects and perhaps even fears the Catholic Church's capacity for mass mobilization, which was demonstrated dramatically during Pope John Paul II's visits to Mexico in 1979 and 1990. On each of those occasions, an estimated 20 million Mexicans participated in street demonstrations and other public gatherings held in

connection with the papal visit. In 1990 a well-organized protest movement organized by the Catholic Church in response to a state law legalizing abortions in the southern state of Chiapas succeeded in overturning the law, virtually ending hopes for liberalizing abortion laws throughout Mexico.

Since the 1980s church-state relations have been strained by the highly visible political activism of some local and state-level church leaders. In the northern state of Chihuahua, for example, the archbishop publicly criticized PRI fraud in the July 1986 gubernatorial election and sided openly with the candidate of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). In the southern state of Chiapas during 1994 and 1995, Bishop Samuel Ruiz García served as mediator between the Zapatista rebels and the federal government. Closely identified with the cause of the state's impoverished Indian population, Ruiz was accused by hard-liners within the PRI-government apparatus and even by conservative members of the Catholic Church hierarchy of being a provocateur and Marxist revolutionary who helped to organize the rebellion or, at minimum, knew that it was being planned.

This and other episodes of overt political activism by church leaders and priests have been poorly tolerated by most members of the ruling political elite. But President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, determined to "modernize" church-state relations, induced the Congress to repeal many of the constitutionally mandated restrictions on religious activities (including church-run private schools), while maintaining the prohibition on overt participation of the clergy in partisan politics. In 1992 the Salinas government also resumed diplomatic relations with the Vatican, which had been suspended for 128 years. Opinion polls showed broad public support for these steps toward normalizing church-state relations.[3]

However, the assassination of Juan Jesús Posadas, Cardinal of Guadalajara, in May 1993 opened a major new breach, with the government claiming that the cardinal was the unintended victim of a confrontation between rival drug-trafficking organizations while Posadas's successor contended that he had been deliberately targeted for elimination by groups or persons unknown. The still unsolved assassination case and the involvement of church leaders and laymen in the Chiapas conflict promise to generate continuing tension in the church-state relationship.

REVOLUTION AND ITS AFTERMATH

The civil conflict that erupted in Mexico in 1910 is often referred to as the first of the great "social revolutions" that shook the world early in the twentieth century, but Mexico's upheaval originated

[3]See, for example, "Encuestalia: ¿Quien quiere un Papa?" Nexos 148 (April 1990).

within the country's ruling class. The revolution did not begin as a spontaneous uprising of the common people against an entrenched dictator, Porfirio Díaz, and against the local bosses and landowners who exploited them. Even though hundreds of thousands of workers and peasants ultimately participated in the civil strife, most of the revolutionary leadership came from the younger generation of middle- and upper-class Mexicans who had become disenchanted with three and a half decades of increasingly heavy-handed rule by the aging dictator and his clique. These disgruntled members of the elite saw their future opportunities for economic and political mobility blocked by the closed group surrounding Díaz.

Led by Francisco I. Madero, whose family had close ties with the ruling group, these liberal bourgeois reformers were committed to opening up the political system and creating new opportunities for themselves within a capitalist economy whose basic features they did not challenge. They sought not to destroy the established order but rather to make it work more in their own interest than that of the foreign capitalists who had come to dominate key sectors of Mexico's economy during the Porfirian dictatorship, a period called "the Porfiriato."

Of course, some serious grievances had accumulated among workers and peasants. Once the rebellion against Díaz got under way, leaders who appealed to the disadvantaged masses pressed their claims against the central government. Emiliano Zapata led a movement of peasants in the state of Morelos who were bent on regaining the land they had lost to the rural aristocracy by subterfuge during the Porfiriato. In the north, Pancho Villa led an army consisting of jobless workers, small landowners, and cattle hands, whose main interest was steady employment. As the various revolutionary leaders contended for control of the central government, the political order that had been created and enforced by Díaz disintegrated into warlordism—powerful regional gangs led by revolutionary *caudillos* (political-military strongmen) who aspired more to increasing their personal wealth and social status than to leading a genuine social revolution. In sum, "although class conflict was central to the Revolution, the Revolution cannot be reduced to class conflict. . . . [It] was a mix of different classes, interests, and ideologies," giving rise to a state that enjoyed considerable autonomy vis-à-vis specific class interests.[4]

The first decade of the revolution produced a new, remarkably progressive constitution, replacing the constitution of 1857. The

[4]Alan Knight, "Revolutionary Project, Recalcitrant People: Mexico, 1910–1940," in Jaime E. Rodríguez, ed., *The Revolutionary Process in Mexico* (Los Angeles, Calif.: UCLA Latin American Center, 1990), pp. 228–29.

young, middle-class elite that dominated the constitutional convention of 1916–1917 "had little if any direct interest in labor unions or land distribution. But it was an elite that recognized the need for social change. . . . By 1916, popular demands for land and labor reform were too great to ignore."[5] The constitution of 1917 established the principle of state control over all natural resources, subordination of the church to the state, the government's right to redistribute land, and rights for labor that had not yet been secured even by the labor movement in the United States. Nearly two decades passed, however, before most of these constitutional provisions began to be implemented.

Many historians today stress the continuities between prerevolutionary and postrevolutionary Mexico. The processes of economic modernization, capital accumulation, state building, and political centralization that gained considerable momentum during the Porfiriato were interrupted by civil strife from 1910 to 1920, but they resumed once a semblance of order had been restored. During the 1920s, the central government set out to eliminate or undermine the most powerful and independent-minded regional *caudillos* by co-opting the local power brokers (known traditionally as *caciques*). These local political bosses became, in effect, appendages of the central government, supporting its policies and maintaining control over the population in their communities. By the end of this period, leaders with genuine popular followings, like Zapata and Villa, had been assassinated, and control had been seized by a new postrevolutionary elite bent on demobilizing the masses and establishing the hegemony of the central government.

The rural aristocracy of the Porfiriato had been weakened but not eliminated; its heirs still controlled large concentrations of property and other forms of wealth in many parts of the country. Most of the large urban firms that operated during the Porfiriato also survived, further demonstrating that the revolution was not an attack on private capital per se.[6]

THE CÁRDENAS UPHEAVAL

Elite control was maintained during the 1930s, but this was nevertheless an era of massive social and political upheaval in Mexico. During the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940), peasants

[5]Peter H. Smith, "The Making of the Mexican Constitution," in William O. Aydelotte, ed., *The History of Parliamentary Behavior* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 219.

[6]Stephen Haber, *Industry and Underdevelopment: The Industrialization of Mexico, 1890–1940* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988).

and urban workers succeeded for the first time in pressing their claims for land and higher wages; in fact, Cárdenas actively encouraged them to do so. The result was an unprecedented wave of strikes, protest demonstrations, and petitions for breaking up large rural estates.

Most disputes between labor and management during this period were settled, under government pressure, in favor of the workers. The Cárdenas administration also redistributed more than twice as much land as that expropriated by all of Cárdenas's predecessors since 1915, when Mexico's land reform program was formally initiated. By 1940 the country's land tenure system had been fundamentally altered, breaking the traditional domination of the large haciendas and creating a large sector of small peasant farmers called *ejidatarios*—more than 1.5 million of them—who had received plots of land under the agrarian reform program. The Cárdenas government actively encouraged the formation of new organizations of peasants and urban workers, grouped the new organizations into nationwide confederations, and provided arms to rural militias formed by the *ejidatarios* who had received plots of land redistributed by the government. Even Mexico's foreign relations were disrupted in 1938 when the Cárdenas government nationalized oil companies that had been operating in Mexico under U.S. and British ownership.

The Cárdenas era proved to be a genuine aberration in the development of postrevolutionary Mexico. Never before or since has the fundamental "who benefits?" question been addressed with such energy and commitment by a Mexican government. Mexican intellectuals frequently refer to 1938 as the high-water mark of the Mexican Revolution as measured by social progress, and characterize the period since then as a retrogression. Certainly, the distributive and especially the redistributive performance of the Mexican government declined sharply in the decades that followed, and the worker and peasant organizations formed during the Cárdenas era atrophied and became less and less likely to contest either the will of the government or the interests of Mexico's private economic elites. De facto reconcentration of landholdings and other forms of wealth occurred as the state provided increasingly generous support to the country's new commercial, industrial, and financial elites during a period of rapid industrialization.

Critics of the Cárdenas administration have laid much of the blame for this outcome on the kind of mass political organizing that occurred under Cárdenas. The resulting organizations were captives of the regime—tied so closely to it that they had no capacity for autonomous action. Under the control of a new group of

national political leaders whose values and priorities were unfavorable to the working classes, these same organizations, after Cárdenas, functioned only to enforce political stability and limit lower-class demands for government benefits. "The institutional shell of Cardenismo remained," writes historian Alan Knight, "but its internal dynamic was lost. In other words, the jalopy was hijacked by new drivers; they retuned the engine, took on new passengers, and then drove it in a quite different direction."[7]

Cárdenas represented a coalition of forces that was progressive but not committed to destroying the foundations of Mexican capitalism. While he was advised by left-wing Keynesian economists trained in England, Cárdenas himself was not a socialist. He may have considered socialism a desirable long-term goal, but neither he "nor his associates believed it was a realistic possibility for the immediate future."[8] His government's large investments in public works (electricity, roads, irrigation projects) and its reorganization of the country's financial system laid the foundations for the post-1940 "Mexican miracle" of rapid industrialization and low inflation within a capitalist framework. In the long term, the principal beneficiaries of Cárdenas's economic project proved to be the middle classes and unionized industrial workers—not peasants and the unorganized urban poor.

The Cárdenas era fundamentally reshaped Mexico's political institutions: The presidency became the primary institution of the political system, with sweeping powers exercised during a constitutionally limited six-year term with no possibility of reelection. The military was removed from overt political competition and transformed into one of several institutional pillars of the regime. And an elaborate network of government-sponsored peasant and labor organizations provided a mass base for the official political party and performed a variety of political and economic control functions, utilizing a multilayered system of patronage and clientelism.

By 1940 a much larger proportion of the Mexican population was nominally included in the national political system, mostly by their membership in peasant and labor organizations created by Cárdenas. No real democratization of the system resulted from this vast expansion of "political participation," however. Although working-class groups did have more control over their representatives in the government-sponsored organizations than over their former masters on the haciendas and in the factories, their influence over public policy and government priorities after Cárdenas was minimal and highly indirect. Policy recommendations, official actions, and nominations for elective and appointive positions at all levels still emanated from the central government and official party headquarters in Mexico City, filtering down the hierarchy to the rank and file for ratification and legitimation.

Cárdenas's experiment with democratization was centered in the workplace. Workers would participate in economic decision making in their *ejido* community or industrial plant. The outcome was greater workplace democracy during Cárdenas's presidency, but hardly the "workers' democracy" that in 1938 he claimed would be the end result of his political institution building.

[7] Alan Knight, "Cardenismo: Juggernaut or Jalopy?" *Journal of Latin American Studies* 26:1 (1994), p. 107.

[8] Nora Hamilton, *The Limits of State Autonomy: Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 281.