

Political Unrest in Mexico

There was a genuine swing back and forth in Mexico (and in other countries, as well) between republicans, who were anti-monarchical and democratic, and conservatives, who preferred a strongman like a king and who supported the “traditional values” of maintaining the political and economic power of elites and the inferiority of the lower social classes, and promoting the Catholic Church. There were strong republican voices in Mexico that created that first strong constitution. However, the old guard supported leaders such as Santa Anna and eventually the Austrian prince, Maximilian. The political tide would later turn and bring Benito Juárez to the presidency and his great reform movement—and back again after his death to the rise of Porfirio Díaz and his long run until the Mexican Revolution.

Caudillos

Caudillos were typically strongmen who were very charismatic and had a strong regional power base from which they could position themselves on to the national stage.

Agustín de Iturbide

Agustín de Iturbide was born on September 27, 1783, in Valladolid, Mexico. As was befitting of his birth and social class, Iturbide entered military service and fought for the royalist army. In 1810, Miguel Hidalgo approached Iturbide about joining the revolution. However, Iturbide declined, opting instead to remain loyal to Spain. Iturbide’s successful defense of Valladolid against José María Morelos secured him the military command of Guanajuato and Michoacán, though he was later removed from the position in 1816 after allegations of misconduct emerged.

The year 1820 marked a turning point in Mexico’s fight for independence. Though the revolutionary priests, Hidalgo and Morelos, had long been captured and killed, and the resistance led by Vicente Guerrero was limited to the southern part of Mexico, events in Spain precipitated a strong response from former royalists who now wished to assert their independence. Iturbide and Guerrero joined forces, writing and eventually publishing the Plan de Iguala on February 24, 1821. The three-part plan promised Mexican independence from Spain, the equality of Spanish colonists and Creoles, and a ban on all other religions aside from Roman Catholicism. The so-called “Army of the Three Guarantees” swept through Mexico and ultimately secured the country’s independence through the signing of the Treaty of Córdoba on August 24, 1821.

Less than one year later, Iturbide crowned himself the emperor of Mexico. Frivolous spending and rampant corruption rendered Iturbide’s rule ineffective and made him wildly unpopular with Mexico’s citizens. Mounting resistance led by Antonio López de Santa Anna resulted in Iturbide’s abdication and flight to Europe in March 1823. Iturbide returned to Mexico in 1824 where he was immediately captured and shot.

Antonio López de Santa Anna

Antonio López de Santa Anna was born on February 21, 1794, in Jalapa, Mexico. Santa Anna was renowned for his duplicity, first supporting Iturbide and his ascension to power before later spearheading his removal. Santa Anna gained national prestige in 1829 after helping defeat a Spanish plot to retake Mexico. Four years later he became president, a position he held for three years before being deposed following his capture during the Texas Revolution.

Santa Anna managed to regain control of Mexico for a brief period in 1839 as dictator before launching a successful revolution that placed him back in power from 1841 to 1845. He was forced into exile but returned to Mexico to assume control of the Mexican army at the start of the Mexican-American War. He retired from service in 1847 and moved to Jamaica before relocating to New Granada six years later. He died in Mexico City in 1876.

Texas Revolution and the Mexican-American War

During the 1820s, small numbers of Americans began moving into the Mexican province of Texas from the southeast to raise cotton and sugar on plantations. In 1821, Stephen Austin was given permission by the newly installed Mexican government to establish settlements in east Texas. In 1822, he and three hundred families entered Texas. More immigrants followed. In less than a decade, there were twenty thousand Americans and many slaves in Texas. The settlers far outnumbered the approximately four thousand Mexicans living there. Concerned about the growing imbalance, the Mexican government banned all further settlement by Americans and all further importation of slaves.

Texans—transplanted Americans and native Mexicans—asked several times for autonomy. They declared that they needed slaves to work their plantations and wanted to rid themselves of Mexican government in general. Austin was jailed by the new Mexican dictator, General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, for delivering the most recent request for autonomy, and the Texans rebelled. Santa Anna had seized control of the Mexican government in 1833 and was elected president.

The Texas Revolution ended almost as quickly as it had begun. The fighting lasted from late 1835 to April 1836. The most memorable battle of the revolution was the Battle of the Alamo. The Alamo was a mission-fortress built by Spanish priests in San Antonio. About three thousand Mexican troops besieged the fort, which was defended by fewer than two hundred Texans. The siege began in February 1836 and ended thirteen days later when Mexican cannons blew huge holes through the walls. Mexican soldiers entered the fort through the gaps in the walls, and all 189 Texans, as well as approximately 600 Mexican soldiers, died during the heroic defense of the fortress.

During the Battle of the Alamo, Mexican and American Texans proclaimed their independence. One month after the Battle of the Alamo, Texan troops led by General Sam Houston charged into battle during the Battle of San Jacinto, crying, "Remember the Alamo!" The slogan emerged as a reminder of the defeat and as an inspiration to continue the fight. The Texans defeated Santa Anna in that battle and secured their independence, later electing the hero of the Battle of San Jacinto, Sam Houston, as their first president.

Although Mexico had not recognized Texas's declaration of independence, Texas asked for annexation by the United States. The United States initially refused for two reasons. First, annexation would surely mean war with Mexico, and second, Texas would be a slave state. The United States was still trying to

reach a compromise over the issue of slavery. By 1844, however, the clamor to admit Texas was growing, and it became a major campaign issue in the presidential election that year.

James K. Polk ran on a platform of annexation against the incumbent Senator Henry Clay and won. Early in 1845, the United States annexed Texas. The Mexican-American War was fought to determine where the southwestern boundary between Texas and Mexico lay. When U.S. troops under General Zachary Taylor moved into territory that the Mexicans viewed as theirs, they were attacked. The United States responded with a declaration of war.

Zachary Taylor led an army across the Rio Grande into Mexico. He won a victory at the Battle of Monterrey in September 1846. Santa Anna marched north to meet Taylor's army but was defeated at the battle of Buena Vista in February 1847. Meanwhile, another American army under the command of Winfield Scott landed on the Mexican coast, near Veracruz. Scott won battles at Veracruz and Chapultepec and eventually occupied Mexico City.

The war lasted from April 1846 to February 1848. Under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), which ended the war, Mexico ceded to the United States territory that would become all or part of the following states: Texas, California, Nevada, Utah, west Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona.

Benito Juárez

Benito Juárez was born in Oaxaca, Mexico, on March 21, 1806. Of indigenous descent, Juárez's parents died when he was young. He was raised by an uncle until leaving for school at the age of twelve. He originally planned to be a priest, but changed his course of study and graduated in 1831 with a law degree. He secured his first public office that year and would go on to dedicate his life to public service as a legislator, judge, and eventually president of Mexico.

Juárez embarked on a campaign of political and economic reform, including facilitating the shift from a Catholic Church-dominated economy to a capitalist economy with a federal system of government. In 1853, Juárez was exiled by Santa Anna but returned from the United States in 1855, at which point he became the Minister of Justice and Public Instruction. As minister, he banned special courts that gave preferential treatment to members of the clergy and military, and broke up large, Church-held estates. Two years later, Juárez was appointed the head of Mexico's Supreme Court and acted as vice president, as well. Juárez became president in 1861 after several years of internal struggle and conflict, but was deposed after Mexico fell under the imperial control of Maximilian I in 1863. Juárez was reinstated as president in 1867 and governed until 1871, during which time he implemented reforms across Mexico. Juárez died in 1872 after being reelected in 1871.

Emiliano Zapata

Emiliano Zapata was born into a poor family on August 8, 1879, in Anencuilco, Mexico. Even at an early age, Zapata was a known rebel and was arrested as an adolescent for participating in a rebellion among the peasants in his village. Over time, Zapata became an important leader in his hometown and led an ongoing battle between the peasants and landowners in an attempt to regain and protect the land that had been taken from the poor.

In 1910, Zapata campaigned for Francisco Madero against President Porfirio Díaz, a measure he hoped would secure land reform in Mexico. Zapata became general of the Liberation Army of the South and

won the First Battle of Ciudad Juárez, a four-day battle that marked the decline of Díaz's presidency. When Madero ascended to power, however, he ignored Zapata's demands, forcing the passionate leader to resume his revolution. Zapata, along with other leaders, created the Plan of Ayala, which promised to depose Madero, install a provisional president before holding legitimate elections, and return stolen land to Mexico's peasants.

Zapata was fighting at this early stage to prevent the leaders from the north—who were large landholders in their own right—from seizing sole power over the country. He wanted to make sure he had a voice and that the issues he fought for were addressed. After years of conflict, Mexico's leaders were prepared to draft a new constitution in 1917. He argued for the inclusion of land reform in the new constitution of 1917 (which is the current constitution of Mexico) but was not invited to attend. Unfortunately, the new government did not move to enforce the constitutional provisions for land reform that Zapata had fought for. Zapata was ambushed and shot in 1919.

Pancho Villa

Pancho Villa was born on June 5, 1878, in Durango, Mexico. His parents, laborers on a large estate, died when he was young. Villa's life as an outlaw began at a young age; he was forced to flee after killing an estate owner following an assault on his sister. Like Emiliano Zapata, Villa joined Francisco Madero's revolution against Porfirio Díaz in 1910 and asserted himself as a proficient soldier and leader. In 1912, Villa was condemned to death by General Victoriano Huerta and imprisoned; he managed to escape to the United States and later returned to Mexico in 1913, at which point he joined forces with Venustiano Carranza to continue the revolution.

Villa and Carranza, following a series of victories against Huerta and his forces, captured Mexico City in June 1914. Chronic distrust led to the dissolution of Villa's relationship with Carranza, leading him to align himself with Emiliano Zapata by the end of 1914. Villa sustained the revolution through the duration of Carranza's rule, eventually retiring in 1920. Villa was assassinated three years later.