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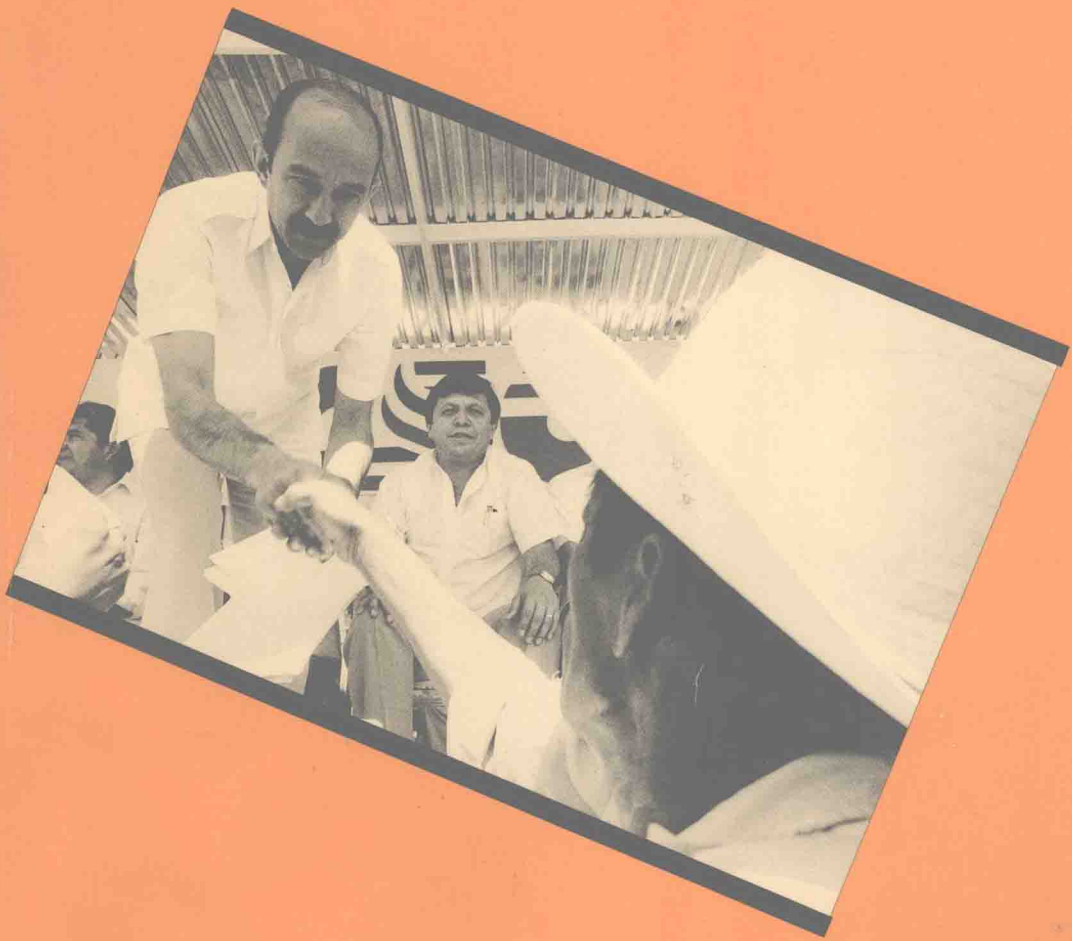
Wayne A. Cornelius and Ann L. Craig



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

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Cover photo: PRI presidential candidate Carlos Salinas de Gortari campaigns in Mexico, 1988. Photo courtesy of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional.

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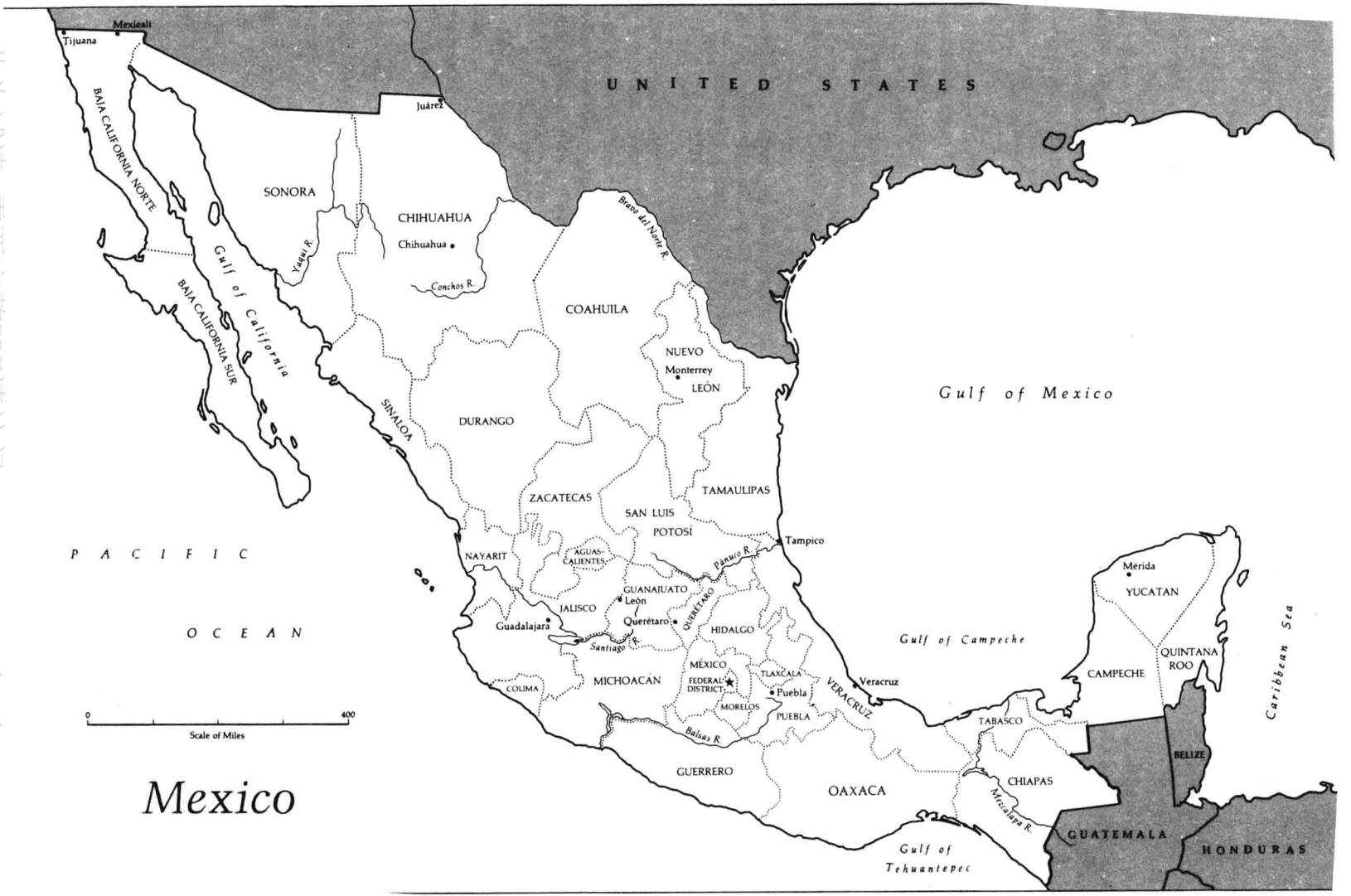

Mexico

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The Mexican Political System: The End of an Era

On July 7, 1988, Mexico's newly elected president, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, appeared before the television cameras to make a startling pronouncement: "The era of the virtual one-party system [in Mexico] has ended," giving way to a period of "intense political competition." Salinas's statement was intended both as a celebration of Mexico's maturing political system and as a thinly veiled warning to the leadership of his own party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which had dominated all levels of the political system continuously since its creation in 1929. Henceforth, PRI leaders would be operating in a much more fluid and uncertain political environment. Given the strength demonstrated by opposition parties, the government could no longer guarantee the outcomes of the electoral process.

Although many PRI militants were clearly unpersuaded that the era of one-party dominance had ended, the results of the July 6 election vividly reflected the new political realities of which Salinas spoke: For the first time in history, a Mexican president had been elected with less than half of the votes cast (48.7 percent)—more than 20 percentage points below the vote share attributed to PRI presidential candidate Miguel de la Madrid in the 1982 election.[1] Also for the first time, a PRI presidential candidate had failed to carry several whole states: Baja California Norte, México State, Michoacán, Morelos, and the Federal District, which includes most of the Mexico City metropolitan area. These five entities were won by ex-PRIista Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, who was officially credited

[1] If the 695,042 annulled 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). If these votes are *included* in the tally, Salinas becomes the first Mexican president elected only by a plurality of the total votes cast.

with 31.1 percent of the nationwide vote—far more than any previous opposition candidate.

The ruling party's control of the Congress was weakened significantly, setting the stage for a new era in executive-legislative relations. Sixty-six PRI candidates for seats in the lower house of Congress were defeated—nearly as many as the total of ruling party candidates defeated in all elections between 1946 and 1985. For the 1988-91 period, the PRI was reduced to a bare working majority in the Chamber of Deputies (260 out of 500 seats), and for the first time since the ruling party was founded in 1929, opposition party candidates were elected to the Senate (4 out of 64 seats). Because the PRI no longer commanded a two-thirds majority in the lower house, President Salinas would have to negotiate with the opposition party delegations to secure passage of key legislation amending the Constitution.

Moreover, the Congress had ceased to function as a reliable instrument for the internal distribution of power and its perks within the ruling party. With the recognition of so many opposition victories for congressional seats in 1988, aspiring PRIistas had to face the reality that nomination by their party was no longer tantamount to election. The tradition of the "*carro completo*" (clean sweep) by PRI candidates was clearly threatened.

What happened after the 1988 election was nearly as extraordinary as the election results themselves. The validity of the presidential results was immediately challenged by all opposition parties, which alleged massive fraud by the PRI and government election officials and refused to recognize the legitimacy of the Salinas government.[2] During the three-month period between the election and certification of the results by the newly elected Congress acting as the Electoral College, Mexico would endure unprecedented uncertainty about whether the newly elected

[2]The actual extent of irregularities in the tabulation of the 1988 presidential election 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. No "exit" surveys of voters leaving polling places were permitted by the government. In subsequent months, government officials denied access to a large portion of the sealed ballot boxes that had been used in the election. Nevertheless, the official tally for Salinas was within a few percentage points of his showing in several of the most scientific 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 considerably smaller than the nineteen-point spread indicated by the official results.

president would be able to assume office or whether the election results would be annulled by the Congress in response to massive protest demonstrations led by a coalition of opposition parties. In the end, the opposition pulled back from its confrontational, anti-system strategy. Salinas's election was certified, but only with the votes of PRI members of Congress; not a single opposition party representative supported his confirmation.

Mexico's political earthquake of 1988 produced significant shifts in well-established patterns of electoral behavior. The emergence of a left-of-center, nonsocialist opposition movement outside of the ruling party, led by the son of Lázaro Cárdenas, Mexico's most revered president of the postrevolutionary era, undermined the PRI's electoral base in the most developed, urbanized parts of the country while cutting into its formerly "safe" support in rural areas. The neo-Cardenista coalition drew relatively little support away from the Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN), Mexico's principal right-of-center opposition party, which held its own in its traditional strongholds. The strong performance of opposition candidates of both right and left in several of the states where gubernatorial or municipal elections were held in 1989 proved that the previous year's results were no fluke. The PRI's sixty-year-old monopoly of state governorships was finally broken, with the overwhelming, officially recognized victory of PANista candidate Ernesto Ruffo in Baja California Norte. Finally, the low turnout in the 1988 presidential election (less than half of those eligible bothered to vote) and considerably lower turnout rates in most state and local elections held during 1989 and 1990 signaled a serious erosion of public confidence in the whole system of parties and elections.

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, flexibility, and a high capacity for co-optation of dissidents. 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 economic development strategy. 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, due 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, unprecedented in depth and duration, placed enormous stress on Mexico's political system. Indeed, it could be argued that the serious divisions that emerged within the political elite in 1987-88 and the PRI's electoral debacles of 1988-89 were inevitable consequences of the multiple failures of government performance in managing the economy. It does not necessarily follow, however, that a recovery of economic health in the 1990s will reverse the decline of Mexico's hegemonic one-party regime. The PRI has managed to regain some of the electoral ground that it lost in 1988, but its image of invincibility has been shattered.

The 1988 election results demonstrated beyond all reasonable doubt that the political system put in place by Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s has outlived its usefulness. In many ways, Mexican society—increasingly complex and heterogeneous, more urban, better educated, rapidly being integrated into the world economy—has simply outgrown that system. The main issues now are what set of political structures and arrangements will replace it, how rapidly the change will occur, and how conflictual the transition process will be.

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, only 8.5 percent of the population spoke an Indian language.[3] The Indian minority has been persistently marginal to the national economy and political system. Today, the indigenous population is heavily concentrated in areas that the government classifies as the country's most economically depressed, located primarily in the southeast and the center of the country. 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 especially troubling reminder of the millions of people who have been left behind by uneven development in twentieth-century Mexico.

[3]This represents an undercount, since the census counts only Indians over the age of five. Indians constitute an estimated 15 percent of the total population.

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 wars 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 erratic performance that characterize Mexico's agriculture 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 makes church-affiliated schools subject to the authority of the federal government, denies priests the right to vote or speak publicly on political issues, and gives 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 1927-29, 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 official 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 partici-

pated 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 liberalization of abortion laws throughout Mexico. The Catholic church has also been able to enlist the help of the federal government and the PRI in its drive to prevent the growth of evangelical Protestant "sects" in Mexico.

During the 1980s church-state relations were strained by the highly visible political activism of some church leaders in northern Mexico, who publicly criticized electoral fraud committed by the PRI and sided openly with the conservative opposition party, the Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN). In 1986, the archbishop of the state of Chihuahua ordered the temporary suspension of all church services, in protest of the fraud-ridden elections of July 1986 in his state. This and other episodes of overt political activism by church leaders and priests led the government in December 1986 to amend the federal electoral code to provide stiff fines and jail terms of up to seven years for clergy found to take sides in electoral campaigns.

In 1988 President Salinas began an unprecedented formal rapprochement with the church, as part of his project to "modernize" Mexican politics and win back some of the proclerical PAN's supporters for the official party. He invited several senior church leaders to attend his inauguration, met with the pope during his visit to Mexico in 1990, and took the first steps toward establishing full diplomatic relations with the Vatican. Salinas was aware of the considerable public support for changes that would close the formal breech between church and state. Opinion polls show that a majority of Mexicans in large cities favors granting priests the same political rights as other citizens, including the right to vote in elections. By a smaller margin, the public is willing to allow private schools to teach religion. The average Mexican still has reservations, however, about lifting restrictions on political and economic activities by the church as an institution.[4]

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

[4]See, for example, "Encuestalía: ¿Quién 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.[5]

[5]Alan Knight, "Revolutionary Project, Recalcitrant People: Mexico, 1910-1940," in *The Revolutionary Process in Mexico: Essays on Political and Social Change, 1880-1940*, ed. Jaime E. Rodríguez (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center, 1990), 228-29.

The first decade of the Revolution produced a new, remarkably progressive constitution, replacing the Constitution of 1857. The young middle-class elite that dominated the constitutional convention of 1916-17 "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."[6] 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 upon 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.[7]

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

[7]Stephen Haber, *Industry and Underdevelopment: The Industrialization of Mexico, 1890-1940* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988). This helps to explain why, despite the great violence of the 1910-20 period and the destruction of the political and military institutions of the Porfirian regime, the Mexican Revolution brought about so little in the way of immediate social reforms. More than twenty years would pass, for example, before large-scale redistribution of landholdings would begin, under President Lázaro Cárdenas.

THE CÁRENAS 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 (1934-40), peasants 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 (ejidos) from 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.

How do we explain this burst of reformism coming from a regime that since 1917 had grown increasingly conservative, aligned with U.S. and other foreign capitalists, and unresponsive to the accumulated grievances of Mexico's poor? Apparently Cárdenas and his followers took the interests of peasants and urban workers more seriously. They believed that the state could and should control both capital and labor, and that more vigorous state intervention on the side of the working classes could ameliorate the worst excesses of the capitalist economic system while preempting threats to political stability that might stem from neglect of the poor. Cárdenas's efforts to mobilize and organize the working classes were a necessary instrument of reform. Government-sponsored worker organizations were preferable to uncontrolled mass mobilization, and they were also an effective counterweight to the regular military and other conservative groups that resisted redistributive policies and that might even