



Mexico

GOVERNMENT

Mexico in Transition

Mexico is a nation in transition. Its economy is struggling. The old political system is dying. Big changes seem certain. Some Mexicans fear economic collapse and civil war. This reading looks at the decline of Mexico's long-time ruling party—and ponders the country's future.

At the end of a hard century, Mexico is struggling. . . . Politics are in turmoil. . . . The gap between rich and poor is widening. The poor . . . are growing restless. Even the relatively small middle class has conducted protests and work disruptions. Everyone, it seems, wants something new. . . .

“We have everything,” one Mexican told me in exasperation [frustration]. “So why are we in crisis?” The answer may lie in history. The Mexican people have survived centuries of war followed by periods of stifling [overpowering] authority. The Spaniards ruled for 300 years. After their reign the 19th century [1800s] brought a war of independence, war with the U.S., civil war, another conflict, this time with France, then three decades of dictatorship.

The dictatorship was drowned in blood in the revolution of 1910, in which more than a million people died. This led to a constitution modeled on the U.S.'s and passed in 1917. But by 1929 the party now known as the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) had shaped a system that looked like a democracy but worked like an authoritarian regime [all-powerful government]. . . . Freedoms of speech and press were curtailed [severely limited], and elections were controlled. . . . Voters at some polls were handed “ballot tacos”—several ballots stuffed into one—so they could cast multiple votes. Loyalists were bused from place to place to vote repeatedly.

But the PRI also initiated [started] some landownership reform, developed and distributed oil wealth, and provided more stability than Mexico had experienced the century before. It responded, [although] slowly, to its citizens' demands. Roads got paved; schools were built. . . . Loyalty was widespread. Today, all that has changed. . . .

The decline of the PRI began in 1968 when the army killed more than 200 students during a demonstration over social reform, shocking the nation. Then, in 1985, when an earthquake killed 10,000 people in Mexico City, the government's response was slow and inefficient; Mexican citizens, who independently rescued, housed, and fed victims, lost faith in the government's ability to take care of them. Three years later, the hotly contested national election was accompanied by fraud—computers broke down with the race undecided and were booted back up with the PRI's victory installed.

In the early 1990s the government rode high on . . . economic reforms, which encouraged the takeover of state-run industry, friendly relations

with the U.S., and the signing of NAFTA [the North American Free Trade Agreement], and led to a growing middle class and hope among the poor. But catastrophe hit in 1994: Indians rebelled in Chiapas [a state in southern Mexico, on its border with Guatemala] on the day NAFTA took effect. The PRI's presidential candidate was assassinated. . . . Investors from abroad—and Mexican businessmen—lost confidence in Mexico. . . . A severe recession ensued [followed], throwing more than a million people out of work. . . . The economy is still floundering.

So is the PRI. . . . “The system is dead,” [says] author Carlos Fuentes. . . . A free press is struggling to emerge in print and television. Opposition parties have won important local elections. The middle class, battered by the crisis, is restless. “People are really frustrated,” says a teacher. . . .

“In Mexico,” Porfirio Díaz reportedly said after he was thrown out as president and dictator in 1911, “nothing happens until it happens.” He meant that Mexicans operate on both patience and inertia [inactivity], like the stone heat that brews in the depths of [a volcano]. But when the Mexicans act, they [cannot be stopped]. Such a heat is growing now. Everyone in Mexico can feel it, but no one seems able to predict its outcome. Only one thing is certain: Whatever happens to Mexico will be in character. And what is the character of today's Mexico that will shape tomorrow's? That's the intriguing [interesting] question.

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Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. In what ways have the PRI's decades of rule benefited Mexico?

2. How does the PRI hold on to power, according to the reading?

3. How did a geography event weaken the PRI's control over Mexican politics?

Activity

Design a protest sign about the PRI. It should either support the PRI for the benefits it has brought, or attack it for its shortcomings.