

Porfiriato of Mexico

Porfirio Diaz, 1876-1910¹

Development of Diaz' Power

Porfirio Diaz first became president of Mexico through revolt, not electoral politics. Benito Juarez decided to run for a fourth term, using governmental powers to insure his election over Diaz. Porfirio revolted, crying fraud, but lost. When Juarez died in July, 1872, and his vice president, Sabastian Lerdo de Tejada became president, Diaz quietly began organizing a coalition to use to win the 1876 presidential election or, if necessary, to overthrow the government. He promoted the idea of "sufragio efectivo, no reeleccion," (a fair vote count and no reelection to public office) to prevent the kind of continuism practiced by Juarez and likely to be practiced by Lerdo. Diaz called for respect for the constitution, claiming that Lerdo obeyed it only when convenient. Through pro-Diaz newspapers, the government was accused of malfeasance and corruption. Porfirio quietly strengthened his ties with his former comrades in arms, let the pro-Church faction know that he would not enforce the anticlerical provisions of the constitution, and reassured conservatives that a Diaz government would serve their interests. When Lerdo "won" the election of 1876, Diaz, issuing the Plan de Tuxtepec calling for obedience to the constitution and "effective suffrage, no reelection," overthrew the government and declared himself president on November 29, 1876.

Except for the 1880-84 term, when his childhood friend General Manuel Gonzalez served as president, Diaz was president until his forced exile in May, 1911. Having argued against reelection in 1876, he dared not seek reelection in 1880; moreover, he had not fully consolidated his personal power. When he stepped down in 1880, he went back to Oaxaca and a short term as state governor.... When he won the presidency again in 1884, he was determined never to leave. He created excuses to stay in office, amending the constitution whenever necessary. In 1904, the seventy-four-year-old dictator had the presidential term extended to six years, but his politically ambitious rivals demanded that the post of vice presidency be created. Each hoped, of course, that, he would be chosen for the post and would become president when the old man died, as many thought he would before the term ended. Diaz, however, chose Ramon Corral, one of the most hated men in politics.

Diaz ruled by offering "pan or palo," bread or the club, and setting his rivals against one another. Those who supported him received "bread" in the form of bribes, public office, land grants, promotions, or pensions. Through his control of the Liberal Party organization in each state, he determined who would hold even the lowest office. His supporters received promotions and jobs for their friends and relatives in the growing national bureaucracy. To control military officers, he divided the nation into military zones and, with a few exceptions, rotated his generals through them to prevent them from building an independent power base. Others became "pajama generals," officers who received full pay for quietly living on their estates. By 1896, the army, greatly reduced in size since 1876, was led by men

¹ Selections in this reading are from Donald J. Mabry, Mississippi State University: "Porfirio Diaz," *Historic World Leaders*, 4 212-216; from the Modern History Sourcebook: Channing Arnold & Frederick J. Tabor Frost: *The Rule of Porfirio Diaz*, 1909; and from Henry Bamford Parkes, *A History of Mexico*.

personally loyal to Diaz. His public works program rewarded numerous supporters and provided thousands of jobs. The government tolerated gambling, prostitution, smuggling, and other lucrative acts when conducted by its friends.

Those who did not obey him were hit with the club. Dissidents were assassinated or, if they were lucky, forced into exile. When a political supporter started acquiring too much power, he lost access to public money and had to compete against a rival sent by Diaz. The new rural police, *rurales*, used ruthless tactics not only to end banditry but also to enforce the dictator's will. The national army suppressed riots and rebellions and, when needed, supported the state political bosses appointed by Diaz. Physical attacks on reporters and newspaper plants soon ended freedom of the press. Although Diaz did not dare repeal the anticlerical provisions of the constitution or similar statutes, for doing so would rekindle the Church-State conflict, he did allow the church to regain much of its lost influence. Although part Indian, Diaz grew "whiter" during his dictatorship as he disparaged Indians, the vast majority of the Mexican population, and longed for European immigration. His anti-Indian attitudes encouraged supporters to sell rebellious Indians into slavery in Cuba or to kill them. In short, Diaz used the standard techniques of dictatorships.

From an account of Diaz while he was still in power:

One can safely describe Diaz as a born ruler. He instinctively understands his subjects: he has not learned it, for he began thirty years ago. He was never educated in statecraft, for, indeed, he had no education at all; he was merely the son of an innkeeper, first sent to a Jesuit seminary, whence he ran away and joined the army. No! the man's secret is an iron will and positively miraculous tact. Whatever he does, whatever he orders, is always done so nicely. Everybody knows it has got to be done. Nobody ever crosses Diaz and lives to boast of so doing. But he gilds the pills he thinks his people must swallow, and they gulp them down and look up with meek smiles into that awful face. Here is a little characteristic story of him.... For the over-popular governor of a State, Diaz provides distinguished employment elsewhere. Such a case occurred while we were in Yucatan. Señor Olegario Molina, of whom we shall later speak more, has been for some years deservedly popular in Merida, for he has done much to improve it. President Diaz visited Merida recently, and on his return appointed Señor Molina a cabinet minister. When he arrived in Vera Cruz, Molina found the presidential train awaiting him, and on reaching Mexico City the president and the whole cabinet had come to the station to greet him, and drove him triumphantly to the Iturbide Hotel. Charming courtesies! how favorably the presidential eyes beam on him! Yes, but he is banished: as much banished as the shivering pauper Jew workman turned away from the London docks. He was too powerful: he is safer in Mexico City, far away from the madding crowds who would perchance have made him state dictator. A too popular cabinet minister, again, is sent as minister to Madrid: another is found essential to the pacification of a turbulent State of northern Mexico; and so the pretty game goes on, and there is literally no kicking amongst the presidential team.

Economic Development in the *Porfiriato*

Diaz also stayed in power because he successfully encouraged economic development. He created a solid banking system and an effective tax collection system. State tariffs, taxes on production, and the sales tax were abolished. He paid off Mexico's creditors and, in 1894, balanced the national budget for the first time in Mexican history. Mexico was the world's largest silver producer but he put the nation on the international gold standard. The Mexican peso became one of the world's soundest currencies. He revised laws to make the country attractive to investors. The constitution was amended to allow foreigners to own subsoil minerals, a right which had been in the hands of the crown and then the nation, thus opening mines and, later, oil fields to foreign ownership. Modifying the land laws of the Reform, he allowed surveyors to keep huge chunks of the national lands they surveyed. Through his control of the judiciary rights, he guaranteed that his friends would win law suits instigated by Indian communities trying to keep their land. By 1910, the nation had 900 large land owners and a landless rural population of nine million out of a total population of fifteen million. Many haciendas were huge; those owned by the Terrazas-Creel clan contained more acreage than the entire nation of Costa Rica.

Foreigners soon owned much of the nation. They initially bought landed estates but soon invested in commerce and industry. Railroad building began under Juarez and increased under Gonzalez, but boomed during the Diaz years as the total mileage of tracks went from less than 400 miles in 1876 to over 12,000 in 1910. These foreign railroad companies laid track for export purposes, to carry Mexican minerals and goods abroad, not to create a national railroad network. Foreigners created telephone and telegraph companies, bought mines, started or took over factories, opened department stores, and, at the turn of the century, drilled for oil. Mexico City, the national capital, blossomed into one of the most beautiful cities in the world while Monterrey, with its steel mills and factories, became a major industrial city. Foreign domination of the national economic life became so pervasive and the practice of hiring unqualified foreigners before qualified Mexicans became so common that many Mexicans asserted that Mexico was the "mother of foreigners and the stepmother of Mexicans."

Most Mexicans suffered from the Diaz economic policies, but the dictator and his followers did not care. Diaz' intellectual elite, the *cientificos* (loosely translated as scientists), believed in "the survival of the fittest." They argued that societies could only progress through ruthless competition among individuals and the application of "scientific" principles to government. They also believed that the Indian majority was incapable of rational thought, and, thus, inevitably would suffer as their "betters" won the competition for resources. They ignored the fact that Diaz was stacking the deck, using whatever means necessary to insure the outcome he wanted. Economic policy was neither fair nor rational. Mexico needed sound public roads to foster internal trade but Mexican roads, on which the average person depended, were no better than they were in 1810 even though Mexico exported asphalt. Industrial workers and miners, groups which enjoyed higher wages than peons, were usually forced to spend those wages in company stores, where they paid higher prices. If they protested or sought higher wages, Diaz sent in the army to break strikes. By 1910, the average Mexican was worse off economically than he or she had been in 1810!

During the eighties and nineties capital was pouring into Mexico from Europe and the United States, and every branch of economic activity was making astonishing progress. Before the end of the century more than 9000 miles of railroads had been built. The output of the mines rose from a value of about 30,000,000 pesos in 1880 to more than 90,000,000 in 1900. The annual value of Mexican foreign trade, which had amounted to 50,000,000 pesos in the seventies, exceeded 200,000,000 by the end of the century.

In 1894, with expenditures at 41,000,000 and revenue at 43,000,000, Mexico, for the first time in her history as an independent nation, achieved a balanced budget. The corner once turned, there was no looking back. By the year 1910 the revenues of the federal government had reached 110,000,000 and those of the states and the municipalities, 11,000,000 in the time of Juarez, had risen to 64,000,000.... Every Mexican revolution---it was argued---had been the work of unpaid generals and bureaucrats; deficits had led to *pronunciamentos*, and *pronunciamentos*, had led, in turn, to more deficits. But the political genius and the iron will of Don Porfirio had broken the vicious cycle and made revolution impossible.

Between 1890 and 1910 the price of almost every important article of food was more than doubled. In 1910 the real wage of a peon, as measured by the price of corn, was one quarter of what it had been in 1800.