

MEXICO'S CENTENNIALS

The Promise and Legacy of the Mexican Revolution

by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas

Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas spoke for CLAS on February 3, 2010. This article is adapted from his talk.

Today I will discuss why the Mexican Revolution broke out, the key decisions that shaped the country's revolutionary transformation, its setbacks and why I think that the ideals and unattained goals of the Mexican Revolution are still valid for Mexicans seeking to build a democratic and sovereign nation and an egalitarian and progressive society.

The social and political movement known as the Mexican Revolution exploded as a reaction against the long-lasting dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, an authoritarian regime centered on one man and one man's decisions. It was a social reaction against a change-resistant system. Nothing seemed to move in Mexico. People were tired, disenchanted and irritated because there were no opportunities but those offered by the dictator.

Porfirio Díaz, a hero in the wars against the French Intervention and Maximilian of the Habsburg Empire, ran twice as a presidential candidate and lost. He took up arms against the outcomes of those elections, was defeated, arrested and amnestied. He persisted in rebellion, eventually ousting the president and taking office himself.

His slogan during the uprisings was "No Reelection," and at first, Díaz seemed to abide by this promise, leaving office in 1880 at the end of his four-year term. A politician close to him, a general who had also fought against the Intervention and Maximilian, was elected (or chosen) to succeed Díaz. However, Díaz ran in the next election, arguing that he was the only one who could successfully run Mexico. He won, and the Constitution was reformed in 1887, allowing the president to be reelected once. Díaz was then elected for the next term, 1888-92.

Another constitutional reform soon took place, removing the limits on reelection. Díaz was elected president in 1896, 1900 and 1904, this time to serve a six-year term. Then, in 1908, Díaz made a significant mistake: he gave an interview to an American journalist, James Creelman — which was published in both Mexico



Porfirio Díaz poses in full dress uniform, August 13, 1910.

and the United States — in which he declared not only that Mexico was mature enough for democracy and that democratic practices should revive, but also that he would not run for office in 1910 and would look favorably upon the emergence of an opposition party.

No one really believed he wouldn't run, but many thought there would be an open, democratic race for the vice-presidency. By 1910, Díaz would be 80. His term would end in 1916, so it was thought that whoever was elected vice-president would succeed Díaz in office.

The Creelman interview provided the spark that led to the emergence of an anti-reelection movement. Francisco I. Madero, a member of a well-to-do family with a position in local politics in the state of Coahuila,

Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

actively participated in the anti-re-election movement. He wrote *The Presidential Succession of 1910*, a book in which he severely criticized the Díaz administration and proposed the creation of an Anti-Reelection Party. He soon became the party's presidential candidate.

When election season came around, Díaz made the announcement that everyone was expecting: he would run for office once again.

A few weeks before the election, Madero was arrested on trumped-up charges, as were 5,000 of his followers. He was given the city of San Luis Potosí as his prison. The election took place in July 1910, while Madero remained a prisoner there. To no one's surprise, Díaz was declared president-elect, and the country, with Díaz at its head, prepared for the September celebrations of the centennial of Mexico's independence. Large and impressive diplomatic missions arrived from all over the world to witness the festivities: parades, diplomatic receptions, dedications of museums and new schools, the opening of the National University and so on. Díaz was at the zenith of his power, with the country in his fist. At least so it seemed.

However, unbeknownst to either Díaz or Madero, something had been boiling just beneath the surface for years. Discontent was much deeper and more widespread than the governing class realized. By the turn of the century, a small group of self-proclaimed liberals had been organizing throughout the country, distributing their publication *Regeneración* (Regeneration). In it, they demanded that the government respect the Constitution, comply with the Reform Laws (which included the separation of church and state and the suppression of



Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Pancho Villa (in the presidential chair) with Emiliano Zapata and supporters in Mexico City.

religious education) and restore democracy. They also began organizing the Mexican Liberal Party under the leadership of Ricardo Flores Magón.

Díaz did not tolerate criticism or opposition, so when the liberals opposed his reelection in 1903, they began to be persecuted. Many were jailed or forced into exile. Liberal publications were forbidden, and no space was allowed them in public, open politics. This caused them to radicalize, and they began preparing an insurrection.

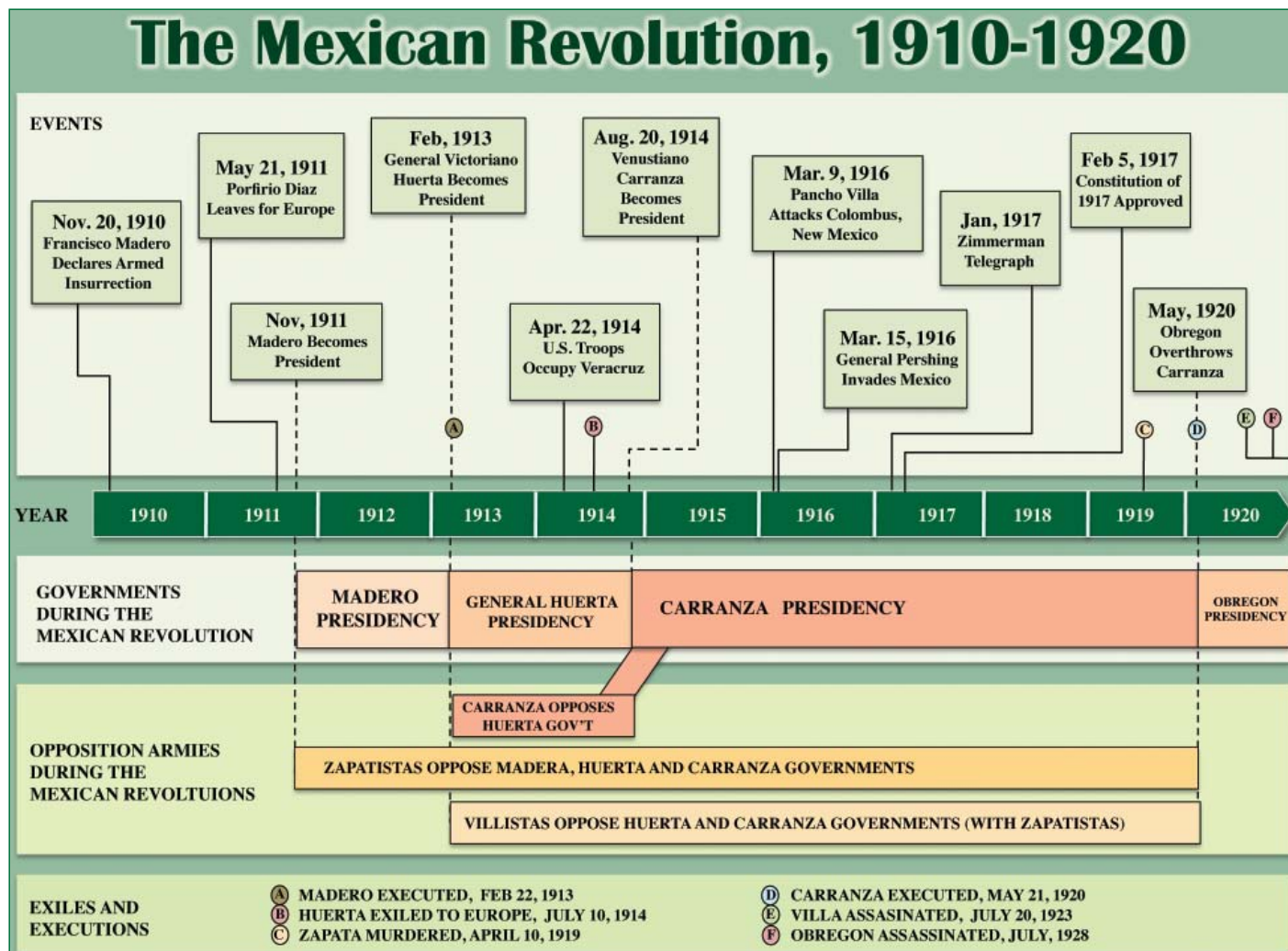
In mid-1906, the Mexican Liberal Party published a manifesto outlining its most important demands. First and foremost was a proposal to reform the Constitution in order to ban the reelection of the president, vice-president and state governors. Other demands included the complete secularization of education, an eight-hour workday, a minimum daily wage, workers' compensation, sanitary worker housing, the annulment

of peasants' debts to landowners and the protection of indigenous people's rights. Magonistas also called for an armed uprising against the Porfirian government.

During his imprisonment, Madero had not been idle. He remained in contact with his followers, and he also made preparations to rebel. Eventually escaping from his prison-city, Madero set up operations in San Antonio, Texas. From there, he launched the Plan of San Luis Potosí on October 5, 1910, in which he rejected the outcome of the election and demanded its annulment. He proclaimed himself provisional president and called for armed revolution, to begin punctually at 6:00 p.m. on November 20, 1910.

Madero's convocation shook the country. It was the spark that set fire to the tinder that had long been accumulating: the aspirations of change provoked by the Díaz—

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A timeline of major events of the Mexican Revolution.

Creelman interview, the ideas put forth by the Mexican Liberal Party, the anti-reelection movement and a long drought that had resulted in several years of poor harvests. Revolution erupted everywhere. New military leaders emerged: Pascual Orozco, Francisco Villa, Emiliano Zapata. The federal army was incapable of controlling the uprising and suffered a serious defeat, more political than military, when Ciudad Juárez, the most important border city, fell to the revolutionaries commanded by Orozco.

The Treaty of Ciudad Juárez was signed by the revolutionaries and the government on May 21, 1911. Under its terms, Díaz agreed to resign and go into exile, and a new presidential election was planned. However, the treaty contained three provisions that would prove fatal to Madero: the creation of a provisional government headed not by a revolutionary but by a recognized Porfirian; the demobilization of the revolutionary armies, while the federal army remained intact; and the acceptance of the Congress selected by Díaz and elected in 1910, with which the new government would have to deal.

In November 1911, Madero was elected president in the fairest election ever held in Mexico. However, his fellow revolutionaries were not convinced that Madero would deliver on their more substantial demands and began to rebel even before he was elected. Pascual Orozco withdrew recognition of Madero as Chief of the Revolution; Emiliano Zapata proclaimed the Plan of Ayala, demanding the immediate restoration of lands to dispossessed villages. Orozco was defeated and went into exile, and Zapata was held, with more or less difficulty, under military control.

The Porfirians revolted as well: Bernardo Reyes and Félix Díaz, the deposed leader's nephew, both tried to overthrow Madero and were defeated and imprisoned. At the same time, the new president had to face opposition in Congress; fierce criticism from the Porfirian press, now free and unrepressed; and the impatience of the revolutionaries, who saw the slow and obstructed government as being incapable of responding to their demands. These difficulties were compounded by a federal army, commanded by Porfirian generals, that had little sympathy for the new government.

The troubled new administration lasted only 15 months before being toppled in a coup instigated by the U.S. ambassador, Henry Lane Wilson. An admirer of Díaz, who viscerally disliked Madero, he conspired with the military commanders in the capital. Madero and Vice-President Pino Suárez were arrested, forced to resign and held prisoner in the National Palace. In a nod to constitutional law, the foreign minister, Pedro Lascuráin, who was third in line for the presidency, succeeded them for 45 minutes, during which time he named the military commander Victoriano Huerta secretary of government, the position fourth in line for the presidency. Lascuráin then resigned, making Huerta (known in Mexico as “the Usurper”) president of Mexico. Huerta promptly ordered the assassination of both the president and the vice-president.

The revolutionaries reacted immediately. The Governor of Coahuila, Venustiano Carranza, issued the Plan of Guadalupe, calling on the people to take up arms against the usurpers and fight to restore constitutional order. After several months of hard fighting, the Constitutionalists, as Carranza’s followers were known, triumphed. But their victory was unstable. The Constitutionalists, Villistas and Zapatistas tried to reach an agreement and failed. Fighting resumed, this time pitting revolutionary against revolutionary, with Carranza on one side and Villa and Zapata on the other.

The Constitutionalists defeated Villa, who withdrew to Chihuahua, while Zapata kept control of large portions of

the state of Morelos, where land was restored to the villages. The Constitutionalists took control of the country, save for Villa and Zapata’s strongholds, and established provisional military state governments. They began to implement new policies like land reform and the recognition of workers’ rights, and Carranza convened a Constitutional Convention.

The Congress met in December 1916 in the city of Querétaro. Carranza submitted a project that was considered moderate to conservative by the radical wing of the Constitutionalists. His proposal contained some elements of the Liberal Party’s program combined with Zapata’s demands for agrarian reform. Intense discussions took place in Querétaro, with the radicals managing to push through most of their demands.

The resulting Constitution clearly expressed the goals and ideals of the Revolution. It sketched the outline of the progressive and democratic nation for which the revolutionaries had fought, with articles establishing secular education, an eight-hour workday and the right to strike. Another central provision reaffirmed an idea that dated back to the struggle for independence: Article 39 proclaimed that national sovereignty resides in the people, who have at all times the right to alter or modify their form of government. At the core of the 1917 Constitution, however, was Article 27. It recognized the nation’s right to impose constraints on private property as dictated by the public interest, to regulate the exploitation of natural resources and to grant land to villages.

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Uncle Sam does his best to “civilize” a wayward Mexico, 1916.

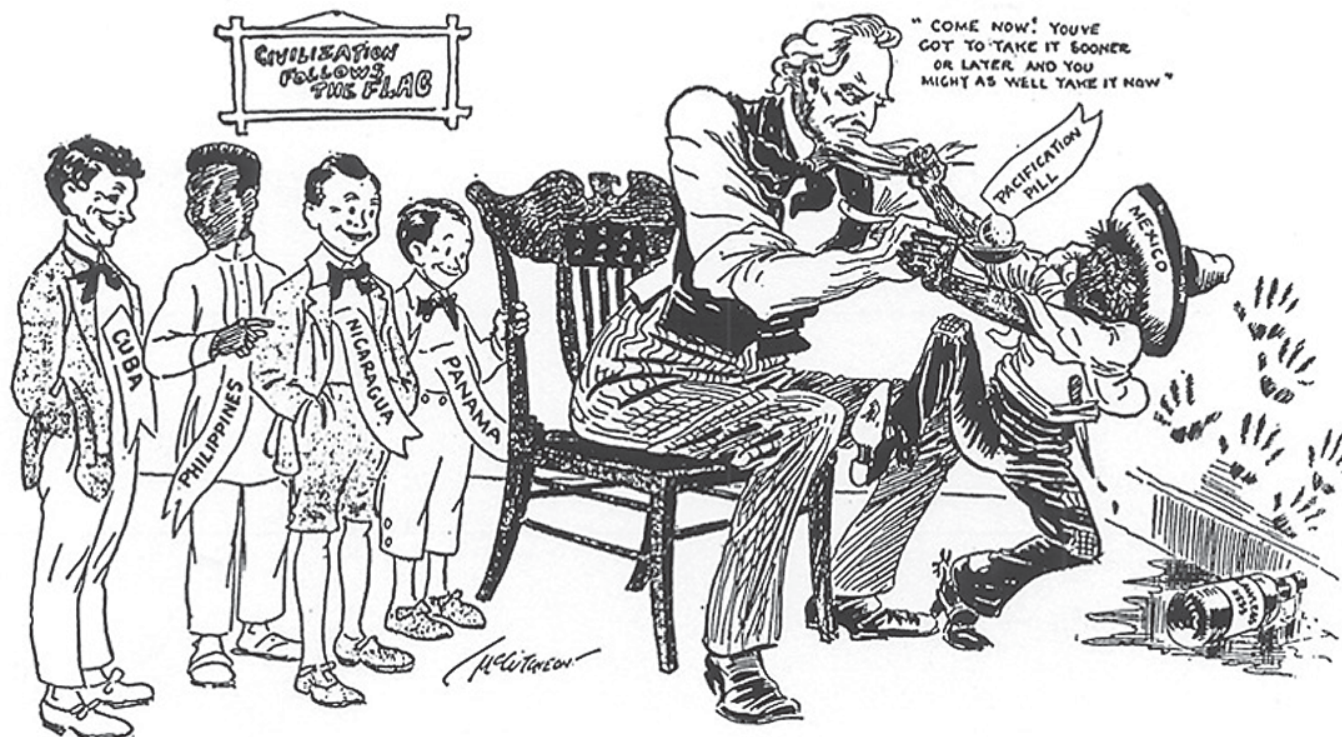


Image by John T. McCutcheon.

The Promise and Legacy of the Mexican Revolution

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Peasants' demand for land had become the Revolution's central cause. Progress toward agrarian reform became the measure by which post-revolutionary governments were judged. Carranza, for example, distributed 292,000 acres. The following six administrations distributed 16,575,000 acres of mostly marginal lands in an effort that was widely regarded as insufficient. It wasn't until the election of Lázaro Cárdenas in 1934 that the pace of land distribution accelerated: 39,358,000 acres were distributed during his term in office, more than double the amount under previous administrations. Not only were high-quality lands given to peasants, but they were also complemented with government irrigation projects and organizational assistance.

The new Constitution also impacted the government's relationship with foreign-owned oil companies, a relationship that had been rocky since the time of Madero. In June 1912, his administration increased the oil export tax by 20 cents per ton (equivalent to 3 cents per barrel), an insignificant rise even in those days. Ambassador Lane Wilson responded immediately, sending a harsh diplomatic note protesting the "discriminatory and almost confiscatory tax" on the export of oil products.

By the end of 1914, Constitutionalist forces occupied Tampico, the Gulf Coast headquarters of the foreign oil companies. The military commander, Lt. Col. Francisco J. Múgica, required oil exporters to register at the customs office so that they could pay their taxes. The oil companies refused. Múgica responded by ordering the closure of oil pipelines. Under pressure, British and American companies grudgingly agreed to pay the taxes.

In 1917, the Carranza administration levied new taxes on oil exports and on land used for oil production, leading to another wave of protests by the oil companies. When new legislation regarding drilling concessions on national lands was approved in 1920, protests reached such a dimension that the government suspended the granting of drilling concessions.

In early 1925, just a few weeks after taking office, President Plutarco Elías Calles proposed a new law regulating oil exploitation. The reaction from the United States was swift. U.S. Secretary of State Frank Billings Kellogg issued a harsh criticism of the Mexican government for certain agrarian policies and for increasing workers' salaries — nothing to do with oil legislation. At the same time, the U.S. ambassador, James R. Sheffield, attacked the

still-unfinished legislation. The situation became so tense that by the end of the year armed intervention seemed imminent, and President Calles ordered the military commander in La Huasteca, one of the main oil producing areas, to set fire to the wells if the Americans invaded.

President Portes Gil, who succeeded Calles, wrote in his *Memorias (Memoirs)*:

General Calles let events go serenely by, and when he was convinced that the United States would begin an armed intervention in a matter of hours, he telegraphed the American president, telling him he was sending, with a person of his absolute confidence, original, very important documents, that he wished him to see before he committed the crime of invading national territory; and if, after reading those documents, the government of the United States still maintained its aggressive attitude toward Mexico, he would make them public so the world could judge the unheard-of outrage to be committed against a weak nation that was merely defending its sovereignty. Those documents were Secretary of State Kellogg's letters, which had reached President Calles hands through means that remain a mystery... On September 22, Ambassador Sheffield left his post...

Those letters, obtained by a spy who had infiltrated the U.S. embassy in Mexico, exposed the involvement of Ambassador Sheffield and Secretary of State Kellogg with the oil companies.

As these events demonstrate, oil has been a subject of conflict between the United States and Mexico ever since the Revolution took power. In fact, the most important feat of revolutionary policy was, without a doubt, the expropriation of the oil companies and the nationalization of the oil industry in 1938.

By the end of 1933, the party created by President Calles, the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (National Revolutionary Party, PNR), had approved a Six Year Plan for the term 1934-40 and proclaimed Lázaro Cárdenas its presidential candidate. The Plan declared that Article 27 of the Constitution would take effect, thereby nationalizing the subsoil, and also that the state would intervene to balance the economic forces in the oil industry and stimulate the development of national enterprises.

Encouraged by these moves, several oil unions merged to form the Sindicato de Trabajadores Petroleros de la República Mexicana (Mexican Petroleum Workers' Syndicate, STPRM), in 1936. Among the new union's

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1938

Méx. 18 de Marzo.

En el acuerdo colectivo celebrado hoy a las 20 horas con-
muniendo al gabinete que se a-
pliegan las Leyes de Expropiación
de los bienes de las Compañías
Petroleras por su actividad relati-
va habiendo sido aprobada
la decisión del Ejecutivo Fe-
deral.

A las 22 horas de acono-
cer por radio a toda la
Nación el paso dado por el
Gobierno en defensa de su
Soberanía recibiendo en su
dominio la refinería Petrolera
que el Capital Imperialista se
había apropiado para man-
tener el país dentro de una
situación humillante.

19 de marzo
1938

Siendo las 3 horas de la ma-
ñada, firmé en Palacio el De-
creto de expropiación que
firmaron los Sres. Antero Muñoz,
Eduardo Suárez, Raul Castellanos

The March 18, 1938, diary entry of President
Lázaro Cárdenas, which records the
nationalization of the oil industry.
(Image courtesy of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas.)

Antonio Valdez, Enrique Calderón,
Gustavo Corona, el Secretario de
Economía Sr. Sr. Buenavista y
el Ingeniero Manuel Santillán,
Director de la Administración
General del Petróleo.

Con mi acto así, México,
contribuye con los demás países
de Hispano América, para que
se logre un gran salto de de-
sarrollo económico del capi-
talismo imperialista.



Left:
The Cárdenas family picnics in the garden at Los Pinos, March 19, 1938.

(Photo courtesy of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas.)

Below:
Lázaro Cárdenas at the zoo with his grandsons Lázaro and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Batel, 1969.

(Photo courtesy of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas.)



demands were an increase in wages and improvements in working conditions. When their demands were rejected, the workers declared a strike. At this point, the Cárdenas government intervened, appointing a special commission to rule on the dispute but requiring that workers continue working so oil production could continue. Labor authorities, in several instances, ruled in favor of the workers. However, the companies refused to abide by their verdicts until the case reached the Supreme Court, which confirmed the previous findings in favor of the workers.

Throughout the conflict, Lázaro Cárdenas kept a diary in which he recorded his thoughts. My personal impression is that even before becoming president, Cárdenas thought that it was necessary to better control the oil industry and to increase the state's participation in oil exploitation, but that he considered nationalization unviable. If he even thought about it, he kept it to himself as an ideal that would be very difficult to achieve.

However, the evolution of the labor conflict began to open up new possibilities. In a diary entry from January 1, 1938, after the Federal Labor Board had ruled in favor of the workers and while the case was in the hands of the Supreme Court, Cárdenas wrote:

National unrest. Foreign oil companies, supported by their governments, always rebel against submitting to the nation's laws. We shall see... Restore to the nation's full domain the conceded deposits, which they keep as simple reserves, preventing the country's progress...

Another entry, dated March 9, 1938 reads:

On the 7th, by conduct of the United States Embassy, the oil companies' representatives asked to meet with me. They said their companies faced the impossibility of complying with the verdict, and wanted a consultation to see if compliance could be postponed. They were told the process had ended, and they had to comply with it.

At 10 p.m. the same day, I met with the leaders of the oil union, who informed me that they had decided to terminate their working contracts, having seen the companies' rebellious attitude, expressing once more their support of the government's decisions...

Mexico has today the great opportunity of freeing itself from the political and economic pressures exerted by the oil companies [which have been] exploiting, for their own benefit, one of our major natural resources...

Several revolutionary administrations have tried to intervene in the subsoil concessions granted to foreign companies, but circumstances have not been propitious because of existing international pressures and internal problems. But today conditions are different; there are no armed confrontations within the country, and a new world war is at the door. England and the United States frequently speak in favor of democracy and the sovereignty of nations, so it may be the moment to see if their governments will do as they say when Mexico makes use of its sovereign rights...

On returning from Zacatepec... I called out of the car to General Francisco Múgica, Secretary of Communications. I told him of my decision to expropriate the oil companies' assets if they refused to comply with the Supreme Court's ruling.

We agreed that another opportunity to restore the nation's oil wealth is unlikely to present itself. Not doing so out of fear of possible diplomatic demands from England or the United States would be unpatriotic, and the people would — justifiably — hold us responsible.

On March 10, Cárdenas wrote:

Up to now, no official mention has been made of the intention to expropriate. When the time comes, notice will be given.

In political and financial centers, it is generally believed, even by the companies, that the government might arrive but only to occupy the industrial installations.

A decision on this serious matter cannot wait much longer.

On March 18, around 10 p.m., the expropriation of the oil companies was announced. On March 19, with the nation in turmoil and in the midst of a strong international reaction, Cárdenas went on a picnic with his family and close friends.

The 1917 Constitution set the foundation for the rule of law. But when the time came to transfer power, the newly formed democratic institutions proved weak. The successions of 1920, 1924 and 1928-29 were all decided at gunpoint.

It was through the process of consolidating the new political system, while at the same time keeping internal peace, that Calles' National Revolutionary Party was formed. The precursor to today's Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI),

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Cuahtémoc Cárdenas campaigns for Head of Government of Mexico City, 1997.

the PNR was a conglomeration of regional parties and regional political bosses that soon became the center of real power in Mexico. That power was exercised by Calles, who came to be known as the *Jefe Máximo* (Maximum Chief) during the six years after he left the presidency, a period known as the Maximato.

During the Maximato, successions were resolved peacefully, even when political confrontations between PNR candidates arose, as occurred in 1930 and 1934. It wasn't until 1935, when a stark confrontation between Calles and President Cárdenas put an end to the Maximato, that the last word in political decisions was transferred to the president.

In the period between 1934 and 1982, the Mexican political system gradually lost its flexibility

and hardened into a rigid political machine, transforming from a system committed to the Revolution's ideals and goals to one that consciously and consistently took action against revolutionary legislation and institutions. The power of the president also grew during this period, particularly with regard to succession. At first, the president played the role of arbiter among competing presidential candidates from the official party. By 1958, however, choosing the party's next presidential candidate became the personal and uncontested decision of the president.

By mid-1986, things began to change: a movement toward contested elections emerged and expanded within the PRI, and more widely, within Mexico's dominant political

system. The central demands of this movement, which became known as the Democratic Current, were for the government to pay more attention to the people's living conditions and for the party to abide by its own internal rules and elect its candidates through democratic procedures. The stage was set for a confrontation over the upcoming 1988 presidential and congressional elections.

The Democratic Current gained support among the party's rank and file and began to challenge the president's unofficial powers, among them the power to choose a successor. The party apparatus closed ranks around the president, harshly attacking the reformers. Every possibility of acting within the party was denied the movement's members. When the president exercised his informal privilege of designating the party's presidential candidate, the Democratic Current broke with the PRI and became part of the opposition, joining with other political parties and social organizations to form the Frente Democrático Nacional (National Democratic Front, FDN).

Democratization from within the system turned out to be a losing battle, but it was, nonetheless, the beginning of a political transition. In spite of the opposition's mobilization of voters, the PRI stole the 1988 election through massive electoral fraud. While the FDN used every legal and political resource at its disposal in an attempt to stop the consummation of fraud, people were not organized, and there was no culture of citizen participation in politics. The FDN didn't have the capacity to peacefully assemble a popular movement strong enough to force the PRI to acknowledge defeat.

In spite of the setback, the Democratic Front continued to work to democratize Mexico's political system, eventually transforming itself

into a new party, the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (Party of the Democratic Revolution, PRD). Its first goal was to establish respect for the vote. It took years and several important events — some of them painful and tragic — to turn this goal into reality. Over 600 people were assassinated — with their killers going unpunished — in the process of organizing the new political party. Fraud remained routine in local elections, and progressive opposition movements were repressed. The Zapatistas rose up in southern Mexico. Presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio was assassinated. Mexico suffered through a deep economic crisis.

Meanwhile, people were becoming more and more conscious that their participation and their vote could change Mexico. They began putting pressure on the state, pushing through political and legal reforms that made electoral authority independent of the executive. Opposition parties and candidates began to be represented in the media. Finally, in the midterm elections of 1997, the official party lost its absolute majority in the lower chamber of Congress, and the PRD candidate was elected mayor of Mexico City. From then on, Mexico continued to have real, if imperfect, elections.

However, creating a system in which the vote of every citizen is fully respected is only part of what the Mexican people have been fighting for. Democracy is that and much more. It is equality, and Mexican society is one of the most unequal in the world: the richest 1 percent earn 9.2 percent of gross income while the poorest 1 percent receive just 0.07 percent, that is, 130 times less. Democracy is social welfare, and poverty affects 65.6 percent of the population, a total of 70.1 million

people. It is social welfare, and over 40 percent of the labor force lacks social security, and 26 million Mexicans work in the informal economy. Democracy means growth, and the Mexican economy shrank 8 percent in 2009 and is predicted to grow by just 1 percent this year. Democracy means opportunity, and during the past year over a million formal jobs were lost, and 20 million people were unemployed. It means opportunity in Mexico, and over 12 million Mexicans have been forced by circumstances to live and work in irregular migratory situations in the United States. It means access to knowledge, and education and research budgets are being cut.

This situation may be in part a consequence of the world economic crisis, but it is also the result of three decades of bad policies that prioritized

the concentration of wealth and looked outside our nation's borders for the solutions to Mexican problems.

To move forward, we have to remember the goals for which Mexicans struggled in the last century. The revolutionaries fought for democracy; for equality and justice; for education, knowledge and culture; for a just and generous nation; for shared progress; and for a fair and equitable world order. If we want to build a new Mexico, the Revolution's teachings can show us the way.

Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas is one of the founders of the PRD. He served as the Head of Government of Mexico City from 1997-99 and is currently president of the *Fundación para la Democracia*. He spoke for CLAS on February 3, 2010. This article is adapted from a transcript of his talk.

Signs marking a historic route in commemoration of Mexico's dual anniversaries.



Image by Gary Denness.