



Photo by Fernando Castillo/Latin Content/Getty Images.

MEXICO'S CENTENNIALS

President Felipe Calderón speaks at a ceremony honoring heroes of the War of Independence.

Limited Independence, Limited Democracy

by Lucas Novaes and Sinaia Urrusti Frenk

This year, Mexico is commemorating its two most important historical landmarks since Spain's conquest in 1519: the bicentennial of the War of Independence and the centennial of the Mexican Revolution. While the Calderón administration has planned an elaborate national celebration with thousands of events across the country, in his talk for the Center for Latin American Studies, Mexican historian Lorenzo Meyer was adamant that there is little to celebrate. The nation is suffering from low growth, inequality and a tsunami of crime related to drug trafficking. Indeed, Meyer, one of the country's most active political analysts, echoed a 2008 report by the U.S. Joint Forces Command

that characterized Mexico as being in danger of becoming a failed state.

In the course of his talk, Meyer advanced a hypothesis that is unlikely to earn him an invitation to any of this year's celebratory events. "The Mexican Revolution is meaningless in regard to the substantive issues," he said, "because we are exactly like the rest of Latin America, and the other Latin American countries didn't have a revolution 100 years ago." To support his claim, Meyer cited statistics comparing poverty and inequality in Mexico and Latin America. Mexican income inequality is actually slightly worse than the Latin American average. The poorest 20 percent of the population receives 3.6 percent of total

income; in Latin America, that figure is 3.8 percent. Mexico does slightly better on poverty: according to the United Nations, 34 percent of Mexicans live below the poverty line, while the regional average is approximately 40 percent. The country also lags behind on growth. The International Monetary Fund's (IMF) figures show that, during the last decade, the Mexican economy grew an average of 1.9 percent per year, while Latin American countries grew, on average 3.7 percent per year — almost twice as much.

How did Mexico reach this discouraging point? To find an answer, Meyer went back to colonial times. New Spain — as Mexico was then known — was, he said, the perfect colony. Not only was it the most productive Spanish territory in the Americas, it was also the most tractable. While New Spain experienced many local rebellions over local issues, there were no significant challenges to Spanish rule after the fall of the Aztec Empire as there were in Peru, Spain's second most important colony.

The initial move toward independence, when it came, was more a response to external events — the Napoleonic Wars — than it was a desire to overturn the status quo. Miguel Hidalgo y Castilla, a *criollo* (Mexican-born Spanish) priest in the city of Querétaro, fomented a plot to separate Mexico from Napoleonic Spain and place it under the rule of King Ferdinand VII, the deposed Spanish monarch. When his plan was exposed, Hidalgo y Castilla issued the famous “Grito de Dolores” urging his parishioners to march against the government. In addition to the priests and intellectuals who had formed his initial movement, Indians and peasants responded to his call, and their grievances began to overlay



Image from Poliano/Wikimedia Commons.

King Ferdinand VII of Spain (Portrait by Vicente López Portaña, 1829).

the original, essentially conservative, focus of the insurrection. Hidalgo y Castilla soon found himself at the head of an undisciplined army whose slogan was, “Death to the Gachupines,” (a derogatory term for *peninsulares* or natives of Spain). After a few early victories — including the taking of Guanajuato, which resulted in a massacre of local *criollos* and *peninsulares* — Hidalgo y Castilla was defeated and executed.

José María Morelos, a mestizo priest and keen military strategist, took up the fight, declaring independence from Spain and even drafting a new Constitution. When he, too, was executed in

1815, the rebellion devolved into a succession of local revolts that continued to bedevil the authorities for the next several years. Events took a particularly curious turn in 1820-21 when Colonel Augustín de Iturbide was sent to defeat the rebels in Oaxaca. A staunch conservative known for the brutality with which he had put down the insurrection in its early years, Iturbide hardly seemed the man destined to cleave Mexico from Spain. However, a coup on the peninsula coincided with his expedition; the victorious generals forced King Ferdinand VII to reinstate the liberal Constitution of 1812. Incensed by Spain's swing to

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the left, Iturbide joined with the rebels and marched on Mexico City. Thus was independence won, but it was an independence that reinforced the power of the traditional elite. As Meyer pointed out, Mexico changed to avoid change. There was a relocation of the capital from Madrid to Mexico City, but there was no real transformation in the political power structure.

An important consequence of the War of Independence was the consolidation of the negative relationship between the elite and the lower classes. The tiny group of whites and mestizos at the top of the social pyramid had traditionally regarded the lower classes as dangerous. Events such as the massacre in Guanajuato confirmed this belief and unleashed a merciless counteroffensive that Meyer compared to the Guatemalan government's attack on indigenous communities in the 1980s and '90s. The peculiar end to the War of Independence, with the conservative Iturbide essentially co-opting and neutralizing the rebels, left inter-class hostilities intact. In Meyer's words, "Mexico began independence as a failed state and continued that way until the 1880s."

In the intervening decades, banditry was widespread and law enforcement rare. This gave birth to an age of bandit-heroes who emerged from the lower classes and

dared to confront the corrupt social structure. Meyer referenced the work of Chris Frazer, an American historian who has argued that from this era on, legendary bandits have formed an important part of the Mexican popular imagination.

The weakness and lawlessness of post-Independence Mexico brought it hard against the parameters of its new sovereignty: its proximity to the United States. U.S. troops crossed the border several times in the 19th century, most importantly during the Mexican-American War (or the First North American Intervention, as it is known south of the Rio Grande), in which Mexico lost 55 percent of its territory. Mexico soon learned that it had won merely "independence within limits." To this day, Mexico cannot aspire to be a fully independent nation due to its economic dependence on and geographical proximity to the United States, Meyer argued.

Stability began to be reestablished during the administration of Benito Juárez and was consolidated during "the Porfiriato," the period from 1876 to 1911 dominated by President Porfirio Díaz. In the words of Meyer, Juárez and Díaz "created a liberal dictatorship that was able to run things." Díaz "introduced law and order," Meyer commented, adding, "Well, order more

Calavera zapatista (Zapatista skeleton), by the Mexican illustrator J.G. Posada (1852-1913).



Image by J.G. Posada.



Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

This composite picture portrays Francisco Madero leaving the National Palace on February 9, 1913, the first of the Ten Tragic Days that would end in his assassination.

than law.” The dictator was viewed very positively in the United States, and the U.S. stopped intervening in Mexico during his tenure in office.

In Díaz’s success, however, lay the seed of his ultimate failure. A brilliant politician, Díaz always knew who was who in the local political arenas across Mexico. He was a master at spotting and countering those who were capable of making trouble for him. By creating such a centralized and personalized system, he also eliminated all those capable of succeeding him. As Díaz aged, the problem of transferring power became more acute.

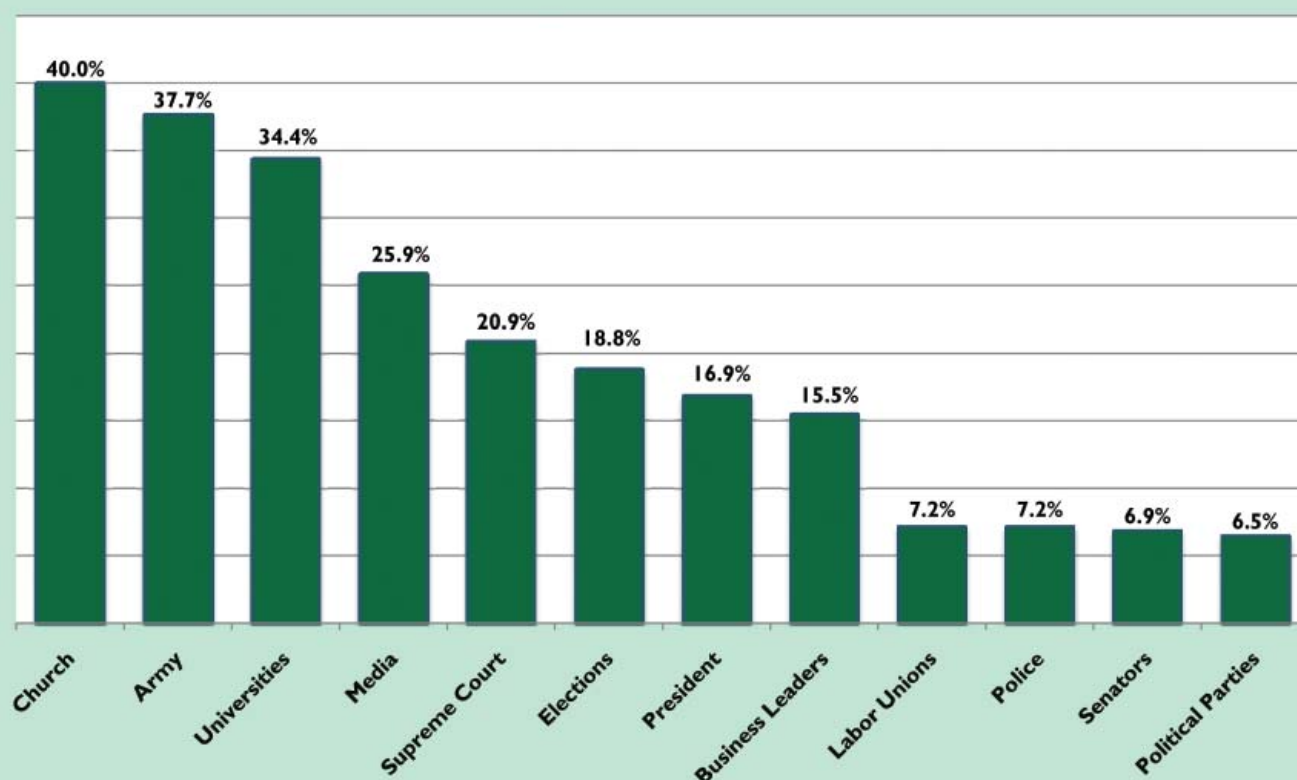
It was against this backdrop that Francisco I. Madero, a wealthy member of the elite, waged an “anti-reelection” campaign against Díaz and ran for the presidency in 1910. Madero was jailed and escaped into exile, and Díaz was reelected in a blatantly fraudulent election. From his base in San Antonio, Texas, Madero organized an armed resistance to the Díaz government that ultimately brought him to the presidency. In the process, he unleashed the Mexican Revolution, a force that ultimately proved to be beyond his control. As Meyer noted, Madero’s original intention was “to modernize the political structure, not to create a revolution or to involve the dangerous classes.”

Madero was overthrown and then shot in early 1913, and the Mexican Revolution recommenced with multiple factions fighting one another, initiating another long period of instability. While the Revolution is generally considered to have ended in 1920, the following decade continued to see outbreaks of violence. Meyer credited Lázaro Cárdenas with finally restoring peace and “a new kind of stability.” “Díaz’s stability was political control,” he said. “The new stability was created by the introduction of huge, historical reforms,” including agrarian and labor reforms and the professionalization of the army. It was “stability with social justice.” Unfortunately for Mexico, this period of reform did not last beyond Cárdenas’ term in office (1934–40). Instead, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI) capitalized on these gains to consolidate what Meyer termed, tongue planted firmly in cheek, “the best authoritarian system in Latin America — perhaps in the world.”

Under the PRI, Mexico commenced a 70-year-long period of uninterrupted one-party rule. The *priistas* solved the problem of succession that had foiled Porfirio Díaz by allotting each president only one term in office but allowing him to handpick his successor with the help of

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Percentage of Mexicans who claim to have "a lot" of trust in listed institutions



Data from the "Economía, gobierno y política" poll conducted by Consulta Mitofsky, May 2010.

top party leaders. Meyer summed up this period saying, "If the legacy of Independence is independence within limits, the legacy of the Revolution is democracy within limits."

In spite of the corruption and stunted democracy that characterized the rule of the PRI, many Mexicans held positive views of the government for several decades. One of the goals of the Revolution had been to reduce the gap between the rich and poor, and the PRI initially presided over a period of economic development and growth that seemed to promise progress toward that goal. Meyer cited a public opinion survey from the 1960s that found that, in general, Mexicans were proud of the Revolution and of their political system, even though they were well-aware of the existence of widespread corruption.

By the late 1970s "the dream began to unravel," Meyer said. The 1980s brought the crash in oil prices, and 1994 saw the Mexican Peso Crisis in which the currency underwent a severe devaluation. The end of the PRI's grip on power with the 2000 election of Vicente Fox, a member of the Partido Acción Nacional (National Action Party, PAN), led to a brief period of optimism. However, the drug war unleashed by his successor, the current president Felipe Calderón, has dragged Mexico back down the road toward instability.

A recent survey by Consulta Mitofsky, Mexico's leading public opinion research firm, made clear how far public confidence has fallen since the 1960s. Tellingly, the institutions most distrusted by Mexicans are those necessary for a well-functioning democracy. The five institutions with the lowest levels of trust were the Senate, unions, the police, Congress and, in last place, political parties. Surprisingly, the most trusted institutions in Mexico were none other than those inherited from colonial times, namely the Church, universities and the army.

Even though Spain no longer holds a pivotal position in Mexico, in many ways the U.S. has stepped into that country's former role. For Meyer, the world is small from Mexico's perspective: the outside world is the United States. The dependence of Mexico's economy on its northern partner can be quickly assessed. Mexican trade is more concentrated in the United States than at any time since World War II, when Mexico was cut off from Asian and European markets, accounting for 77 percent of Mexican exports. Additionally, more than 10 percent of Mexico's population lives on U.S. soil, making remittances the nation's second largest source of income. Thus, it was no surprise that during the recent financial crisis the Mexican economy was hit like almost no other — according to the

IMF, only 15 countries experienced a more severe decline in real GDP in 2009 than Mexico.

Even Mexico's main security problem, narco-trafficking, is inextricably linked to the country's geographical proximity to the U.S. drug market. For Meyer, the current situation of extreme drug-related violence is related to the larger problem of limited independence. "Dependency theory was unfashionable for a while," Meyer said, referring to a set of theories that gained currency in the 1960s and posited that resource-exporting, developing nations are at a perpetual disadvantage in their dealings with industrialized countries, "but I think it is still very useful for explaining our relationship with the outside world."

If crises are an opportunity to advance constructive change, Mexico is missing the window of opportunity. According to Meyer, Mexico is instead going through one of those periods in history when "mediocrity is everywhere." Perhaps the wars commemorated this

year brought positive and necessary change to Mexican society, but these movements also crystallized into a partially independent state plagued by chronic political and social inequality. Meyer may be right: perhaps the most appropriate way to commemorate the successes and failures of the Mexican War of Independence and the Revolution is to study them in an effort to understand Mexico's current crisis.

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President Calderón attends the presentation of the program of activities commemorating Mexico's dual centennials.



Photo by Alfredo Guerrero.