

The Mexican Revolution

(1910-1917)

Álvaro Matute*



Robert Dorman

As the twentieth century began, Mexico suffered from a myriad of problems: on the one hand, in 1900 President Porfirio Díaz was reelected for the fifth time, which, while it guaranteed stability, also implied the lack of

political mobility for new generations of professionals who aspired to high positions in the government bureaucracy. This was replicated in most states nationwide. Many governors were reelected indefinitely and the emerging groups began to express their disagreement.

* Researcher emeritus of the UNAM Institute for Historical Research.

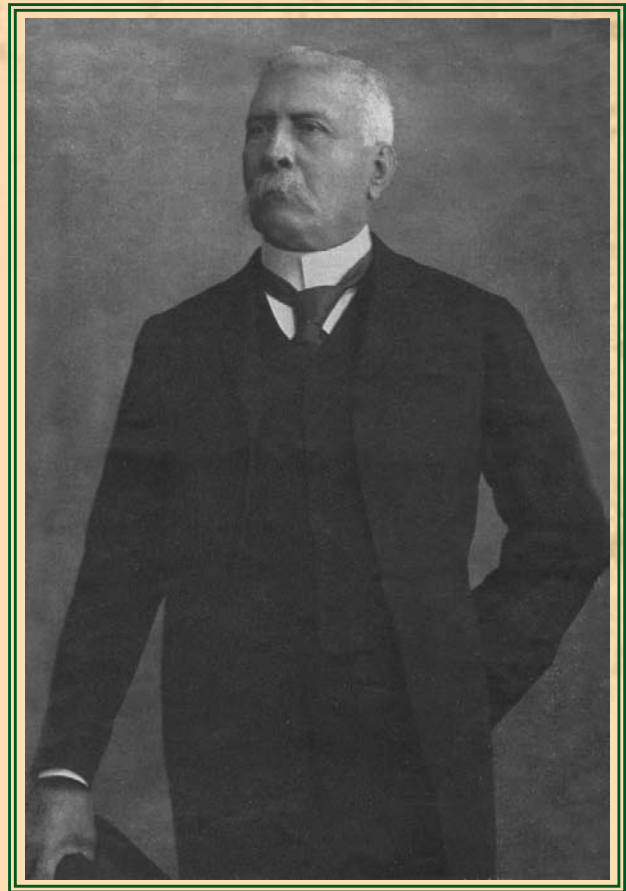
Photo Credits: The photo on this page was published on Brenner, Anita, *The Wind that Swept Mexico. The History of the Mexican Revolution 1910-1942* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1943). Porfirio Díaz (p. 53), Archivo Histórico Ezequiel A. Chávez, Instituto de Investigaciones sobre la Universidad y Educación; Emiliano Zapata (p. 54), Fototeca Archivo General de la Nación; Venustiano Carranza (p. 55), Colección fotográfica sueltas, Fondo Reservado, Biblioteca Nacional, UNAM; Little girl (p. 57), Metropolitan Magazine, n.d.

As a result of the 1856 Lerdo Law that confiscated ecclesiastic property, but which also tended to destroy community goods and foster individual private property, and the laws on fallow land stemming from it, many peasant communities lost their *ejido* lands to the expansion of latifundios formed in the last third of the nineteenth century. Emiliano Zapata from the state of Morelos was an outstanding spokesperson demanding the return of communal goods; in his state, the owners of large tracts of land planted with sugar cane had

taken it from peasant communities. Industrial workers suffered under a different yoke: among others, they were denied their rights to association and to strike; and there were no regulations establishing minimum working ages, the length of the work day, or wage and benefits policies, despite the fact that the workers had already developed mutualism and cooperativism. This spurred the emergence of anarchist and anarcho-sindicalist groups and ideas, as well as the propagation of the ideas derived from Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, establishing what has been identified as social Catholicism, which would soon manifest itself in the organization of Catholic workers congresses that demanded, just like their anarchist counterparts, an answer from the state. The liberal heirs of the reformist tradition protested the rapprochement between certain Catholic Church hierarchs and the government, pressing for the need to apply the Laws of the Reform establishing the separation of Church and state. Thus, a series of factors came together bringing with them political, agrarian, labor, and religious problems.

In 1900 President Porfirio Díaz was reelected for the fifth time, which, while it guaranteed stability, also implied the lack of political mobility for new generations of professionals.

People began to act. In the city of San Luis Potosí, the liberals held a congress in 1903 where complaints were voiced to the government because of its rapprochement with the church. Out of that congress emerged the group that three years later would publish the Plan and Program of the Liberal Party, a well crafted document in which, while the relationship between church and state still had a place, the most important focus was a series of political, economic, and social proposals for reforming the country. This plan dealt with labor issues like limiting the work day and establishing a minimum wage; and agrarian measures, like making sure there were no fallow lands in the country. It also put forward the need for mandatory, secular, state-run education. This group's ideas circulated among broad sectors of workers through the newspaper *Regeneración*, whose editor, Ricardo Flores Magón, was its main ideologue. For his trouble, Flores Magón was persecuted and jailed many times, to the point of being forced into exile in the United States. The Catholic



Porfirio Díaz.

Workers Circles, for their part, broadened their grassroots organization and held congresses in which they debated advanced labor reforms.

In urban areas, professionals close to the political class began to speculate about the succession of General Porfirio Díaz. They expressed their concerns about how the presidential succession should be resolved in articles, pamphlets, and books, and asked themselves if the Mexican people were ready for democracy or not. They also discussed whether it was possible to organize political parties. These speculations were fueled even more by President Díaz's statements to journalist James Creelman from *Pearson's Magazine*, published in March 1908, announcing that he intended to retire at the end of his term in 1910. The book written by vineyard-owner Francisco I. Madero, *La sucesión presidencial en 1910* (The Presidential Succession of 1910) in San Pedro de las Colonias, in the northern state of Coahuila, explained the author's expectations about the dictator's announced retirement. In his book, he expressed an agreement with "Don Porfirio" —as Díaz is still known today in



Emiliano Zapata, the caudillo of the South.

Mexico: because the middle class had grown stronger, the possibility existed for the exercise of democracy. Other writers, on the other hand, were skeptical on this point. One of them, evolutionist Andrés Molina Enríquez, the author of what was undoubtedly the best diagnosis of the situation, warned that democracy was still far off. In his book *Los grandes problemas nacionales* (The Great National Problems), published in 1909, he took into account factors like the interaction among ethnic-social groups with different forms of land ownership. From this analysis, he was able to come to important conclusions foreseeing that in the face of kind of diversity that existed, it was impossible to evolve. A homogeneous society, by contrast, could have a democratic government, but before that, it would evolve from a personal dictatorship into a party dictatorship.

When 1910 came around, Porfirio Díaz changed his mind and decided to launch his campaign for president again. After a bad experience, the Democratic Party, formed in 1909 to support General Bernardo Reyes, dissolved when some of its members were persecuted. The only party left standing was the Anti-re-electionist Party, organized by Francisco I. Madero, who

The Maderistas' victory immediately had transcendental political consequences: Porfirio Díaz resigned and, at the end of the same month, left the country on a boat bound for Europe.

went on the first campaign tour worthy of the name in the history of Mexico. Despite harassment and persecution, the campaign was successful; but when the elections were held, fraud handed the victory to the dictatorship. Madero, basically imprisoned in San Luis Potosí, wrote the Plan of San Luis, in which he called for an uprising on November 20, 1910 and for the population to disavow the fraudulently elected authorities. At first, the response was small, but in the first three months of 1911, increasing numbers of rebel groups joined him, particularly in the northern part of the country.

By May, when a large number of rebellions had broken out nationwide, the forces came together in Ciudad Juárez, on the U.S. border, where what was to be the decisive battle was fought. The Maderistas' victory immediately had transcendental political consequences: Porfirio Díaz resigned

the presidency and, at the end of the same month, left the country on a boat bound for Europe, where he would spend the last five years of his life.

Between May and November was the period known as the “Interim,” headed by Francisco León de la Barra. Madero made a triumphal tour from the border to the capital, where many problems awaited him. On the one hand, the groups around him were divided. In addition, there was a commitment to disband the revolutionary troops, some of which, like the Zapatistas, refused as long as the government had not fulfilled its agrarian promises. In addition, the freedoms Madero guaranteed, in particular the freedom of the press, were used against the revolutionary leader himself, who was even personally satirized. Even with all of this, in November he took the oath as president and began his administration.

A few days later, the Zapatistas’ impatience manifested itself through the Plan of Ayala, which urged the restitution of the towns’ collective *ejido* farms. New anti-Madero outbreaks



Francisco I. Madero, who overthrew Porfirio Díaz.

In 1913 Carranza gave the movement a national dimension by sending contingents to the South and Southeast and occupying ports and customs offices, allowing him to raise money for his movement.



Venustiano Carranza (right).

were not long in coming: General Bernardo Reyes, Pascual Orozco, and Félix Díaz headed important military uprisings. In the midst of this difficult situation, a new Chamber of Dep-

uties—the twenty-sixth— was elected, with a government plurality, and began the task of writing legislation to satisfy the discontented groups.

When the president thought he had mastered the situation, a new military uprising in Mexico City freed Generals Bernardo Reyes and Félix Díaz from the city’s prisons. Reyes was killed when he tried to take the National Palace, as U.S. Ambassador Henry L. Wilson orchestrated a conspiracy in which General Victoriano Huerta betrayed the president and took him prisoner in February 1913 in what is known as the “Tragic Ten Days.” Madero was assassinated and Huerta instituted a dictatorial regime by dissolving the Chamber of Deputies and sending anyone who opposed his government to prison, or even murdering them, including a senator.

After Huerta took over the presidency, the governor of Coahuila, Venustiano Carranza, disavowed him and incited the people to bring down his government based on the Plan of Guadalupe published in March 1913. Up until then, very little had been advanced regarding the reforms that had fueled the revolutionary movement. The deputies began to debate about restoring the *ejidos* to the towns and labor reform issues; peasant groups continued their struggle, while the workers—both the anarcho-syndicalists, organized in the House of the World Worker, and the Catholics— developed labor proposals for social justice.

The center of this period is Carranza’s struggle against Huerta, which



different groups from the north joined, like the Division of the North under the command of Francisco Villa and the Sonorans who would create the Northwest Army, under its supreme commander General Álvaro Obregón. For his part, Zapata continued the struggle. Carranza gave the movement a national dimension by sending contingents to the South and Southeast and occupying ports and customs offices, which allowed him to raise money for his movement. The military actions against the federal army took place between March 1913 and August 1914, when the latter was defeated.

Once having overthrown President Huerta, the different groups agreed to hold a convention to design a program of reforms. It began in October 1914, but the groups around Villa argued that it should be transferred to the city of Aguascalientes, considered neutral territory. Once established there, the convention declared itself sovereign and disavowed Carranza, who left Mexico City and set up his government in Veracruz. The struggle between Constitutionalist and Conventionists was imminent, and the Sovereign Revolutionary Convention forces moved to Mexico City.

In December 1914, the Pact of Xochimilco was signed, unifying the forces of Villa and Zapata and putting them-

selves momentarily under the command of the president elected by the convention, Eulalio Gutiérrez. General Obregón, for his part, decided to throw his support to Carranza, which was instrumental in the Constitutionalist victory in mid-1915. Parallel to the military battles, another struggle, this one along ideological lines, was being waged through the publication of legislation and decrees on social issues that benefitted peasants and workers. The latter, members of the House of the World Worker, lent their support to the Constitutionalist army and joined it in what they called Red Battalions to fight against Villa. Maintaining the revolutionary armies active meant that the meager existing harvests and cattle were used to feed the troops, causing fairly widespread famine. This was accompanied by monetary chaos since each army minted and issued its own currency. As if this were not enough, epidemics spread due to the lack of hygiene in both cities and countryside.

Although the military phase had not concluded in 1916, its eventual outcome was clear, and this would be the year to channel the revolutionary reforms into legislation that would be applied immediately. Both the defeated conventionists and the victorious constitutionalists applied themselves to writing plans and laws designed to satisfy the demands emanating from the struggle. In fact, the convention survived in the territory controlled by Emiliano Zapata. In that year,

1916, he would publish a “Program of Reforms” that included many of the ideas expressed by Magón’s followers since 1906, plus others that had emerged during the revolutionary struggle itself. Carranza, for his part, would convene elections for a Constituent Congress to session at the end of the year in the city of Querétaro, where he would present a constitutional reform proposal for debate.

The congress was elected and began its session in December 1916, concluding February 5, 1917. While the only participants present were from the victors’ camp, in social, generational, and professional terms the composition of the delegates was representative and varied. Carranza’s plan was rapidly surpassed by the more radical wing, whose proposals on educational, agrarian, labor, and religious issues overshadowed his more moderate project that ran along traditional liberal lines. The radicals—dubbed Jacobins—went much further. As a result, the state was given more faculties as the supreme arbiter in labor, agrarian, educational, and religious matters. Although individual guarantees were established, many of them ceded precedence to a preponderance of the state, manifested in a strong government centered on the figure of the president, who was not limited at all, except for the republican norms that maintained an equilibrium of the

Although the military phase had not concluded in 1916, this would be the year to channel the revolutionary reforms into legislation that would be applied immediately.

branches of government and individual freedoms. The Constitution also gave the ownership of the land, the sub-soil, minerals, and hydrocarbons to the nation, as well as the faculty of transferring it to individuals.

Thus, the new Constitution established mandatory, free, secular, state-regulated education. It dealt with the agrarian problem by establishing the nation’s power over the soil and sub-soil and the ability to divide up large tracts of land. It handled labor issues by establishing a maximum number of hours of work, a minimum wage, and certain benefits, plus prohibiting child labor. It controlled the number and nationality of the Church’s clergy and banned worship in the street. Lastly, it strengthened the institution of the presidency.

It would not be easy to apply the Constitution, that is, to turn the majority of its articles into legislation that would make it possible to actually put in into practice. The commitment of the administrations that came out of it would be to make it an effective document. No easy task, since the country was plagued by a great deal of unrest, and the international scene was complicated by World War I, making the situation no easier.

The final results made possible the construction of a state headed by a strong central government based on workers and peasants who benefitted from it, as well as a popular army and the collaboration of the emerging middle classes, who expressed all manner of scientific, technological, and cultural advances. ■■



BASIC READING

- Ávila Espinosa, Felipe Arturo, *Los orígenes del zapatismo* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México/UNAM, 2001).
- Matute, Álvaro, *La revolución mexicana. Actores, escenarios y acciones (Vida cultural y política, 1901-1929)* (Mexico City: Océano, 2010).
- Portilla, Santiago, *Una sociedad en armas. Insurrección antirreeleccionista en México, 1910-1911* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1995).
- Salmerón Sanginés, Pedro, *La División del Norte. La tierra, los hombres y la historia de un ejército del pueblo* (Mexico City: Planeta, 2006).