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*Mexico: What Everyone Needs to
Know*

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MEXICO'S COLONIAL HERITAGE

How did the Spanish viceroys shape Mexico's political heritage in the 19th and 20th centuries?

When Spain sent expeditions to what is today Mexico and conquered the indigenous populations, they needed to create a structure of governance for their colonies in North and South America. The Spanish crown, through a Council of the Indies, created a system based in part on their reconquest of Spain from the Moors. The most important institution in the Spanish New World was the viceroy, or vice king. Given that Spain governed territory from the Tierra del Fuego as far north as what is today Kansas, the task of governing was an immense challenge because of the difficulties of communication between Spain and the new world and within the entire North American continent. For more than a century, beginning in the 1500s, Spain divided the colonies into two viceroyalties, and Mexico was part of the viceroyalty of New Spain, which eventually included the Philippine Islands.

Under the Spanish system, the viceroy combined three major powers. He was the political leader of the entire territory encompassed by New Spain. In addition to having civil powers, he was also the commander in chief of the militia in the region. Finally, he was vice-patron of the Catholic Church.

By giving the viceroy such combined, extraordinary powers to govern, the crown created a political institution that concentrated most decision-making authority into the hands of one individual and created a system of governance that assigned to what could be described today as the executive branch most of the political, military, and, to a great degree, religious power. This pattern of governance, in spite of the presence of a weak legislative body as well as stronger, pluralistic local authorities, created a significant heritage during three centuries of colonial rule favoring a concentration of power in the executive branch. Considering that many of the organized indigenous cultures conquered by the Spanish also were governed by their quasi religious-political authoritarian structures, the combined European and indigenous heritage promoted an authoritarian, hierarchical experience superimposed on localized, semi-independent communities. The colonies remained divided into two major viceroyalties, New Spain, founded in 1535, and Peru, established in 1543, until New Granada was added in 1739 and Río de la Plata in 1776.

As is the case with most authoritarian political structures, such a concentration of power creates the potential for abuses of authority, and some later viceroys, many of whom served for long terms at the whim of the crown, were found to have been corrupt or to have abused their authority. These negative characteristics combined with the concentrated authority, in part, contributed to the colonists' growing dissatisfaction with colonial rule, eventually leading to independence movements in New Spain and elsewhere in the colonies. Nevertheless, in spite of Mexico achieving independence in 1821, its first leader, Agustín Iturbide, declared himself emperor, continuing the authoritarian tradition established by the long reign of viceroys.

In the remainder of the nineteenth century, except for a brief period in the 1860s and 1870s, Mexico's political system was dominated by strong individual rulers, who governed

through their personalities rather than through institutions, contributing to the long-term weakness of established political structures. By the twentieth century, ordinary Mexicans rejected the most durable example of this centralized control, that of Porfirio Díaz, who ruled from 1884 to 1911. This rejection took the form of a violent revolution during the decade from 1910 to 1920. Despite this rejection of Díaz, and a political mantra of no reelection, Mexico evolved a political system after the 1920s that also relied on a centralized, authoritarian model, led by a collective leadership, and that produced a different president every six years. Revisionist scholarship in the last decade has demonstrated that many Mexicans, since independence, have expressed democratic values and attempted to put them into practice, especially at the local level.