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## “Bread or the Club”

### Carleton Beals

The Díaz dictatorship did not develop overnight; the centralized and personalistic character of the regime formed over many years. Díaz began building his political machine in 1876; by 1892 it had become known worldwide. While our knowledge of the inner workings of the Díaz political machine is still limited, this excerpt from one of the earlier works on Mexico vividly summarizes its major outlines. For this account of the dictator's modus operandi we are indebted to Carleton Beals (1893- ), one of the earliest American students of Mexico, who later became an eminent lecturer and a prolific writer.

How did Díaz govern? His cabinet, in a constructive sense, was reduced to impotence, ever the battleground of petty ambitions. Its members might seek personal enrichment or serve as instruments of coercion as Romero\*, or as false symbols of liberalism, as Baranda\*\*, but constant rivalry, largely fomented by Porfirio himself, made only coordination that imposed by his paternal will. Cabinet Ministers soon abandoned any immediate desire to succeed Díaz; the experiences of Benítez\*\*\*, Vallarta†,

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\*Manuel Romero Rubio, 1822-95; Díaz's father-in-law and a prominent liberal.

\*\*Joaquín Baranda, 1840-1909; lawyer, author, and former governor of Campeche.

\*\*\*José Justo Benítez, 1833-1900; lawyer and former treasury secretary, most prominent of *porfiristas*.

†Ignacio Luis Vallarta, 1830-93; distinguished liberal jurist, former foreign relations minister, and governor of Jalisco.

Escobedo††, Pacheco†††, Romero, García de la Cardena††††, had taught them better.

With first success, Porfirio, suspicious of possible rivals, and of Vallarta in particular, transferred Presidential succession from head of the Supreme Court to President of the Senate. A very uncertain device. Almost any demagogue might step upon the scene. Vallarta eliminated, he shifted the succession to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and permanently installed there, Ignacio Mariscal [1829–1910; a lawyer and diplomat], whom he knew to be a weak, inoffensive but fairly intelligent man, who instead of intriguing gravely stroked his neat pointed goatee and translated Whittier and Longfellow.

But each minister if he had no immediate hopes prepared for Díaz' possible death, constantly intrigued for preference, worked to build up his bureaucratic influence, vilely plotted against fellow-members, subsidized newspapers to attack his associates. Wolf versus wolf. So long as these papers fulsomely praised Díaz, the inviolate king in Republican toga, they were fairly free to sling slime. Repression merely spewed more poison over lesser satellites. Díaz often actually passed out secret work to launch such attacks against his closest collaborators. Always the check-rein.

The governors, mostly close friends of Porfirio, were at first chosen for implicit loyalty during darker revolutionary days, but increasingly, as time went on, they were wealthy Catholics, belonging to exclusive aristocratic circles. A few hoary *caciques* were left in place, granted their offices and reelection for unconditional servility. Whatever their lack of home popularity, governors had to be tried and true to Díaz. If unpopular, the more they had to depend on Díaz for survival, and he could always utilize their unpopularity as a pretext for elimination. Also the Chamber, quite under Díaz' thumb, could accuse, judge and remove state governors by simple majority vote.

In general, so long as they paid their bills to the center and kept complete order, Díaz gave the governors full support and a free hand. Great wealthy dynasties were built up.

But none, however powerful, took any important step without consulting Díaz. All had to sing the song "General Díaz before God," and wisely

††Mariano Escobedo, 1826–1902; liberal military officer who served with distinction against the French; Díaz gave him a seat in Congress.

†††Carlos Pacheco, 1839–91.

††††Trinidad García de la Cadena, 1813–86; liberal military officer who was shot for rebelling against Díaz.

toasted the Dictator fulsomely on all public occasions, calling him the great "hero of peace," but never omitting references to his martial exploits, particularly the April 2 victory in Puebla, as Minister Mariscal called it, "the greatest military feat in history."

"Kill them in cold blood," wired Díaz, and Mier y Terán [Luis, 1835–91; military officer most partial to Díaz, brutally put down anti-Díaz insurrections] obeyed implicitly. The same servility was displayed by all, whether it was throwing the journalist Ordoñez into an oven, assassinating Carrasco in Mixcoac, or Valdés in Mazatlán. The wires hum and Governor Jesús Aréchiga kills his former friend and protector, García de la Cadena. "Clean the frontier," and it is cleaned.

The governors had to serve for everything; to falsify elections, beat up political nightingales, stamp on "seditious" journalists, conscript individuals into the army, to apply Ley Fuga,\* conserve the Dictator's popularity, contribute designated sums to all great fiestas in his honor. They handpicked their state legislatures, with prior personal ratification by Porfirio. Local authorities, for the most part imposed by the governors, were closely watched by Díaz. However powerful and ruthless in their own bailiwicks, nationally the governors had to remain non-entities, and in their fear for their jobs, the majority of them paid Porfirio's private secretary Chausal five hundred pesos a month, which he split with Pineda, not to show the Dictator unfavorable letters.

At no time during Porfirio's rule were the Chamber and Senate formed by popular vote, though at the beginning of his 1876–1880 and 1884–8 terms, a small independent bloc survived. But by the end of Díaz' first administration, Congress had been well steam-rollered. As *El Monitor Republicano* said re the 1880 elections, the times had now passed when a Ramírez [probably Cirilo, 1818–90; justice of the supreme court], a Lerdo [de Tejada], a Zarco [probably Francisco, 1829–69; prominent liberal author and member of congress] could cause a Ministry to fall with one of their great discourses. Opposition had now ceased.

By 1892, the personnel was selected by the President himself. The credentials were not even issued by the legal electoral college. Toward the close of each two years, Díaz received innumerable letters, soliciting a seat for favorites, from governors, Doña Carmen [Díaz's wife], the Archbishop (godfather of several of the great Liberal's children), ministers and loyal political groups. A long list was formed, which Díaz went over painstakingly, sometimes without even consulting his secretary. Due regard was paid to the person and his nominator. First came the relatives of

\*See p. 23.

the President, his son, sons-in-law, nephew, father-in-law . . . some thirteen or fourteen seats. Next old comrades-in-arms or their sons—for instance, General Ireneo Paz [1836–1924; Díaz's favored military officer] (later also one of his sons, Arturo), whose paper *La Patria* was well-subsidized and who received (until ousted and jailed through Científico\*\* influence) fat contracts for printing the Government *Diario de los Debates*. Then relatives of generals, cabinet ministers and governors. Dehesa's [Teodoro A., 1848–36; a Díaz favorite, former governor of Veracruz] two sons were deputies. Some owed their seats merely to being friendly fellow-Oaxacans—Castellanos, Cervantes, Fenocchio, Chapital, etc. Manuel Fernández Ortigosa and Manuel Romero Ibañez from Oaxaca were authors of the eulogistic bombastic biography *La Moral en Acción* circulated in floods by the government. Finally, were seated the *niños finos*, "the refined children," the blue-stocking pets of Carmen and her friends and of the Archbishop, including Luis Aguilar and Eduardo Viñas, administrators of the property of the Archbishopric of Mexico (who had also helped Díaz attack González) and Joaquín Silva, brother of the Archbishop of Morelia. Some appointments were humorous—that of Ramón Reynoso, a dentist, called hurriedly one night to attend the dictator, later his regular dentist; Angel Gutiérrez, his doctor, also had a seat; Porfirio was taking no chances. Francisco Romero, an insignificant militarist, was rewarded for fighting innumerable duels; an insuperable swordsman and dead shot, he eliminated numerous enemies of the régime. Antonio Tovar, President of the Circle of Intimate Friends, received his seat for similar reasons. Newspaper men were not neglected: Manuel Flores, manager of *Imparcial*, later, on the *Excelsior*, Reyes Spíndola, fellow Oaxacan and editor and owner of *Imparcial*, Carlos Díaz Dufoo and Francisco Bulnes, also of *Imparcial*. Lastly, a few men of real merit, but with similar connections, or close to the Científicos, were seated; such as Emilio Pardo [1850–1911; lawyer, professor, and diplomat], Emilio Rabasa [1856–1930; jurist, novelist], José [María] Gamboa [1856–1911; lawyer and diplomat], Rafael Zurbarán Capmany [lawyer, later became a Madero supporter], etc. The final list made up, the governors were given the names which "ought to be favored by the public vote." Those thus designated, rarely legal residents of their districts, were duly elected. Even at the last hour, before the pseudo-polls opened, Díaz sometimes wired changes of names; even after the public had presumably elected a

\*Term applied to group of men influential in the latter half of *porfiriato*, from about 1892 to 1911. Included Justo Sierra, Francisco Bulnes, and José Limantour.—Ed.

candidate, his name might be stricken off and arbitrarily substituted by that of one not even a candidate. In the rare instances in which a governor made bold to substitute some name of his own choice, or there was an accidental slip-up, credentials were conveniently "lost," and when found, the proper candidate would be named in them. A handpicked Permanent Commission seated the official candidates without comment.

Later the list of favored deputies was not made known until after the elections were supposed to have taken place; sometimes even Díaz' private secretary did not know the complete list.

Often, in open violation of the law, the deputies were arbitrarily shifted, one election to the next, from one district to another. To prevent Congressmen becoming too interested in the problems of their own states, which might interfere with gubernatorial omnipotence, Díaz preferred that a deputy from Oaxaca should represent Tamaulipas and vice versa. Rosendo Pineda, who had a slight tilt with Porfirio in 1892, was "punished" by being made deputy from Celaya instead of from Oaxaca. Deputy Joaquín Redo, from Sinaloa, intimate of Díaz, remarked to him on the eve of the President's fifth reëlection, "You and all of us should go home that these posts be filled by young men." Díaz looked at him intensely without answering. A few days later Díaz made up the lists for deputies and senators, exclusive of Chihuahua. Redo's name had been omitted. For seven days he made Redo feel how empty it seemed to be out of office, then published his name as deputy for Chihuahua. Above all, Díaz favored men from his native state, some of them ignorant ranchers, generously rewarded for their dogged faithfulness, doomed to official flunkeyism by their very lack of education.

The two bodies served also as a cemetery for needy friends. The Senate, even more than the Chamber, became known as the "Political Pantheon," for there Porfirio dumped outworn cabinet ministers, incapable governors, useless military commanders.

Díaz kept in both bodies a number of eternal functionaries upon whom he could implicitly depend, men whose word was known to be that of Porfirio; and who instantly gave thumbs up or down on every project. For many years Antonio Argüinzóniz in the Senate, and Chavero [Alfredo, 1841–1906; playwright-historian] in the Chamber, later Díaz' relative "El Chato" Lorenzo Elizaga [d. 1883; author], brought in the official encyclical, which was promptly obeyed.

The deputies were goose-stepped by carefully chosen secretaries, so nothing could ever be presented without Porfirio's prior knowledge. For the most part, no initiative not suggested by the Executive was ever

brought in. Any measure introduced without permission was immediately killed. If wise, the Congressman interested first consulted the President, won his sanction, his indifference or opposition. Sometimes, though opposed to a measure, the Dictator gave permission to have it introduced; sometimes feigned enthusiasm, then secretly killed it. Three such laws, dear to Justo Sierra were thus knifed: the unremovability of Supreme Court Magistrates, a divorce law and a law regulating liberty of profession. Díaz was opposed to the first and third, Carmen to the second. Justo Sierra was mollified by being made President of the Supreme Court, humiliated by being made to swallow the practice he opposed.

The Executive's own projects, except for minor points, were scarcely discussed. Rarely were any negative votes cast save for "appearance's sake." The bold person who cast an unauthorized opposition vote soon found himself cooling his heels back in his native Podunk.

The press, for the first half of Porfirio's rule, sarcastically commented on the utter lack of seriousness in the Chamber. Many members never attended sessions except when their vote was needed for a quorum. Almost as disreputable a place as our own American House—the vast semi-circle, obscured by dense tobacco fumes, was nothing more than a smoking room; some members reading newspapers; in darker corners, some snoring tranquilly, others seating themselves on the carpet runways, here and there small groups talking animatedly about the latest scandal.

Aside from insults hurled between factions, the sessions lacked novelty. The one theatrical event of the year was the inevitable last session oratory of the farcical Juan A. Mateos [1831-1913], the Chauvinist novelist, who, with Porfirio's consent, emitted a wild, sarcastic, humorous and inaccurate Jacobin speech against the clergy—perhaps at the very moment that the Archbishop was bending low over Carmen's lily-white hand.

While most Executives throughout Mexico's history have controlled a majority in Congress, always there have been opposition and interesting controversy. In Juárez' and Lerdo's administrations, Díaz had lavishly lauded the independent group of which he was a member because it represented popular aspirations, not official will. The only opposition under Díaz, once he perfected control, was promoted by himself—such orators as the fake critic, Francisco Bulnes, who, like the king's jester, often amused by daring paradoxical polemics; who if he sometimes bordered on *lèse majesté*, never slipped over the brink. Not until 1930 did the National Revolutionary Party (Calles' [Plutarco Elías, president, 1924-28] bureau of political control) become so well-organized as to crush all opposition and install 100 percent Simon-pure servile representation.

Frequently Díaz obliged Congress to give him extraordinary powers in

various branches; his acts and decrees under such sanctions were never discussed, merely fulsomely praised; if need be, the powers were always renewed.

The judiciary was formed in the same arbitrary manner. The President named and removed Supreme Court members at will. Congress accepted his decision absolutely. No name, however worthy, not originated by Díaz, was ever proposed. The Supreme Court in turn appointed the ancillary judges Porfirio designated.

Favorites need not fear the hand of the law too much. Nor generals or bull-fighters. But God help you if you were a Mexican and had not taken the precaution to be one or the other. General Magar murdered the unarmed brother of his mistress, but was released from prison after a few months and returned to the active list. A bull-fighter killed a woman, and in the face of public clamor was released for a Saturday *corrida*. He escaped to the United States, whereupon his brother was arrested, tried and acquitted.

Occasionally cabinet ministers mixed in judicial affairs, but never openly. Usually a message was sent on a card—the famous so-called "age of visiting cards"—the undersigned hopes such and such a decision will correspond to justice, or that it be promptly rendered.

Díaz himself "fixed" the Supreme Court—"merely a tool for all that was vile"—through his brother-in-law "Chato" Elizaga. Later, when foreigners came to exercise more influence, the general rule was: a foreigner always right, a Mexican always wrong. An American was above the law, whatever his social rank; no important foreigner came out second best in a suit with a Mexican, unless the latter were a powerful Científico engaged in a big steal.

Díaz was told that his millionaire protégé, the Spaniard Iñigo Noriega [1853-1923], had said, "The Supreme Court does exactly what I wish it to." Díaz replied, "The bad thing is, not that he said it, but that it's true." If this were true, it was because Díaz was willing.

On one occasion Noriega forced the Supreme Court to issue an order making him immune from appearing to answer charges, "corporally punishable," in an under court. Only Magistrate Alonso Rodríguez Miramón gave a dissenting opinion to "such a monstrous pretension."

"Sad it is to confess," said Magistrate Demetrio Sodi, "the court does not respect its own decision, . . . a loose and capricious versatility that results in the discrediting of all its judgments and the most complete uncertainty among all the litigants."

Wrote Magistrate Rodríguez, "In almost all cases, the only one who

studied them [the sentences]\* was the revising Judge, and all the rest adhered to his opinion . . . so that in fact and positively only one Judge decided. It is . . . habitual for some of the magistrates not even . . . to pay attention to the discussion . . . and when the occasion to vote arrives, without the least notion of the matter in hand, emit the stock phrase 'With the Señor Reviser,' . . . It has happened that forty or fifty cases have been decided in three hours or less, allowing each one scarcely three or four minutes, i.e., they have decided upon the property, the honor, the liberty, the life of man, in the space of time given to any trivial and unimportant incident."

He cites the case of a clearly innocent man thus accidentally condemned to death. . . . "How many judicial iniquities the archive-dust of the Supreme Court covers, not merely in questions of death sentences, but of other grave matters of imprisonment, deportations, etc.!"

The sessions were secret; the public was excluded. And even defense lawyers, save for a few inner Científicos, could not get to the revising magistrate, let alone present their case before the Court! Lawyers and interested people used to hang out at the doors of the Supreme Court all morning in the hope of catching the Reviser or other magistrates, and forcing them to listen to a few hasty words as they strode in or out. José Castillo describes the scene: "Something to see, the entrance of the little house on Juárez Avenue where the Court was installed. . . . Foot in the doorway or on the sidewalk, spying out the arrival or departure of the magistrates, hunting them down almost, were distinguished lawyers. There they had to wait, moderating their impatience, dissimulating their ire; and they could only talk to these gentlemen justices in half words, almost on the run, synthesizing their thought, making their right to plead a sort of personal recommendation for the business, and converting . . . the administration of justice into a favor. Not all . . . would allow themselves to be spoken to; they conceded this favor only to their intimates; and put on such a vinegar face for every one not their friend that the boldest was disheartened; and they [the magistrates]† passed on hurriedly without stopping, scarcely listening to their interlocutors. Others, more affable, conceded attention and amiability, but gave their audiences in the open air of the street door." All this argument was useless if the case was important to Díaz, to Noriega, the Científicos, or a powerful foreign company.

\*Author's editorial interpolation.

†Author's editorial interpolation.

Not once did the Court ever give habeas corpus to a jailed newspaper man; usually even consideration of the plea was pigeon-holed for a long time so that the very attempt to remain within the law merely increased the period of imprisonment. Even newspaper men sentenced in military courts, as was Victoriano Agüeros, were ignored. Inocencio Arriola, editor of *El Tercer Imperio*, was sentenced for material published in a fake issue put out by friends of the sentencing judge; but even this palpable injustice did not faze the Supreme Court.

The same was true of dispossessed landowners. Never did the Supreme Court grant an injunction in their favor. Witness the failure of the villagers affected by the Xico grant to Noriega; those affected by the concession to Noriega of the land and woods of Popocatépetl; the villagers of Santa Ajueda, San José de la Magdalena, San Lucas and San Bruno, whose property was seized by the "El Boleo" mining company. Note the futile attempt of Mexicans to protect themselves against the Colorado River Land Company in which Díaz and Corral were stockholders.

And the minor courts were just as venal. Outside of the capital no juries existed. Said Baerlein [probably Henry Phillippe Bernard, early 20th-century writer]: "In the books on these more exotic countries, it appears to be the custom to devote a chapter to the glories of the pasture-land on which the beef of Britain will be some day grown, another . . . to the . . . railway that will soon return dividend. . . . But there is nothing said about the 'justice' of the country."

By the end of Díaz' rule, the judiciary had become perfected in corruption; they protected every sort of shady deal projected by Porfirio's intimates. In his *Diplomatic Episodes*, Henry Lane Wilson [U.S. ambassador to Mexico, 1909-13] a great admirer of the dictatorship, wrote that the most difficult problem the Embassy had to deal with . . . was "the lame, incompetent, corrupt judiciary." All Mexican courts were "the creatures of the Executive." Only through the exercise of "the utmost vigilance and by pressure upon the President . . ." was it possible to prevent "the grossest injustices" to American citizens.

Enough has already been said to indicate that elections were a farce, always so in Mexico. No régime whether popular or unpopular, has ever reached power without armed force, either before or after the rubber-stamp elections. Occasionally, especially at the beginning of Porfirio's rule, attempts, particularly in local elections, were made to deposit votes for non-official candidates. But such voters were persecuted, arrested or murdered, and their votes falsified. Hence as time went on nobody voted.