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Mexico: What Everyone Needs to Know

Who was Benito Juárez?

Sometimes referred to as “Mexico’s Lincoln,” Benito Juárez was the most important figure in the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century and the political father of Mexican liberalism. Benito Juárez was born in the poor southern state of Oaxaca in 1806. He was able to attend law school in Oaxaca, graduating in 1834, despite the fact that he came from humble Zapotec indigenous origins. He became a practicing lawyer and a local political leader and judge. But Conservative forces dissolved the state legislature while Juárez was serving in it. During the 1840s, the Liberals clashed violently with the Conservatives, the leading opposing political party. Juárez became governor of his home state, as a Liberal Party member, in 1847. Eventually, the Liberals defeated the Conservatives, and Juárez was appointed president of the Supreme Court in 1857, a post which made him next in line for the presidency. Shortly thereafter, the Conservatives staged a coup, and Juárez succeeded to the presidency constitutionally, leading to a civil war from 1858 to 1861 known as the War of the Reform.

During the civil conflict, the Liberals, under Juárez’s leadership, issued radical reform laws that severely attacked the Catholic Church’s economic and social influence, and restricted the Church’s ability to acquire revenues and perpetuate its economic influence through its control over real property. The Liberals again succeeded in defeating the Conservatives by 1861, and in March, Juárez was re-elected

president. When his government suspended payments of its foreign debt, the French used it as an excuse to intervene and establish an empire in collaboration with the Conservatives from 1862 to 1867, imposing Archduke Maximilian on the throne. Juárez led the Liberal forces against the French and Conservatives, ultimately defeating them after years of warfare. Juárez ran for the presidency in 1867, which many of his Liberal colleagues opposed, raising the issue of no reelection. In 1871, he again ran for the presidency, but Congress decided the election, granting him the office. He died in 1872. Strongly criticized during his lifetime for his multiple reelections to the presidency and for his strengthening of presidential power, he nevertheless remained a major symbol of Mexican nationalism for his leadership against the French.

What was the War of the Reform?

In the 1830s, Liberals and Conservatives began an ideological battle for control of Mexico's political future. These ideological conflicts led to constant fighting between the forces supporting both movements. The Liberals favored a decentralized, federalist form of government, restrictions on the social and economic influence of the Catholic Church, and economic support of small landholders. The Conservatives favored a strong, central government dominated by the executive branch, a fundamental role for the Church, indeed an alliance between church and state, and support for large manufacturing firms. The War of the Reform, sometimes referred to as the Three Years War, took place from 1858 to 1861. It resulted from a Conservative reaction to the radical Liberal laws passed during the 1855-57 government of Juan N. Alvarez and Ignacio Comonfort. Historians typically refer to three notable pieces of Liberal legislation named after the cabinet ministers responsible for initiating their respective new laws or *leyes*. The Ley Lerdo directly attacked the

economic basis of the Catholic Church by forcing corporate owners, such as the Church, to sell their huge landholdings. It was passed in the hope of depriving the Church of its wealth and stimulating economic growth by making millions of acres available to the public. Unfortunately, they also applied the law to the collective holdings of indigenous communities, leading to exploitation of the indigenous communities and a loss of tribal property. The Ley Juárez, named after Benito Juárez, eliminated and restricted special legal rights that the military and the Church had retained from the colonial era. Finally, the Ley Iglesias introduced legislation that limited the Church's ability to charge high fees for performing Catholic sacraments, another important source of Church income.

These three laws and other equally radical Liberal legislation were incorporated into the 1857 Constitution. The government secularized cemeteries, removing Church control and an additional source of income. Once again, both sides gathered their forces, each controlling different geographic sections of Mexico, with the Conservatives fighting against the implementation of these laws from 1858 to 1861, and repealing them in those regions they controlled. The Liberals finally achieved political and military supremacy in 1861, defeating the Conservative armies. Juárez became president in March 1861, setting the stage for the French intervention and an alliance between the Conservatives, the Church, and the French.

Why was the Constitution of 1857 so important?

The 1857 Constitution remained in effect from 1857 to 1917, making it the most durable national legal document after that of the current 1917 Constitution. A careful reading of the 1857 Constitution clearly reflects the important political and social principles of nineteenth-century Mexico as interpreted by the Liberal Party (which eventually defeated its Conservative opponents after a series of civil wars). The 1857 constitution

exerted a significant impact on Mexico's political history in the late 1850s and the 1860s, after the Liberals incorporated its most radical legislation directed against the Catholic Church into the actual Constitution. By giving national, symbolic legitimacy to the radical anti-Church beliefs, it provoked Conservatives to resist the Liberals more strongly in the ensuing War of the Reform, 1858–61. Furthermore, in their desperation to defeat the Liberals and restore themselves and the Church and military allies to power, the Conservatives formed an ultimately disastrous alliance with the French and imposed a monarch on Mexico, a decision having important implications for Mexican nationalism and the principle of nonintervention.

The principles established in the Constitution of the United Mexican States influenced the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and the subsequent political issues that characterized the country after the approval of the 1917 Constitution. The most important principles included in the constitution were those that described the rights and structures of a federal system, sharing many similarities with the U.S. Constitution, including freedom of speech, freedom of press, the division of powers into three branches of government, the right to bear arms, and municipal autonomy, as well uniquely Mexican provisions such as the limitation on the Church to own real property and the elimination of special courts and privileges for the military and the Church.

During the administration of Porfirio Díaz, many of these political principles were ignored and abused, but the Constitution was not amended or replaced. At the turn of the century many Mexicans, opposed to the authoritarian behavior of the Díaz regime, wanted to restore in practice the basic Liberal principles found in the Constitution. They established numerous local Liberal clubs that brought together like-minded opponents of the regime. Many of these individuals became active in the revolt against Díaz, and contributed significantly to political leadership during and after

the revolution. The 1917 Constitution reaffirmed many of the basic political principles, restoring the original Liberal political values, while at the same time it incorporated social and economic principles (such as severe restrictions on the Catholic Church) that were far more radical than those found in the 1857 document.