

# Mexico—The Essentials



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## THE STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE

In the small, remote, largely indigenous town of Dolores, Guanajuato, the local priest, Father Miguel Hidalgo, called on residents to begin the odyssey to national independence, political self-rule, and economic self-determination. He raised the banner of *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* as their patron. As his ragtag followers moved across the countryside, others joined, eventually numbering perhaps 20,000 people, including Creoles, mestizos, Indians, and blacks. Spaniards and conservative Mexicans feared that Hidalgo had initiated an uprising of the masses, similar to the slave revolution in Haiti. Controlling such an undisciplined force of men, women, and some children, often traveling with livestock and looted goods, was next to impossible. The hoard got out of hand, sacked Guanajuato, then Valladolid, and killed Spaniards across the colony. The struggle degenerated into pillaging mobs, dilapidated government institutions, and ravaged agriculture and mines after Hidalgo's execution.

Despite the rebellion, liberal Spaniards, eager to preempt colonial separation, proposed a commonwealth to replace the empire. They called for elections for delegates from across unoccupied Spain and all the colonies to a parliament to write a constitution for the Spanish world. Once they gathered, the delegates spelled out the new regime in the Constitution of 1812. The new administrative structure established municipal councils in each community of 1,000 inhabitants or more. This led to the incorporation of Indian towns as municipalities. In this way, the Constitution encouraged civic participation by class and racial groups formerly excluded, even as the rebellion continued.

The commonwealth constitution and Hidalgo's death notwithstanding, the ferocious violence on both sides destroyed expectations that the revolt could end quickly. José María Morelos, a mestizo priest and former student of Hidalgo, picked up the banner of Guadalupe. His effective guerrilla force, composed of Afro-Mexicans and mulattoes from the Pacific coastal areas as well as Indians and mestizo followers, won control of major parts of central Mexico, but not the cities of Veracruz, Puebla, and Mexico City.

In 1813, events in Europe disrupted both the commonwealth and independence movements. British General Arthur Wellington defeated the French at Vitoria,

liberating Spain and earning him the title of Duke of Wellington. Fernando VII returned to the throne and immediately sought to reestablish colonial order. He abolished the Constitution and dispatched 10,000 troops to Mexico between 1813 and 1815. Despite the capture and execution of Morelos in December 1815, the army's heavy-handed use of force only fragmented the insurgents into small groups who nevertheless continued the struggle for independence. Widespread rebellion and banditry, often cloaked in patriotism, destroyed legitimacy and pushed order farther away. Unexpectedly, an 1820 liberal revolt in Spain restored the Constitution of 1812, but both the royal army and the conservative clergy treated the revival of constitutionalism with uncooled hostility.

Colonel Agustín de Iturbide, with clarity unobstructed by principles or loyalties, understood the ambitions and fears of most of his countrymen and conjured a proposal to end the decade-long insurgency. His Plan of Iguala in 1821 declared independence, recognized Catholicism as the official religion, and proclaimed political and social equality. These three guarantees pulled together rebel officers (*caudillos*), local bosses (*caciques*), clerics, and the nabobs of silver mines and export agriculture into a coalition sufficient to end the political violence and take a chance as an independent nation. Shortly, Juan O'Donojú, named by the crown as the new viceroy, arrived from Spain to take charge of the government only to find most of the country under the control of rebel leaders. He met with Iturbide, signed a treaty conceding independence, and returned home. A triumphant Iturbide entered Mexico City to proclaim the achievement of independence on September 27, 1821.

## THE TIME OF TROUBLES

Mexicans for the most part shared the freedom of having almost nothing left to lose. The Plan of Iguala as a proposal for organizing the nation failed. Its only unambiguous commitment was to monarchism. Most inhabitants, especially the rich and powerful, believed that monarchy remained the most stable political structure. A Spanish prince seemed possible and a committee attempted to recruit one, but the Spanish king refused to allow any of the princes to consider the offer. As a backup, the Plan of Iguala stated that if no prince accepted, Mexicans could select their own monarch. In this situation, Iturbide, with the backing of the army, stepped forward to assume the crown as emperor.

Neither Iturbide nor anyone else possessed the prestige to set the course of the new nation as the neat theoretical divisions that marked colonial politics, society, and ethnicity disappeared. Independent elites at times cooperated, but largely competed in a free-for-all to improve opportunities for themselves as they abandoned the self-restraint imposed by colonial officials. As church leaders, military commanders, and land-owning noblemen sought to increase their privileges, they divided generally into Conservatives who favored some form of centralized authority or Liberals who preferred a republic with decentralized powers.

The desire for a monarchy remained strong among both groups, though muted because of disenchantment with Iturbide. Veteran army officers made increasing demands until Emperor Iturbide, to prevent revolution, abdicated the throne on March 19, 1823.

The failure of the empire left the former colony adrift. Revolts broke out that renewed political instability, pervasive violence, and ubiquitous banditry. Although both Liberals and Conservatives distrusted each other, they had greater misgivings about the masses that they agreed must be supervised. Conservatives' reluctance to relinquish the idea of a monarchy stemmed from their conviction that the lower classes needed regulation of crown and church. Liberals blamed the colonial regime, especially the Catholic Church, for the degradation of the lower class, especially indigenous peoples. They insisted that priestly influence over everyday life should end.

Both believed it prudent to invite European immigration as a means of revitalizing a supposedly degraded people and populating the northern frontier to block the expansion of the United States. Liberals hoped to attract northern Europeans, including Protestants, whereas the Conservatives believed that to do so would destroy their Catholic culture. In angry frustration, many Liberals in the provinces reacted by creating quasi-independent states. The disputes continued for nearly a half century and resulted in emperors, dictators, and presidents creating such political confusion that civil wars periodically swept the nation and foreign invaders attempted to grab Mexican territory and wealth.