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Mexico: What Everyone Needs to Know

*What is the Constitution of 1917?*

In order to understand Mexico's development throughout most of the twentieth century and many of its current policies, it is essential to understand the most important articles of the 1917 Constitution. The 1917 Constitution, currently in effect, emerged from the violent confrontations during the revolutionary decade, especially from those events occurring during 1911–16. Mexico held a special constitutional convention, electing representatives from every state. Many of these individuals advocated an ideological posture reflecting the major social, economic, and political goals of the revolution, a posture that was far more radical than the beliefs subscribed to by the 1916–20 government of Venustiano Carranza. The 1917 Constitution became an essential component of the rhetoric of the Mexican Revolution, legitimizing numerous concepts for the Mexican public, who developed a reverence for its basic principles.

It can be argued that one of the principles that emerged from the revolutionary era represented symbolically by this document is constitutionalism. Expressed differently, the fundamental principles contained in the constitution have achieved a legitimacy in the eyes of most Mexicans that exceeds their legal status. The influence of constitutionalism

in the popular culture can be illustrated by the fact that in various cities in Mexico, including the national capital, streets are named after the most important individual articles, not just the word Constitution, a common practice in older American towns and villages. For example, in Tijuana, there is an arch known as Calle Artículo 123, which is located near Revolución and First Street, not far from Constitución. Articles 3, 27, and 130 also are the names of important streets in major cities and state capitals.

If one had to summarize the most important principles found in these four articles, you could refer to the most significant causes of the Mexican Revolution. Article 3, which is devoted to education, requires that government ensure that education at the elementary, secondary, and normal levels is free of religious influence; that elementary education is compulsory and free; and that it promotes the dignity of the individual and equal rights. Article 27 focuses on ownership of land and water, and the need to divide up large landed estates to develop small landholdings. It states that ownership of all natural resources shall belong to the nation, which shall grant concessions to exploit those resources. This article also banned, until the 1992 reforms, the ownership of any real property by religious institutions. Foreigners were not allowed to acquire direct ownership of lands or waters within one hundred kilometers of the borders or fifty kilometers along the shores. Article 123 established labor rights, including a maximum limit of eight hours of work a day, the right of workers to organize, the right to strike, and, most interestingly, the enactment of a social security law. Article 130 detailed numerous restrictions on churches, including no legal standing for religious groups, the freedom of religion, marriage as a civil contract, that ministers be Mexican by birth, that churches obtain government permission to build new places of worship, that ministers may not inherit real property, and that ministers may never publicly or in privately organized groups criticize the laws of the nation or the government.