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Mexico: What Everyone Needs to Know

**THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN POLITICAL
STRUCTURES AFTER 1920**

Why did the assassination of President-elect Álvaro Obregón alter Mexico's political future?

General Álvaro Obregón was president of Mexico from 1920 to 1924 and the first figure to complete a presidential term after the implementation of the 1917 Constitution. His administration was followed by that of Plutarco Elías Calles, another northern revolutionary general, who completed his term between 1924 and 1928. One of the central provisions of the Constitution responding to Porfirio Díaz's blatant abuse in maintaining himself in office for seven consecutive periods was a prohibition, in Article 83, against serving as president more than one time, regardless of being elected or appointed

previously. Obregón, politically ambitious and desirous of becoming president a second time, persuaded his supporters in Congress to amend the Constitution to permit nonconsecutive reelection, allowing him to run for the presidency in 1928. Many army officers, civilians, and students were strongly opposed to his running for reelection, and some were murdered by government forces in 1927. Nevertheless, Obregón won the election; but shortly thereafter, before taking office, he was assassinated by a Catholic fanatic. His unexpected death set in motion a series of crucial political changes.

Because Mexico does not have a vice president, the Constitution provides a process whereby the Congress chooses a temporary president and then holds a new election. Anticipating the new election in 1929, and wanting to create stability in the post-revolutionary leadership, General Calles and other prominent military and civilian politicians established a national political party, the National Party of the Revolution (PNR), and ran a candidate for the presidency. Calles himself hoped to use the party to further his own ambitions, but he was unable to extend his influence beyond June 1935. This was when his former protégé, General Lázaro Cárdenas, who had won the 1934 election as the PNR's second presidential candidate, exiled his mentor to the United States. The PNR (later PRI) became the essential political vehicle for legitimizing presidential and government nominees for political office, winning every gubernatorial race until 1989, most senate and district congressional seats until the 1990s, and all presidential races until 2000. Popular opinion, strongly against presidential reelection, forced the Calles faction to reamend the Constitution in 1928 to reaffirm no-reelection. This has become inviolable in theory and in practice since 1929. Obregón's death set in motion two established principles of Mexican politics for most of the twentieth century. First, presidents could become powerful, personalist decision-makers, but only for the length of their

terms. Second, self-perpetuating personal leaders like Díaz were replaced by a perpetual political organization (later named the PRI) allowing a rotating pool of ambitious politicians to govern Mexico for seven decades.

What was the influence of Plutarco Elías Calles on the formation of a modern Mexican state?

Plutarco Elías Calles formed part of a generation of self-made revolutionaries, who were born in the 1870s and supported the Constitutionalist Army during the revolution. From Sonora, he became involved during the initial phase of the revolution in support of Madero. Calles reached the rank of brigadier general by 1914, having joined the Constitutionlists in February 1913. He then served as the military commander and provisional governor of his home state from 1915 to 1917, and then as the constitutional governor, from 1917 to 1919. He did not become a senior general during the revolution, only reaching the rank of division general in 1920. He served as a cabinet member five times and twice as secretary of War, defeating antigovernment forces during an army rebellion in 1929. The political disciple of Álvaro Obregón, Calles ran for the presidency in 1923–24, becoming president in 1924 and serving a full term.

Calles made three notable contributions to the modern Mexican state, two while in the presidency and the third after leaving office. Historians correctly attribute many of the basic public financial institutions to the Calles presidency. Calles surrounded himself with capable individuals, including treasury secretary Alberto J. Pani and Manuel Gómez Morín, later the co-founder of the National Action Party. Gómez Morín was instrumental in devising important financial legislation, including that which established the Bank of Mexico, Mexico's equivalent of the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank. The creation of the bank and other credit institutions helped stabilize the economy and encourage economic growth.