

# Mexico—The Essentials



WILLIAM H. BEEZLEY

*and*

COLIN M. MACLACHLAN

New York    Oxford  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Alemán initiated a renovation of Mexico City. He lavished attention on the National University (La Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México—UNAM). A building spree created a new university city, with its campus dotted with grandiose structures resembling those constructed by the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. He supported construction of middle-class homes and working-class condominiums in the capital. Beyond the city, his desire for international tourism and a beach getaway resulted in the conversion of Acapulco from a sleepy fishing village to the nation's first world-class oceanside resort.

Major construction projects offered opportunities for kickbacks, overcharging for real estate, and use of substandard building materials. Alemán's opponents accused him and his associates of corruption. Certainly it occurred, but to what extent and how high in the government remains lost in political accusations, opposition rumors, and personal vindictiveness. Real estate speculation, influence peddling, skimming federal funds from a variety of sources including PEMEX, and collecting bribes were reported to be customary.

To the public, some individuals personified corruption. Maximino Avila Camacho, older brother of the president, and Jorge Pasquel, rumored to be Alemán's hit man, both achieved notoriety for their lavish spending, extravagant lifestyles, and association with Hollywood starlets. Maximino, who had dominated Puebla state politics, dressed as a cowboy with six shooters, used his private plane to bring guests from Hollywood and New York for outrageous parties until his death from a heart attack. His life provided the story for Angeles Mastretta's novel *Arráncame la vida* and subsequent successful movie. Pasquel, from Veracruz like the president, parlayed his family shipping profits into such a substantial fortune that he paid cash for his favorite Cadillac convertibles (he had six) and three large airplanes. He financed a Mexican baseball major league that, before it failed, had repercussions in the US big leagues. At the time of his death, he was finishing a house described as fit for King Farouk of Egypt. One commentator observed, the "old style general with pistols, his tequila and his whores was less costly to Mexico than the 'new administrator type' with his flowered shirts, his imported whiskey and his water skis."

The PRI used patronage to sustain popular support for the regime between elections and engineer at least the appearance of public excitement for official candidates. The PRI officials in close contact with the local people took credit for pulling the necessary strings to get useful government projects, clinics, and schools. In effect, they posed as representatives of the people able to obtain individual and community benefits. Government control, not ownership, of the press and later television, made it possible to report enthusiastic crowds, giving the impression that the entire country supported the party's candidates.

Opposition to the official party existed. The *Partido de Accion Nacional* (PAN) and an assortment of special-interest parties ran candidates, fully understanding that they had no chance of presidential victory, but that some opportunities existed for congressional and state offices. In addition, prominent opponents received diplomatic passports, appointments to public commissions,

## THE MIRACLE OF THE RISING MIDDLE CLASS

Miguel Alemán took office in December 1946 as the first postwar president and first of the renamed official Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). He represented above all a new generation as he and his appointees were the sons of revolutionaries. Young and civilian, these elite were bound by a shared university experience. Alemán was the first graduate of the national law school to become president and brought many of his classmates into his administration. Of the 107 presidential appointees, 88 had university degrees, 45 had attended the university at the same time as the president, and 13 had been in the same law school class. With his appointments, the president drastically altered the nature of political camarillas or networks from regional ones based on powerful state families to a national camarilla with a ladder of advancement tied to prominent government officials in Mexico City. It marked the beginning of a mandarin class of political bureaucrats disconnected from regional concerns.

secret subsidies, and other benefits. As government entrepreneurialism emerged, union leaders were expected to cooperate in return for increased wages and benefits. Government regulations discouraged smaller enterprises from establishing an economic foothold, pushing them into the illegal economy or to remaining small enough that they posed no competition. Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa described the regime as the “perfect dictatorship”—and it was for a time.

Despite the party's success, political problems emerged. Workers on the government-owned railroad went on strike in 1958. The union leader, Daniel Vallejo, demanded pay increases, democratic union elections, and worker participation in management. Other unions including oil workers joined the strike and radical students supported them. Faced with a possible general strike in 1959, the president ordered the army to intervene. The strike ended with arrests and included putting Vallejo in prison without the prospect of a trial.

Challenges appeared in the countryside. Rubén Jaramillo, self-proclaimed heir to Zapata, rebelled in Guerrero. Federal troops eventually captured him and his family and shot them to death. In the north, peasants seized land in five states, and again federal troops responded with ruthless evictions and ghastly executions in early 1963. The administration offered small plots in tropical Quintana Roo that did not attract those used to semi-arid conditions. In the end, President Adolfo López Mateos (1958–1964) renewed land distribution and subsidized food sales in both the countryside and cities.

Despite the economic miracle, things got worse. President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964–1970) used troops against striking doctors and nurses as a warning not to challenge the government. Disaster still overtook the government, the PRI, and the nation. Mexico won the right to host the Olympic Games in 1968—a first for Latin America.

Worldwide student unrest spread to Mexico. Many first-generation university students challenged the PRI's efforts to alleviate poverty and ignorance. When federal authorities called the police to the UNAM campus to repress students, it launched major demonstrations. University students, organizing a strike action group, called for worker and public support, eventually holding protests of 500,000 people. President Díaz Ordaz refused to negotiate. On October 2, 1968, as 10,000 students protested in the Plaza of Three Cultures in Tlatelolco, he ordered the police and army to attack with gunfire. Some 350 dead, 2,000 wounded, and thousands jailed, beaten, and tortured ended the demonstrations for a time. The Olympics went on, but the government and the PRI had been damaged.

The Tlatelolco Massacre prompted intellectuals to abandon the PRI; students took refuge in the counterculture; and the loyal opposition party, the PAN, began to contemplate serious national challenges. It sparked a reform effort to make the PRI more acceptable to the younger generation. Carlos A. Madrazo made recommendations that called for open primaries, retiring the most outrageous PRI ministers, and reducing the voting age. Before anything could happen, he died in a suspicious plane crash in 1969.