

58. Plutarco Elías Calles: The Legal Challenges of the Postrevolutionary State (1928)*

With a new constitution and a growing set of government offices, the Mexican government expanded to accomplish the work of putting into effect the goals of the Revolution. The government, as a series of institutions, was tenuously held together by a group of politicians who had emerged from the military phase of revolution. The fragility of this coalition was revealed when President Álvaro Obregón was shot by a Catholic zealot in 1928, and the question of presidential succession fell into question. Plutarco Elías Calles, the incumbent president, made a speech before Congress on September 1, 1928, urging his fellow revolutionaries to consider how to proceed. The speech lays out some of the challenges that Mexicans faced at the moment. What are those challenges, and how might we understand them as integral to the transition away from earlier forms of governance in Mexico? In what ways was Calles limited by other political movements of the era—for example, Maderismo, as expressed in the Plan de San Luis Potosí or the military (Source 52)? How might we consider this speech an early step toward the creation of the National Revolutionary Party (Partido Nacional Revolucionario, PNR), a precursor to the Party of the Institutionalized Revolution (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI) in 1946?

Mexico Must Become a Nation of Institutions and Laws

The death of the president-elect is an irreparable loss which has left the country in an extremely difficult situation. There is no shortage of capable men: indeed, we are fortunate to have many capable individuals. But there is no person of indisputable prestige, who has a base of public support and such personal and political strength that his name alone merits general confidence.

The general's death brings a most grave and vital problem to public attention, for the issue is not merely political, but one of our very survival.

We must recognize that General Obregón's death exacerbates existing political and administrative problems. These arise in large measure from our political and social struggle: that is, they arise from the definitive triumph of the guiding principles of the Revolution, social principles like those expressed in articles 27 and 123 [of the Constitution], which must never be taken away from the people. At the start of the previous administration, we embarked on what may be called the political or governmental phase of the Mexican Revolution, searching with ever increasing urgency for ways to satisfy political and social concerns and to find means of governing appropriate to this new phase.

All of these considerations define the magnitude of the problem. Yet the very circumstances that Mexico now confronts—namely, that for perhaps the first time in our history there are no *caudillos* [regional or military leaders]—give us the opportunity to direct the country's politics toward a true institutional life. We shall move, once and for all, from being a "country ruled by one man" to a "nation of institutions and laws."

The unique solemnity of this moment deserves the most disinterested and patriotic reflection. It obliges me to delve not only into the circumstances of this moment, but also to review the characteristics of our political life up until now. It is our duty to fully understand and appreciate the facts which can ensure the country's immediate and future peace, promote its prestige and development, and safeguard the revolutionary conquests that hundreds of thousands of Mexicans have sealed with their blood.

I consider it absolutely essential that I digress from my brief analysis to make a firm and irrevocable declaration, which I pledge upon my honor before the National Congress, before the country, and before all civilized peoples. But first, I must say that perhaps never before have circumstances placed a chief executive in a more propitious situation for returning the country to one-man rule. I have received many suggestions, offers, and even some pressures—all of them cloaked in considerations of patriotism and the national welfare—trying to get me to remain in office. For reasons of morality and personal political creed, and because it is absolutely essential that we change from a "government of caudillos" to a "regime of institutions," I have decided to declare solemnly and with such clarity that my words cannot lend themselves to suspicions or interpretations, that not only will I not seek the prolongation of my mandate by accepting an extension or designation as provisional president, but I will

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never again on any occasion aspire to the presidency of my country. At the risk of making this declaration needlessly emphatic, I will add that this is not merely an aspiration or desire on my own part, but a positive and immutable fact: never again will an incumbent president of the Mexican Republic return to occupy the presidency. Of course, I have absolutely no intention of abandoning my duties as citizen, nor do I intend to retire from the life of struggle and responsibility that is the lot of every soldier and of all men born of the Revolution. . . .

Historical judgment, like all a posteriori judgments, is often and necessarily harsh and unjust, for it overlooks the pressing circumstances that determine attitudes and deeds. I do not intend to review the history of Mexico merely to cast blame on the men who became caudillos owing to the frustrations of our national life. Those frustrations—the inert condition of the rural masses, who have now been awakened by the Revolution; the sad, nearly atavistic passivity of citizens of the middle and lower classes, who fortunately have also been awakened—inspired those caudillos to identify themselves . . . with the fatherland itself. They styled themselves “necessary and singular” men.

I need remind no one of how the caudillos obstructed—perhaps not always deliberately, but always in a logical and natural way—the formation of strong alternative means by which the country might have confronted its internal and external crises. Nor need I remind you how the caudillos obstructed or delayed the peaceful evolution of Mexico into an institutional country, one in which men are what they should be: mere accidents, of no real importance beside the perpetual and august serenity of institutional laws. . . .

I would never suggest such a path if I feared, even remotely, that it could cause us to take a single step backward from the conquests and fundamental principles of the Revolution. . . . [I suggest this path] out of the conviction that effective freedom of suffrage must be extended even to groups representing the reaction, including the clerical reaction. This should not alarm true revolutionaries, for we have faith that the new ideas have affected the conscience of nearly all Mexicans, and that the interests created by the Revolution are now much stronger than those represented by the reaction, even if it were to be victorious. The districts where the political or clerical reaction wins the vote will, for many years at least, be outnumbered by those where the progressive social revolutionaries triumph.

Not only will the presence of conservative groups not endanger the new ideas or the legitimate revolutionary institutions; their presence will also prevent revolutionary groups from weakening and destroying themselves through internal squabbling, which is what happens when one finds oneself without an ideological enemy. . . .

We revolutionaries are now sufficiently strong—having achieved a solid basis in law, in the public consciousness and in the interests of the vast majority of people—that we need not fear the reaction. We invite that reaction to take up the struggle in the field of ideas, for in the field of armed combat—which is the easier of the two forms of struggle—we have triumphed completely, as those groups representing liberal ideas of social progress have always done. . . .

I would not be behaving honorably if I did not point out the many dangers that could result from dissension within the revolutionary family. If such dissension should occur, it would be nothing new in the history of Mexico, which has at times abounded in shady, backroom political dealings that brought to power ambitious, unprincipled men who weakened and delayed the final triumph of progress and liberalism in Mexico, surrendering themselves, whether consciously or not, to our eternal enemies.

I have spoken of our political adversaries with special tolerance and respect, even going so far as to declare the urgency of accepting the representatives of every shade of the reaction into the Chamber of Congress if they win in perfectly honorable democratic struggles. Having said this, I should be permitted to insist that, if one day ambition, intrigue, or arrogance should fracture the revolutionary group that for so many years was united in the struggle for a noble cause—that of the betterment of the great majority of the country—then the conservatives will once again seize the opportunity to insinuate themselves. If this happens, it is almost certain that the reaction will not need to secure a direct military or political triumph. History and human nature permit us to foresee that there will be no shortage of disaffected revolutionaries who, upon failing to find sufficient support from the disunited revolutionary factions, would call insistently at the doors of our old enemies. This would not only endanger the conquests of the Revolution, but it would surely provoke a new armed social conflict that would be more terrible even than those the country has already suffered; and when the revolutionary movement triumphed, as it must triumph, after years of cruel struggle, Mexico would be bled dry and would lack the strength to resume the march forward from the point where it was interrupted by our ambitions and dishonor.

Finally, in my triple capacity as revolutionary, division general, and chief of the armed forces, I will address myself to the army. . . . We have an opportunity that is perhaps unique in our history. In the period that follows the interim presidency, all men who aspire to the presidency of the country, be they military men or civilians, will contend on the fields of honorable democracy. As I have so frankly pointed out, there will be many dangers for Mexico—dangers that imperil the revolution and the fatherland itself. Anyone who, during those anxious moments, abandons the line of duty and [tries] to seize power by any means other than those outlined in the Constitution, will be guilty of the most unforgivable criminal and unpatriotic conduct.

All members of the national army must be conscious of their decisive role in those moments. They must embrace the true and noble calling of their military career: to give honor and fidelity to the legitimate institutions. Thus inspired by the duties imposed upon them by their mission, they must reject and condemn all whispers and perverse insinuations from ambitious politicians who would seek to sway them. They must choose between doing their duty, and thereby winning the gratitude of the Republic and the respect of the outside world, and betraying the Revolution and the fatherland at one of the most solemn moments in its history. The latter course of conduct could never be condoned by society or history.