

Introduction

Mexico's Search for Peace and Postrevolutionary Political Institutions

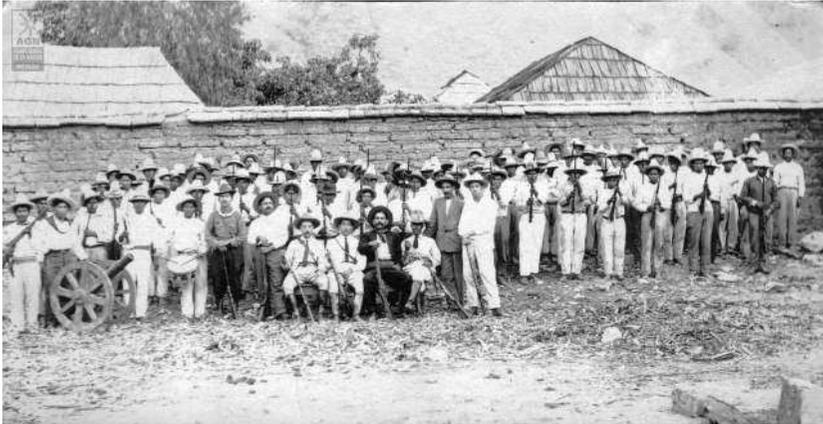
A good government depends on the wellbeing of the people, and for the government to do right, it unquestionably needs the support of the governed.

Letter from a constituent to Governor Felipe Carrillo Puerto
of Yucatán, 1922

In the first weeks of 1924, in a region that many said had been left out of the Mexican Revolution of 1910–20, a small army was formed by Socialists in the state of Chiapas, in far southeastern Mexico. Most of its members were likely coffee workers and poor farmers. These men did not take up arms against an oppressive, elite-led federal government as so many Mexicans had done during the Revolution. Instead, they organized and armed themselves to defend the federal government and local political institutions that they had helped to build. When Mexico's first postrevolutionary government came under attack during the de la Huerta rebellion of 1923–24, southeastern Socialists rose up in the government's defense and in defense of their rights that they believed it could best guarantee.

One of their brigades was named for Felipe Carrillo Puerto, the Socialist governor of the nearby state of Yucatán who had been executed by rebel forces a few weeks earlier (see Photograph 1.1). As workers and *campesinos* across the Southeast took up arms to combat the rebels and to avenge Carrillo Puerto's murder, former Secretary of the Interior and presidential candidate Plutarco Elías Calles recognized their organized resistance as emblematic of a sea change in Mexico.¹ In a private letter to his brother, he described the popular outcry in Yucatán, and marveled, "All of the worker and agrarian organizations have raised the alert to now like never before punish the reactionaries, and to demonstrate that the working people of Mexico are not the herd of

1 For a discussion of the particular Mexican postrevolutionary meanings of "campesino," see Christopher R. Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos: Politics, Identity, and Agrarian Struggle in Postrevolutionary Michoacán, 1920–1935* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1–12.



Photograph 1.1 The Felipe Carrillo Puerto Brigade, Chiapas, 1924
 Source: Archivo General de la Nación, Colección Carlos A. Vidal. Sección: Actividades militares, políticas y administrativas, serie: fotografías sobre eventos públicos y sociales y obras públicas en Chiapas, caja 3, sobre: 14, foto: 2.

sheep that they were twelve years ago.”² It was a lesson that Calles would not forget. Five years later he laid the foundations for Mexico’s single party-dominated political system when he founded the party that would eventually become the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Its design was conspicuously influenced by precedents of party-driven politics that he observed in the Southeast, where Socialists took power in the states of Campeche, Chiapas, Tabasco, and Yucatán between 1920 and 1925. In the years that followed, Calles’ party was adapted to usher in the era of mass politics in Mexico, again following southeastern examples.

This book is a new genealogy of the modern Mexican political system that looks to the Socialist Southeast to explain its origins. Its chief purpose is to examine how and why short-lived political experiments conducted in a far-flung region that the Mexican Revolution nearly bypassed became so important to the development of Mexico’s postrevolutionary political institutions and traditions. This is the story of Mexico’s remarkable, decade-long transition from civil war to a lasting postrevolutionary peace, and of some of the people, ideas, and movements that made it possible. It is also the story of the very high political and human costs that process entailed.³

2 Fideicomiso Archivos Plutarco Elías Calles, Fondo Plutarco Elías Calles (hereafter FAPECFT-PEC), expediente: 53: ELIAS, Arturo M. (1919–1926), legajo: 9/22, foja: 362, inventario: 1717. Calles to Arturo M. Calles, January 5, 1924.

3 By “peace” I refer to postrevolutionary pacification, rather than to an end to all political violence; this was certainly not achieved, and in many cases in the decades that followed it was state-

Revolutionary Promises and Postrevolutionary Dilemmas

The Mexican Revolution was a prolonged struggle fought by numerous heterogeneous factions, each with its own vision of the kind of country Mexico could and should become. As revolutionary armies clashed throughout the 1910s, their leaders also fought a war of words, ideas, and egos. In the process, they mobilized workers and campesinos across Mexico, often recruiting them as soldiers and partisans with ambitious promises of labor reform, land redistribution, political freedom, and a more just social order once the war was over. But when the Revolution ended in 1920, few if any revolutionaries had clearly articulated plans for how they would fulfill all of those revolutionary promises or, just as critically, how they would maintain long-term alliances with the popular constituencies they had exhorted to action.

Most politicians of the 1920s recognized that workers and campesinos could no longer be ignored or excluded wholesale from the political sphere, but translating the Revolution's ambitious ideals into a workable system of governance was a daunting challenge by any measure. From the beginning, there was a broad range of opinions on how and to what degree commitments to reform and redistribution of resources should be implemented by government, or for how long. Well into the twentieth century, federal reform efforts were also endlessly complicated by the resiliency of entrenched local elites and power brokers, and the durability of existing political traditions and power structures, both formal and informal. With no established traditions of electoral democracy or mass politics, but with its popular legitimacy rooted in strong rhetorical and constitutional commitments to both, the 1920s was a time of both trial and transition for the infant postrevolutionary political system. Mexico was wracked by violence and political upheaval in those years, which included the executions and exiles of numerous revolutionary heroes and political innovators. On several occasions the country nearly descended into civil war again.

The National Revolutionary Party (PNR) was meant to solve all of these ongoing dilemmas. Its creation was announced by its founder, president Plutarco Elías Calles, when he declared in 1928 that "we must see to it, once and for all, that Mexico passes from the historical condition of being a 'country ruled by one man' to that of 'a nation of institutions and laws.'"⁴ After a decade of violence and political turmoil, this was a frank acknowledgment that Mexico had to abandon some of its old political habits and to embrace new ones in order to move forward and to secure a lasting peace. Calles' proposed solution was the building of a singular,

sponsored. However, large-scale armed rebellions against the federal government were principally confined to the 1920s.

4 Plutarco Elías Calles, *Pensamiento político y social: antología (1913–1936)*, ed. Carlos Macías (México, D.F.: Fideicomiso Archivos Plutarco Elías Calles y Fernando Torreblanca, 1994; repr., 1), 240–51.

uniquely powerful political party that united the majority of the political class under one institutional roof. It was to be based in Mexico City, but, crucially, it would also have a strong presence at the local level across Mexico, via a network of affiliated organizations. Through a hierarchy of alliances, citizens at the grassroots level could become connected to the political agendas of leaders at the highest echelons of power, even if their only direct contact with the political class was via the local branch office or an individual representative of the national organization.

For all of its amply documented flaws and failures, the party that eventually became the PRI has proven to be one of the most successful and powerful political parties that emerged during the twentieth century. The era of the PRI put an end to what one Mexican journalist in the mid-1920s despairingly described as a century of “imprisoning, exiling and murdering presidents,” and ushered in an era of unprecedented institutional stability and continuity.⁵ From 1929 to 2000, three successive versions of the “revolutionary” party dominated politics at all levels, only relinquishing the presidential palace after seven decades. Although it was restructured, its name changed three times, and its political direction changed many more times than that, several essential features of the party remained constant.⁶ It continued to participate in elections and to run elaborate campaigns, even when the competition was negligible. It continued to actively court popular support, although its ability to win it waned over time. For decades, it largely succeeded in quarantining intra-elite political conflict within the party, preventing the kind of schisms and power struggles that had consistently provoked violence and upheaval in previous periods. To this day it continues to insist, in its very name as well as in its rhetoric, that its political legitimacy is derived from its self-ascribed status as the sole institutional heir of the Mexican Revolution.

Lastly, the government controlled by the parties of the Revolution generally preferred collaboration or cooptation of popular movements to rule by overt force. The breaking of this unwritten compact with the Mexican electorate was politically calamitous, as the PRI's popular legitimacy was gravely compromised and its landmark 2000 electoral defeat was hastened by the accumulated instances in which it violently repressed opposition groups and dissidents. The massacre of hundreds of peaceful protesters at the Plaza de Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco in 1968 is the most

5 Alonso Capetillo, *La rebelión sin cabeza: génesis y desarrollo del movimiento delabuerista* (México, D.F.: Imprenta Botas, 1925), 12. “Un siglo hemos pasado encarcelando, desterrando y matando Presidentes!”

6 The National Revolutionary Party (PNR) was founded in 1929. It was reorganized and its name was changed to the Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM) in 1938. It became the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in 1946. In referring to these parties collectively, I do not mean to minimize the differences between them, but to emphasize that each served as the institutional foundation for its successor, and to express the continuities of the political system that they dominated.

notorious example of many. It was not a violently repressive system by design; indeed, quelling recurrent, destabilizing political violence was one of the party's foundational objectives. Practice was another matter from the outset, for reasons explored in this book. State-sponsored violence over the course of its long incumbency is inescapably one of the PRI's defining legacies.

This was not a democratic system, but nor was it straightforwardly authoritarian.⁷ It was a system that depended on popular support, in spite of never making a serious commitment to electoral democracy. Under PRI governance, Mexican citizens could not count on ballots they cast being freely or fairly counted, but nor did they endure a brutal military dictatorship like those that took hold in much of Latin America during the mid-late twentieth century, nor the scale of state-led violence that resulted in so many countries. Although at times it was very dangerous to be an outspoken dissident, it was a system that did not include the extreme, ongoing purges of the political class perpetrated in other contemporaneous postrevolutionary contexts (comparisons with China, Russia, and Cuba are particularly revealing). As Friedrich Katz underscored, the importance of this difference cannot be overstated.⁸ Mexico under the PRI did not have a strong record when it came to the protection of human rights or basic political and civil liberties, but real opportunities for political participation and even contestation did exist, albeit circumscribed.

I do not mean to overstate the strength and efficacy of the party, nor to suggest the perfection of the Mexican political system as it stood by 1929, or as it functioned in practice in the years that followed. On the contrary, one of my goals in writing this book is to provide a better historical understanding of the party's inarguable successes in spite of its notable

- 7 Mario Vargas Llosa famously described the PRI as "the perfect dictatorship." Recent scholarship across disciplines has reevaluated this assessment from a variety of angles, particularly in terms of how much political control the PRI ever really had. See, in particular, Paul Gillingham and Benjamin T. Smith, eds., *Dictablanda: Politics, Work, and Culture in Mexico, 1938–1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). See also Kenneth F. Greene, *Why Dominant Parties Lose: Mexico's Democratization in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2007), Beatriz Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- 8 Friedrich Katz, "Violence and Terror in the Mexican and Russian Revolutions," in *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence during Latin America's Long Cold War*, ed. Greg Grandin and Gilbert M. Joseph (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). Luis Medina Peña stresses that another essential difference between these cases was that Mexican revolutionaries did not have a preexisting political party to manage postrevolutionary political reconstruction, which Russian and Chinese revolutionaries did. Luis Medina Peña, *Hacia el nuevo estado: México, 1920–1994*, 2nd edn. (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1995; repr., 6), 50. See also Garrido's comparison of the PRI and the communist parties of Russia and China: Luis Javier Garrido, *El Partido de la Revolución Institucionalizada: la formación del nuevo estado en México, 1928–1945* (México, D.F.: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1982), 13.

defects and weaknesses.⁹ Scholars in many disciplines have examined how and why the Mexican single party-dominated system was so durable once it was already in place, even in the face of substantial and nearly constant contestation, but relatively little attention has been paid by historians to how or why this system took root in the first place.

However specious the notion of an “institutional revolution,” and despite the fact that over time the PRI lost all popular legitimacy as the representative of Mexico’s revolutionary heroes and the champion of their ideals, the party’s core traits may all be traced directly back to the search for peace and stability by politicians in the years immediately following the Mexican Revolution. While groundbreaking in its implementation, the idea of a single party-dominated system was not a new one. As they designed the PNR, Calles and his collaborators looked to recent precedents of party formation, political organizing, and multi-class alliance building in Mexico. The Southeast provided a number of especially useful and relevant examples.¹⁰ During the 1920s, the states of the region collectively constituted a testing ground for new political traditions and institutional structures, for the practical limits of radicalism and reformism, and for a total redefinition of the working relationship between Mexican citizens and their government, one that was critically mediated by a new style of political party. In recognition of the importance of these experiments, President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40) once famously described Socialist Tabasco as Mexico’s “laboratory of revolution.”¹¹

- 9 As Benjamin T. Smith has underscored, state hegemony and federal control on the one hand and decentralization and regional independence on the other should not be understood to be mutually exclusive in Mexico in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Benjamin T. Smith, *Pistoleros and Popular Movements: The Politics of State Formation in Postrevolutionary Oaxaca* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 43.
- 10 The geographical delimitation of this book to the states of Campeche, Chiapas, Tabasco, and Yucatán conforms to the contemporary conception of the Southeast as a region. When politicians of the era referred to the Southeast, these were the four states they almost invariably included in that designation. The exclusion of neighboring Veracruz, particularly considering its history of radical politics in the same period, might seem arbitrary to readers today, but the line that was consistently drawn around what was considered to be the Southeast is an interesting historical fact in and of itself. I have chosen to respect that line in my analysis in order to illuminate what it was that people at the time understood to be special and unique about the political experiments undertaken there, and to address the particular political significance of the Southeast in those years. On radicalism in Veracruz in this period, see Heather Fowler-Salamini, *Agrarian Radicalism in Veracruz, 1920–38* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1978).
- 11 Carlos R. Martínez Assad, *El laboratorio de la revolución: el Tabasco garridista*, 5th edn. (México, D.F.: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2004), 14. Thomas Benjamin ascribes the first use of the term “laboratory” to describe Mexico’s regional political experiments to Carleton Beals, in 1923. Thomas Benjamin, “Laboratories of the New State, 1920–1929: Regional Social Reform and Experiments in Mass Politics,” in *Provinces of the Revolution: Essays on Regional Mexican History, 1910–1929* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1990), 73.

The Southeastern Revolution

At the turn of the century, the Southeast was not a region that seemed likely to produce a highly influential school of revolutionary reform. In those years it was a region legendary for the wealth it produced, and notorious for the de-facto enslavement, systematic oppression, and political marginalization of its large indigenous population. The Southeast was far removed from Mexico City as the crow flew, but also crippled in many parts by a lack of transportation infrastructure across an often difficult terrain that was divided by rivers, canyons, and mountain ranges in some places, and by wetlands and bodies of water in others; in the early twentieth century, travel both to and within the region was often difficult and sometimes outright impossible. It was also a part of Mexico with



Map 1 The Mexican Southeast

a deeply entrenched tradition of local sovereignty, which many elites and some non-elites were prepared to defend vigorously. All of these factors together meant that for several years, while revolutionary armies clashed across the North and center of Mexico, the Southeast remained relatively peaceful. It was not until the mid-1910s that the region became a theater of the Revolution. Drawn by the economic potential of its primary exports and desperately in need of political territory to which he could credibly stake a claim, Venustiano Carranza, the so-called First Chief of the Constitutionalist revolutionary faction, dispatched troops and a series of military governors to the region beginning in 1914.

The following year, General Salvador Alvarado was recruited to lead the effort as Carranza's proconsul for the state of Yucatán. Alvarado embarked on an ambitious program of social, political, and economic reform, and founded the region's first Socialist political party. He started a regional political movement in the process, as local politicians and organizers picked up where he left off after his departure from the Southeast in 1918. Governors Felipe Carrillo Puerto in Yucatán (1922–24), Ramón Félix Flores in Campeche (1921–23), Carlos A. Vidal in Chiapas (1925–27), and Tomás Garrido Canabal in Tabasco (1921–24 and 1931–34) each substantially adapted Alvarado's programs and strategies to fit their own political objectives and to address the political, social, and economic particularities of their states. Although they were markedly different in some respects, their Socialist governments commonly pursued substantial land and labor reform and the increased enfranchisement of women and indigenous peoples. While they all called for state-led economic reform and redistribution of resources, none argued for the overthrow of capitalism. They collaborated with one another to varying degrees, and all cultivated similar alliances with national politicians, parties, and organizations. Most importantly, the southeastern Socialist leaders all used similar organizational frameworks to put together cohesive and powerful political organizations and popular coalitions in their respective states. These parties used their combined elite power and grassroots support to conduct some of the most progressive and far-reaching programs of reform in postrevolutionary Mexico.

Political parties already existed in Mexico by the 1920s, but the southeastern political laboratories produced something new. Built in response to the social, political, and economic realities of the region, they crafted innovative solutions to many of the greatest political challenges of the immediate postrevolutionary period in the nation as a whole. For the first time, Mexico had relatively depersonalized organizations that endured across multiple electoral cycles and ran multiple candidates, and established constituent bases well beyond elite political circles. Above all, the southeastern Socialist parties constituted vital, institutionalized, two-way

conduits of influence, support, and communication between politicians and their constituents, all the way down to the grassroots.¹²

This was a highly idiosyncratic brand of Socialism, an extremely diverse and ill-defined political label to begin with, even just within Mexico.¹³ Southeastern Socialism was adamantly nationalist, but its leaders nevertheless selectively borrowed from and referenced political movements in other countries, from US progressivism to anarchosyndicalism to Marxism, among other influences.¹⁴ The southeastern Socialists repeatedly stated their desire to belong to a political wave of the future that they perceived to be sweeping the world, but insisted that radical change and reform must only be implemented by Mexicans, and on Mexican terms.¹⁵

It was a school of politics that was adamantly participatory, but never fully democratic. When the southeastern Socialists frequently spoke of democracy, they referred to their core principle of enfranchisement of a broad spectrum of citizens through their active participation in a corporatist, hierarchical political system that was for all intents and purposes dominated by a single political party led by elite and middle class politicians. While elections remained a key feature of the practice of politics in the Socialist Southeast, it was not a system that lent itself to multi-party competition or electoral democracy.¹⁶ Even as the Socialists actively sought to depersonalize the Mexican political system and to politically mobilize groups that had long

12 Machine politics were nothing new in Mexico (or the Southeast), but parties with genuine popular constituencies were. On the politics of Porfirian and early revolutionary Yucatán, see Allen Wells and Gilbert M. Joseph, *Summer of Discontent, Seasons of Upheaval: Elite Politics and Rural Insurgency in Yucatán, 1876–1915* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

13 On the origins of Mexican Socialism, see Barry Carr, *Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 14–46. See also Heather Fowler-Salamini, “De-Centering the 1920s: Socialismo a la Tamaulipeca,” *Mexican Studies / Estudios Mexicanos* 14, no. 2 (1998): 292–95. On southeastern Socialism in the 1920s, see Gilbert M. Joseph, *Revolution from Without: Yucatán, Mexico, and the United States, 1880–1924* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1988); Daniela Spenser, *El partido socialista chiapaneco: rescate y reconstrucción de su historia* (México, D.F.: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, 1988); Martínez Assad, *El laboratorio de la revolución*; Paul K. Eiss, *In the Name of el Pueblo: Place, Community, and the Politics of History in Yucatán* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

14 On Mexican communism, see Carr, *Marxism and Communism*; Daniela Spenser, *Stumbling Its Way Through Mexico: The Early Years of the Communist International* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2011). Fowler-Salamini has documented the influence of the Mexican Communist Party on agrarian radicalism in the state of Veracruz in the 1920s. Its influence was far less decisive in the Southeast. See Fowler-Salamini, *Agrarian Radicalism*, 29–33.

15 Spenser argues that Mexican radicals in the 1920s admired and sought to learn from the Bolsheviks, rather than to emulate the Russian example. Daniela Spenser, *The Impossible Triangle: Mexico, Soviet Russia, and the United States in the 1920s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 63.

16 On the lack of a democratic tradition in postrevolutionary Mexico, see Katz, “Violence and Terror,” 51.

been excluded from the political process, in practice their model perpetuated the concentration of power in the hands of a relatively small number of people. The important difference was that those people were now at least theoretically held accountable to represent the needs and wishes of a much broader spectrum of much more politically engaged constituents.

The reformers of the Southeast had peers in many other parts of Mexico that pursued similar political projects and reformist goals, sometimes via similar institutional apparatuses. By the late 1920s there were Socialist parties across all of Mexico. Some were more similar to the southeastern Socialist parties than others. The nearby state of Veracruz was home to one of the more radical and well-known agrarian reform movements in the 1920s that had many similarities to its Socialist peers to the east. Elsewhere, the northern state of Tamaulipas had a Socialist party that became influential in its own right and was modeled in part on southeastern precedents, led by future president and PNR leader Emilio Portes Gil.¹⁷ So did the southwestern state of Michoacán, led by noted radical General Francisco Mújica in the early 1920s, after he briefly served as the revolutionary proconsul of Tabasco in the mid-1910s. As governor of Michoacán (1928–32), future president Lázaro Cárdenas also established reformist institutional structures that resembled those of the southeastern Socialist parties, such as a statewide workers' confederation.¹⁸ By the end of the 1920s, "Socialism" was adopted as a designation by politicians throughout Mexico to describe a diverse collection of political projects. For the most part, these were reformers who intended to distinguish themselves for their relative radicalism in a political milieu that was comprised almost entirely of "revolutionaries;" thus, some Mexican Socialists of the era often used the designation interchangeably with "radical."¹⁹

Although it is impossible to ascribe Mexican Socialism as a political style as it was at the end of the 1920s to any one regional party or movement, southeastern Socialism was particularly influential on national politics.²⁰ By the mid-1920s some Mexican politicians were arguing that the southeastern Socialist model might be usefully applied at the national level, and several attempts to do this were made previous to the founding of

17 Heather Fowler-Salamini has written about both of these political experiments and projects. See Fowler-Salamini, *Agrarian Radicalism*; Fowler-Salamini, "De-Centering the 1920s." Another point of comparison is the Socialist Confederation of Parties of Oaxaca, founded in 1926. See Smith, *Pistoleros and Popular Movements*.

18 On both Mújica and Cárdenas in Michoacán, see Boyer, *Becoming Campesinos*.

19 Barry Carr has argued that "Socialism" frequently served as a distinguisher between revolutionaries and reactionaries in this period. Carr, *Marxism and Communism*, 15.

20 On the influence of regional politics during the 1920s, and the Socialist governments of the Southeast in comparative perspective with reformist state governments elsewhere in Mexico, see Benjamin, "Laboratories of the New State."