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FROM INDEPENDENCE TO THE
 LIBERAL REPUBLIC, 1821–1867

The royalist brigadier, Agustín de Iturbide, proclaimed the independence of Mexico on 24 February 1821 at Iguala, a small town in the heart of the southern, tropical *tierra caliente* or ‘hot country’. In his manifesto, the Plan of Iguala, Iturbide called for independence, the union of Mexicans and Spaniards and respect for the Roman Catholic Church. The form of government was to be a constitutional monarchy in which the emperor would be chosen from a European, preferably Spanish, dynasty ‘so as to give us a monarch already made and save us from fatal acts of ambition’, and the national constitution was to be drawn up by a congress. With this the first of his so-called ‘three guarantees’, Iturbide won the support of the old guerrilla fighters for independence, particularly General Vicente Guerrero who at this time was operating not far from Iguala. The second guarantee offered security to Spanish-born residents of Mexico, and with the third he sought to attract the clerical establishment by promising to preserve ecclesiastical privileges, recently under attack in Spain by the liberal, revolutionary regime. The army would take upon itself the task of ‘protecting’ the guarantees.

Iturbide’s appeal proved remarkably successful. In less than six months, he was master of the country, except for the capital city and the ports of Acapulco and Veracruz. It was at Veracruz that the newly appointed Spanish captain-general, Juan O’Donojú, disembarked on 30 July. He had been instructed to introduce liberal reforms in New Spain but at the same time to ensure that the colony remained within the Spanish empire. His instructions, however, were based on information received in Madrid about events which had taken place in the colony some four or five months previously, and he at once recognized that the

¹ The Author and the Editor wish to acknowledge the help of Professor Michael P. Costeloe, University of Bristol, in the final preparation of this chapter.

situation had changed significantly since then. Mexican independence appeared to him already a fact and, wanting to depart as quickly as possible from the yellow fever infested port, he decided to seek a meeting with Iturbide. They met on 24 August in Córdoba, at the foot of the snow-capped Citlaltepétl volcano, and they signed a treaty which recognized 'The Mexican Empire' as a sovereign and independent nation. The treaty paraphrased the Iguala manifesto, but there were several modifications. According to the manifesto, the throne was to be offered to Ferdinand VII, or, in case of his refusal, to a prince of a reigning dynasty. It was assumed that there would be at least one prince willing to accept. The text signed in Córdoba, however, named four specific candidates, all of the Spanish dynasty, and no reference was made to other European royal families. If the four Spaniards were to refuse the throne, the future emperor was to be selected by the Mexican congress. This change is unlikely to have been fortuitous, and it was to have important consequences, especially in the career of the ambitious Iturbide. As the meeting at Córdoba lasted only a few hours, it seems certain that Iturbide had already carefully prepared the long text in advance and was well aware of the implications of the changes made to the original Iguala declaration. O'Donojú, on the other hand, who must have been tired following his long journey from Spain and was possibly ill, overlooked the modification. He signed the document with his constitutional title of Captain General and Superior Political Chief, although to the present day he remains known in Mexico as the last Spanish viceroy. Brigadier Iturbide signed as First Chief of the Imperial Army. Within a few months he was to be Generalísimo.

The acceptance of independence by O'Donojú facilitated the transfer of power in the capital. Having delayed his entrance so that it coincided with his thirty-eighth birthday, Iturbide rode into Mexico City on 27 September. On the next morning, he chose the thirty-eight members of the governing junta stipulated in both the Iguala manifesto and the treaty of Córdoba. In a formal act, this junta then declared the independence of Mexico. With Iturbide acting as its president, the junta consisted of well-known ecclesiastics, lawyers, judges, members of the Mexican nobility and a few army officers, among them Colonel Anastasio Bustamante who, like Iturbide, was a former royalist officer. Old fighters for independence such as Nicolás Bravo, Guadalupe Victoria and Guerrero were not members, but O'Donojú was included in accordance with the agreement reached at Córdoba. It was expected that he would give

Iturbide a helping hand in the transition between the viceroyalty and a future empire under a Spanish prince. In fact, O'Donojú fell ill and died ten days later before being able to appoint the commissioners who were to have gone to Madrid to negotiate a settlement, again as envisaged in the Córdoba agreement. As president of the junta and regent of the empire, Generalísimo Iturbide could still have sent envoys to Madrid but he did not do so.

Not surprisingly, the Spanish attitude towards Mexican independence was hostile from the beginning. Although the greater part of the Spanish army stationed in Mexico swore allegiance to the new nation, a group of royalist diehards withdrew to San Juan de Ulúa, an island fortress in front of Veracruz harbour, and waited there for reinforcements with which to reconquer the country. They were not disavowed by the Madrid government and on 13 February 1822 the Spanish Cortes rejected the Córdoba treaty. The news of this refusal by the mother country to accept Mexico's independence reached Mexico City several months later.

Independence in 1821 did not bring any immediate revolutionary change in the social or economic structure of the country. The first and principal effect was that the political power formerly exercised by the royal bureaucracy was transferred to the army, that is to say, to a coalition of Iturbide's royalist and Guerrero's republican armies.

The second pillar of the new nation was the Roman Catholic Church. Like all the established colonial institutions, it had suffered significant losses in its manpower and material possessions during the decade of war. By 1822 there were ten dioceses but only four had bishops, and from a total of 4,229 in 1810 the secular clergy had decreased to 3,487. The male regulars had decreased from 3,112 in 1810 to approximately 2,000 by the end of 1821 and the number of monasteries from 208 to 153. In sum, the total number of clergy fell from 9,439 to 7,500 and the number of parishes also declined. Church revenues, particularly from tithes, showed a substantial fall. In the archbishopric of Mexico, the tithe income was reduced from 510,081 pesos in 1810 to 232,948 pesos in 1821 and in the dioceses of Michoacán, from 500,000 pesos to 200,000 pesos by 1826.

The tithe figures reflect the general economic decline which had taken place. The statistics provided by the amount of coinage minted indicate that mining decreased by more than a half from a yearly average of 22½ million pesos in 1800–9 to approximately 10 million pesos in 1820 and 1822. (In 1821 only about 6 million pesos were minted.) There is no

reliable information available on agriculture and manufacturing. Cereal production may have recovered by 1820, but sugar cane and other farming sectors remained depressed. Manufacturing output may have declined by as much as a half and public finances were reduced by a similar proportion. Government revenues in 1822 amounted to over 9 million pesos but expenditure rose to 13 million pesos, leaving a deficit of 4 million pesos. The public or national debt had shown a marked increase from 20 million pesos in 1808 to 35 million pesos in 1814 and 45 million pesos by 1822.

It was against this background of economic recession and budget deficit that the constitutional congress assembled in the capital on 24 February 1822. To Iturbide's unpleasant surprise, most of the deputies were either 'bourbonists', that is, pro-Spanish monarchists, or republicans. They were in dispute with him over several matters from the very first day and it was against a background of rapidly deteriorating relations between Iturbide and the deputies that the Spanish rejection of the Córdoba agreement became known. Until that moment, Spain, the mother country with which the bonds of kinship and religion remained strong, had still been venerated by almost everyone. Now Spain denied freedom to her daughter country. The ensuing resentment and disappointment quickly gave rise to the feeling that there was no reason why Mexico should not have a monarch of its own choosing. Spain, by its refusal to accept the reality of independence and its rejection of the opportunity to keep Mexico within the Bourbon dynasty, played into the hands of Iturbide. On the night of 18 May 1822, the local army garrison proclaimed him Emperor Agustín I and on the next morning, under considerable military and popular pressure, congress accepted the situation and acknowledged its new monarch. Since Spain had rejected the Córdoba treaty, said deputy Valentín Gómez Farías, a physician and future liberal leader, Mexico was free to determine its own destiny. In the absence of the archbishop who declined to anoint the new ruler, Iturbide was crowned by the president of the congress on 21 July in the capital's magnificent cathedral.

Iturbide's empire was not to last. From the outset, there were basic obstacles to its survival. The Mexican nobility yearned for a European prince and looked with disdain on Iturbide, the son of a merchant; *hacendados* and traders, most of whom were Spanish born, hoped for a European prince to deliver them from forced loans and other fiscal burdens; and finally there was a strong body of republicans which

included some prominent journalists, lawyers and progressive clergy. One such cleric was Servando Teresa de Mier who, after an adventurous life in Europe and the United States, had been imprisoned in the dungeons of the San Juan de Ulúa fortress. Its shrewd Spanish commander released him at the end of May and Servando soon occupied a seat in congress. Both within that assembly and in the public arena outside, he was to propagate his republican ideas with great vigour.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Iturbide's fall was even faster than his elevation. The bourbonists charged him with having violated his promise to offer the throne to a European prince. Iturbide's own arbitrary acts encouraged the spread of republican ideas which until then had by and large been restricted to intellectuals. Ambitious army officers were also discontented; while a foreign prince might be tolerable, they found it difficult to accept one of their own kind; if an imported prince was not to be had, then the solution was a republic, which was at least a system in which they could become presidents. Opposition to Iturbide grew and in an atmosphere of restricted freedom of expression, conspiracies mushroomed. By 26 August, just five weeks after his coronation, Iturbide had already imprisoned nineteen members of congress and several army officers. On 31 October, he dissolved the troublesome congress altogether. He weakened his position even further by a series of confiscatory fiscal measures and the merchants who suffered, for the most part Spanish, turned to the bourbonists for support.

The port of Veracruz was especially important to Iturbide's security. It was situated opposite the island fortress of San Juan de Ulúa which remained in Spanish hands.² A rebellion might be started there, with Spanish acquiescence if not support, and in the event of failure, rebel leaders could take refuge in the fortress. Distrusting the ambitious young military commander of Veracruz, a twenty-eight-year old colonel, Antonio López de Santa Anna, Iturbide summoned him to Jalapa, a town in the mountains over a hundred kilometres from the port, where he relieved him of his command and ordered him to report to Mexico City. Santa Anna had not the slightest intention of obeying the emperor. After galloping all night, he returned to his barracks the following morning and, before news of his removal reached Veracruz, on the afternoon of the same day, 2 December 1822, he publicly accused Iturbide of tyranny. He proclaimed a republic, calling for the reinstatement of congress and

² The Spaniards in San Juan de Ulúa did not capitulate until 1825.

the formation of a constitution based on 'Religion, Independence and Union', that is, the same three guarantees of the Iguala manifesto which he claimed had been infringed by the emperor. He also made a bid for the support of influential local Spanish merchants at Veracruz by calling for peace and commerce with the mother country.³

Within a few days, however, Santa Anna had changed his mind about his hasty profession of republican faith. In 1822, Mexican republicans did not often use the term 'republic' in their propaganda; instead, they spoke of Liberty, Nation and the Sovereignty of Congress. A decade previously, Hidalgo had not formally proclaimed independence and it had taken several years for the idea of a Mexico not subject to the king of Spain to take root. Now, similarly, the word republic also sounded too revolutionary. Hence Santa Anna revised his position and, four days later, he issued a more moderate and detailed manifesto. This document was probably drawn up by the former minister of the newly independent republic of Colombia to Mexico, Miguel Santa María (a native of Veracruz), who had been expelled by Iturbide for participating in a republican conspiracy and was at that time in Veracruz awaiting a ship to take him home. Without mentioning a republic, the manifesto called for the removal of the emperor. 'The true liberty of the fatherland' meant a republic to the republicans and a constitutional monarchy to bourbonists and Spaniards. Thus both factions were urged to unite against Iturbide. The insistence on the Iguala guarantees had the same purpose: 'independence' was essential to Mexicans, 'union' to Spaniards, and 'religion' to both. It is not known whether Santa Anna was sincere about the republic or whether he had imperial ambitions of his own.

A fortuitous circumstance helped Santa Anna: the inveterate guerrilla fighter, Guadalupe Victoria, who had recently escaped from prison, chanced to be in Veracruz and he signed Santa Anna's manifesto of 6 December 1822. Thus Santa Anna, who had been a royalist officer during the war of independence and until now a supporter of Iturbide, secured the aid of a famous insurgent general who was already suspected of republican inclinations. A few weeks later, Generals Bravo and Guerrero, former comrades-in-arms of Morelos, escaped from Mexico City and once back in their own region of the *tierra caliente*, they declared their support for the Veracruz uprising. 'We are not against the established system of government', they declared: 'we do not intend to

³ The proclamation is reproduced in C. M. Bustamante, *Diario Histórico de México, I, 1822-1823* (Zacatecas, 1896), 16-17.

become republicans; far from that, we only seek our liberty.' Such denials, however, seem to confirm the impression that they were indeed republicans, but their own support was among Indian peasants who were held to be not only religious but also monarchist. Finally, the majority of the army in which the officers – many of them Spaniards by birth – had been royalists and later supporters of Iturbide succumbed to the influence of two former Mexican liberal deputies to the Spanish Cortes, the priest Miguel Ramos Arizpe and José Mariano Michelena. The army 'pronounced' itself against Iturbide. The emperor abdicated on 19 March 1823, and the reassembled congress promptly appointed a provisional triumvirate consisting of Generals Victoria, Bravo and Negrete, the first two of whom were generally thought to be republicans. On 8 April, congress nullified the Iguala manifesto as well as the Córdoba treaty and decreed that Mexico was henceforth free to adopt whatever constitutional system it wished. The republic was a fact.

Thus Santa Anna had unleashed a movement which brought down Iturbide's empire and ended with the establishment of a republic. Even if the new political system was conceived by intellectuals, it was the army which had converted it into reality and at the same time become its master. The speed with which it succeeded pointed the way to future uprisings by dissatisfied military officers.

Bearing in mind Iturbide's past services to the nation's independence, congress did not at first deal with him harshly. He was offered a generous allowance provided that he resided in Italy. But the former emperor was not happy in exile. Misled by rumours of support, he returned in July 1824, landing near Tampico on the Gulf Coast, and unaware that, during his absence, congress had declared him a traitor. He was arrested and executed within a few days of his arrival.

Iturbide's inability to introduce some measure of order into the Treasury had been an important cause of his downfall. The triumvirate applied itself at once to the task of restoring public confidence and the improved atmosphere made it possible to obtain two loans on the London market: 16 million pesos were borrowed at the beginning of 1824 with Goldschmitt and Company and a similar amount with Barclay and Company a few months later.⁴ Mexico thereby assumed a burden of 32 million pesos in foreign debt, but because of a low contract price and bankers' deductions, only about 10 million pesos was in fact received.

⁴ Throughout the period examined in this chapter one peso equalled one U.S. dollar.

The government originally expected to use this money for long-term improvements, but when it finally arrived it was quickly absorbed by current expenses such as salaries of public employees, notably the military. Nevertheless, the proceeds of these loans seem to have been a stabilizing factor in the first years of the republic and in 1823–4 the foreign debt which they entailed did not seem excessive.⁵ With British interest in the mineral resources of the country very evident, Mexico was optimistic about its future. During the years 1823 to 1827 the British invested more than 12 million pesos in Mexican mining ventures, especially silver-mining companies. Thus a total of well over 20 million pesos were injected into the ailing economy.

The person who was most instrumental in bringing British capital to Mexico was Lucas Alamán, who from April 1823 was Minister of the Interior and of Foreign Affairs (one of four Cabinet members). The brilliant son of a Mexican mining family which had acquired a Spanish title of nobility, Alamán had returned from a prolonged stay in Europe shortly after Iturbide's fall from power. As Marquis of San Clemente, he had perhaps dreamt of becoming a minister in the court of a Mexican Bourbon monarch, but the end of Iturbide's empire was not followed by any renewal of attempts to offer the throne to a European prince. On the contrary, it meant the end of serious monarchist plans for many years to come: Alamán entered, therefore, into the service of a republican government.

With the republic now taken for granted and monarchism being viewed almost as treason, new labels began to be adopted. Former supporters of a Mexican empire with a European prince at its head became centralist republicans, advocating a strong, centralized régime, reminiscent of the viceroyalty. Most of the republican opponents of Iturbide became federalists, supporting a federation of states on the United States model. The old destructive struggle between royalists and independents, who had in 1821 become bourbonists and republicans respectively and then temporary allies against Iturbide, re-emerged in 1823 under different slogans. After Iturbide's abdication power fell briefly into the hands of the bourbonist faction, but then a perhaps unexpected turn of events had helped the republican cause. Blaming the bourbonists for having overthrown Iturbide, the former emperor's supporters now joined the republicans and the elections for the new constitutional congress produced a majority for the federalists.

⁵ There was at this time an internal public debt of 45 million pesos.

The constitutional congress met in November 1823 and almost a year later adopted a federal constitution which closely resembled that of the United States. The Mexican constitution of 1824 divided the country into nineteen states which were to elect their own governors and legislatures, and four territories which were to be under the jurisdiction of the national congress. The usual division of powers – executive, legislative and judicial – was retained but in one important respect the Mexican constitution differed from its northern model: it solemnly proclaimed that: ‘The religion of the Mexican nation is and shall be perpetually the Catholic, Apostolic, Roman religion. The nation protects it with wise and just laws and prohibits the exercise of any other.’⁶ Of the three guarantees in the Iguala manifesto only two remained; independence and religion. The third, union with Spaniards which implied a monarchy with a European prince, had been replaced by the federal republic.

In contrast to the insurgent constitution of Apatzingán in 1814 which specified that the law should be the same for everyone, the 1824 charter did not mention equality before the law. This omission was certainly not intended to safeguard the interests of the small, if not insignificant, Mexican nobility which only comprised a few dozen families. Its significance was much greater because it permitted the continuation of the *fueros* or legal immunities and exemptions from civil courts enjoyed by the clergy and the military. These privileges had, of course, existed before independence but then both the Church and the army had been subject to royal authority on which civil obedience to laws depended and which had not been seriously questioned for three centuries. With the supreme regal authority gone, and in the absence of a strong nobility or bourgeoisie, the vacuum was at once filled by the popular heroes of the victorious army. Freed of royal restraint, the army became the arbiter of power in the new nation. Federalist or centralist, a general was to be president of the republic.

Mexico also adopted the United States practice of electing a president and a vice-president. The two leading executives could be men of different or opposing political parties with the obvious danger of rivalry continuing between them while in office. Indeed, the first president was a liberal federalist, General Guadalupe Victoria, a man of obscure origins, and the vice-president a conservative centralist, General Nicolás Bravo, a wealthy landowner. Both men had been

⁶ Felipe Tena Ramírez, *Leyes fundamentales de México, 1808–1973* (Mexico, 1973), 168.

guerrilla fighters for independence but by 1824 they belonged to two hostile factions. Political parties were as yet unknown but the two groups used the masonic movement as a focal point for their activities and propaganda. The centralists tended to become masons of the Scottish Rite while the federalists, with the help of the United States minister to the new republic, Joel R. Poinsett, became members of the York Rite. The lodges provided the base from which the conservative and liberal parties would arise almost a quarter of a century later.

President Victoria sought to maintain in his cabinet a balance between the centralists and the federalists in the hope of keeping some semblance of unity in the national government. Nevertheless, the most able of the pro-centralist ministers, Lucas Alamán, was, as early as 1825, quickly forced out of office by federalist attacks. In the following year, after a long and bitterly fought electoral campaign, the federalists gained a significant majority in Congress, particularly in the chamber of deputies. Tension increased in January 1827 with the discovery of a conspiracy to restore Spanish rule. Spain was the only important country not to have recognized Mexican independence and with many wealthy Spanish merchants still resident in the new republic, as well as others who retained their posts in the government bureaucracy, it was not difficult to incite popular hatred against everything Spanish. Mexican nationalism became a convenient and effective weapon used by the federalists to attack the centralists who were widely believed to favour Spain. Fighting on the defensive and using religion as a counter to nationalism, the centralists took revenge for Alamán's dismissal in a campaign against the American minister Poinsett who was a Protestant. As the well-intentional but ineffectual President Victoria was unable to control the ever more aggressive federalists, the centralist leader and vice-president, Bravo, finally resorted to rebellion against the government. Bravo was promptly defeated by his former comrade-in-arms, General Guerrero, and sent into exile. Both had fought the Spaniards side by side under the command of Morelos, but Guerrero had chosen the federalist cause which allowed him to keep control of his native *tierra caliente*.

The main political issue was the forthcoming presidential election, scheduled for 1828. Bravo's revolt spoiled the chances of the centralists who were unable even to present a candidate. Then the federalists split into moderates and radicals. The centralists or conservatives chose to rally behind the moderate candidate, General Manuel Gómez Pedraza, the Minister of War in Victoria's cabinet and a former royalist officer and