

## FEDERAL CONTROL IN MEXICO

*By Norman D. Harris.*

The last quarter of a century has been characterized by a remarkable development of the federal or central government of many of the states of the world, as in France and the United States, for example. Nowhere has this growth in power of the federal government been productive of greater results, or of larger national benefits and development, than in Mexico. That state has furnished us with a striking example of a federal republican government based upon a monarchical principle. There we find twenty-seven republics each enjoying local representative autonomy and joined together on a basis of equality, placing the sovereignty of the land into the hands of the "Mestizos," or Mexicans proper, who constitute only forty-three per cent. of the population, and entrusting the general control to a federal executive of almost unlimited powers. Yet the past hundred years' experience of republican government in the Americas has fully demonstrated that no better form of rule for the Latin-American states has ever been devised.

Though the oldest, Mexico is the most backward State in North America to-day. This is not due to any lack of political intelligence on the part of the people, but rather to the lack of experience and co-operation among their leaders, to the influence of the Church, to the intrigues of foreigners, and to the form of government—or, better, misgovernment—existing prior to 1870. No country ever suffered more from an overdose of so-called "liberty" and "state rights." All commerce and industry was practically at a standstill. Brigandage was rife throughout the land and traveling dangerous. Every Mexican state was practically a sovereign unit, owing little allegiance or obedience to the central power. They controlled the resources of their own districts and maintained their individual police and military forces. Local "Juntas," jealous of each other and of outside interference, administered the affairs of state; and personal rivalries resulting in displays of force, were frequent. The central government was powerless to control the states, to protect its own interests, or to preserve the Republic from civil war. For, during many years a constant struggle between the centralists led by General Santa Anna, and

the federalists, went on for the control of the government itself. At length the federalists won, and gave to the country the federal republican constitution of February 5, 1857.

The temporary empire of Maximilian, created soon after this by French intrigue and French soldiers, came to an abrupt end in 1867; and the way was opened for the organization of an effective administration on the basis of the constitution of 1857. This, with the reform laws of 1859 and 1873, whereby the separation of the Church and state and other vital changes were affected, furnished the means by which a strong central government could be created. In the main the Constitution of the United States was followed; but there are some very striking differences.

The president and vice-president are elected for six years by an indirect system through electoral colleges held in each state.<sup>1</sup> The Deputies and Senators of the federal Congress are chosen for two years in the same way—two Senators from each state and the Federal District and one Deputy for every 60,000 inhabitants. The Mexican Congress possesses the same powers and duties as our own; and it can pass laws over the presidential veto upon a second ballot, provided there is an absolute majority in each house in favor of the measure. There is a "Permanent Committee" of 29 members, chosen by the Legislature, which approves appointments and acts in any advisory capacity while Congress is not in session.<sup>2</sup>

But the most significant feature of the whole scheme lies in the power of initiating legislation, given the President.<sup>3</sup> It is true that this privilege must be shared with both houses of Congress and the state legislatures; but it affords the executive a rare opportunity of shaping and directing the law-making, whenever he may choose to exercise it. Yet, in spite of this elaborate system, the vital force was lacking that should breathe life and stamina into the governmental machinery, evolve an efficient administration, and bring an end to the civil dissensions and jealousies. It came at length in the person of Senor Porfirio Diaz, who, like Bismarck, was compelled to fight his way to national unity "through blood and iron."

General Diaz had been in the presidential chair three times before the majority of the people began to understand clearly the

<sup>1</sup> Constitution of Mexico, Title III., Sect. II., Arts. 78-79, and amendment of May 6, 1904.

<sup>2</sup> Constitution, Title III., Sect. II., Art. 65.

<sup>3</sup> Constitution, Title III., Sect. II., Art. 65.

wisdom of his policy and the purity of his motives. He had a broader vision than most of his contemporaries, and his plans embraced a wider field than "Junta politics" and personal gain. He was not seeking the aggrandizement of any particular state of the Republic or the triumph of any special party, but rather the creation of a great nation—united, self-respecting and progressive—that should take its place in the family of nations and not be ashamed. He recognized the natural richness of the country and the advantages of its splendid geographical situation; but he realized that without unity and a powerful federal government, it could never fulfil its destiny.

President Diaz, though extremely modest and simple in his private life, has always been incessantly active and resourceful in the direction of public affairs; and at 80 years of age he still administers the affairs of state with firmness and dispatch. Personally he is upright and apparently incorruptible—a strenuous opponent of all public evils, and the champion of all that is good in politics and government. Yet his long term of office, confirming as it does the wisdom of his political policies, and his earnest desire to promote the welfare of Mexico at any cost, have led him sometimes into acts unnecessarily arbitrary and dictatorial.

His has been an arduous, but self-sacrificing and patriotic service. In speaking with the writer recently concerning his services to Mexico, he modestly disclaimed any personal merit, and added: "I have only tried to serve my country faithfully in all things, as you would yours." He has earnestly wished for some years to retire, and has attempted to resign several times. On more than one occasion he has expressed himself officially as being compelled to "remain in office for the sake of the nation which trusted me. \* \* \* I have waited patiently for the day when the people of Mexico would be prepared to choose and change their government at every election without danger of armed revolution and without injury to the national credit or interference with the national progress." He has been upheld in this policy by the constitution which expressly forbids the President or Vice-President to resign save for a most grave cause and then only in case Congress shall approve of the act.<sup>4</sup> Only last year it was planned to run Senor Limantour for president and General Reyes for vice-president. Unfortunately, Limantour declined to be nominated and was opposed by some on account of his French birth; while General

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<sup>4</sup> Constitution, Title III., Sect. II., Art. 82, as amended May 6, 1904.

Reyes proved to be untrustworthy. So Senor Diaz has been persuaded to run again, and will remain in office until a suitable leader who will continue the policy and work of the present regime can be found.

President Diaz has served seven terms—continuously, since 1884—and enjoys the confidence of his people more to-day than ever. He was re-elected this summer without serious opposition, together with Senor Ramon Corral, the former vice-president. The latter, who is also Minister of the Interior, is a man of considerable ability and quite capable of going on with the government whenever Senor Diaz decides to retire. The charge has been made—and more persistently of late—that Diaz and his colleagues in office are the leaders of a great “ring” or trust that rules Mexico primarily to protect its own interests and to keep the control of affairs in its own hands. That there is a certain amount of truth in this, no one can deny; but the key to this political enigma is readily found when one notes two or three of the chief peculiarities in the Mexican political system. In the first place, there are no large organized political parties, such as exist in the United States—if we except the party of Diaz. This has been the case ever since the present constitution was put in force; but there is no doubt that the government in its anxiety to free the country from the scourge of brigandage and revolution, has gone to unnecessary lengths in restricting political organizations.

Then, not only have the mass of the Mexican people been lacking in political experience and education, but they have shown a singular disinclination to interest themselves greatly in governmental matters. “Our difficulty has been,” said President Diaz, “that the people do not concern themselves about public affairs. The individual Mexican, as a rule, thinks much about his own rights, and is always ready to assert them; but he does not think so much about the rights of others. He thinks of his privileges, but not of his duties.” This is undoubtedly the reason why the duties of citizenship were so emphatically enumerated in the constitution—paying taxes, voting, holding office, serving in the army or in the national guard, and acting as jurors, being specially mentioned.<sup>5</sup>

Then, again, the Diaz regime has been built upon, and has enjoyed ever since it began, the support of the conservative and

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<sup>5</sup> Constitution, Title I, Sect. 4, Art. 35-36; and amendment of June 10, 1898.

aristocratic element of the Mexican state. The situation is similar to that in Germany, where the Hohenzollerns have ruled successfully ever since the Empire was founded through the support of the conservatives. In fact, Bismarck deliberately constructed the constitution so as to place the control of affairs largely in the hands of the aristocratic and conservative portion of the body politic, for he distrusted the masses. The people not being prepared or sufficiently trained for complete self-government, Senor Diaz felt compelled to erect his governmental fabric on the same basis. Then, too, he had to contend with the fact that 38 per cent. of Mexico's population was of peon or Indian blood—totally ignorant of the principles of modern constitutional government and incapable of exercising judicially the electoral franchise or of taking an intelligent part in any form of popular government. Without doubt, it would have been impossible at the time to have created an efficient administration in any other way; and the subsequent success of his government would seem to have justified the move. Yet the system is open to grave criticism because it has not yet planted the principles of democracy very deep in the people and because it contains elements antagonistic to the development of sound republican institutions.

Irrespective of the means employed in the conduct of affairs, or the basis of the electoral system now in use, the general principle of federal control has met with almost universal acceptance. No propagandist or demagogue—even though he be a popular hero like General Reyes—has the slightest chance of bringing on a serious revolution or of effecting a change in the form of government. The majority of the citizens have been convinced of the value and efficiency of the present administrative system. Many of the best and most influential men who were Diaz's opponents in the '80's, are supporters of his government to-day. The commercial, industrial, and financial elements are a unit in upholding the new system. The people have received favorably the principle of federal supremacy and control; and it has come to stay.

The constitution not providing the proper means of rendering the federal government effective, it was incumbent on the chief executive to find a way. This was accomplished chiefly through three channels of operation: the army, the administration of internal affairs and the control of the finances.

The army was nationalized, reorganized, and placed directly under the control of the president.<sup>o</sup> All local organizations and state militia were disbanded and in the future forbidden. An efficient and well-disciplined police force was established under federal control; and the country bandits and restless spirits were transformed into the "Rurales"—the most effective and best paid rural constabulary in existence to-day. One is safer travelling anywhere in Mexico than he is on the streets of many of our great cities.

The federal administration was organized under eight ministers of state responsible directly to the president and his council. Each department was given special duties and held to a strict account along all lines; while every effort was made to secure the recognition of their respective spheres of activity by all the states of the Republic. To insure effectiveness the whole country was districted and commissioners placed over each district, who are responsible directly to the cabinet and have special duties and powers pertaining to the police, the health, the federal taxation and other matters of public welfare. Their work is quite distinct from that of the local state authorities. The value and effectiveness of this organization has been proved on a number of occasions, where local disturbances have occurred and national disasters overtaken the people—as in the recent floods at Monterey.

A remarkable reorganization has also been successfully achieved in the national finances, until in 1893 the country for the first time had an excess of income over expenditure. By 1908-9 the surplus had reached \$136,000,000 (Mexican), of which \$71,000,000 were expended on public works, and \$75,000,000 were on hand in the treasury on December 14, 1909. The credit of Mexico in European markets has steadily risen until she is able to borrow money at reasonable rates like other nations; and foreign capital has been attracted to the country in large sums. In 1899 she placed her European debt, amounting to \$116,000,000, on a 5 per cent. basis and was able to negotiate a 4 per cent. loan in 1904 at 89. While the federal revenues reached the sum of \$114,286,000 by 1906-7. All this has been due to the brilliant efforts of her able finance minister, Senor Limantour—one of the group of notable statesmen whom President Diaz has drawn into the service of the federal government.

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<sup>o</sup> In conformity with the power conferred on the President in Art. 85, Sect. II., of Title III., of the Constitution.

The railways, with the exception of the Mexican line from Vera Cruz to the City of Mexico, have all been constructed during the "regime" of Diaz. They have grown from 60 miles in 1875 to over 14,000 in 1908. Beside the great trunk lines running from the United States to the capital, there are now two roads crossing the country from the Gulf to the Pacific Ocean and one being constructed south from Arizona on the western side of the Republic that will soon reach Guadalajara. Thousands of dollars have been spent for public buildings and improvements. Streets have been paved, sewers laid, hospitals built and all the modern precautions taken to preserve the life and health of the people in all the cities. So successfully has this been done that even the old scourge of yellow fever has practically been eradicated from the coast towns and the tropical districts.

In 1895 there were scarcely twelve stable banks in Mexico, of which only three had a capital of \$5,000,000 (Mexican) or over. On December 31, 1907, thirty-four banks with a combined capital of over \$100,000,000 were in successful operation. The exports of the state rose from \$46,554,000 (Mexican) in 1884 to \$248,019,000 in 1907, while the imports increased from \$35,819,000 to \$283,363,000 in the same period.

Systematic efforts have been made to promote the development of the country's natural resources and to encourage the creation of new industries. The number of mining properties under development rose from 10,376 in 1899 to 31,194 in 1909. In 1908 the "Institution for Loans to Irrigation Works and for the Encouragement of Agriculture" was established. And in 1909 a large Stock Yards Company was incorporated with headquarters at Mexico City, for the purpose of furnishing, under governmental supervision, the people with pure meats prepared under sanitary conditions.

The genuine interest of the federal government in matters of public welfare is nowhere shown to greater advantage than in educational matters. Every effort has been made to provide the citizens everywhere—both Mexicans and peons—with a common school education. Over \$6,280,000 were expended by the government in 1908 for this purpose; and a large number of worthy young men are sent abroad every year to be educated at the expense of the state. Technical institutes and schools of a higher grade are being added as rapidly as possible; and a national university has been started in the City of Mexico. "I want to see educa-

tion throughout the Republic," said President Diaz, "carried on by the national government. I hope to see it before I die. It is important that all citizens of a republic should receive the same training so that their ideals and methods may be harmonized and the national unity intensified."

Altogether the federal government of Mexico has made an enviable record—worthy of any nation—but this is only a beginning. Mexico is a nation in the making. She is still in that immature stage between childhood and manhood; and though this may seem to the Mexican an "era of glorious progress," it is but a period of transition in which the foundations are being laid for the future prosperity of an enlightened people. For the "Mexicans are at the beginning, not the end, of their civilization; the rise, not the fall, of their life. Here is the material of a vigorous and prolific race which may be destined to bulk, largely—like the whole of Spanish-America—in the future regime of the civilization of the white man."

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