

Two Views of Porfirio Díaz (1910-1912)

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Porfirio Díaz (1830-1915) was the Mexican president most associated with modernization and centralization following that country's independence. Part Indian and of a poor background, Díaz at first thought of becoming a Roman Catholic priest. But the outbreak of the Mexican War led him to enlist; he rose to be a brilliant and successful general. He fought against French power and ultimately led one of the armies that secured Mexican independence. But Díaz became disillusioned with the new regime that he had helped install and he led a series of coups until one finally succeeded in 1876. For the next 34 years, he ruled Mexico with an iron hand and much success. The benchmark of Díaz's rule was centralization and the reorganization of the Mexican economy. He made it easier for foreign investors to profit in Mexico, leading both to the building of the Mexican railroads and a hatred of outside profiteers. Although Díaz was continually reelected under the provisions of the Constitution, he did not allow political opposition. When Francisco Madero ran against him in 1910, he was abused by Díaz supporters and arrested. Madero led a military coup against Díaz and ousted him.

The following selections present two different views of the Díaz regime. The first, by Francisco Madero, was his presidential platform of 1910, issued before his arrest. The second was written by an exiled opponent of Díaz, Luis Para y Pardo.

The Presidential Platform of 1910

A popular maxim said, "Mexico is the mother of foreigners and the stepmother of Mexicans." This saying, which passed from mouth to mouth and even appeared in books by foreigners, summed up in a few words the financial, administrative, domestic, and foreign policies of General Díaz. And nothing explains better why, while foreign countries showered decorations on Díaz and his sons, nephews, kinsmen, and lackeys and exalted him as the greatest statesman of Latin America, the Mexican people, outside the circle of his adoring favorites, heaped curses on him and waited impatiently for death to snatch him from the Presidency of the Republic or for some man to arise and topple him from his pinnacle of power....

The object of every national government is to improve the social and political condition of its people. A good government does not reject foreign aid, for that would be absurd and even impossible in the present state of civilization, but it insists that this cooperation always be subordinated to the national interest. Immigration is only desirable when the immigrant represents a civilizing force and joins his interests to those of the country in which he makes his residence.

Only colonial governments of the worst type have for their sole object the unrestrained, senseless, and disorderly exploitation of the national resources for the benefit of foreigners and the enslavement or extermination of the natives. The government of General Díaz belongs in this unhappy category....

TASK: Answer the following questions based on the reading "The Presidential Platform of 1910." Answer the questions by highlighting, underlining, and annotating all relevant material throughout the reading. Make sure that you can differentiate the answers so as to better facilitate discussion. Please read the introductory paragraph for historical background!

1. What tone does the author set in the very first paragraph of the first reading regarding his feelings and attitude toward President Díaz? What, if any, economic benefits does the author acknowledge to have occurred under the Díaz regime? What, however, have been the "cost" of these benefits?

3. Most of this first reading is a severe critique of the Díaz government. According to the author, what specific problems exist (Be complete — there are a lot!) in Mexico in the following areas: 1. exploitation of resources, 2. agriculture and land ownership, 3. foreign intervention and ownership, and 4. standard of living and social issues

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The dazzling prosperity of the Díaz era was due in very large part to the exploitation of certain resources—of minerals, above all—on a greater scale than ever before. The export of these commodities, as well as that of certain tropical products in great demand abroad, increased in an astounding way. In only twenty years of Díaz' rule the export of minerals rose from a value of 36 million pesos (in 1890) to more than 111 million (in 1910). In the same period the export of henequen increased from a value of less than 6 million to more than 20 million pesos, and the export of other tropical products, such as fine woods, tobacco, coffee, etc., also rose sharply.

But aside from henequen, coffee, and some other products of particular regions, this prosperity was based on the exploitation of exhaustible resources owed by foreigners who did not even reside in Mexico. The lion's share of the 120 million pesos of exported minerals went into dividends for foreign stockholders; only the extremely low wages paid to the workers remained in the country. As in colonial times, ships sailed from Mexico with treasure drawn from the bowels of the earth by enslaved Indians, for the benefit of foreign masters who never set eyes on the places where those riches were produced.

As in colonial times, around these mines arose populous and hastily built centers. But again as in colonial times, the day had to come when the veins would be exhausted and the people would depart with empty purses, leaving only skeleton cities, vast cities of the dead like Zacatecas, Guanajuato, Taxco, that retain only the vestiges of their ancient splendor.

The same happened with our agricultural exports, except for henequen and coffee.... As concerns the exploitation of the fine woods, it is well known that it was carried on in such a destructive way that whole forests were ravaged without seeding a single useful plant in the looted soil.

Meanwhile agricultural production for the internal market, the cultivation of the grains on which our people live, remained stationary or even declined in relation to the population; year after year it was necessary to import North American corn and wheat to fill the needs of the internal market.

Equally dismal are the statistics for industry: There were 123 textile factories in 1893; eighteen years later the number was 146. And only the fact that the textile industry, almost entirely monopolized by Spaniards and Frenchmen, enjoyed privileges that closed the door to similar foreign articles and compelled the people to buy high-priced articles of inferior quality, made this achievement possible. The tobacco and liquor industries, on the other hand, advanced by leaps and bounds. There were 41 factories manufacturing cigarettes and cigars in 1893; in 1909 their number had increased to 437—that is, ten times. The production of rum reached 43 million liters in 1909.

The panegyrists of General Díaz proclaim his greatness as an administrator. They base their claim above all on the construction of more than 20,000 kilometers of railroads. I have already explained the open-handed generosity of Díaz in granting concessions to American capitalists for the construction of railroads. Each of these concessions was a gift, made directly to the capitalist involved or through the mediation of some favorite that he had bribed. All Mexico knows that many families owe their present wealth to concessions secured from General Díaz and sold to foreign capitalists. In the ministry of communications there were employees who defrauded the state of millions of pesos, taking bribes from individuals who obtained concessions and subventions for the construction of railways. It is no mystery that many of those roads were not constructed with the aim of favoring commerce or of meeting the needs of particular regions....

The official statistics maintain a profound silence concerning the nationality of the

directors of the mining companies, the great agricultural enterprises, and of the manufacturing industries of Mexico. But everyone knows that more than 75 per cent of them are foreign; as for the railroads, their foreign character is so marked that English has been the official language of the majority of lines.

In order to explain and justify this situation, which became so acute during the rule of General Díaz that it caused almost a crisis of "antiforeignism," some say that our lack of enterprise, our apathy, and our ignorance render us unfit to exploit our own resources, and that these must inevitably pass into the hands of foreigners.

I do not deny that from lack of education and on account of the social conditions in our country the Mexican people suffers from such defects. Nor do I make the mistake of attributing this state of affairs to General Díaz, or of demanding that he explain why the national character did not experience a radical change under his rule.

But this is not the only reason that Mexico is absolutely dominated by foreigners at present; furthermore, the government of General Díaz made not the slightest effort to keep the foreign invasion within the limits of fair dealing and the national interest. The monopolization of business by foreigners would have been legitimate and beneficial for the country if it had been the result of free competition between the natives and the immigrants—if the latter, through their capital and their spirit of enterprise, employed within just and legal limits, had emerged victorious....

But for every property legitimately acquired, for every dollar, or franc, or mark, or pound sterling invested in enterprises that yielded benefits to the country, how many monopolies, servitudes, ruinous and truly iniquitous contracts did the government of General Díaz not leave behind it!

Not apathy and ignorance but tyranny deprived the Mexicans of the possession and exploitation of their own resources. If a

Mexican sought the grant of a waterfall, a forest, a piece of land, a mine, or a deposit of coal or oil, his petition had to be supported and endorsed by some minion of the President who secured at an exorbitant price the favor of having the matter attended to with fair dispatch. Frequently the Mexican, having purchased in this manner the services of public officials, would receive a round "No" for an answer; and in a little while he would see in the Official Daily the announcement that the favor he was applying for had been graciously granted—to none other than the person whose intercession he had sought!

And if this happened to Mexicans on a social level close to that of the privileged class, what must have been the condition of laborers, small farmers, and artisans! Pity the unhappy peasant who, loving the soil he had inherited from his forefathers and seized with a sudden passion for progress, undertook to irrigate his inheritance, to buy machines and use fertilizers, and who by means of patient and painful effort succeeded in obtaining the best yields and in attracting the attention of the neighborhood to his land! From that moment was awakened the rapacity of the *jefe político*, of the military commander, of the secretary of the state government, or of the curate, canon, or archbishop, who would not rest until they had despoiled him of his property; and if he defended it with the admirable tenacity with which the Indian defends his land, he would land in the barracks, condemned to the slavery of the soldier-con-vict, or a group of soldiers would take him out of jail and shoot him in the back while on the march.

Governmental expenditures during the thirty-five years' reign of Don Porfirio amounted to more, much more, than 2 billion pesos. This vast sum was entirely at his disposal; it was tribute paid by the country that General Díaz could have invested in bettering the social condition of Mexico. But of this immense sum of money not a cent was ever invested in

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irrigating or fertilizing the land on which 12,000,000 Indians passed their lives in struggle for a handful of grain with which to sate their hunger. Nor was any part of it used to bring to these people—the largest social class, the only class devoted to the cultivation of the soil—some notion of justice or some education that would enable them to take a step toward civilization. Not the least effort was made to liberate the rural population from the slavery that made its life almost intolerable. Calling itself paternal, his government made not the slightest effort to rescue this enormous mass of people from the clutches of alcoholism, which a rapacious masterclass injected into the veins of the people the better to ensure its domination.

That is why at the end of those thirty-five years the rural population of Mexico continues under a régime of true slavery, receiving a daily wage of a few cents, sunk in ignorance, without hope of redemption. And since the monopolies have greatly raised the cost of living, the situation of the people in general is much worse than when General Díaz rose to power. Above that great oppressed mass arose a wealthy, brutal, splendid caste—but when has the wealth of a master-class served any other purpose than to oppress and degrade the serfs? Has it ever served to liberate them?

Are We Ready for Democracy?

Thinking carefully over our past, re-reading our history, we find episodes so surprising, actions so heroic, Mexicans so great, so magnanimous that they appeared on our national soil in such good time to save the Fatherland that we seemed to see the hand of Providence which guides us toward our great destinies. All our history has a certain seal of greatness which impresses one, and not even the very Dictatorship of General Díaz fails to have it. After all, our present President has been able to carry to an end a colossal work and he had surrounded himself with such prestige abroad and even

in the country that he has built a very high pedestal on the crest of which shines his bronzed figure, always serene, always tranquil, and with his gaze fixed on the great destinies of the Fatherland.

General Díaz has not been a common despot and history tells us of very few men who have used absolute power with so much moderation. The work of General Díaz has consisted in erasing the deep hatreds which earlier divided Mexicans. Although this program was rather limited in the beginning, it has come to put down such deep roots in the national soil to such an extent that its flourishing growth in our country seems assured. General Díaz, with his iron hand, has ended our turbulent and restless spirit. Now that we have the necessary calm and that we understand how desirable is the rule of law, now certainly we are prepared to come together peacefully at the electoral urns in order to deposit our votes.

Undoubtedly, the principal obstacle in our country for implanting democratic practices in our country has been militarism which recognizes no law other than brute force.... Consequently, this element will be the principal difficulty which the people will encounter in order to make use of their electoral rights.

Let us see how it will be possible to overcome this obstacle. Immediately one understands that General Díaz, who owes his power to his victorious sword, will hardly permit that such power be taken away from him while his sword preserves his prestige. This idea is in the national consciousness, and everybody is of the opinion that it is better to wait until General Díaz disappears from the scene, even though this situation should be prolonged for some years more, provided the soil of the Republic be not stained again with the blood of brothers. The result is that there is nobody who is animated to promote any democratic movement, because the opinion prevails that it will fail roundly if, indeed, it does not face greater dangers.