

The Independence of Mexico

Nowhere did the sudden shift of political and psychological advantage brought about by the Cadiz mutiny have a more dramatic effect than in Mexico. From 1815 until 1820 the cause of independence still flickered in the resistance offered by a harried force of rebels in the south, led after the death of Morelos by a mestizo, Vicente Guerrero. In November 1820 the viceroy Apodaca sent Agustín de Iturbide, a trusted creole veteran of the campaigns against Hidalgo and Morelos, to deliver the final blow to the secessionists. But news of the Cadiz mutiny had changed Iturbide's attitude to the question of Mexico's ties with Spain: he made contact with the rebel leader Guerrero and forged an alliance with him against the Spanish government. Together they issued the Plan of Iguala on 24 February 1821, and this became the document which steered Mexico through a virtually bloodless transition to independence.

According to the Plan of Iguala, Mexico would become an independent monarchy, limited by the 1812 constitution of Cadiz, with either Ferdinand VII or one of his brothers as emperor; Catholicism would remain the only legitimate religion and the Church would retain its property and privileges; all subjects, including Indians, mestizos and the many Spaniards living in Mexico, would enjoy equality before the law. These were to be the three pillars of the new order—Independence, Religion, and Union – and they would be defended by an *Ejército Trigarante*, an Army of the Three Guarantees, formed by a fusion of Iturbide's royalist troops with Guerrero's rebel forces. The plan offered something – though not everything – to every major interest group in Mexico, from Catholic traditionalist to liberal reformer; it even honoured Spain as the mother country, a sentiment that was still shared by most Mexicans. Iguala, in short was a creative compromise which very soon gelled into a national consensus. Within six months it had received the support of all the principal garrisons in Mexico, and the new viceroy sent out from the Peninsula had to recognize that the country had effectively won its independence, a fact that was ratified by treaty on 24 August 1821. A month later, Iturbide entered Mexico City in triumph and was installed as president of the Regency of the Mexican Empire.

The Plan of Iguala succeeded because it reconciled two historic interests of the creole élites which had never before coincided in the one political settlement: it allowed for legitimate creole self-government, while providing for social authority based on a monarchical and religious framework. It is little wonder, then, that it attracted other regional élites. The new Mexican empire invited the captaincy-general of the Yucatán, as well as the Central American provinces which comprised the Kingdom of Guatemala (namely, Chiapas, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Guatemala itself), to join it under the terms of Iguala. All agreed, except for El Salvador, which was promptly compelled to do so by the Mexican army.

But Spain would seek to destroy the settlement of Iguala by its unwillingness to come to terms with political facts. The liberal government in the Peninsula refused to recognize Mexican independence. Worse still, neither Ferdinand nor any Spanish prince could be induced to accept the Mexican Crown. This repudiation of a Mexican monarchy by the Bourbons removed the

lynch pin from the Iguala Plan, for with a break in dynastic continuity the legitimacy of the Mexican Crown would be compromised beyond repair.

Iturbide, nevertheless, tried to save the institution of Monarchy in Mexico. On the evening of 18 May 1822 a public demonstration led by soldiers from his own regiment proclaimed him Agustín I of Mexico; succumbing to popular pressure, congress accepted him as emperor. But Iturbide would prove unable to conjure up the sacred aura of royalty, which alone could command the allegiance of all his subjects. The creole aristocracy would not forgive him for being the son of a merchant, his brother officers regarded him as a political schemer, and Spaniards resident in Mexico still wanted a real prince of the blood. Finally, calls for a republic, which until then had fallen mostly on deaf ears, began to find a response in Mexico. As the consensus which had sustained the Plan of Iguala crumbled, the new creole emperor took arbitrary measures to shore up his authority, and in doing so stirred up even more hostility. In December 1822 an ambitious young colonel, Antonio López de Santa Anna, opportunistically proclaimed a republic and swiftly won the backing of several dissatisfied generals. The bulk of the army came out in support of the rebels and on 19 March 1823 Agustín I abdicated. He would be shot a year later when he returned to Mexico from his European exile on the mistaken assumption that he could regain his throne.

Thus, only two years after the declaration of independence on the basis of the Plan of Iguala, the principle of monarchy had been destroyed by a military *coup d'état*, the first of many in independent Mexico. A federal republic was declared by General Guadalupe Victoria as its first president. The Central American provinces, except Chiapas, seceded, and after a prolonged civil war, their federation broke up into five separate republics. For the next fifty years Mexico itself would be repeatedly torn apart by civil wars, and not the least of the many complicating factors in the labyrinthine affairs of the young Mexican republic was the stubborn survival of conservative hopes for the restoration of a Mexican monarchy, hopes that would not die until well past the middle of the century.

Source: Williamson, Edwin. *The Penguin History of Latin America*. London: Penguin Books. Pp. 225-227