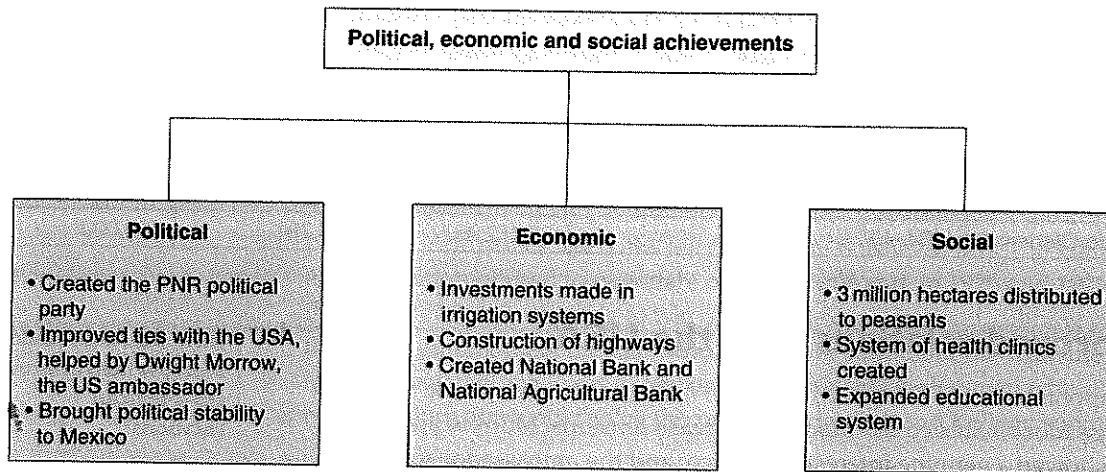


## The USA and Mexico by 1929

In terms of how well Calles was able to deal with Mexico's northern neighbor, the Mexican historian Enrique Krauze put it succinctly when he wrote in 1987 that 'Calles won more important items than the oil battle ... The United States withdrew her threat of invasion; he dissolved the worries of a "Soviet Mexico", and he reduced the harshness and hysteria of North American diplomacy. He won what he could win.'



SUMMARY DIAGRAM

Political, economic and social achievements of Calles

## 7 The *Maximato*: Who did what?

▶ *Key question: How did Calles control Mexican politics from 1928–34?*

Once Calles' term in office as President was over, the former general was not content to sit on the sidelines. He would be the power behind the scenes of the next three presidents, each of whom felt the intense pressure Calles applied to bend them to his will.

Why was Obregón assassinated?

### → Obregón and the 1928 elections

After spending four years mostly on his *hacienda* in Sonora, Obregón decided to re-enter national politics in 1928. However, the law – which forbade someone from holding the presidency for more than one term – stood in his way. Calles pressured Congress to amend the 1917 Constitution to allow

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presidents to be re-elected and run for a second term. Also included was that presidential terms would now be six years in length, known as the *sexenio*, instead of the traditional four. Obregón was still a popular figure in Mexico and not much stood in his way. Those who opposed this arrangement, including two politicians who wished to run for the office, soon found that Calles did not tolerate any challenge to his authority. Twenty-five generals and 150 others were summarily executed without trial. Obregón ran unopposed.

Obregón had escaped an assassination attempt in 1927, for which he blamed 'clerical reactionaries'. He would not be so lucky six months later, on 20 July 1928. After being elected President but before assuming the post, he met with a group of his supporters for a fancy luncheon. His assassin, a caricaturist called José de León Toral, had been making the rounds of the president's supporters, drawing quick sketches. When he approached Obregón and asked to show him his work, he pulled out a revolver and shot the president-elect five times. Toral later declared he killed Obregón and that his 'intention was good. My soul will be saved. So will Obregón's because I offered my life in atonement for him'. A religious fanatic, he did not distinguish between the more conciliatory Obregón and the atheist Calles. Supposedly his last words before being executed by a firing squad were 'Viva Cristo Rey!' (Long Live Christ the King).

### Political aftermath of the assassination

Many Mexican observers suspected that Calles, or the Minister of Labor and head of CROM (see page 85), Luis Morones, was behind the political killing. Calles acted quickly and pressured Congress to elect Emilio Portes Gil as interim president. By taking himself out of the running, he probably saved the country from another bout of rebellion. Portes Gil was to serve as leader from 1 December 1928 until February 1930. Elections for a new president were scheduled for November 1929.

Thus began the period in Mexican history known as the *Maximato*. Three presidents served from 1928 until 1936, all suspected of being controlled by Calles, who operated behind the scenes. Calles was called *el jefe máximo*.

### Presidency of Emilio Portes Gil (1928–30)

Portes Gil made his position clear when he announced to the press in September 1928 that 'My task will be to continue the policies developed by President Calles in all branches of public administration and also to procure the fulfilment of the social program outlined by the late General Obregón.' The 37-year-old was soon put to the test when competing factions of *Callistas*, *Obregonistas*, *ruralistas*, *cromistas*, disaffected Catholics and disloyal generals each tried to take political control, often through violent means, in eight Mexican states. A bomb exploded on the presidential train carrying Portes Gil in an assassination attempt. Nevertheless, this rebellion was crushed fairly quickly.

### KEY TERM

**El jefe máximo** Supreme leader, also known as Plutarco Calles.

**Callistas** Supporters of Calles.

**Obregonistas** Supporters of Obregón.

**Ruralistas** Supporters of land reform.

**Cromistas** Supporters of the workers' union CROM.

← What did Portes Gil accomplish in his two years as President?

In his short administration of fourteen months, Portes Gil attempted to enact significant land reform. He was able to provide as much land to peasants as Calles had distributed in 1948. He also oversaw the treaty that finally put an end to the bloody Cristero Revolt. Finally, he was able to defuse a crisis at the National University of Mexico that resulted in the university being granted autonomy. In foreign relations, Portes Gil broke off diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union.

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## → **Presidency of Pascual Ortiz Rubio (1930–32)**

### **The Partido Nacional Revolucionario, 1929**

Although the law had been changed that allowed him to run for his own second term, Calles declined to do so, in favor of engineering politically useful substitutions. He seemed quite content to be the puppet-master. It was also under his guidance that a new political party, the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR) or National Revolutionary Party, was formed.

Calles hoped to bring some order to Mexican politics by creating a national political party that would be responsible for choosing the country's leaders and creating national policies. Up until that time, political parties were usually short-lived and only functioned when there were elections. Calles created something much more permanent. The PNR was a loose amalgamation of important political interests all joined under one roof. It was this organization that ensured continuity in Mexican politics. However, the PNR and its successors turned Mexico into what was basically a one-party state until the elections of 2000, or, to put it another way, ruled Mexico for 71 years without much opposition.

### **The 1929 elections**

In the special elections of 1929 that were meant to replace the interim president, the two main contenders were Pascual Ortiz Rubio, backed by the PNR, and the former Secretary of Education, José Vasconcelos, chosen by the Anti-Re-electionist Party. Vasconcelos wished to end the corruption that had infected the political process and reinvigorate the ideals of the Revolution. When he was chosen by his party, he said 'Mexico has less liberty than an imperial colony. National autonomy has been limited by perpetual tyranny.' These were clear insults towards Calles and the PNR. Vasconcelos was also in favor of women's suffrage – Mexican women would not get to vote until 1958. *The National Revolutionary* newspaper was the mouthpiece of the PNR, giving a voice to their views against Vasconcelos: 'One doesn't govern a country with literary instruction ... the PNR did not distribute the Iliad ... only 35 million hectares.' It attacked Vasconcelos and 'the intellectuals, homosexuals, bourgeoisie, students, feminists and fanatics' who favored him. The campaign was violent. In September 1929, shots were fired at Vasconcelos, though he was not hit.

Ortiz Rubio was elected President of Mexico with a reported 93.6 per cent of the vote. These figures were certainly manipulated by the PNR, which also

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carried out a campaign of violence and intimidation to blunt Vasconcelos' appeal to many middle-class Mexicans. Vasconcelos quickly left Mexico, fearing assassination. He said that 'I have not been defeated – I have been cheated. Dozens of my leaders have been killed by the Portes Gil Government and hundreds of my followers are yet in jail. Our crime is to have won 95 per cent of the vote.'

### The aftermath of the elections

Very quickly, the Mexican government crushed a revolt by those who refused to accept the official election results. They executed generals and rounded up Vasconcelos officials.

On 5 February 1930, Ortiz Rubio took the oath of office before 50,000 spectators. Two hours later, his motorcade was attacked. He was shot in his jaw but recovered. The would-be assassin, Miguel Flores, was a Vasconcelos supporter. In retaliation, the military tortured and murdered dozens of Ortiz Rubio's opponents. This was not an auspicious beginning to Ortiz Rubio's presidency. He was supposed to finish out the *sexenio* but would only last two and a half years.

### Challenges facing Ortiz Rubio

Domestically, the new President had difficulties blunting Calles' influence. Whenever he tried to chart an independent course, Calles held him back, particularly when Ortiz Rubio sacked a Calles crony, Rivera Palacio, while choosing who was going to be in his Cabinet. Calles then engineered the virtual takeover of the Cabinet by forcing the President to install Calles' supporters. Ortiz Rubio could not turn to the Party for any sort of substantial support because the PNR was torn apart by various factions. The legislative elections in July 1930 provided ample evidence of how the PNR had become the controlling force in Mexican politics. Although there were countless examples of electoral fraud, the PNR's choices became the new legislators. Ortiz Rubio also had the misfortune of becoming President as the Great Depression took hold. Petroleum, mineral and agricultural exports plummeted as nations put up protective trade barriers, and it became difficult to get credit. Exports fell by half from 1929 to 1932 and Mexico's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) dropped by 12.5 per cent in 1930.

### Mexico's three international problems

First, foreign bankers wanted to be sure the country could repay its external debts before lending it any further money. The Mexican government hoped to take out a new loan of US\$450 million to be used for public works, but the bankers would not budge. In July 1930, Mexico issued bonds in exchange for the original loans and an agreement was signed for these to be paid off over 45 years. The bankers agreed to wipe off US\$211 million (the accumulated interest since 1910) of Mexico's debt. Mexico then asked for new loans, but these were refused because bankers were not confident in its ability to pay them back.

Secondly, the seemingly endless conflict with the USA over the oil industry continued (see chapter 4). US oil companies were beginning to shift their attention to Venezuela, where a more compliant government did not threaten growing oil production. Consequently, oil production and exports fell significantly during the Great Depression, from 200 million barrels in 1921 to 33 million in 1932.

Lastly, the Great Depression led to the repatriation of over 300,000 Mexican workers from the United States. Mexico had also forced the departure of roughly 40,000 US workers from Mexico.

One bright spot, internationally, was that Mexico finally joined the League of Nations in September 1931. For years, Mexico had been sidelined from full international participation because of the continued unrest and civil strife brought on by the Revolution and the lack of resolution regarding ownership rights of petroleum. Mexico was reluctant to become a member of an organization that had not stopped US intervention in the Caribbean and Central America. However, as the threat of a US invasion receded, Mexico looked further afield. Mexico needed to find new markets now that its most important trading partner, the USA, was importing much less as a consequence of the Depression.

#### SOURCE Q

**Excerpt from *Triumphs and Tragedy: A History of the Mexican People* by Ramón Eduardo Ruíz, Norton and Co, New York, 1992, page 383.**

*Prodded by the Great Depression, racial bigotry had its day in the sun, this time against the Chinese. Brought in during the late nineteenth century, mostly to lay railroad track and work in the mines, the Chinese had tarried only briefly in those jobs. When the Maderistas took office, most of them were in business and commerce for themselves, the owners of laundries and stores selling groceries, vegetables, clothing, shoes, and diverse other items. Usually they were in competition with Mexicans. They took Mexican women for their wives and raised boys and girls with the faces of two races. This led Sonora in 1923 to bar marriages between Mexicans and Chinese and, two years later, to confine the Chinese to their own barrios. Those who broke the law were fined, sent to jail, or deported. Ghettos for Chinese, also decreed by law, could be found virtually the length and breadth of the border ... even Chiapas and Oaxaca [much further south], heavily Indian states, followed that pattern. For all that, this failed to satisfy the bigots who, in the early 1930s, ran the Chinese out of Sonora and Sinaloa, headquarters of the agitators ... One of their principal leaders was Rodolfo Elías Calles, the son of the Jefe Máximo and governor of Sonora. Francisco (Pancho) Villa had earlier shot and killed Chinese ... In towns such as Cananea, mobs fell upon the hapless Chinese, beating them and looting their stores. Altogether, eleven thousand Chinese had to flee northern Mexico.*

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What were possible reasons for attacks against the Chinese, according to Source Q?

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## The end of Ortiz Rubio

Politically, Ortiz Rubio's days were numbered, since Calles would not allow any sort of disobedience. Ortiz Rubio had little choice but to resign for 'health reasons' in September 1932. Like many other ousted Mexican leaders, he left for the USA.

Next in line for presidency was someone Calles knew would be more malleable. Abelardo Rodríguez was yet another Sonoran and military officer. Few were fooled by Calles' manoeuvres. As an editorial in the *Washington Post* put it, 'That the forceful guiding hand of General Plutarco Elías Calles is behind the latest change in Mexico, the resignation of President Pascual Ortiz Rubio, is not doubted by those who are familiar with Mexican politics.'

## Presidency of General Abelardo Rodríguez (1932–34)

Rodríguez was a self-made millionaire whose fortune was garnered in casinos and bars in Sonora. He had served as minister in several administrations and was a pliant tool in the hands of Calles. Unsurprisingly, Congress unanimously chose him to complete the final two years of Obregón's unserved *sexenio*. He clearly knew his role: after being chosen, he said 'I shall try to bring to a final stage of development all the possibilities of the Revolution with the aid of the National Revolutionary Party'. He was put in place to administer Calles' programs.

## The Great Depression

During Rodríguez's presidency, Mexico slowly crawled from the depths of the Great Depression. This was due to two important factors. First, the value of Mexico's exports increased so that by 1934 they were equal to when the Depression first struck in 1929. Secondly, significant changes were made in the country's monetary policies. The peso was allowed to float instead of being artificially pegged to the US dollar. Both these factors increased Mexico's monetary reserves.

## Relations with the USA

US–Mexican relations were generally smooth. Franklin D. Roosevelt chose his friend Josephus Daniels to be his ambassador to Mexico. Daniels was the public face of Roosevelt's foreign policy, the **Good Neighbor Policy**, towards Latin America. Daniels showed his appreciation of and admiration for Mexico's history and culture, and this made him a welcome guest. He also stressed his approval of universal public education in Mexico and his support for the elected government in Spain at the outset of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. Both of these positions were dear to the Mexicans.

← In what ways was Rodríguez more malleable than the previous two presidents?

### KEY TERM

#### Good Neighbor Policy

When Franklin D. Roosevelt became president in 1933, he announced that the USA would become a good neighbor to Latin American countries. This marked a departure from US military interventions.

Domestically, 1932–34 saw the expansion of national industries, especially in the production of electricity and cement. Roads were built and local demand was met by locally produced goods rather than imports.

### Domestic policies

The government also hoped to offset the power of foreign-owned petroleum companies by creating the *Petróleos de México* (PEMEX). It was funded wholly by the government but remained of little threat to the foreign concerns because it had few resources. Thinking ahead, the government also expanded Mexico's territorial waters to 50 km, hoping that in the future petroleum would be found in the Gulf of Mexico.

Rodríguez continued to make efforts to professionalize the armed forces so that they would not be a future threat to the state. Allegiance to the nation, fitness and obedience to authority were stressed. The soldiers, it was hoped, were not in the army to enrich themselves but to serve.

In other employment, a minimum wage was set for the first time, but conditions for industrial workers did not dramatically improve. Strikes became more frequent; in 1934 there were 202. Rodríguez attacked many of the independent unions behind them. Strong-arm tactics were used to attack Communists and Jews alike. A repressive trend seemed to be developing in Mexico as the government kept searching for conspiracies from alleged enemies.

The PNR created the Six-Year Plan to provide guidelines for the country's social, educational and economic progress. This was passed at the Party convention in December 1933 and took effect the following year. Land reform, public health care and education were all discussed. There was a call for 15 per cent of the federal budget to be earmarked for education – an impressive demand (at least on paper).

### The Church and education

The Catholic Church was suspected of plotting against the government and came under increased scrutiny and persecution. The Church was very much against the introduction of 'Socialist' education, as the Ministry of Education termed it, for all. It also vigorously deplored the proposed addition of sex education to the curriculum. Both measures struck at the core of the Church's beliefs. The government, for its part, hoped both to expand its influence in schools and further cripple the Church. Congress had even amended the Constitution with an article that made its intentions plain. The article read 'The education from the state will be socialist – and will further exclude all religious doctrine to combat fanaticism and prejudices ... the school will organize its teaching and activities to help create in the young a rational and exact concept of the universe and social life. Only the State – Federal, State, Municipal – can provide primary, secondary, and university education.'

### *An education to escape 'the slavery of capitalism'*

The government also sponsored huge marches to promote its plans, such as the one that took place in Mexico City on 28 October 1934. Tens of thousands

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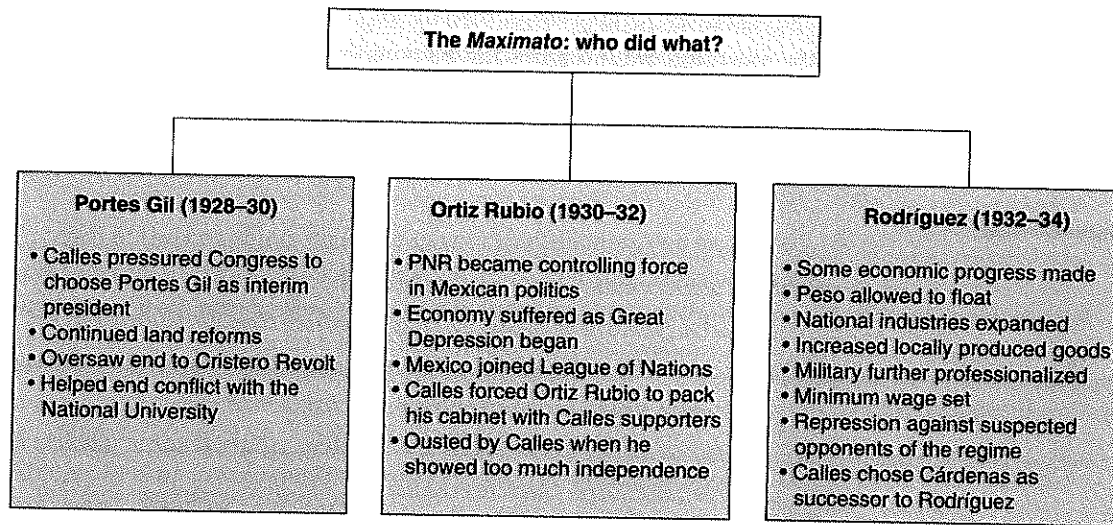
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marched in front of Rodríguez and his full Cabinet. The president-elect, Lázaro Cárdenas, saluted the marchers from the balcony of the PNR headquarters. There certainly was no separation from the party and government policy since they were one and the same. According to the *New York Times*, some of the banners paraded included slogans such as 'Socialistic education means freedom from Catholic oppression'; 'We seek the return of all priests to their home which is the Vatican'; and 'We demand socialistic education to escape from the slavery of capitalism'. It was all a good show meant to cement support for the government, but it did not mean that the country had embarked in any particularly new direction. That would have to come from the next president.



**SUMMARY DIAGRAM**

Similarities and differences of the three presidents during the *Maximato*

**Chapter summary**

**The Construction of the Post-Revolutionary State, 1920–34**

From 1920 to 1934, successive governments sought to bring order and stability to Mexico. This was no easy task in the aftermath of a bloody revolution that cost the lives of 1 million Mexicans. The need to placate various

groups, among them industrial workers, peasants, the middle class and *hacendados*, did not lead to dramatic social and economic changes. President Obregón ushered in the decade, and his four-year term was followed by that of Calles. Calles served as President from 1924 to 1928 and continued to rule the country from behind the scenes until 1934. Several serious outbreaks of violence and rebellion occurred, including the ferocious Cristero Revolt, but the foundations for a calmer and more prosperous Mexico had been laid.