



**Mexico**

# Mexico

## Capital

Mexico City

## National Symbols

### The National Flag

The Flag of the United Mexican States or Mexico is a vertical tricolor of green, white, and red with the national coat of arms in the center of the white stripe. While the meaning of the colors has changed over time, these three colors were adopted by Mexico following independence from Spain during the country's War of Independence. The current flag was adopted in 1968, but the overall design has been used since 1821 when the First National Flag was created. Throughout history, the flag has changed 4 times, as the design of the coat of arms and the length-width ratios of the flag have been modified.



### The Coat Of Arms

The coat of arms has had the same features throughout time: an eagle, holding a serpent in its talon, is perched on top of a prickly pear cactus; the cactus is situated on

a rock that rises above a lake. The coat of arms is derived from an Aztec legend that the gods told them to build a city where they spot an eagle and a serpent, which is now Mexico City. The current national flag, the Fourth National Flag, is also used as the Mexican naval ensign by ships registered in Mexico.



### The National Tree

The Mexican national tree is the Nopal. The word "nopal" comes from the indigenous Nahuatl word "nopalli." This cactus is a type of prickly pear that grows throughout Mexico. Evidence suggests that the people of Mexico were eating nopal 11,000 years ago. Plant specialists dating the remains of seeds and pieces of the pads (called "pencas") believe that the cultivation of nopal as a food crop began about 5,000 years ago.

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With its ability to grow to 15 feet and form a dense spiny barrier of tennis racket-sized pencas, nopal makes an effective hedge to repel intruders or contain livestock. It also serves as an inexpensive but nutritious cattle feed, and plays an important role in preventing soil erosion. Recently, medical science has discovered many medicinal uses for nopal. The fibers of the plant produce a thick syrup that helps to regulate and reduce blood sugar and cholesterol. The syrup also relieves sore throat and irritable bowel syndrome. Nopal flowers and pads are used topically to treat burns, cuts, insect bites, and sunburn.



Nopal is an essential ingredient in Mexican cuisine. Typical dishes include nopal tacos and eggs with nopal. Many vegetable and meat plates feature nopal as a key ingredient. The fruit of the plant is eaten plain or candied. Fortunately, for the Mexican child who must "eat his vegetables," the spines are scraped off during preparation.

## History

### Independence Day

Every September 16th Mexicans all over the world celebrate Mexico's independence from Spanish rule.

### Independence

As is widely known, indigenous peoples were the first to inhabit what is now known as Mexico. They created great civilizations such as the Olmec, the Teotihuacan, Maya, Toltec, and of course the most powerful of all, the Aztec Empire.

After Christopher Columbus "discovered" America, the Spaniards carried out expeditions to find gold in Mexico. In 1521, about 500 Spanish soldiers arrived in Mexico, headed by an ambitious man: Hernan Cortes. At this time, the Aztecs had built a great empire that ruled over all Meso-America, so the Spaniards decided to direct their attacks towards them.

The indigenous nations that were under Aztec rule were tired of the physical and economic hardships imposed upon them by the empire. The circumstance made them think that by helping the Conquerors defeat the Aztecs, they would be better off. So they decided to help the Spaniards. They didn't know it at the time, but they had been liberated from one oppressor and fallen into the hands of a much more powerful and authoritarian one. This is how the Conquest of what is now Mexico began.

On the 13th of August 1521, Cuauhtemoc, the last Aztec emperor was captured. The indigenous allies of the Spaniards raided Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec empire. This was the beginning of three centuries of Spanish rule. The new colony was named "Nueva España" (New Spain).

The years that followed were devastating. The conquerors brought with them diseases not known to the natives.

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The epidemics that broke out as well as the merciless workload that was imposed upon the natives, dramatically diminished the Indian population. There were approximately 20 million Indians inhabiting the territory before the Conquest, and after just one century of Spanish rule there were only 1 million left!

Colonial society was highly stratified. Spaniards, born in Spain, occupied the higher positions, followed by "Criollos", those born in Mexico from Spanish parents; then Mestizos, the mix-blood offspring of Spaniards and Natives; Indios, Native Indians; and Negros, African slaves. Each socio-ethnic group had different rights and duties. Discontent steadily grew, especially among the Criollos, who were always treated as second-class subjects of the Spanish Crown. It was no surprise then, that Criollos were the spark that ignited the Independence movement.

Influenced by the concepts of liberty, equality and democracy proposed by the French philosophers Rousseau, Montesquieu, Voltaire, and by the war of Independence of the United States, they decided to start a revolt. It was 1810, and their plan was to start the war on the 2nd of October. Unfortunately, their plans were discovered in early September. The movement was in trouble. They had two alternatives; either abandon their plans, or move faster and start the revolt immediately. Fortunately for Mexico, they decided upon the second option.

In the early hours of September 16th, 1810, Father Hidalgo, accompanied by several conspirators (Ignacio Allende, Doña Josefa Ortiz de Dominguez) rang the bell of his little

church, calling everyone to fight for liberty. This was the beginning of the War of Independence, which lasted 10 years.



## Government

The United Mexican States is a democratic republic whose government is based on a congressional system, in which the president of Mexico is both, head of state and head of government. The federal government is divided into three branches: executive, legislative and judicial as established by the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States, published in 1917. The constituent states of the federation must also have a republican form of government based on a congressional system as established by their respective constitutions.

### The Powers of the Union

The federal government, known as the Supreme Power of the Federation, is constituted by the Powers of the Union: the executive, the legislative and the judicial powers. All branches of government are independent.

### Executive Branch

The executive power is exercised by the executive branch, which is headed by the

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President, advised by a cabinet of secretaries.

The president of the United Mexican States is elected for a 6 year term. There is no office for a vice-president; in case of "absolute absence" or incapacity of the President, the Congress of the Union (with a quorum of at least two-thirds of all representatives) will elect by absolute majority an interim president. If the absolute absence occurred during the first two years of the period, the Congress will also call elections in no less than 14 months and no more than 18 months after the inauguration of the interim president.

## Legislative Branch

Legislative power or Congress is divided into a two-chamber legislature comprising the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies.

The powers of Congress include the right to pass laws, impose taxes, declare war, approve the national budget, approve or reject treaties and conventions made with foreign countries, and ratify diplomatic appointments.

### Senate

The Senate addresses all matters concerning foreign policy, approves international agreements, and confirms presidential appointments. The Senate is integrated by 128 representatives of the constituent states of the federation. Senators are elected every six years.

### The Chamber of Deputies

The Chamber of Deputies addresses all matters pertaining to the government's

budget and public expenditures. It is formed by 500 representatives of the nation. All deputies are elected every three years.



## Judicial Branch

Judicial power consists of The Supreme Court of Justice, comprised of eleven judges or ministers appointed by the President with Senate approval, who interpret laws and judge cases of federal competency.

Other institutions of the judiciary are the Electoral Tribunal, collegiate, unitary and district tribunals, and the Council of the Federal Judiciary. The ministers of the Supreme Court will serve for 15 years and cannot be appointed to serve more than once.

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## Provinces



## State and Local Governments

Mexico is a federation of 31 free and sovereign states. All constituent states of the federation must have a republican form of government based on a congressional system. The executive power is vested upon an elected governor. The legislative power is vested upon a unicameral Congress whose composition is determined by the constitutions of each state. All states are independent and autonomous in their internal administration. The federal government cannot intervene in any particular state's affairs unless there is a full cessation of government powers and through previous study, recommendation and/or approval of the Congress of the Union. The states cannot make an alliance with any foreign power or with any other state. They cannot unilaterally declare war against a foreign nation unless their territory is invaded and cannot wait for the Congress of the Union to issue a declaration of war.

## Municipal Governments

All states are divided into municipalities, the smallest autonomous political entity in Mexico. Municipalities are governed through a municipal council (ayuntamiento) headed by a mayor or municipal president (presidente municipal) whose work is

supported by a predetermined number of regents (regidores) and trustees (sindicos), according to the constitutions of the states they are part of. Since 1917, there are no intermediate entities or authorities between municipalities and the state governments. Members of the municipal councils cannot be reelected for the next immediate term. Autonomous municipalities are constitutionally known as "free municipalities" (municipios libres).

Municipalities are responsible for public services (such as water and sewerage), street lighting, public safety, traffic, supervision of slaughterhouses and the cleaning and maintenance of public parks, gardens and cemeteries, as well as in zoning and urban planning. They may also assist the state and federal governments in education, emergency fire and medical services, environmental protection and maintenance of monuments and historical landmarks. As of 1983, they can collect property taxes and user fees although more funds are obtained from the state and federal governments than from their own collection efforts.

## The Federal District

Mexico City does not belong to any state in particular, but to the federation, being the capital of the country and seat of the powers of the Union. As such, it is constituted as a Federal District. The Federal District is divided into "delegaciones" or boroughs. Though not fully equivalent to a municipality in that they do not have regulatory powers, they have gained limited autonomy in recent years, and the representatives to the head of government are now elected by the citizens as well.

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## The First President

Between the time of Emperor Agustin de Iturbide's abdication (March 19th, 1823) and Guadalupe Victoria's assumption of the office of President (October 10th, 1824), there was a brief period when the executive power of the government was held by a committee. At one time or another the members of this committee included Pedro Celestino Negrete, Jose Mariano Michelena, Nicolas Bravo, Miguel Dominguez, Vicente Guerrero and Guadalupe Victoria.

## Main Political Parties

Constitutionally, political parties in Mexico must promote the participation of the people in the democratic life of the country, contribute in the representation of the nation and citizens, and be the access through which citizens can participate in public office, through the programs, principles and ideals they postulate.

All political parties must be registered before the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE), the institution in charge of organizing and overseeing the federal electoral processes, but must obtain at least 2% of votes in the federal elections to keep their registry. Registered political parties receive public funding for their operation and can also obtain private funding within the limits prescribed by the law.

Political parties are allowed to form alliances or coalitions to nominate candidates for any particular election. The coalition must present itself with a particular name and logo. Proportional representation (plurinominal) seats are assigned to the coalition based on the percentage of votes obtained in the elections, and then the

coalition re-assigns them to the constituent political parties. Once each party in the coalition has been assigned plurinominal seats, they do not necessarily continue to work as a coalition in government.

Politics in Mexico are dominated by three main political parties: National Action Party (PAN), the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). As of 2006 the following political parties are also registered before the IFE and all have representatives at the Congress of the Union: Labor Party (Partido del Trabajo, PT), Green Ecological Party (Partido Verde Ecologista de Mexico, PVEM), Convergence Party (Convergencia), New Alliance (Nueva Alianza, PNA), and Social Democratic and Peasant Alternative Party (Partido Alternativa Socialdemocrata y Campesina, PASC).

Throughout the 20th century, PRI had an almost hegemonic power at the state and federal level, which slowly began to recede in the late 1980s. Even though since the 1940s, PAN had won a couple of seats in the Congress, and in 1947 the first presidential municipality (in Quiroga, Michoacan), it wasn't until 1989, that the first non-PRI governor of a state was elected (at Baja California). It was in 1997, that PRI lost its absolute majority in the Congress of the Union, and in 2000 the first non-PRI president was elected since 1929.

## Festivities

Independence Day is the main Mexican festivity. Flags wave from practically every house and building. Streets, houses, buildings and cars are decorated everywhere in the country.

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On every street corner there are vendors selling flags, balloons, sombreros, etc., all with the green, white, and red, reminding of the national colors. Many people walk around dressed in typical Mexican clothing: men as "Charros" and women as "Chinas Poblanas". Those who don't own a typical outfit, at least find something to wear in the colors of the flag.



Food is always a very important part of these festivities. Literarily hundreds of stands are set up several days before and offer the traditional "antojitos", most aptly described as a variety of finger foods, Mexican candies, and punch. Punch is a drink made of fruits that are in season: guavas, sugarcane, raisins and apples, and such a delicious aroma. During September, Mes de la Patria, (the month of the nation) restaurants serve traditional Mexican dishes, such as Mole Poblano, Chiles en Nogad and Guacamole.



Live Mariachi Music bands play to the delight of all present. There are also photography stands where anyone can have a picture taken, wearing a "sombrero" and on the top of a wooden horse! The euphoria is collective and all are prepared to shout, yell and make as much noise as possible with fake trumpets, noisemakers and whistles.

As the evening advances, the plaza gradually fills with more and more people; suddenly there is practically no room to move. Excitement and euphoria reach a crescendo at the culminating moment when a government official arrives in the Zocalo Plaza, at 11:00 P.M. to give the "grito" or cry of Independence. This ritual recreates the moment in which Father Hidalgo, gathered his followers in Dolores Guanajuato. It is customary for our President to deliver the grito in Mexico City's Zocalo Plaza. In front of this square the Palacio Nacional, (the National Palace) is located together with the President's office. Here, in this colonial building the original bell rung by Hidalgo is placed every 16th of September.

The ceremony reaches the high point when the crowd joins in proudly shouting out the names of the heroes of our Independence, to end with the exciting VIVA MEXICO! When the grito ceremony ends, the sky lights up with multicolored rockets that

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shower the hearts of Mexican people with the pride of knowing that they are a free and independent nation.

## Social Recognition

### Historic Figures

#### Pancho Villa



Pancho Villa's real name was Doroteo Arango, born in San Juan del Rio, Durango, in 1877 or maybe in 1879, according to some sources.

The most wanted man of the world spent much of his life in Durango until, at age 16, he killed a man who had raped his younger sister. Little record exists of the next four or five years of his life, during which he changed his name to Francisco Villa to evade the law. By the time Villa was 20, he had moved northward to working on and off as a miner in Parral while selling stolen cattle in Chihuahua. Tired of the laborer's life, he added bank robbery to his list of crimes.

Villa's Robin Hood story began after he established himself and his bandit followers in the sierras in 1900. During this period, he

became a legendary hero to the poor for skillfully evading the oppressive rural police. In 1910, Villa and his men came down from the hills to join the revolutionary forces, making a historical transition from "banditos" to "revolucionarios". The charismatic figure was able to recruit an army of thousands, including a substantial number of Americans. Villa even created one squadron made up entirely of Americans under the leadership of Capt. Tracey Richardson, a man who apparently fought with many different insurgent armies around the world at that time.

Around this time, Villa also became something of a folk hero in the U.S., and Hollywood filmmakers as well as U.S. newspaper photographers flocked to Northern Mexico to record his battle exploits, many of which were staged for the benefit of the cameras. Pancho Villa officially married 26 times.

Villa's forces were based in Chihuahua, where Villa ruled over northern Mexico like a medieval warlord. Villa financed his army by stealing from the endless cattle herds in northern Mexico and selling them north of the border, where he found plenty of U.S. merchants willing to trade guns and ammunition. In true Robin Hood style, he broke up the vast land holdings of local "haciendados" and divided and gave them out to the widows and orphans of his fallen soldiers.

A split among the revolutionary leaders soon placed Obregon and Carranza against Pancho Villa. When the U.S. government came out openly in support of the Carranza presidency, Villa retaliated by entering forcibly US border towns in order to steal

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On the U.S. side of the border, Villa's image went down while many in Mexico saw Villa as an avenger of decades of "Yanqui" oppression. Despite his popularity, the combined forces of Carranza and Obregon defeated the Villistas one battle after another. In 1919, the Mexican government accepted his surrender and retired Villa on a general's salary to Durango. In 1923, he was assassinated while returning from bank business in Chihuahua.

Today, Villa is remembered with pride by most Mexicans for having led the most important military campaigns of the constitutionalist revolution. Because of Villa's attack to US towns and subsequent evasion of U.S. troops, he is also often cited as the only foreign military personage ever to have "successfully" invaded continental U.S. territory.