



Two Emperors and a Strongman Mexico's Struggle with Personal Rule

Mexico's first century of independence produced two short-lived emperors and a president whose authority outlasted both monarchies combined. Agustín de Iturbide wore the first imperial crown. Maximilian of Habsburg accepted the second, hoping to establish a lasting dynasty. Porfirio Díaz never claimed a throne, but his long presidency concentrated power so effectively that Mexico's republican institutions often served his personal rule.

Their governments differed: the emperors pursued monarchical projects, while Díaz preserved the outward forms of a republic. Yet their stories share a central question: Could a powerful ruler bring lasting stability to a country divided over land, privilege, sovereignty, and political participation?

Iturbide: From Independence to Empire

Agustín de Iturbide began his military career defending Spanish rule against Mexican insurgents. In 1821, however, he changed course and reached an accommodation with independence leader Vicente Guerrero. The resulting Plan of Iguala called for an independent constitutional monarchy, protection of Catholicism, and unity between people of Spanish and American birth.

Iturbide entered Mexico City at the head of the Army of the Three Guarantees in September 1821. Independence had been achieved, but the form and leadership of the new government remained unsettled. The original hope that a European royal would accept the Mexican throne failed to produce a monarch.

In May 1822, a military and popular demonstration demanded that Iturbide become emperor, and Congress approved his elevation. He was crowned Agustín I that July. The soldier who had helped secure independence now embodied the new nation's imperial ambitions.

A Crown That Lasted Less Than a Year

The first emperor inherited an exhausted treasury, competing regional interests, and deep disagreements over political authority. His relationship with Congress deteriorated, and his decision to dissolve it in October 1822 strengthened opposition.

Military leaders and provincial interests rallied around demands to restore representative government. The Plan of Casa Mata, proclaimed in February 1823, helped undermine imperial authority and bring back Congress. Iturbide abdicated on March 19, less than a year after becoming emperor.

Exile did not end his story. He returned to Mexico in July 1824, apparently unaware that legislation had made his return a capital offense. Arrested shortly after landing, he was executed at Padilla, Tamaulipas, on July 19. Mexico's first emperor had gone from independence hero to monarch, exile, and condemned man in fewer than three years.

Maximilian: An Empire Supported by Foreign Arms

Four decades later, another imperial experiment emerged from foreign intervention and Mexico's internal divisions.

French emperor Napoleon III used Mexico's financial difficulties as an opening to pursue a government favorable to French interests. Mexican conservatives who opposed the liberal republic also supported a monarchy. Their chosen ruler was Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian of Austria, younger brother of Emperor Franz Joseph.

Maximilian accepted the crown in 1864 and arrived with his Belgian wife, Carlota. His court brought European ceremony to Mexico, but its survival depended heavily on French troops. President Benito Juárez never accepted the empire's legitimacy and continued the republican resistance.

Maximilian was also an awkward champion for his conservative supporters. Some of his ideas were liberal, making him less willing than they expected to reverse the reforms of his republican opponents. He consequently struggled to reconcile the interests of the people who had brought him to power with his own conception of enlightened government.

Iturbide's Grandson: The Heir Who Never Reigned

The two imperial stories became directly connected through a child.

Maximilian and Carlota had no children together. In September 1865, Maximilian reached an agreement with the Iturbide family that placed **Agustín de Iturbide y Green**, the first emperor's young grandson, under his guardianship. The arrangement linked the foreign-born emperor to the family of Mexico's original monarch.

The child's parents were Ángel de Iturbide, a son of Agustín I, and Alice Green, an American. The agreement carried a painful personal cost: the boy was separated from his parents, and his mother subsequently sought his return. Contemporary diplomatic correspondence records both the agreement and her distress.

Young Agustín was widely described as a prospective successor to Maximilian. Contemporary accounts even called him the heir to Mexico's throne. The prospect was striking: a grandson of the first emperor might eventually inherit the second emperor's crown.

Nevertheless, "scheduled to succeed" makes the arrangement sound more certain than it was. The guardianship agreement itself did not establish an unconditional succession, and the empire's survival was far from assured. Agustín represented a possible dynastic future, not a guaranteed next reign. The monarchy collapsed before that future could be tested.

The End of the Second Empire

After the American Civil War, the United States increased pressure against the French intervention. Persistent Mexican resistance and the expedition's mounting costs also weakened Napoleon III's commitment. French troops withdrew, leaving Maximilian increasingly exposed.

He remained in Mexico and made his final stand at Querétaro. Republican forces captured him, and a military court condemned him to death. On June 19, 1867, Maximilian was executed alongside Generals Miguel Miramón and Tomás Mejía.

Like Iturbide, he had worn a Mexican crown only briefly and died before a firing squad. With his death, the second imperial experiment ended, and Iturbide's grandson never became emperor.

Porfirio Díaz: Power Without a Crown

Porfirio Díaz achieved something neither emperor managed: decades of political dominance.

His ascendancy began in 1876 and lasted until 1911. He served as president during 1876–1880 and again from 1884 to 1911, with Manuel González holding the presidency between those periods. Altogether, Díaz occupied the office for roughly thirty years.

The *Porfiriato*, as this era became known, brought substantial economic change. Railways expanded, industry developed, and foreign investment helped transform mining and other sectors. For supporters, Díaz offered order and modernization after decades of upheaval.

Those achievements carried heavy costs. Political competition narrowed, opposition faced repression, and economic benefits were distributed unequally. Many rural communities faced pressure on their land, while workers had limited power to challenge employers or the government. Mexico modernized, but prosperity and political influence remained concentrated.

The Election That Became a Revolution

The decisive crisis came as Díaz approached another presidential election in 1910.

Francisco I. Madero challenged the system of repeated reelection and demanded genuine political competition. Díaz's government arrested him before the election. After escaping, Madero issued the Plan of San Luis, calling for an uprising on November 20, 1910.

The Mexican Revolution therefore began **before Díaz fell from power**. His refusal to permit an effective electoral challenge helped turn political opposition into armed rebellion.

Díaz resigned in May 1911 and departed for exile in France. His political demise was an early victory of the revolution, rather than its starting point. His actual death followed in Paris in 1915.

Removing him did not resolve the grievances that had united his opponents. Some wanted democratic elections; others sought land redistribution, improved working conditions, or greater regional independence. The fall of the old ruler exposed those differences and opened a much longer struggle over Mexico's future.

The Fragility of Personal Power

Iturbide's empire lasted less than a year. Maximilian's lasted about three. Díaz's presidency extended across roughly three decades. Their different outcomes reveal both the appeal and the limitations of government centered on one man.

Crowns could confer ceremony, and long tenure could create an appearance of permanence. Neither could settle Mexico's deeper disputes over legitimacy, national independence, land, and political rights. When those disputes overwhelmed the ruler, the struggle continued beyond him.