

The chaotic years (1821-1848) were followed by the presidency of Benito Juárez, a liberal, and the country adopted a new constitution which threatened the power of the conservatives. The Reform Laws introduced by Juárez expropriated all Church property (other than church buildings themselves) and clearly separated Church from State. The conservatives looked for support abroad and Napoleon III of France took the opportunity to gain a foothold in the New World. Maximilian von Hapsburg was named emperor and the French military took over most of the country. Juárez was forced to flee, but returned after the U.S. Civil War. With some support from the United States, which sought to eliminate European influence in the region, Juárez was able to defeat Maximilian and return to the presidency.

Juárez died in office and, after a period of turbulence, one of his generals, Porfirio Díaz, became president and governed for 30 years with all the excesses of a dictatorship.

The Díaz rule ended with the Revolution of 1910, led by Francisco Madero, a moderate democrat. Although the revolutionary forces quickly gained power, Madero proved to be an ineffective leader and he was soon overthrown and executed by General Huerta. A bloody civil war ensued which led to the deaths of more than one million Mexicans. The revolutionary forces of Carranza, Villa and Zapata triumphed in 1917 and the new constitution that year called for extensive land reform and firmly entrenched the rights of labour unions.

Even though the revolution ended in 1917, it was difficult for the central government to exert its authority throughout the country as local revolutionary warlords were unwilling to relinquish power. Hence, the post-revolutionary years were marked by considerable instability.

In 1929, the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR) was founded as a broad-based organization that could counteract political instability by drawing support from all of Mexico's regions and major social groupings. The PNR became the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and it held full power until 1988, when it lost its first state election to the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN).

The tripartite combination of labour, campesinos and popular sectors within the PRI has enabled it to ensure an orderly succession of presidential leadership from the time of its founding to the present day. Mexico's current president, Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León, was elected in 1994.