

Mexico: Background

People

Mexico is the world's largest Spanish-speaking country. It is also distinguished within the Latin American region by being largely (79%) of "mestizo" or of mixed Indian-Spanish origin; 11% of the population is Indian.

Although Mexico has been successful in reducing its rate of population growth in the last 15 years, 53% of Mexicans are less than 20 years old. Both education and health care are theoretically free and universal, but in reality these services are either not available or beyond the financial reach of one-quarter to one-third of the population.

The majority of Mexicans remain outside the economic mainstream, and the gap between the wealthiest and the poorest is widening. The standard of living of the middle class has been declining rapidly.

Mexico is a centralized country with one quarter of the population living in the capital. This creates a number of serious problems: pollution (the federal district is the most polluted urban area in the world), overpopulation, lack of proper public services, delinquency, inadequate housing, etc.

History

An advanced indigenous civilization existed in Mexico prior to the Spanish conquest and this is a source of great pride for modern-day Mexicans. The major cultures were the Olmec, the Maya, the Toltec, and the Aztec. They had made impressive advances in mathematics, astronomy, agriculture and architecture, and, in some areas, rivalled or surpassed the highest scientific and cultural achievements known anywhere in the world at the time.

Many of these cultures (Olmec, Maya) were long past their zenith and had virtually disappeared, except for their magnificent stone monuments and cities, by the time the Europeans arrived. The Aztec civilization,

centred in Teotihuacan (now Mexico City), was flourishing in the 16th century but was completely destroyed by the Spaniards.

Hernan Cortés conquered Mexico in 1519–21 and founded a Spanish colony which lasted nearly 300 years. Independence from Spain was proclaimed by Father Miguel Hidalgo on September 16, 1810, and the republic was established on December 6, 1822.

Drastic social and economic problems finally erupted in the revolution of 1910. Prominent leaders in this revolution – some were rivals for power – were Francisco I. Madero, Venustiano Carranza, Pancho Villa, and Emiliano Zapata. The Revolutionary Party, under various names and after a number of reorganizations (now known as the Institutional Revolutionary Party) continues to be the most important political force in the nation.

Government

The constitution of 1917 established Mexico as a federal republic. The executive branch of government, headed by the president, is dominant and exercises enormous power. There is no vice-president. The president appoints the members of his cabinet, and they enjoy a certain autonomy within their areas of responsibility. They are not chosen from members of the Congress.

The Congress is a bicameral body consisting of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. Two senators are elected from each of Mexico's 31 states plus the Federal District (Mexico City), for a total of 64. The Chamber of Deputies consists of 500 members elected for a three-year term. (Two hundred seats are reserved for the opposition and are allocated on the basis of proportional representation.)