

Looking back on Mexico

By **DR DUDLEY ANKERSON CMG**

POLITICAL CONSULTANT AND AUTHOR



DUDLEY ANKERSON is a political consultant specialising in Latin America and particularly in Mexico. Previously he spent twenty five years in Her Majesty's Diplomatic Service, serving amongst other posts in Argentina, Mexico and Spain. He is the author of a biography of Saturnino Cedillo, a prominent figure in the Mexican Revolution, and of several articles on Mexican history. In 2013 he was awarded a CMG by the Queen for services to relations between the United Kingdom and Latin America.

I first visited Mexico over forty years ago and am often asked how the country has changed in that time. It is a difficult question to answer because in some ways it has certainly changed, but not in others. Economically and politically the country has altered quite fundamentally; in other ways it appears timeless.

The most visible change is demographic – a population of sixty million has become one of a hundred and ten million with a more marked proportion of younger people. Cities have grown. Querétaro was a small provincial city in 1972 and one travelled into the countryside to visit the Cerro de las Campanas where the ill-fated emperor Maximilian was executed in 1867; Querétaro is now a large conurbation which has long since engulfed that historic spot. The same is true of other provincial centres dating back to the colonial period, such as Guadalajara, Puebla and San Luis Potosí. The country's infrastructure has also changed: an efficient highway system links not only the state capitals but all larger urban centres. In 1974 it took me over ten hours to travel by bus from Mexico City to Oaxaca, a journey which now takes half that - or even less by car.

It is remarkable how Mexico has absorbed such change successfully, coping with the additional pressure on the country's health and education services. Medical facilities have expanded to cope with the demands of a growing population. And while there is room for further improvement in standards in primary and secondary education, particularly in rural areas, Mexico now possesses an impressive range of universities, both private and state.

In parallel with these developments the country's political life has also changed. In the 1970s Mexico was effectively, if not theoretically, a one party state, governed by the all-powerful Institutional Revolutionary Party or PRI. It seemed at the time that the PRI – or the PRI system because it was more than a party – would remain in power for ever; but even then there were signs that it was being overtaken by developments beyond its control. The tragedy of the Tlatelolco massacre, the violent repression of the student protests on the eve of the 1968 Olympic Games, which was fresh in the memory when I first arrived in Mexico in 1972, appeared to have been a reaffirmation of the PRI's power and a warning of the futility of outright opposition; but in retrospect it marked the first stage in the weakening

of the PRI's hegemony. In fact the PRI was a victim of its own success in that it had presided over the creation of a more developed and modern country for which the old PRI system was no longer a suitable vehicle of government. The more far-sighted amongst the PRI's leaders recognised that political reform was as necessary as economic reform and worked towards a liberalisation of the system. While they had hoped for a controlled transition events moved rapidly after 1994. Sensing the futility of seeking to delay change, President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) guaranteed free and fair elections in 2000 which were won by the opposition National Action Party (PAN). This PAN victory was also a historic achievement for the party, some of whose members had fought for free elections for many years when their goal must have seemed unachievable.

This sense that the old system was no longer viable was also true with regard to the Mexican economy. By the 1970s Mexico's import substitution model, based upon protectionism, which had been highly successful in stimulating the second wave of industrialisation in the 1950s and 1960s – the first was in the late nineteenth century – had served its purpose and was becoming an impediment to the development of a truly competitive economy. Presidents Echeverria (1970-76) and Lopez Portillo (1976-82) attempted to avoid the structural reforms required to modernise the economy by undertaking massive borrowing; but this strategy merely created an unsustainable foreign debt and led to painful devaluations. Presidents de la Madrid (1982-88) and Salinas de Gortari (1988-94) opened up the economy, culminating in the North America Free Trade Agreement in 1994. This truly historical step represented a dramatic advance and opened up new possibilities for Mexican trade and industry, the benefits of which are visible today.

The two terms of PAN governments under Presidents Fox (2000-06) and Calderón (2006-12) provided welcome economic stability after the upheavals of the mid-1990s and left the country with a healthy balance of payments. They also witnessed a number of social reforms. However, the electorate was concerned by the somewhat sluggish economic growth under the two PAN Presidents and by growing public insecurity and the rise of violent organised crime, particularly under President Calderón. As a result the PRI was returned to power in 2012 under President Peña Nieto, whose current State Visit to the UK underlines the excellence

of the bilateral relationship. But the PRI of today is not the PRI of the 1970s. The current leaders of the PRI fully recognise the changes that have taken place over the last twenty years and that there is no return to the old system. Indeed, President Peña's first two years have been spent in promoting a radical reform programme covering education, political institutions, telecommunications, and particularly energy, which will further transform the Mexican economy, increasing competition and building upon the changes promoted by President Salinas twenty years earlier. It is a remarkable achievement which will bring lasting benefit to the country.

The government's stated focus is now upon tackling the country's other challenges, such as security and the need for greater transparency in government. The proximity of Mexico to the US drugs market and to a ready supply of high-calibre weapons from gun stores across the US border, has led to a rise in organised crime and criminal violence in recent decades in Mexico with which both PAN and PRI governments have struggled. This in turn has exacerbated the problem of corruption. The urgency of tackling these issues has been underlined in recent months by continuing high levels of criminal violence and social protest in several states, such as Tamaulipas, Guerrero and Michoacán, which have led to widespread demands for corrective action. The President is publicly committed to addressing these problems during his four remaining years in office and they will doubtless be amongst his government's top priorities.

But if Mexico is now a very different country from the Mexico of the 1970s politically and economically, in what ways has the country not changed? What, then, is timeless?

There are three areas which come to mind. Firstly,

and most obviously from a tourist's point of view, are the country's stunning scenery and visible history. The variety of Mexico's scenery is quite remarkable, from the beaches of the Pacific Coast and the Yucatán peninsula, to the rugged mountain ranges of the Sierra Madre Oriental and Sierra Madre Occidental or the arid deserts of the north. Numerous visitors from the days of the Spanish conquest onwards have rightly commented upon the country's exceptional natural beauty. And this is complemented by the quite exceptional architecture one finds everywhere in Mexico, whether pre-Hispanic, colonial or modern. The country's archaeological sites are world famous; whether the Mayan ruins in Yucatán and Chiapas, the pyramids at Teotihuacan near Mexico City or the Mixtec temples in Oaxaca. Returning to some of these sites after forty years I invariably find them as striking as ever.

The second constant in Mexico is the country's cultural vibrancy, whether in painting, sculpture, music, cinema or literature. The Mexicans are an exceptionally creative people artistically, an inheritance which dates back to the pre-Hispanic period, as is evident from a visit to Mexico's world famous Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. In the twentieth century this rich artistic tradition produced the muralists such as Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, writers such as Octavio Paz and film directors such as Emilio Fernández, Alfonso Cuarón and Alejandro González Iñárritu amongst others. Furthermore, popular culture, such as the music of corridos and mariachi compositions and – as any visit to a Mexican market will reveal – handicrafts, continues to flourish.

And finally, there are the Mexicans themselves. Their warmth and hospitality, their strong religious and spiritual roots and their family values are central to making Mexico as attractive a country today as it was when I first visited it. E

Economically and politically the country has altered quite fundamentally; in other ways it appears timeless

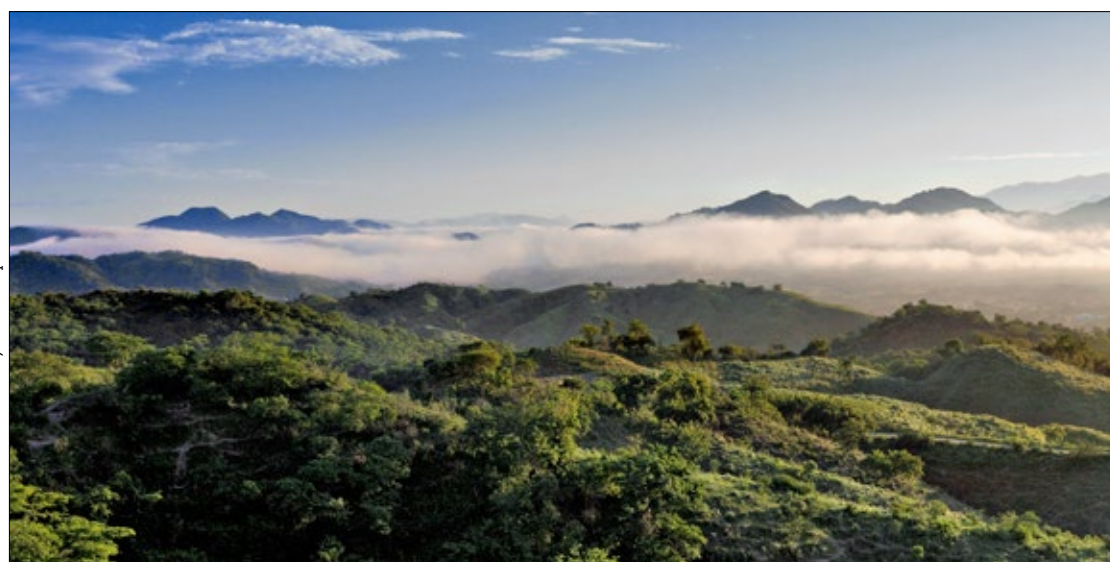


Photo: Mexico Tourism Board/Ricardo Espinosa - REO

In the mists of time: Mexico's diverse landscapes continue to inspire