

Review: Mexico's journey to democracy marked by violence and corruption

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By TONY BECKWITH / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

Absolute power, it is said, corrupts absolutely. This axiom is amply demonstrated in *Opening Mexico*, the penetrating account by Julia Preston and Samuel Dillon.

These two Pulitzer Prize-winning reporters for *The New York Times* lived in Mexico for many years, reporting on its transformation from a tapestry of "fiefdoms commanded by regional strongmen" to "a lively democracy" and everything in between. As journalists, they have an organizing style that is helpful here as they weave their story through three decades of political struggle and largely bloodless revolution. The details are at times bewildering, and the colorful cast of characters is occasionally hard to keep straight, but the story is enthralling and written with a relaxed lucidity that makes it hard to put down.

The PRI, the Institutional Revolutionary Party, was created in the volatile aftermath of the Mexican Revolution and evolved (but not much) into the ruling party in a sham democracy that lasted 72 years. The presidency was passed from one PRI official to another, and they reigned like supreme monarchs for six-year terms. By the 1990s, however, "pluralism was flourishing across Mexico like bougainvillea, from the ground up."

The change had its origins in the student massacre of 1968, "a decisive factor in Mexico's democratic opening." The authors paint a horrific picture of the presidency using military snipers to attack student protesters. When the dust settled, it was finally obvious that the PRI was not a democracy working for the people.

Ms. Preston and Mr. Dillon scrutinize the business community, the law, the church, the media, academia, the military and so on, showing just how each institution was enmeshed in the web of corruption spun throughout the entire country. They describe the exhilarating ride to riches – for some – when oil was discovered, the government's financial crises and scandals, the corrosion of narcotics corruption and the rampant violent lawlessness: "Most city forces did not strive to prevent or punish crime; they administered it." A fascinating chapter traces the emergence of the intellectual dissent that coalesced into literary publications with strong political agendas. These were the forums of ideological debate in which opposition figures honed their vision of a new, democratic Mexico.

The authors carefully place piece after piece into their magnificent mosaic of history. The reader comes away better understanding the immensity of the accomplishment of the elections held in 2000, which dismissed the PRI and ushered in the new era. Vicente Fox, who took over from the old regime, believed that ending the dictatorship was "a heroic exploit for Mexico. Something like when the Americans put a man on the moon." This is an important book because it goes far beyond traditional stereotypes and facile scenarios, replacing them with clear-eyed insights into a nation that rose up and transformed itself from a feudal state into a modern democracy.

Writer and translator Tony Beckwith lives in Austin.

Opening Mexico

The Making of a Democracy

Julia Preston and Samuel Dillon

(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$30)

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