

Introduction:

Cárdenas, the Mexican Revolution, and Yucatán

FROM 1911 TO 1920, a series of peasant revolts, coups, and civil wars known as *the Revolution* transformed Mexico. In the subsequent two decades, the nation recovered, and a new state took form. The post-revolutionary regime's longevity and stability have drawn much scholarly attention. Its paradoxical combination of popular mobilization and lack of a competitive, multiparty political system has been characterized as an experiment in one-party democracy by a North America political scientist, compared to the "soft dictatorship" (*dictablanda*) of Spanish strongman Primo de Rivera in the 1920s, and lauded by an admiring Mario Vargas Llosa as the perfect dictatorship.¹

The key features of the postrevolutionary state in Mexico emerged during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40): presidentialism (extreme concentration of power in the hands of the executive, limited only by the president's six-year term), corporatism (integration of society into the party organizations by sectors), populism, and a "third way" of economic development balancing state intervention and capitalism. Not surprisingly, the Cardenista period is one of the most studied in Mexican history.

Three distinct theoretical currents have shaped our understanding of the Revolution, Cárdenas, and Cardenismo, defined here as the project of political inclusion, social transformation, and economic nationalism implemented by the president and his key collaborators. The first generation of generally prorevolutionary scholars focused on land reform, education, and (to a lesser extent) politics, arguing that Cardenismo was fundamentally a populist phenomenon. In the 1970s and 1980s, a wave of revisionists challenged the populist consensus by revealing how caciquismo (boss rule), corruption, and other undemocratic practices survived the Mexican Revolution and flourished in the postrevolutionary era, including the Cardenista era. Often working from a Marxist perspective, the revisionists generally assumed that the Revolution overthrew the old dominant landowning class only to bring a new, petit bourgeois ruling class to power.²

2 Cárdenas Compromised

Recently, many scholars armed with more advanced theoretical approaches and carefully conducted regional and local research have corrected the excesses of the revisionists and underscored the genuine popular support that the Mexican Revolution and Cárdenas enjoyed among many social sectors. In particular, Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent have challenged scholars to rethink revolutionary state formation by taking into account both popular culture and social movements. Several members of this third generation of scholars, generally known as the neopopulists, posit that the Revolution and Cárdenas nurtured a new national political culture that legitimized itself in no small part by addressing popular demands.³ One neopopulist scholar, Jennie Purnell, has used a new concern for the interplay of social and cultural factors to profoundly analyze, not only popular support for the postrevolutionary state, but also genuine popular opposition to it — a huge gap in modern Mexican historiography, especially in light of the election of 2 July 2000.⁴

This study tests revisionist and neopopulist interpretations of Cardenismo by asking four questions. First, who were the Cardenistas, and who opposed them? Second, to what extent did Cárdenas truly succeed in mobilizing popular support and building an enduring base for the postrevolutionary regime among the workers and peasants by meeting popular demands (the core of neopopulist arguments)? Third, how much success did Cárdenas have in centralizing power on the national level (an achievement long assumed by the revisionists to be the cornerstone of the postrevolutionary state)? Fourth, what did Cardenismo change? Did it represent the culmination of state building that froze the process of revolutionary change, or was it an opening during which political institutions and social structures were called into question?

This study focuses on the regional as opposed to the community or national level to avoid the idiosyncrasies of local analyses while not losing sight of important phenomena that can be seen only on the grassroots level, such as changes in political culture and the degree of popular support enjoyed by Cardenismo.⁵ It analyzes Cardenismo in Yucatán because that state and the northern, cotton region of La Laguna (northern Durango and southern Coahuila) were the two areas where Cárdenas tested land reform on the largest scale.⁶ It is only a slight exaggeration to say that Yucatán was Cárdenas's TVA; more resources were spent there on agrarian reform than in any other place except for La Laguna for most of his presidency.⁷ While there are several regional studies of Cardenista-era Mexico, there is no other archive-based history of Yucatán during the period, in spite of its importance as a Cardenista revolutionary laboratory.

Moreover, the Cardenista project in Yucatán extended far beyond land reform. Cardenismo crafted a greatly enlarged, progressive national government to foster a more productive, more patriotic, and somewhat less patriarchal society. As federal engineers oversaw a massive land reform in the henequen zone of the northern half of Yucatán, federal teachers and doctors sought to reform and modernize rural society. National Cardenista politicians sought to root out the influence of the old landowning oligarchy and the regional bosses of the native Socialist Party of the Southeast (Partido Socialista del Sureste, or PSS) and create a mass base for the modern Mexican state.

Yucatán seemed to offer Cárdenas the perfect place to forge a new Mexico. It boasted a revolutionary tradition dating back to the governorships of conquering northern general Salvador Alvarado (1915–17) and home-grown radical Felipe Carrillo Puerto (1922–24). The division between the so-called Divine Caste, a small number of white families that still dominated the state's economy, and the poor, Maya-speaking majority gave the Cardenistas the opportunity to mobilize a revolutionary social base along ethnic and class lines. The southeastern state was, in short, the best place to realize what Cárdenas believed was the promise of the Mexican Revolution. Consequently, a consideration of Yucatán is crucial if we are to gauge the effect of Cardenismo on Mexico as a whole.

Until now, the paucity of archive-based investigations and the distortions of contemporary political polemics have hampered our understanding of Cardenismo in Yucatán. The right-of-center opposition Party of National Action (Partido de Acción Nacional, or PAN) built a strong base in Yucatán in part by blaming all regional problems on meddling presidents and federal bureaucrats. The most hated of the carpetbaggers from the Mesa Central was none other than Lázaro Cárdenas, whose program of agrarian reform was compared by one Yucatecan critic to Stalin's collectivization.⁸ PANista Ana Rosa Payán, former mayor of Mérida and at the time of writing senator from Yucatán, expressed the bitterness toward Cardenismo that animates much of the regional and national Right when she claimed recently, "Economically, [the national government] sunk us. This was a very rich state until 1937, when the all-powerful Mr. Lázaro Cárdenas came to destroy the wealth of this state, and since then things have only gotten worse; if we are subsidized, it is because it [the national government] has taken our wealth."⁹ On the other hand, the postrevolutionary state and its political extension, the PRI, have mythologized Cárdenas, echoing the eulogists of Cárdenas's own day, who styled him a crusader who delivered the promise of the Revolution to the people.¹⁰

4 Cárdenas Compromised

Most recent historiography on Cardenismo in Yucatán has reflected these misconceptions: historians sympathetic to the postrevolutionary regime attribute far too much power to Cárdenas and the national government—a position facilitated by much theory but backed by little empirical research—while revisionists often uncritically restate conservative attacks on Cardenismo without historical analyses.¹¹ The Yucatecan historian Hernán R. Menéndez has traced many of the half-truths and omissions to attempts by both the Mexican state and its conservative opponents selectively to interpret history for their own political benefit.¹² Although diametrically opposed in their views of Cárdenas, both official (pro-Cárdenas) and conservative (anti-Cárdenas) scholars depict the national state as an all-powerful entity, thus depriving key Yucatán actors of agency.¹³

Sources, Methodology, and Order of Argument

Moving beyond the polemical discussions of Cardenismo in Yucatán required returning to primary sources. Fortunately, local, state, and national archives yielded rich veins of virtually untouched documentation. In Mexico City, the Archivo General de la Nación's collection of President Cárdenas's papers and the archives of the Secretary of Gobernación (the powerful national ministry charged with overseeing elections and maintaining domestic order) allowed me to reconstruct relations between the national Cardenista regime and Yucatecan officials and the colossal agrarian reform project in the henequen zone. The Archivo General de Estado de Yucatán in Mérida contained many of the records of the gubernatorial administrations of Cardenista-era Yucatán, most importantly, the correspondence between the state government and local authorities. About half the municipal archives in the state had been moved to Mérida as well, which proved very useful in reconstructing local histories. The state's José María Pino Suárez *hemeroteca* (periodical archive) in Mérida contained a complete series of the progovernment *Diario del Sureste* and the opposition *Diario de Yucatán* dailies and the weekly *El yucatanista*, which helped me fill in the gaps in the archival record and provided much political *chisme* (gossip).

Yucatán inspired a prodigious amount of writing by natives and foreigners during the 1920s and 1930s. By reading a seemingly endless stream of guides, amateur histories, ethnographies, travelogues, and fictional works, I fleshed out my understanding of key actors and the social and cultural environment of Cardenista-era Yucatán.

The sheer volume of data mined from archival, periodical, and secondary

sources made it difficult to piece together a reasonably sized and coherent narrative of Cardenismo in Yucatán while at the same time explaining the bewildering number of institutions, actors, and structural considerations that explained its evolution and outcome. To that end, I adopted a chronological order of argument and balanced explanations of national- and regional-level processes with short case studies of events in representative or important localities. As explained below, I use the concepts of *camarilla* and *cacique* to analyze the interaction between Mexico City, the state capital of Mérida, and the local level.

Consequently, this work challenges the static models of Cardenismo common to disciplines outside history by reintroducing process and careful attention to local variations into the scholarly debate. By showing how political networks or *camarillas* cut across class, ideological, and ethnic lines, it moves beyond flat structuralist analyses of society and politics. For instance, chapter 3 highlights the ability of the wealthy provincial oligarchy to manipulate the Yucatecan hero cult of “proletarian martyr” Felipe Carrillo Puerto and regionalist sentiment through an alliance with the self-professed Cardenista leader Gualberto Carrillo Puerto.

Similarly, while I argue that Cárdenas’s reforms in Yucatán eventually failed, the outcome was not preordained by structural limits. Cardenismo in Yucatán was a historical process that evolved over time; both elite and popular actions affected how it unfolded. Still, reacting to popular mobilizations both for and against the Cardenista project, Cárdenas and his national collaborators made a series of choices that ultimately decided the outcome of reform. Cárdenas did not commit resources needed to fulfill his project in Yucatán until late 1937, over two and a half years after agrarian reform began and popular Cardenista elements started mobilizing in Yucatán (chaps. 1 and 2). Facing strong resistance in Yucatán as well as competing demands from other national commitments on scarce resources (chaps. 3 and 4), Cárdenas abandoned sociocultural and political reform in favor of agrarian reform in a kind of strategic triage (chaps. 4 and 5). Then, only a few months later, faced by the overwhelming economic demands created by oil nationalization as well as fear of a political crisis over his succession, Cárdenas returned control of agrarian reform and electoral politics in Yucatán to state officials (chaps. 5 and 6). Agency, and a combination of elite and popular political conflicts, sealed the fate of Cardenismo in Yucatán (chap. 6).

In the end, Cárdenas’s ambitious project for Yucatán was fundamentally compromised on several levels. Both its failures and its successes challenge

6 Cárdenas Compromised

the revisionist and, to a lesser extent, the neopopulist interpretations of Cardenismo. Contradictions in the Cardenista coalition, the limits of time, and competing national demands on finite political and economic capital forced Cárdenas to abandon his revolution from above in favor of reliance on regional cliques or *camarillas*. Here, I build on the arguments of Alan Knight and Jeffrey Rubin, who have attacked the revisionist notions of an all-powerful national state (for Knight, “statolatry”) and call for researchers to “decenter” (Rubin’s word) Mexican historiography.¹⁴ I found that, stung by popular and landowner opposition to reform, the Cardenista national state repeatedly made key concessions to regional *politicos* that, in turn, greatly undermined most of the planned Cardenista reforms in Yucatán.¹⁵

Many will undoubtedly find this approach overly political. While social and economic forces influenced the fate of Cardenismo, choices made by Cárdenas and a host of important national and regional elites ultimately doomed the Cardenista reforms and popular Cardenismo in Yucatán to failure. Structural obstacles and resistance by established interests limited Cárdenas’s choices and raised the costs of his reforms both politically and economically. But, in the end, Cárdenas chose to abandon Cardenismo in Yucatán, in part to preserve his gains elsewhere.¹⁶

My conclusions differ significantly from both dominant interpretations of Cardenismo. The revisionists posit a strong, Leviathan-like postrevolutionary state. If this were to be found anywhere, it would have been present in Yucatán during the Cardenista era, where so many federal agencies aggressively intervened. But the Cardenista state was hobbled by economic limits, hampered by infighting, and frustrated for over two years by the effective resistance of the landowning oligarchy and significant popular opposition. When in the fall of 1937 Cárdenas did finally bring the full weight of the national state to bear on Yucatán, the result was, not the clear-cut triumph or revolution from above usually depicted, but a series of clandestine negotiations that in the end undid Cardenismo in the state.

This study also challenges neopopulist interpretations of Cardenismo by rethinking who made up the Cardenista base and showing the degree to which that base depended on state support or at least tolerance to survive. While some neopopulists see Cardenismo as the midwife of a true civil society in Mexico, the experience of Cardenismo in Yucatán demonstrates that, at least in that state, pro-Cárdenas popular mobilizations never achieved the level of autonomy or legal protection suggested by the term.

To be sure, local perspectives do reveal a high degree of grassroots mobi-

lization, especially during the first half of Cárdenas's presidency. But the classic urban worker–rural peasant alliance was not the principal base of Cardenismo in Yucatán. Instead, the Left (the Mexican Communist Party and allied popular organizations) formed the strongest component of Cardenismo, with much of its grassroots support coming from young people, women, and the rural proletariat (known as *peons*). On the other hand, urban workers of the major cities of Progreso and Mérida either remained aloof from political struggles or joined with hacendados to oppose agrarian reform. Just as importantly, in the first half of Cárdenas's presidency, conservative landowners successfully used popular mobilizations among peons and urban labor to weaken Cardenismo and national institutions. But these antiagrarian movements also expressed genuine popular grievances over the shortcomings of agrarian reform.

Regional politicians enjoyed similar success in blunting Cardenista mobilizations from 1937 to 1940, the subject of chapters 5 and 6. In the end, as is painfully apparent in chapter 6, the Cardenista grassroots mobilizations that had survived until 1940 withered when denied the protection of the national Cardenista regime. The neopopulist assumption of a strong grassroots base for Cardenismo must be balanced by a recognition of strong and genuine popular opposition to Cardenismo among many peasants, workers, and peons. In addition, when denied the support of the Cardenista state, popular Cardenismo disappeared as a political force in Yucatán.

Caciques and Camarillas

To understand Yucatecan Cardenismo, this study examines the interaction among national-, regional-, and local-level politics.¹⁷ To do so, it looks at key actors and associations that bridged these different realms: the cacique and camarilla.

The cacique, or boss, controls a community, political organization, or labor union through extralegal means.¹⁸ His power derives largely from his ability to mediate between his own base and larger political, economic, and social structures.¹⁹ At times, his authority can be expressed bluntly through violence; at other times, he calls on more paternalistic means, such as granting favors, sponsoring godchildren, or throwing fiestas. Frequently denounced as petty tyrants, caciques were not absolute rulers; if they threatened a large enough segment of the community, even the most despotic bosses eventually faced a challenge from below or from within their own retinues. Their local power, however, depended not only on maintaining at

least a degree of support from below, but also on maintaining the favor of patrons from larger political, economic, and even cultural systems. By mediating between the region and their domains, caciques channeled resources to clients while delivering votes or other support to patrons.

Just as caciques often dominated political interchange between local and regional levels, *camarillas* — networks of informally linked elites controlling regional political and economic resources — mediated relations between the states and national institutions.²⁰ Because only rarely could a single cacique extend his control over an entire state or region (such a dominant figure was known as a *caudillo*), *camarillas* were coalitions more than the vehicle of a single dominant figure.²¹ United by friendship, family ties, and mutual political and economic interests, rival *camarillas* in Yucatán competed for elected office and bureaucratic posts.²² The fluid political and economic dimensions of *camarillas* often escaped narrow ideological or social definitions. Wells and Joseph's observation that prerevolutionary *camarilla* politics was always "permeable and pragmatic," filled with unexpected alliances with enemies for mutual advantage, was still valid after the Revolution.²³ One *camarilla* might, for instance, include Communists and landowners, while another might unite anarchosindicalists and conservatives. The fact that political networks spanned ideological, class, and ethnic boundaries (which are often assumed to determine political behavior) underscores the importance of identifying *camarillas* to explain Cardenista-era politics. As the brilliant Communist writer José Revueltas once noted, "The most extensive ideology in Mexico is that of friendship."²⁴

Yucatán: A Regional Overview

The persistent influence of caciques and *camarillas* was certainly not confined to Yucatán. Yet Yucatán did possess several distinctive regional characteristics. Geographically, historically, and ethnically distinct from the rest of Mexico, Yucatán was perhaps the least Mexican of all the states of the nation. Moreover, Yucatán's history had been altered forever by a spiky, hardy plant that thrived in its dry, rocky soil: henequen. Known by the Maya for centuries, this agave became a cash crop for Yucatán's bourgeoisie in the late nineteenth century. At that time, North American wheat farmers were looking for a durable fiber to bind sheaves harvested by McCormick's mechanical harvester, a need that henequen met. On the outbreak of the Revolution in 1910, almost 100,000 Maya-speaking Yucatecs, as well as thousands of Yaqui Indians deported from Sonora and imported wage

laborers from Korea, labored on henequen haciendas in debt peonage often compared to slavery.²⁵ In these open-air factories, peons (landless rural workers who lived in hacienda communities) cut the sharp leaves of the henequen plant. Fiber was then pressed out of the leaves in a mechanized “rasping train” on the hacienda grounds, pressed, and then transported to Mérida, where it was woven into twine in cordage factories or simply shipped in bulk. From Yucatán’s port of Progreso, ships exported henequen to the United States, Australia, and Europe. By 1910, henequen wealth had brought untold prosperity to Yucatán’s capital, the “white city” of Mérida. Paved, lit, and spotlessly clean, it boasted a large and prosperous community of planters and henequen factors who proudly called their home the Paris of the West. But the peons and peasants who worked the henequen fields received few, if any, benefits from the henequen boom.

Socially and culturally, Yucatán guarded a distinctive identity within Mexico as a whole. Outside the capital of Mérida and its port of Progreso, Maya, not Spanish, predominated. While regional landowners and their literary panegyrists celebrated its distinctive Maya-Spanish heritage, the Maya-speaking peasantry did not share the romantic provincialism of the landlords.²⁶ And, despite their historical tradition and shared experience of racial oppression, no strong pan-Maya identity could be found among the peasantry. Instead, it was the municipality that remained the locus of political identity for the Maya-speaking rural poor.²⁷

While the municipality claimed strong loyalty, Yucatecan towns and villages were divided between *vecinos* and common folk. For centuries, trade, the professions, and political office had been monopolized by the Spanish-speaking, white or mestizo provincial elites commonly known as *vecinos*, literally “neighbors,” for their residence in the center of town. The poorer, politically marginalized majority of Maya-speaking peoples shared a hybrid Maya and Spanish culture and were mainly peasants, although a fair number were artisans, smallholders, and ranchers.²⁸ To be sure, marriages and unions outside marriage had blurred the racial line between *vecinos* and peasants, and the two groups had lived cheek by jowl for centuries, and to a great degree, shared a common culture. But, although the distinction was weakened by the Revolution, it persisted through the Cardenista era.²⁹

Within Yucatán, important differences distinguished the henequen zone, which included the center, north, and west of the state, from the maize- and cattle-producing south and east. Outside the henequen zone, rural society was less stratified and had no dominant planter oligarchy or large estates. In the henequen zone, on the other hand, powerful hacendados with pater-

nalistic influence over hundreds of employees often overshadowed the power of the town-dwelling vecinos. Henequen municipalities were divided between the villages and towns inhabited by peasants and vecinos and the nearly autonomous hacienda communities made up mainly of peons.

In 1934, some thirty thousand adult male peons and their families lived on hacienda estates. Yucatán's larger henequen plantations were a world unto themselves, boasting their own chapels, stores, and schools; residents rarely interacted with neighboring towns and villages. Landowners used paternalistic loans, gifts, and medical care (and at times schools), along with the social bond of godparentage, to foster loyalty and dependence among peons.³⁰ Although both village-dwelling peasants and hacienda peons worked for wages in the same fields, landowners reserved the highest-paying jobs, those requiring the most skills, for a better-paid, usually literate group of hand-picked resident laborers who formed the loyal core of estate communities. Even the majority of peons, who were paid less and did jobs requiring little skill, received employment security and other considerations denied peasants.³¹ Although the hacienda still dominated much of Yucatán when Cárdenas took office as president, the Mexican Revolution cast a long shadow over its future.

Yucatán in the Mexican Revolution

Between 1911 and 1915, scattered insurgencies erupted to threaten the status quo of insular Yucatán. Yet, during the first years of the Revolution, Yucatecan planters managed to ride out the storm raging across the rest of Mexico with their control over the region intact.³² In the spring of 1915, the pharmacist-turned-general Salvador Alvarado led the Army Corps of the Southeast into Yucatán on the orders of Venustiano Carranza, head of the Constitutionalist faction. At the time, Carranza was locked in a bloody civil war against Emiliano Zapata and Francisco Villa, and Carranza sent Alvarado to Yucatán to secure henequen revenue for his war effort.³³

Alvarado's efforts as military governor expanded far beyond simple financial extraction. He abolished debt peonage and corporal punishment, which had bound thousands of peons to their estate owners. Although paternalistic bonds and economic necessity kept thousands of peons on the estates, in the late 1910s and early 1920s many left.³⁴ To consolidate the postrevolutionary political order, Governors Salvador Alvarado (1915–18) and Felipe Carrillo Puerto (1922–24) sponsored an official party, eventually known as the Socialist Party of the Southeast (PSS).³⁵ It united

elements of the middle class, renegade hacendados, workers, and peasants and organized hundreds of village, neighborhood, and professional leagues under the strict control of a central league. Despite its name, the PSS was far from a Marxist party of class. Instead, its core ideology centered around concepts of individual rights (*libertades*), secularism, and state intervention in the economy. In this sense, Yucatecan socialism owed as much to classical liberalism and anarchosyndicalism as to historical materialism. The PSS linked the reclamation of individual liberties stripped during the prerevolutionary Time of Slavery to the assertion of male honor, which implied equality among men of all social strata. Luis Aboites interviewed old peons and peasants in the eastern provincial town of Espita, who recounted the origins of Yucatecan Socialism. For them, “Socialism brought freedom,” and “Alvarado was Socialist because he gave [us] freedom.”³⁶

In its early years, the PSS supported the empowerment of the poor and disenfranchised. The explicit enemies of the PSS were the old landowning class, the Catholic clergy, and the prerevolutionary *jefe político*, or district prefect, all blamed for slavery and ignorance. Land reform, cooperatives, education, and secularization promised freedom and development. But, by the late 1920s, Yucatecan Socialism suffered from its very success—the old *jefe político* was gone, and the Time of Slavery was increasingly forgotten. A new generation of Socialist caciques spawned new forms of exploitation—protection rackets, arbitrary government, and electoral fraud.³⁷ While for the most part these Socialist bosses maintained a firm hold over village politics, the peon communities on estates remained largely beyond the reach of the revolutionary regime.

Since 1918, the PSS’s leaders had enjoyed regional autonomy in return for supporting national authorities. For years, Yucatecan Socialists had looked to their national protector, Plutarco Elías Calles, president (1924–28) and then *jefe máximo* (maximum chief) (1928–35) of Mexico. In 1929, Calles founded the political arm of the postrevolutionary state, the Party of the National Revolution (Partido Nacional Revolucionario, or PNR), but it failed to create a popular base for the *jefe máximo*. In 1934, Calles needed to fill the presidency with a politician capable of moderating his conservative policies in order to attract popular support for the PNR. Calles’s choice, ex-Michoacan governor Lázaro Cárdenas, had assembled a peasant-worker-intellectual coalition in his home state that would serve as a model for the PNR. He had also repeatedly proved his loyalty to Calles, most recently by disarming the peasant militia of the radical leader Adalberto Tejeda of Veracruz. Not only was the young general the darling of the left wing of the

PNR, but he also had the support of the most powerful generals of the army. At a time of growing economic pressure from the Great Depression and heightened political tension within the PNR, Calles saw in Cárdenas a means of tacking to the left while still maintaining control of the postrevolutionary state.³⁸ Calles's selection of Cárdenas for the presidency would drastically change all Mexico, but no state would be more affected than Yucatán.

Cárdenas and Yucatán

Even before taking office, Cárdenas sought to restart agrarian reform on the national level and reached out to organized labor. This only increased tension within the postrevolutionary elite because reformers and the conservative arch-Callistas—generals and politically connected entrepreneurs were threatened by Cárdenas's policies.³⁹ Cárdenas accepted Calles's authority but expected to govern without interference. When Calles publicly criticized Cárdenas's support for organized labor in June 1935, the president exiled his former mentor and began ousting his loyalists from power. Cárdenas would move even further to the left to gather popular support against Calles.⁴⁰

Even before the break with Calles, Cárdenas had begun to steer the revolutionary state in the direction of agrarian reform. On 10 March 1934, Cárdenas's presidential campaign brought him to Mérida, Yucatán, where he announced that almost nineteen thousand hectares of privately held henequen land claimed by peasant villages for over a decade would finally be turned over to them. Not only did Cárdenas champion the claims of peasant communities to land across Mexico, but in Yucatán he also invoked the legacy of the assassinated Socialist hero Felipe Carrillo Puerto to announce that land would be turned over to those who worked it in the form of collective, federally administered *ejidos* (collective, communal land grants farmed by peasant villages). Cárdenas and his collaborators believed that breaking up the old haciendas would not only yield economic benefits, but also create a new class-based consciousness and a feeling of loyalty to the Cardenista regime.⁴¹ While anticipating resistance on the part of the old oligarchy, Cárdenas hoped that by allowing the landowners to keep part of their land, he would avoid a dangerous confrontation or perhaps even a national civil war. Cárdenas also believed, perhaps naively, that the landowners in Yucatán and elsewhere would voluntarily divest themselves of their landholdings and reinvest their capital in more productive parts of the national economy, such as industry.⁴²

There was more than land at stake, however. Cárdenas always saw agrarian reform as inseparable from a larger social, cultural, and even moral transformation.⁴³ To the national Cardenistas, the hacienda, along with the church and the *cantina*, represented Old Mexico, a backward mind-set mired in superstition, ignorance, and sloth. The collective ejido, along with the school, would instill sobriety, patriotism, industry, and secularism.⁴⁴ The Jacobinism of Cárdenas's early career, however, was soon discarded in the light of social and political realities.⁴⁵ In place of anticlericalism, Cárdenas stressed other aspects of modernization, above all the elimination of the "social vices" of drinking and gambling. At the same time, Cárdenas called for special attention to "the Indian conglomerate" in order to "incorporate it into the national life." Two new national agencies — Indigenous Affairs and Physical Education — reflected the new Cardenista priorities of paternalistic advocacy for Indians and prohibition via sports.⁴⁶

The Cardenista project in Yucatán required an unprecedented degree of federal intervention in a state long suspicious of the national government and jealous of its distinctive regional identity. National Cardenistas, who hailed overwhelmingly from central and northern states, saw in Yucatán much of what needed to be reformed or eliminated to modernize Mexico. Yucatán's physical and historical isolation from the rest of Mexico, the power still wielded by the landowning families, the lack of heavy industry, and the high incidence of Maya monolingualism and rural poverty all added up, from the perspective of the national Cardenistas, to a backward region in need of "Mexicanization" and modernization.

In the minds of the national Cardenistas, negative views and outright stereotypes of Yucatecans coexisted with a mythical vision of the Yucatecan Mayas as a tragically oppressed "race" in need of redemption by the national government. Cárdenas himself clung to a romantic view of the Maya as a proud, stoic folk requiring his government's paternalistic guidance for salvation. Almost two decades after his presidency, Cárdenas spoke of his first encounter with Mayan peasants: "What struck me was their virtues, virtues that many in the interior [Mesa Central] of the Republic completely lacked. They had a grand faith in the Revolution and trusted in the national government to resolve their problems." The widespread belief in the legendary peaceful and hardworking qualities of the Maya among other Mexicans was given a new gloss by Cárdenas, who believed that "the peasant population [of Yucatán] still conserves elements of their ancient and advanced civilization, as demonstrated by their work ethic, cleanliness, and respect for life."⁴⁷

These innate virtues, the Cardenistas believed, could shine through only

if the Maya were saved from an oppressive, unjust provincial social order. Carlos M. Peralta, a northerner and head of the agrarian bureaucracy, told Cárdenas that the Yucatecan peasants “do not know Spanish and have been intellectually degraded as a result of centuries of relegation in the most terrible misery; they remain powerless and inert in the rude class struggle convulsing the state.”⁴⁸ Accordingly, revolutionary change would have to come from above, not below.

The belief in a “quiescent” Maya requiring redemption from the national government was strongly held by the national Cardenistas. The corollary notion that Yucatán’s politicians were corrupt Callistas who had to be eliminated influenced national policy just as strongly. The views of Narciso Bassols, a leader of the left wing of the PNR that rallied around Cárdenas, were typical. According to Bassols, the long-suffering Maya had been forced to witness “hundreds of infamies, deceptions, Socialist mystifications, mass murders, immoral and ostentatious corruptions, banquets of bureaucrats, and Roman orgies all practiced by ‘Socialist *compañeros*.’”⁴⁹

The national Cardenistas believed that the revolutionary process in Yucatán had been started by Felipe Carrillo Puerto, to one Cardenista the president’s Juan the Baptist, and it would be fulfilled by Cárdenas.⁵⁰ While Cárdenas himself was never as vocal in his criticism of Yucatecan politicians as were many of his key advisers, he had little faith in the homegrown leadership of the state.⁵¹ Gualberto Carrillo Puerto, Felipe’s brother, had been among the first in Yucatán to endorse Cárdenas and at times had the president’s ear. But the only Yucatecan whom Cárdenas truly trusted was his close friend and former chief of staff General Rafael Cházaro Pérez, who would be Cárdenas’s main intermediary in the state until his untimely death in an aviation accident in January 1936. After campaigning in March 1934, the president would not return to Yucatán for over three years. Until the fall of 1937, Cárdenas would rely on trusted lieutenants and the federal agencies in Yucatán to implement his project and build a popular base. No item on the Cardenista agenda would be more important than agrarian reform.