

Benito Pablo Juárez García

President of Mexico January 15, 1858 – April 10, 1864
and May 15, 1867 – July 18, 1872

Born 21 March 1806 San Pablo Guelatao, Oaxaca

Died 18 July 1872 Mexico City, Federal District



Benito Pablo Juárez García, was a Mexican lawyer and politician of Zapotec origin from Oaxaca who served five terms as president of Mexico: 1858–1861 as interim, 1861–1865, 1865–1867, 1867–1871 and 1871–1872. Benito Juárez was the first Mexican leader who did not have a military background, and also the first full-blooded indigenous national ever to serve as President of Mexico and to lead a country in the Western Hemisphere. He resisted the French occupation, overthrew the Empire, restored the Republic, and used liberal efforts to modernize the country.

Juárez was born in the village of San Pablo Guelatao, Oaxaca on March 21, 1806, located in the mountain range now known as the "Sierra Juárez". His parents, Marcelino Juárez and Brígida García, were peasants who both died when he was three years old. Shortly after, his grandparents died as well, and his uncle then raised him. He described his parents as "indios de la raza primitiva del país," that is, "Indians of the original race of the country." He worked in the corn fields and as a shepherd until the age of 12, when he walked to the city of Oaxaca to attend school. At the time, he was illiterate and could not speak Spanish, only Zapotec.

In the city, where his sister worked as a cook, he took a job as a domestic servant for Antonio Maza. A lay Franciscan, Antonio Salanueva, was impressed with young Benito's intelligence and thirst for learning, and arranged for his placement at the city's seminary. He studied there but decided to pursue law rather than the priesthood. He graduated from the seminary in 1827 and went on to gain a degree in law.

Juárez became a lawyer in 1834 and a judge in 1841. He was governor of the state of Oaxaca from 1847 to 1852; in 1853, he went into exile because of his objections to the corrupt military dictatorship of Antonio López de Santa Anna. He spent his exile in New Orleans, Louisiana, working in a cigar factory.

Juárez took office as president in late January 1858. He then led the liberal side in the Mexican War of the Reform, first from Querétaro and later from Veracruz. In 1859, Juárez took the radical step of declaring the confiscation of church properties. In spite of the conservatives' initial military advantage, the liberals drew on support of regionalist forces. They had U.S. help under some terms of the controversial and never approved McLane-Ocampo treaty. This turned the tide in 1860; the liberals recaptured Mexico City in January 1861. Juárez was finally properly elected president in March for another four-year term, under the Constitution of 1857.

French Emperor Napoleon III used a pretext to launch the French intervention in Mexico in 1862, with plans to establish a conservative regime. The Mexicans won an initial victory over the French at Puebla in 1862, celebrated annually as Cinco de Mayo (May 5). The French

advanced again in 1863, forcing Juárez and his elected government to retreat to the north, first to San Luis Potosí, then to the arid northern city of El Paso del Norte, present day Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and finally to the capital of the state, Chihuahua City, where he set up his cabinet and government-in-exile. There he would remain for the next two and a half years. Meanwhile Maximilian von Habsburg, a younger brother of the Emperor of Austria, was proclaimed Emperor Maximilian I of Mexico on April 10, 1864 with the backing of Napoleon III and a group of Mexican conservatives. Before Juárez fled, Congress granted him an emergency extension of his presidency, which would go into effect in 1865, when his term expired, and last until 1867 when the last of Maximilian's forces were defeated.

President Andrew Johnson invoked the Monroe Doctrine to give diplomatic recognition to Juárez' government and supply weapons and funding to the Republican forces. When he could get no support in Congress, he supposedly had the Army "lose" some supplies (including rifles) "near" (across) the border with Mexico. He would not even meet with representatives of Maximilian. Gen. Philip Sheridan wrote in his journal about how he "misplaced" 30,000 muskets close to Mexico. Faced with this and a growing threat from Prussia, the French troops began pulling out of Mexico in late 1866. Mexican conservatism was a spent force and was less than pleased with the liberal Maximilian. In 1867 the last of the Emperor's forces were defeated and Maximilian was sentenced to death by a military court. Despite national and international pleas for amnesty, Juárez refused to commute the sentence, and Maximilian was executed by firing squad on June 19, 1867 at Cerro de las Campanas in Querétaro. His body was returned to Europe for burial. His last words had been, '¡Viva México!'

Benito Juárez died of a heart attack in 1872 while working at his desk in the National Palace in Mexico City. Today Benito Juárez is remembered as being a progressive reformer dedicated to democracy, equal rights for his nation's indigenous peoples, lessening the great power that the Roman Catholic Church then held over Mexican politics, and the defense of national sovereignty. The period of his leadership is known in Mexican history as La Reforma (the reform), and constituted a liberal political and social revolution with major institutional consequences: the expropriation of church lands, bringing the army under civilian control, liquidation of peasant communal land holdings, the separation of church and state in public affairs, and also led to the almost-complete disenfranchisement of bishops, priests, nuns and lay brothers.

Juárez's famous quotation continues to be well-remembered in Mexico: Entre los individuos, como entre las naciones, el respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz, meaning "Among individuals, as among nations, respect for the rights of others is peace." It is inscribed on the coat of arms of Oaxaca.

