

International

Mexico's 'love-hate' relationship with former colonial ruler Spain

Mexico to celebrate 200 years of independence

MEXICO CITY: Mexico this month celebrates 200 years of independence from Spain, the former colonial ruler with which it has a "love-hate" relationship today. Most Mexicans have a mixed European and indigenous ancestry and have contrasting feelings about the violence of the conquest, which imposed culture, language and religion on the country. Spain is thus seen as both the motherland and the enemy.

"There is this love-hate, but it depends on the social scale. Among the middle and upper classes we see this ambivalence, but in the lower classes the hatred is deeper," historian Lorenzo Meyer told AFP. The relationship between the two countries' governments has also seen ups and downs, he said. The Spanish benefited from good relations during Mexican dictator Porfirio Diaz's 1884-1911 rule, but distanced themselves from the upheaval of the 1910-1920 Mexican revolution. Ties improved again during the Second Spanish Republic from 1931-1939, before dictator Francisco Franco took power.

Aside from politics, Spain has given Mexico "cultural salvation" from American influence, Meyer said. There is a passion in Mexico for bullfighting and music, with popular songs like "Madrid" and "Granada" penned in the 1930s by Mexican composer Agustin Lara. The affection is mutual, said Mikel Alonso, a chef of Basque origin who has Mexican nationality. "In my hometown when people sing there are only two types of songs - the deep and nostalgic Basque and the happy ranchera," he said.

'Open arms'

Mexico provided refuge to Spanish anti-Franco Republicans, who even established a government in exile in the Mexican capital between 1939 and 1946, and had diplomatic representation until the 1980s. "Franco was never recognized. The Republican embassy here was the one that endured the most in the world," Meyer said. "They lived with the fiction that there was a Republican ambassador but there was a representative of Franco (in the Portuguese embassy) who was really the one who ran the daily business," he added.

Mexico hosted around 20,000 Republicans, including intellectuals who propped up educational institutions. "The welcome given to the Spanish Republican exiles will never be forgotten," said Carlos Martinez Shaw, of the Royal Academy of History in Madrid. "They were received with open arms in Mexico," he added. At the beginning there was reluctance from the Republicans and even a demand that their children have Spanish teachers, Meyer said. "They came not out of love, but out of force. Mexico offered them asylum and gave them facilities. They had nowhere to go," he said.

Mutual ambivalence

One exile was Angel Sarmiento Gonzalez, a Republican deputy who promoted agrarian reform. Pursued by Franco, he came to Mexico in the 1940s with a wife and five children. His grand-

daughter, Veneranda Merino Sarmiento, remembers the gratitude towards Mexico, but also some resentment at times. "There was always someone calling us gachupinas," a disparaging Mexican name for Spaniards, she said.

The Spanish arrived poor and became rich, causing both offense and envy, Meyer said. "But they also despised Mexicans, calling them 'Indians,'" he added. The resentment resurfaced after Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador in 2019 demanded that Spain apologize for the events of the conquest. Madrid flatly rejected Lopez Obrador's request, saying the conquest "cannot be judged in the light of contemporary considerations." Mexican constitutional lawyer Francisco Burgoa sees the demand as at odds with the 1836 Calavatra treaty, the definitive recognition of Mexican independence.

The agreement "puts an end to any dispute or claim between the two countries," he said. Jesus Bustamante, a historian with Spain's Higher Council for Scientific Research, sees the request as part of "nationalist rhetoric" at a time when Mexico faces myriad domestic challenges such as criminal violence. "Perhaps what is happening is that addressing these rhetorical and identity issues and calling Spain to account is a kind of distraction," he said. But there are also still "open wounds," Meyer argued. In Lopez Obrador's logic, "representing the grievances of the popular classes is not harmful, on the contrary," he said. — AFP

Ukraine adopts law limiting oligarchs after gun attack

KIEV: Ukraine's parliament yesterday passed a law meant to reduce the influence of oligarchs in the country a day after an attack on a top presidential aide that officials said could have been a retaliation to the legislation. Gunmen opened fire on a car carrying President Volodymyr Zelensky's senior aide, Sergiy Shefir, on Wednesday.

The new law aims to "prevent risks to national security linked to the excessive influence" of oligarchs, according to the parliament's website. Zelensky put forward the legislation earlier this year when he announced a new campaign to limit the authority of the country's oligarchs, accusing them of exerting too much control over the economy.

Under the law, individuals recognized as "oligarchs" will be prohibited from financing political parties and participating in the privatization of large companies. An individual may be classified as an oligarch if three out of four criteria outlined by the law are met. These are beneficial ownership of a monopoly company, significant influence over the media, participation in political activities, and a fortune of over 2.4 billion hryvnias (about \$87 million).

Ukraine's richest man Rinat Akhmetov, powerful tycoon Igor Kolomoisky and former president Petro Poroshenko—an outspoken critic of Zelensky—are among those who could be targeted by the law. The legislation was passed in a second and final reading by 279 lawmakers out of a required minimum of 226. The vote came after what officials described as an assassination attempt on presidential aide Shefir. More than 10 bullets hit Shefir's car during the attack near the village of Lisnyky, south of the capital Kiev. He escaped unharmed but his driver was "seriously injured."



KIEV: In this file photo, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky (center) and his wife Olena together with members of his crew react at The Olympic Stadium in Kiev, with the chief aide to Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky. — AFP

Shefir is a 57-year-old former script writer and longtime associate of comedian-turned-politician Zelensky, who was on a visit in the United States, promised a "strong response". "That is the price of changes in the state, that is the price of reforms," he said in his speech to the UN General Assembly. Police said they did not rule out that the attack was politically motivated. National police chief Igor Klymenko said Wednesday that Shefir may have been targeted as part of a bid to pressure Ukraine's top leadership or destabilize "the political situation in our country." — AFP

6 die in plane crash in Russia's Far East

MOSCOW: All six crew members on board a Russian transport plane died when it crashed earlier outside the Far Eastern city of Khabarovsk, local officials said yesterday. The wreckage was discovered by a search team after it disappeared from radars on Wednesday evening. Photos from the scene showed debris from the Antonov An-26 transport aircraft scattered across broken tree branches. "All members of the crew died. We extend our condolences to the families," the Khabarovsk branch of the health ministry said in a statement.

Antonov planes were manufactured during the Soviet era and are still used throughout the former Soviet Union for civilian and military transport. They have been involved in a number of accidents in recent years. Investigators said remnants of the plane were discovered on a ridge in the Bolshekhekhtsirsky Nature Reserve, some 20 kilometers south of Khabarovsk. They said they were now looking into the cause of the crash.

The emergencies ministry said it had taken more than five hours to reach the remote crash site. Once notorious for plane accidents, Russia's major airlines have shifted from ageing Soviet aircraft to more modern planes. But poor aircraft maintenance and lax safety standards persist, and the country has recently seen several deadly air accidents. In July, an An-26 flying over the Far Eastern Kamchatka peninsula crashed, killing all 28 people on board. A month later, a Mi-8 helicopter carrying 16 tourists and crew on a sightseeing trip in Kamchatka crashed into a lake, killing eight people. — AFP