



## Yucatán after Independence How the Peninsula Was Divided

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At the dawn of Mexico's independence, the province of Yucatán covered the entire peninsula. During the colonial period, it had come under the legal jurisdiction of the Audience of Mexico, although its highest official, the governor and captain general, operated autonomously from the viceroy of New Spain in matters of the militia and public administration. In the absence of the governor and captain general, the mayor of Mérida took charge of the administrative functions and the king's resident lieutenant in Campeche, the military ones.

For the first half of the nineteenth century, Yucatán's three main cities were Mérida, the administrative capital and the most densely populated; walled Campeche, the main port and richest city; and Valladolid, which commanded the

densely populated eastern part of the peninsula. From the time of Spanish domination and during the nineteenth century, these cities' local governments (*cabildos*) and elites competed and made alliances with each other to gain political control of the region.

In September 1821, news arrived to the port of Campeche about the advance of the Trigarante Army and the signing of the Treaties of Córdoba agreeing on independence from Spain. On September 13, the mayor and deputy political head of the area, Miguel Duque de Estrada, the City Council, the king's lieutenant and the military commanders of the port city came out for the independence of Yucatán from Spain, calling on the provincial authorities in Mérida to join them in their proclamation.

For his part, Juan María de Echeverri, governor and captain general of Yucatán, met with the Provincial Deputyship and Mérida's main officials to declare the independence of

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Photo this page: Detail of the Ateneo Peninsular building, in Mérida, Yucatán.



The city of Campeche historic center.

**On October 1, 1841, a resolution was passed favoring complete independence from Mexico and creating the Yucatecan nation. The proclamation was stopped in the local Senate.**

Yucatán. That was on September 15, but the declaration of independence was cautious because it did not include Yucatán's integration into the new Mexican state pending the outcome of the independence movement in New Spain. Campeche's *cabildo* pressured the provincial authorities to make independence effective; it joined the Mexican Empire, and on November 2 managed to get the Yucatán Provincial



The city of Campeche's Cathedral.



The San Miguel Fort, one of Campeche's landmarks is now a museum.

Photos this page by Elsie Montiel

Deputyship to issue a decree about this. Echeverri resigned from his post arguing that his loyalty to the Spanish government was incompatible with a break with Spain. The peninsula was left without its highest official. This led to clashes between the authorities of Mérida and Campeche; therefore, Augustín de Iturbide, who consummated independence and was declared emperor of Mexico, sent Melchor Álvarez as military commander and interim head of Yucatán's executive.

When Iturbide fell in 1823, the Provincial Deputyship came out in favor of Yucatán becoming a federal republic and joining Mexico only if the country did likewise. The provincial body gave way to the first Constituent Congress, which met from 1823 to 1825. The Yucatán legislature suspended the national decree ordering a declaration of war on Spain in 1823, arguing that it would affect trade with Cuba—still a Spanish colony—and that the central authorities would not guarantee the defense of the peninsula in case of a Spanish attack nor pay for its cost.

Conditioning entry into the new Mexican nation and delaying the declaration of war on Spain caused the Yucatán Constituent Congress to be seriously questioned. The Campeche City Council and authorities declared themselves in rebellion. The legislature tried to offset these unfortunate events by naming Campeche-born Francisco Antonio de Tarrazo governor. However, the conflicts continued, so the central government sent Antonio López Santa Anna as general commander to Yucatán to try to resolve them.<sup>1</sup> In the end, López de Santa Anna occupied the executive and published the first local Constitution in 1825. Finally, national and internal pressure forced Yucatán to declare war, Santa Anna was recalled from the peninsula, and José Tiburcio López occupied the governorship from 1825 to 1829.

López had serious conflicts with José Segundo Carvajal, the general commander of Yucatán, about the costs of maintaining national troops. This, together with political instability in central Mexico, was the cause of the Campeche garrison coming out in favor of centralism in 1829. The movement was successful in the peninsula and turned it into an island in the middle of the Mexican Federal Republic. Nevertheless, it did not mean its separation from the nation: even though they wanted the entire nation to adopt a central system, they accepted implementing any general measure as long as it did not contravene the system itself. The isolation did not last long; given the failure of its representatives and the national pressures, in 1831 Yucatán returned to federalism. Political skirmishes would continue under the federal system. In 1833, Juan de Dios Cosgaya and Santiago Méndez were elected governor and vice-governor, respectively. But Francisco de Paula Toro, Yucatán's general commander, and the Campeche City Council defeated them after only a year in office. Later, the *cabildos* of Mérida and the walled city of Campeche declared themselves in favor of the Central Mexican Republic, which was established in 1839.

The unhappiness of the elites and the general populace about the control over trade, men being drafted into the army, payments to the central government and conflicts with general commanders over their involvement in local politics produced the federalist movement headed by Santiago Imán in Tizimín in 1839. Valladolid and Mérida authorities joined the revolt in favor of the adopting the federal system in the peninsula and throughout Mexico. When they succeeded, federalism was reestablished in 1840. From then until 1857, the governorship alternated mainly between Santiago Méndez and Miguel Barbachano, who were political enemies: the former led the power groups in Campeche, and the latter, the groups in Mérida.

The peninsula recovered sovereignty over internal issues like trade, political administration and the organization of troops, and the Mexican federal Constitution of 1824 and the local Constitution of 1825 were restored. The Yucatán Congress took important measures: it passed a Constitution advanced for its time (1841) and dealt with demands about the control of regional commercial activity, opposition to the draft, appropriate payments to national coffers, and the return to federalism as conditions for rejoining the government of Mexico.

It should be pointed out that in the second congressional session, on October 1, 1841, a resolution was passed

favoring complete independence from Mexico and creating the Yucatecan nation. The proclamation, approved by the majority of deputies, was stopped in the local Senate by Santiago Méndez and the Campeche power groups. The regional government sought to negotiate its demands with the national government, and Mexico City commissioned Yucatecan Andrés Quintana Roo to begin talks with the authorities in his home province. Out of those talks came accords stipulating that the central government would give Yucatán more of a say in handling commercial taxes and local troops in exchange for its recognition of central authorities and breaking off relations with Texas. The political figures of the time called these negotiations the "Treaty of December 1841," which was never ratified by the Mexican Congress.

The lack of an understanding between the national and regional governments led to an armed conflict in late 1842 and the first few months of 1843. The central authorities sent troops to subdue the peninsular dissidents, but the expedition failed to take Campeche and Mérida, which led to the capitulation of the federal troops. Even after this armed clash and the advantage gained by the Yucatecans, the local government decided to enter into talks with the national officials to get recognition of the demands previously put to Quintana Roo in 1841. The federal government recognized these Yucatecan demands in the so-called "Treaties of De-

**In 1847 look place the uprising of the Mayas in eastern Yucatán known as the Caste War. The confrontation was devastating. In the long run, it lead to the territorial division of the peninsula.**



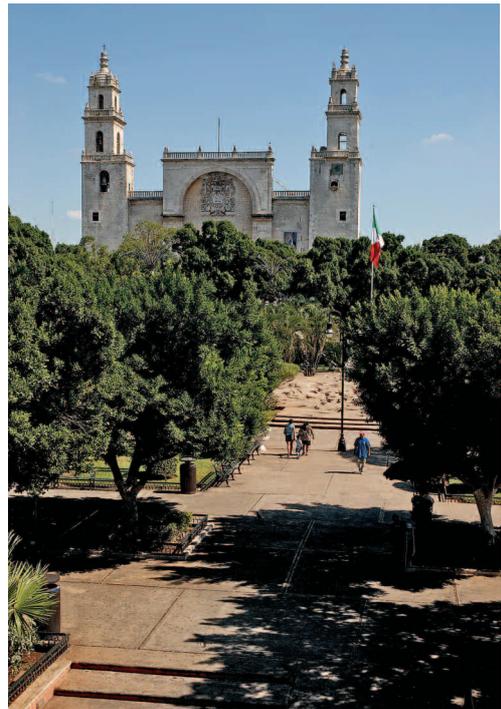
Painting by Rolando Arjona Amábilis depicting the indigenous obligations to the haciendas

ember 1843” and the regional elites accepted coming back into the central administration’s fold in 1844.

Nevertheless, the Yucatecan negotiations were unfruitful in the national legislature from 1844 to 1845. The federal legislators argued that treaties were only signed with other sovereign nations and that the Yucatán peninsula was part of Mexico, not an associate nation. This led to a new break under the administration of Miguel Barbachano. Later, when Barbachano entered into negotiations with Santa Anna to fight the Americans in exchange for the central government’s recognition of his governorship, a revolt broke out in late 1846 in Campeche declaring Yucatán neutral in Mexico’s war with the United States. This movement was headed by Domingo Barret and Santiago Méndez. The peninsula maintained its autonomy from the general government without declaring complete independence from the Mexican nation.

In 1847, things would change with the uprising of the Mayas in eastern Yucatán known as the Caste War. The confrontation was devastating. The rebel indigenous laid waste to important towns like Valladolid, Tizimín, Tekax and Ixamal, and destroyed a large part of the peninsula. The Yucatán elites requested help from the United States, Spain and England in exchange for local sovereignty; that is, they tried to annex themselves to these countries or become their protectorate. In the United States and Spain, at least, the lack of a formal declaration of emancipation was one of the obstacles to intervening in the region. Given the rejection of the great powers, the Yucatán government resorted to the Mexican authorities, who sent resources to repel the Mayan rebels. In return, Yucatán rejoined the nation unconditionally in 1848.

Miguel Barbachano governed the peninsula until 1853. After a period of national political instability because of the Ayutla Plan, under the banner of which the liberals defeat-



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The city of Mérida’s Cathedral.

ed López de Santa Anna in the national government, in Yucatán, Santiago Méndez took office at the head of local government (1855-1857). Méndez and his power group imposed Pantaleón Barrera as governor in May 1857, sparking serious protests by different sectors in Campeche.

On August 7, 1857, the local deputy from the Campeche district, Pablo García, together with Pedro de Baranda, Santiago Martínez, Tomás Aznar Barbachano and other figures from that walled city made a public statement calling for Barrera’s removal. The movement led to the governor being deposed and the split off of the district of Campeche, turning it into a state. On May 3, 1858, the Yucatán and Cam-



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Views of the Mérida’s historic center, the Cathedral and the Government’s Palace.



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Fernando Castro Pacheco, *The Caste War*, 1973-1979, mural at the Government's Palace in Mérida, Yucatán.

peche authorities established the borders. The western part of the peninsula, including Carmen, Seybaplaya, Campeche, Hopelchén and Hecelchakán (Dzitbalché, Bécab and Calkiní) would form a new state. Efforts in the federal Congress to get the new state recognized were successful. In accordance with the national legislature's commission on constitutional points' decision, President Benito Juárez decreed the creation of the state of Campeche on February 19, 1862. On April 29, 1863, Juárez ratified this decision given the approval of the majority of Mexico's local Congresses.

In the long run, the Caste War would bring another territorial division in the peninsula. The struggle hit high points in its first years, but later, it would retreat to the southeastern part of the region, where the rebels maintained autonomy until the early twentieth century. In the late nineteenth century, Porfirio Díaz's national government fought them by establishing settlements in this area: this is how Payo Obispo, today Chetumal, was founded in 1898. The national army made several forays against the rebel indigenous and defeated them at Chan Santa Cruz —today Felipe Carrillo Puerto— in 1901.<sup>2</sup> Díaz proposed creating the territory of Quintana Roo to better control this part of the peninsula, and the federal Congress approved it. The president made it official on November 24, 1902.

However, the territory of Quintana Roo would change several times. In 1913, the Venustiano Carranza government

annexed the eastern part of Yucatán and then returned it to Quintana Roo in 1915. In 1931, Pascual Ortiz Rubio published the constitutional reform that would completely eliminate Quintana Roo, turning the north over to Yucatán and the south to Campeche. When the inhabitants of Chetumal protested and enlisted the support of Lázaro Cárdenas, they managed to abrogate the constitutional reform and get Quintana Roo reestablished in 1935. Finally, with congressional approval, President Luis Echeverría Álvarez decreed the creation of the state of Quintana Roo on October 3, 1974. This would be the definitive political delineation of the peninsula, although the social and cultural links that still join all its inhabitants cannot be erased. ■■■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Antonio López de Santa Anna was born in Jalapa, Veracruz in 1784. During the first half of the nineteenth century, Santa Anna, a military man, was president and national leader of Mexico several times. He was a player in key moments in Mexican history, for example, independence, the U.S. annexation of Texas and the 1846-1848 war with the U.S. In addition, he was national chief executive when the Yucatán authorities broke with the central government from 1840 to 1848. For more about this figure's participation in the events of Yucatán, see Eligio Ancona, *Historia de Yucatán*, vol. 3 (Mérida: UDY, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> The Caste War was one of the longest, most violent indigenous resistance movements in the history of the peninsula. The Mayas were fighting for autonomy and better living conditions. See the articles about Felipe Carrillo Puerto and the Caste Museum in *Voices of Mexico* no. 83 (September-December 2008). [Editor's Note.]