Dictator Porfirio Díaz, a hero of the battle of Puebla, stayed in power in Mexico from 1876 to 1911, a total of 35 years. He served as President the entire time except for 1880-1884, when he ruled through his puppet Manuel González. After 1884, he dispensed with the farce of ruling through someone else and re-elected himself several times, occasionally needing his hand-picked Congress to amend the Constitution to allow him to do so. During that time, Mexico modernized, adding plantations, industry, mines and transportation infrastructure. Poor Mexicans suffered greatly, however, and conditions for the most destitute were terribly cruel. The gap between rich and poor widened greatly under Díaz, and this disparity was one of the causes of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). Díaz remains one of Mexico's longest-lasting leaders, which raises the question: how did he hang onto power for so long?

He Was a Great Politician:

Díaz was able to deftly manipulate other politicians. He employed a sort of carrot-or-stick strategy when dealing with state governors and local mayors, most of whom he had appointed himself. The carrot worked for most: Díaz saw to it that regional leaders became personally wealthy when Mexico's economy boomed. He had several capable assistants, including José Yves Limantour, who many saw as the architect of Díaz' economic transformation of Mexico. He played his underlings off against one another, favoring them in turn, to keep them in line.

He Kept the Church Under Control:
Mexico was divided during Díaz' time between those who felt that the Catholic Church was holy and sacrosanct and those who felt it was corrupt and had been living off of the people of Mexico for far too long. Reformers such as Benito Juárez had severely curtailed Church privileges and nationalized Church holdings. Díaz passed laws reforming church privileges, but only enforced them sporadically. This allowed him to walk a fine line between conservatives and reformers, and also kept the church in line out of fear.

**He Encouraged Foreign Investment:**

Foreign investment was a huge pillar of Díaz’ economic successes. Díaz, himself part Mexican Indian, ironically believed that Mexico's Indians, backward and uneducated, could never bring the nation into the modern era, and he brought in foreigners to help. Foreign capital financed the mines, industries and eventually the many miles of railroad track that linked the nation together. Díaz was very generous with contracts and tax breaks for international investors and firms. The vast majority of foreign investment came from the United States and Great Britain, although France, Germany and Spain were also important.

**He Cracked Down on the Opposition:**

Díaz did not allow any viable political opposition to ever take root. He regularly jailed editors of publications which criticized him or his policies, to the point where no newspaper publishers were brave enough to try. Most publishers simply produced newspapers which praised Díaz: these were allowed to prosper. Opposition political parties were allowed to participate in elections, but only token candidates were allowed and the elections were all a sham. Occasionally, harsher tactics were necessary: some opposition leaders mysteriously “disappeared,” never to be seen again.

**He Controlled the Army:**

Díaz, himself a general and a hero of the Battle of Puebla, always spent a great deal of money on the army and his officials looked the other way when officers skimmed. The end result was a motley rabble of conscripted soldiers, in rag-tag uniforms and sharp-looking officers, with handsome steeds and shining brass on their uniforms. The happy officers knew that they owed it all to Don Porfirio. The privates were miserable, but their opinion did not count. Díaz also regularly rotated generals around the different postings, ensuring that no one charismatic officer would build up a force loyal to him personally.

**He Protected the Rich:**

Reformers such as Juárez had historically managed to do little against the entrenched wealthy class, which consisted of descendants of conquistadors or colonial officials who had built up enormous tracts of land which they ruled like medieval barons. These families controlled huge ranches called haciendas, some of which consisted of thousands of acres including entire Indian villages. The laborers on these estates were essentially slaves. Díaz did not try to break up the haciendas, but rather allied himself with them, allowing them to steal even more land and providing them with rural police forces for protection.
So, What Happened?:

Díaz was a masterful politician who deftly spread Mexico's wealth around where it would keep these key groups happy. This worked well when the economy was humming, but when Mexico suffered a recession in the early years of the 20th Century, certain sectors began turning against the aging dictator. Because he kept ambitious politicians tightly controlled, he had no clear successor, which made many of his supporters nervous.

In 1910, Díaz erred in declaring that the upcoming election would be fair and honest. Francisco I. Madero, son of a wealthy family, took him at his word and began a campaign. When it became clear that Madero would win, Díaz panicked and began clamping down. Madero was jailed for a time, and eventually fled to exile in the United States. Even though Díaz won the “election,” Madero had showed the world that the power of the dictator was waning. Madero declared himself the true President of Mexico, and the Mexican Revolution was born. Before the end of 1910, regional leaders such as Emiliano Zapata, Pancho Villa and Pascual Orozco had united behind Madero. In Morelos, Emiliano Zapata had been fighting the powerful landowners for a year or so already and quickly backed Madero. In the north, bandit leaders-turned-warlords Pancho Villa and Pascual Orozco took to the field with their powerful armies. The Mexican army had decent officers, as Díaz had paid them well, but the foot soldiers were underpaid, sickly and poorly trained. Villa and Orozco routed the federals on several occasions, growing ever closer to Mexico City with Madero in tow. In May of 1911, Díaz knew that he had been defeated and was allowed to go into exile. He was forced to flee Mexico. He died in Paris in 1915, aged 85.

Notes:

(1) The Creelman Interview: In some ways, the 1907 interview became the spark that ignited the Mexican Revolution. In March 1908, Pearson’s magazine published a lengthy interview in English in which well-known James Creelman asked Mexican president Porfirio Díaz some tough questions. In that interview, Díaz said many things relevant to the vision of Mexico he was promoting, including that Mexico was now
ready for democracy and that he would consider not running for the presidency in 1910. These words were designed for a foreign audience, and Díaz never thought they would be translated and published in Mexico in El Imparcial a few days later.

(2) **The Battle of Puebla:** On May 5, 1862, Mexican forces under General Ignacio Zaragoza defeated a much larger and better-equipped force of invading French outside the city of Puebla. This battle is commemorated every year by Mexicans on “Cinco de Mayo.” One of the key players in the battle was young general Porfirio Díaz, who led a cavalry unit. Although the Battle of Puebla only delayed the inevitable French march into Mexico City, it did make Díaz famous and cemented his reputation as one of the best military minds serving under Juarez.

**Sources:**