

## Crime, power and politics in Mexico: a clear account of recent Mexican history, but what does the future hold?

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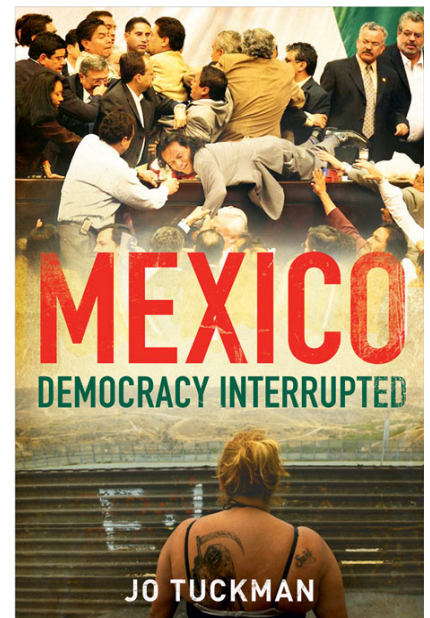
*Political plurality in Mexico may now be firmly established and elections may be generally free and fair, but the country still has far from embraced full democratic transition, argues Jo Tuckman in her new book. Tom Gash finds that Tuckman is close enough to Mexican life that the stories she provides ring true and contain refreshing snippets of detail. A satisfying read, but light on detail about what lies ahead.*



**Mexico: Democracy Interrupted. Jo Tuckman. Yale University Press. May 2012.**

Jo Tuckman's *Mexico: Democracy Interrupted* tells the story of Mexico from the country's first fully open presidential elections in 2000 to the present day. Tuckman has enjoyed a front-row seat at Mexico's process of democratisation, having arrived in Mexico to cover the 2000 election as a journalist and remained there ever since.

The timing of her book could scarcely be better. Just a few weeks ago, Mexico's citizens voted into the presidency, Enrique Pena Nieto, a candidate of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) which had effectively controlled Mexican political life for 71 years, from 1929 to 2000.



*Democracy Interrupted* centres on a compelling thesis. Tuckman argues that political plurality may now be firmly established and elections may be generally free and fair, but Mexico has far from embraced full democratic transition. The underlying political structures and processes are weak and inherently undemocratic. Public institutions are generally fragmented and dis-empowered. The cornerstones of effective democracy – the judiciary, the police, and the media – are visibly corruptible and open to capture by special interests, including organised crime groups. While the headline markers of democracy appear in good health, institutions appear to pay little heed to providing citizens with the effective government they urgently need.

This guiding thesis allows the book to range broadly across contemporary Mexican life without losing focus. It therefore provides a highly accessible introduction to a fascinating and diverse country – but one that someone reasonably familiar with Mexican life and politics will also enjoy.

The book opens with an examination of the violence surrounding Mexico's drug trade and then ranges through economic, political, environmental, religious and social developments. Compelling tit-bits abound. I was particularly taken by the section which examined the growing movement of self-avowed Catholics who worship Santa Muerte, the Saint of Death who judges people for their faith alone and not for the morality of their actions.

The section examining trade union structures was equally illuminating. Here, we get a wonderful pen-portrait of teachers' union leader, [Elba Esther Gordillo](#), a woman judged to have used her "tireless political drive, talent for long-term strategising and... Machiavellian sophistication" to promote not only the wellbeing of her union members but also her own personal power at national and local level.

Only a few things in the book grated with me. I would rather have been spared the mildly sensationalised accounts of drug violence, though I understand why they are included and have probably simply been exposed to so many accounts of Mexico's 'narco wars' that the novelty has worn off. Perhaps Tuckman's fine eye for power games also occasionally leads to too much focus on the power or status motives of politicians, police or religious figures. Many actors here have surely at least partly been motivated by their desire to improve effectiveness or address problems. Readers may also yearn for more on the solutions to Mexico's ills. Here, Tuckman provides clues here but there no compelling blue-print for curing Mexico's weaknesses, perhaps admittedly because no such thing exists.

Overall, however, I found the book deeply satisfying. Tuckman is close enough to Mexican life that the stories she provides ring true and contain refreshing snippets of detail. But Tuckman still conveys the sense of being a highly curious outsider. She asks 'why' and keeps asking why until she reaches the very core of Mexican institutional life. Because of this, Tuckman has produced a book that is not just a clear account of recent Mexican history but also an examination of Mexico's political economy and the power structures that make the country tick. The combination of history, story and political analysis makes this rewarding – and highly readable – fare.

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