

# Forms of Government

By Dr. Nathaniel Richmond

Philosophers and political scientists have studied forms of government for many centuries. Ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle wrote about what they believed to be good and bad forms of government. According to Plato's famous work, *The Republic*, the best form of government was one ruled by philosopher-kings. Aristotle wrote that good governments, whether headed by one person (a kingship), a few people (an aristocracy), or many people (a polity), were those that ruled for the benefit of all. Those that were based on narrow, selfish interests were considered bad forms of government, whether ruled by an individual (a tyranny), a few people (an oligarchy), or many people (a democracy). Thus, democracy was not always considered a good form of government.

## Constitutions and Political Institutions

All governments have certain things in common: institutions that carry out legislative, executive, and judicial functions. How these institutions are supposed to function is usually spelled out in a country's constitution, which is a guide to organizing a country's political system. Most, but not all, countries have written constitutions. Great Britain, for example, has an unwritten constitution based on documents such as the Magna Carta, the English Bill of Rights, and the Treaty of Rome and on unwritten codes of behavior expected of politicians and members of the royal family. The world's oldest written constitution still in use is that of the United States. All countries have written or unwritten constitutions, and most follow them most of the time. Some countries do not follow their constitutions—for example, the Soviet Union did not; other countries, for example France, change their constitutions frequently.

Constitutions usually first specify if the country is to be a monarchy or a republic. Few countries still have monarchies, and those that do usually grant the monarch only ceremonial powers and duties. Countries with monarchies at the beginning of the twenty-first century included Spain, Great Britain, Lesotho, Swaziland, Sweden, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. Countries that do not have monarchies are republics. Constitutions also specify if power is to be concentrated in the hands of a strong national government, which is a unitary system; if it is to be divided between a national and various subnational governments such as states, provinces, or territories, which is a federal system; or if it is to be spread among various subnational governments that might delegate some power to a weak national government, which is a confederate system.

Examples of countries with unitary systems include Great Britain, France, and China; federal systems include the United States, Germany, Russia, Canada, India, and Brazil. There were no confederate systems in the late 1990's, although there are examples from history. The United States under its eighteenth-century Articles of Confederation and the nineteenth-century Confederate States of America, made up of the rebelling Southern states were confederate systems. Switzerland was a confederation for much of the nineteenth century. The concept of dividing power between the national and subnational governments is called the vertical axis of power.

Whether governments share power with subnational governments or not, there must be institutions to make laws, enforce laws, and interpret laws: the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. How these branches interact is what determines whether governments are parliamentary, presidential, or mixed parliamentary-presidential systems. In a presidential system, such as in the United States, the three branches—legislative, executive, and judicial—are separate, independent, and designed to check and balance each other according to a constitution. In a parliamentary system, the three branches are not entirely separate, and the legislative branch is much more powerful than the executive and judicial branches.

Great Britain is a good example of a parliamentary system. Some countries, such as France and Russia, have created a mixed parliamentary-presidential system, wherein the three branches are separate but are not designed to check and balance each other. In a mixed parliamentary-presidential system, the executive (led by a president) is the most powerful branch of government

Looking at political systems in this way—how the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government interact—is to examine the horizontal axis of power. All governments are unitary, federal, or confederate, and all are parliamentary, presidential, or mixed parliamentary-presidential. One can find examples of different combinations. Great Britain is unitary and parliamentary. Germany is federal and parliamentary. The United State federal and

presidential. France is unitary and mixed parliamentary-presidential. Russia is federal and mixed parliamentary-presidential. Furthermore, virtually all countries are either republics or monarchies.

### **Types of Government**

Constitutions describe how the country's political institutions are supposed to interact and provide a guide to the relationship between the government and its citizens. Thus, while governments may have similar political institutions—for example, Germany and India are both federal, parliamentary republics—how the leaders treat their citizens can vary widely. However, governments may have political systems that function similarly although they have different forms of constitutions and institutions. For example, Great Britain, a unitary, parliamentary monarchy with an unwritten constitution, treats its citizens very similarly to the United States, which is a federal, presidential republic with a written constitution.

The three most common terms used to describe the relationships between those who govern and those who are governed are democratic, authoritarian, and totalitarian. Characteristics of democracies are free, fair, and meaningfully contested elections; majority rule and respect for minority rights and opinions; a willingness to hand power to the opposition after an election; the rule of law; and civil rights and liberties, including freedom of speech and press, freedom of association, and freedom to travel. The United States, Canada, Japan, and most European countries are democratic.

An authoritarian system is one that curtails some or all of the characteristics of a democratic regime. For example, authoritarian regimes might permit token electoral opposition by allowing other political parties to run in elections, but they do not allow the opposition to win those elections. If the opposition did win, the authoritarian regime would not hand over power. Authoritarian regimes do not respect the rule of law, the rights of minorities to dissent, or freedom of the press, speech, or association. Authoritarian governments use the police, courts, prisons, and the military to intimidate and threaten their citizens, thus preventing people from uniting to challenge the existing political rulers. Cuba, Mexico, Peru, Libya, Serbia, Belarus, and China are examples of countries with authoritarian regimes.

Totalitarian regimes are similar to authoritarian regimes but are even more extreme. Under a totalitarian regime, there is no legal opposition, no freedom of speech, and no rule of law whatsoever. Totalitarian regimes attempt to control totally all members of the society to the point where everyone always must actively demonstrate their loyalty to and support for the regime. Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler's rule (1933-1945) and the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin's rule (1928-1953) are examples of totalitarian regimes.

### **Forms of Government: Putting it all Together**

In *The Republic*, Plato asserts that people have varied dispositions, and, therefore, there are various types of governments. In recent years, regimes have been created that some call mafiacracies (rule by criminal mafias), narcocracies (rule by narcotics gangs), gerontocracies (rule by very old people), theocracies (rule by religious leaders), and so forth. Such variations show the ingenuity of the human mind in devising forms of government.

Whatever labels that are given to a political system, there are several basic questions to be asked about that regime: Is it a monarchy or a republic? Is all power concentrated in the hands of a national government, or is power shared between a national government and the states or provinces? Are its institutions those of a parliamentary, presidential, or mixed parliamentary-presidential system? Is it democratic, authoritarian, or totalitarian? Finally, does it live up to its constitution, both in terms of how power is supposed to be distributed among institutions and in its relationship between the government and the people? To paraphrase Aristotle, how many rulers are there, and in whose interests do they rule?

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