

## WHICH IS THE BEST FORM OF GOVERNMENT?

It would be interesting if you could listen to a discussion by leaders who actually once directed these different governments. Imagine what it would be like to overhear:

- ★ **Thomas Jefferson**, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence and third U.S. President, who is recognized as a leading supporter of **democracy**;
- ★ **Joseph Stalin**, a former leader of the Soviet Union, who was a feared **dictator**;
- ★ **Louis XIV**, King of France in the late 17th century, who built up the power and authority of the French **monarchy**.

If you listen very carefully, you might be able to hear these three men discussing which is the best type of government:

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**Jefferson:** Gentlemen, a dictatorship and monarchy may have advantages, but democracy is surely the best government. Only a democracy protects its citizens' rights. In a dictatorship or monarchy, people who express dissatisfaction with the government are often arrested. Except for the king or dictator, no one else has any real say in how the government is run. People live in fear. Dictatorship and monarchy are based on the ruler's will. This is not so in a democracy.

**Stalin:** Comrade Jefferson, I agree that the purpose of government is to help the people. This was always my goal as ruler. The problem is that people don't always know what is best. A good ruler can do more than a bunch of arguing politicians unable to make up their minds. I was able to improve our economy in a shorter period than any democracy could have done.

**Louis XIV:** Messieurs, I agree with Stalin. Democracy is unable to truly protect people's rights. In a democracy, the people have to protect their own rights. What kind of government is that? It's a government of chaos, fighting, and disorder. Nobody benefits. In a monarchy, the king is the true representative of the interests of the people before God. A king has only his people's welfare at heart. God tells the king what is best for his people, and the king carries out God's will.

**Stalin:** Comrades, a dictator is not chosen by birth, like a king. A dictator is chosen on the basis of talent. A dictator fights to get to the top. Only the best individual will succeed. Once in power, the dictator can bring together all the interests of society to achieve a single goal. A dictator's aim is always to improve the welfare of the people. The dictator has the advantage of absolute power to achieve this end. A dictator can do more in two years than a democracy can in twenty. In a democracy, listening to everybody's opinion takes far too much time and forces people to make poor compromises. For centuries, Russia was ruled by monarchs and fell far behind the West. I changed all that. We built factories, produced cement and steel, and manufactured tractors.

Some people who disagreed with me died along the way, but that is not so important. In the long run, we were all be better off.

**Louis XIV:** I agree with you, Monsieur Stalin. The will of one person can achieve wonderful things when given complete control over a society. Everyone bends to that person's rule. Society moves towards one goal — whether it is building the economy or defeating an enemy. In contrast, citizens in a democracy are always disagreeing. As soon as the government starts to accomplish something, a new group is voted into power and changes direction. Dictatorships have one weakness, however: the dictator does not rule by inheritance, like a king. For this reason, the dictator is always insecure, always out to win public support through great deeds or by terrorizing opponents. The dictator never knows when someone might try to overthrow him. Your own career is proof of this, Monsieur Stalin. You murdered millions to keep control. You were never sure of yourself. No king would ever act this way by waging war on his own people.

**Jefferson:** Gentlemen, both of you pretend that the ruler has the interests of the people at heart, but is this true? Your own records are not very convincing. Mr. Stalin, you killed millions in your desire for power. Your Majesty was little better. You dragged your country into senseless wars to increase your glory and power.

**Stalin:** Comrade Jefferson, you oversimplify. You say democracy protects the people from over-active governments, but what about poor harvests, floods, or attacks from enemies? By the time a democracy agrees to act, it is often too late. If I did not have total power, my nation could not have responded quickly to threats.

**Jefferson:** Gentlemen, no system of government is perfect. At times there may have been a good dictator or king, but most dictators and kings have proven to be short-sighted, vain, and selfish. The people can only rely on themselves to create a government that looks after their interests. Only democracy recognizes the dignity of each person. I prefer putting my trust in the people.

# THEOCRACY

A **theocracy** is a government run by religious leaders. Like monarchy, theocracy is an old form of government. In a theocracy, the government claims to be directed by God, or divinely blessed. There is no legal separation between church and state, and citizens of other faiths are often excluded or expelled.

In ancient times, rulers were often priests. The Pharaohs of ancient Egypt, for example, were believed to be gods. The Byzantine Empire was ruled by an emperor who was also head of the church. In the Middle Ages, the head of the Catholic Church, the Pope, ruled extensive territories in Italy. In early colonial times, Puritan ministers helped govern Massachusetts.

**Iran's Theocracy.** More recently, Muslim religious leaders seized power in Iran in 1979. The Iranian Constitution emphasizes the importance of religion and Islamic law (*Sharia*). Today, Iran has both a theocratic and democratic government. Voters elect the President and representatives to the legislature. However, these officials remain subject to the control of Iran's religious leader — the head of state or **Supreme Leader** — an Islamic cleric who is appointed for life. As the name indicates, the Supreme Leader is the head of government, even above the elected President. The Supreme Leader interprets religious law, can dismiss the President, and can declare war.



*The Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, rules Iran as a theocracy.*