

Governments: Monarchy, oligarchy, aristocracy and the rule of law

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Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I of England. England had a limited monarchy where rulers like Queen Elizabeth I followed rule of law. Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

The rules in a monarchy type of government are pretty clear: Whatever the ruler says, goes. Everyone must bow to the king or queen. The ruler can yell "off with his head!" to anyone who challenges their power.

Of course, many people have had different ideas about how the ruler should govern, and those beliefs support totally different types of government. The rules shape the government's legitimacy, or how willingly the people accept the power of the government.

Rulers Who Bring Prosperity To Their Lands Will Be Loved

Many countries have been governed by the absolute decisions of the ruler. Not all of these places have been unhappy. A government whose king or queen rules justly and wisely may enjoy a great deal of consent from the people.

Sometimes people may accept their leader because they are afraid of the results if they don't. In the words of the writer Machiavelli, "It is better to be feared than loved." As long as the feared ruler is seen as bringing about good fortune or protecting the lives of his subjects, it is entirely possible that his people will be happy.

An absolute ruler may be accepted because the people believe the idea that God gave him or her the right to rule. This belief is known as divine right. It often has been associated with a monarchy, a form of government in which the power of the king or queen is passed down to their children or relatives. These royal families sometimes believe their power was bestowed by God or some higher power.

Some Chinese emperors ruled by divine right. However, the emperor's rule was threatened if his people perceived that he had lost the "mandate of heaven," or approval of a higher power.

Some Rulers Achieve Power Through Wealth

There's another type of "rule by man": the oligarchy. This is a form of government ruled by a few elites whose right to rule is based on possession of wealth, social rank, military position or achievement. Similar to an oligarchy is the aristocracy, which means "rule of the highest." In the aristocracy, there are more rulers than an oligarchy, but this group is still small and dominated by wealthy and powerful people.

Essentially, if a government is "rule by man," people must accept any and all decisions that are made from above. The subjects, or people being ruled, have little to no say in any government decisions.

In a "rule by law" political system, the people with power cannot make up all their own rules, but must follow an established code of law. In ancient times, a Byzantine emperor established Justinian's Code, a set of laws named after him. We still follow parts of that code today. The Romans were also known for implementing laws, as was Napoleon, emperor of France, many centuries later.

Are Constitutions Essential To Governments Ruled By Law?

Today, most governments at least claim to be ruled by law. The most common thread is whether or not that government has a written constitution. However, the most important question to ask is whether or not the constitution actually is the "blueprint" that determines how and what policies are made.

For example, Nigeria officially is a democracy with a written constitution. However, the country has been continually ruled by dictators, each of whom has ignored the constitution. On the other hand, Great Britain has never had a constitution as a single written document, but has for centuries been governed by law. For much of their history, the English had a limited monarchy—that is, each king or queen must follow a rule of law.

So whether a king can order "off with his head!" depends on the type of government that is accepted in his country. If he sets the rules (rule by man), or if the accepted outside rules allow (rule by law), the victim doesn't have a chance.