

# Authoritarian Governments

## Reader's Guide

### Key Terms

Muslim, mullah, shah

### Find Out

- How does China's Communist Party control the government?
- How is the role of religion different in Islamic governments than in democratic ones?

### Understanding Concepts

**Comparative Government** What are the differences and similarities among the governments of China, North Korea, and Saudi Arabia?

## COVER STORY

### Jail for Teen Hustlers

HAVANA, CUBA, NOVEMBER 1, 1996


Every day the streets of this city fill with teenagers in search of an income. Called *jineteros*, these young street hustlers will sell nearly anything—a cigar, a place to stay, a night on the town—to foreign tourists. Alarmed at their growing numbers, Havana police have begun throwing *jineteros* in jail. Many of them express resentment because of the meager job outlook in Cuba's poor economy. "I have to earn a living," complains Miguel Angel Iglesias, a 19-year-old *jinetero*. "I used to like it in Cuba," Iglesias explains. "Now I have nothing. Before, there was hope. Now it's all gone."



Iglesias hustles for money.

While the number of democratic nations around the world is increasing, many authoritarian governments still exist as well. Governments such as those in the People's Republic of China, Cuba, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Iran present a stark contrast to democracies.

## The People's Republic of China

 Modern China is a study in contrasts. A recent U.S. State Department report on human rights called China an "authoritarian state" in which citizens lack most civil rights and in which the government commits "numerous human rights abuses." At the same time, China's Communist Party government is pursuing economic reforms that are reducing the government's tight grip on the people.

**Political History** China was ruled by emperors until the late 1800s. In 1911 an uprising overthrew the last emperor, and China became a republic a year later. Rival factions divided the new republic until 1929, when the Nationalist Party, under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek, defeated the Communists and gained partial control of the nation. When Japan invaded China in the 1930s, the Nationalists and Communists came together to resist the Japanese. After Japan's defeat in World War II, a civil war broke out in China between the two rival parties.


In 1949 Communist revolutionaries led by Mao Zedong seized power. The Nationalists fled to safety on the offshore island of Taiwan, where they remain today. Mao then led China for the next 30 years. He established a totalitarian government strictly controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in much the same way that the Soviet Communist Party once controlled the Soviet Union.

Mao's government turned China into a socialist state by taking control of all major

political and economic relations with the United States. So far, these efforts have failed to move Castro toward instituting democratic reforms.

**Cuba's Future** Castro has ruled Cuba for nearly 50 years while grooming a new generation of Communist leaders. What will happen when Castro relinquishes power is unknown. Experts predict everything from civil war and more communism to a peaceful transition towards democracy.

## North Korea

 After World War II, the Korean peninsula was divided into North and South Korea. With aid from the United States, South Korea became a democracy with a strong, free-market economy. North Korea became a Communist nation supported by the Soviet Union, until its collapse, and led by dictator Kim Il Sung. Since 1994 Kim's son, Kim Jong Il, has ruled the country with an iron fist.

**Cult of Personality** Today, North Korea's totalitarian government centers on unquestioning loyalty to Kim Jong Il. Kim's government controls all aspects of people's lives. This includes where people live and travel, what jobs they can have, and what schools children will attend.


North Koreans are almost totally cut off from outside sources of information. National propaganda glorifies Kim as the "Great Leader." Kim, people are told, deserves "absolute devotion" because he protects them against foreigners and will someday lead them to great prosperity.

A totalitarian regime like North Korea can cause great suffering. Currently, for example, about 70 percent of the nation's children are malnourished. In the last decade, more than 2 million North Koreans starved to death because the economy could not produce enough food, and much of the nation's money was spent on military weapons and luxury items for Kim.

**Tension With the United States** The first concern of totalitarian leaders is their own survival in power. Although North Korea's economy is weak, its military is strong. In the early 1990s, the country began to develop chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. Few experts believe Kim would use such weapons directly against the United States, but Kim

could sell the weapons to terrorists. Also, the existence of such weapons might lead other non-nuclear nations in the region to develop their own nuclear weapons. As a result the United States has sought to limit North Korea's development of nuclear weapons.

## Islamic Governments

 Islam is a religion spread by the prophet Muhammad, who lived from A.D. 570 to 632. Muhammad claimed that he received the teachings of God (Allah) in a vision. These teachings were written in the Quran. A **Muslim**, or follower of Islam, is "one who submits" to Allah and the instructions of the Quran. For many Muslims, Islam is not only a religion, it is also an identity and a loyalty that transcends all others.

Today there are over one billion Muslims spread across the globe. Muslims form a majority in the Arab countries of the Middle East. However, only one in four Muslims is an Arab. Muslims also make up the majority of the population in some non-Arab countries like Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, and Indonesia. In a number of other countries Muslims hold considerable political influence.

**Religion and Government** In modern times, Islamic countries view the relationship between religion and the state differently than do most Western democracies. Since the beginning of Islam, many teachers of the Islamic faith have believed that political rulers should use Islamic tenets in shaping governmental authority. As a noted scholar of Islam, Bernard Lewis, explains, "In the universal Islamic polity as conceived by Muslims, there is . . . only God, who is the sole sovereign and the sole source of law." Islamic leaders believe there is no need for a separation between religion and the state, since Allah is inherent in politics. The Quran provides the guidance needed on issues such as what the duties of citizens and rulers are, what rights citizens have, what makes a government legitimate, and how the government should exercise power.

Since the American and French Revolutions, some Western nations have drawn a line of separation between religion and the authority of the state. The U.S. Constitution, for example, clearly states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." Not all Western nations, however, follow this principle.

---

## We the People

### Making a Difference

#### Mark, Dennis, and David Richard



Wheels for Humanity logo

In 1988 Mark Richard saw a disabled woman crawling along a roadside in Guatemala. He made up his mind to bring the woman a wheelchair. When he returned to the United States, Mark contacted the local chapter of the Spinal Cord Injury Association. Together they delivered 20 wheelchairs to Guatemala. Twice a year after that Mark repeated the trip, distributing 2,000 wheelchairs. His older brother Dennis helped until he died in 1994. In July 1995 David Richard, another brother, began collecting wheelchairs throughout southern California. He created a nonprofit

organization called Wheels for Humanity. In a California warehouse, volunteers restore battered wheelchairs to be distributed to disabled children in Vietnam, Guatemala, Bosnia, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and other countries. In just 18 months the Richards improved 987 lives with the gift of a wheelchair. “Once you put your hand on a used wheelchair, you’re hooked,” David says.

The work of Wheels for Humanity continues. Various sources estimate that more than 21 million people worldwide are in need of wheelchairs.

---

The Church of England, also known as the Anglican Church, is the official church of Great Britain. The Evangelical Lutheran Church is the state church of Norway. Some democratic countries even have political parties with religious identities, such as Germany’s Christian Democratic Union.

Even when religion does play a role in Western democracies, that role is mostly symbolic. For example, many U.S. coins are imprinted with the phrase “In God We Trust.” But religion is generally not the basis of authority in democracies, nor is it central to their political programs.

**Two Views of Islam** Less than 30 years after Muhammad’s death in A.D. 632, a debate developed within Islam over which institution—religion or the state—should have ultimate authority. This debate continues to the present day.

Some Muslims, often called secularists, believe that religious doctrine and **secular** (nonreligious) law can and should be kept separate. Islam, they argue, is strictly a religion; it should not dictate what happens in government and politics. Other moderates call for practical compromises, with Islamic teachings playing a role but ultimately deferring to government authority on some key issues, such as declaring war. Moderate Muslims believe that Islam can and should try to coexist with the modern world

and modern ideas about government. These Muslims desire friendly relations with Western nations. Some want democratic institutions and the benefits of capitalism in their own countries.

Muslim fundamentalists (also called traditionalists or radicals) take a very different view. They believe Islamic countries should base their legal systems strictly on the *shari’ah*, or law of the Quran, rather than on any Western legal principles. These fundamentalists also hope Muslims across the world can be united in one spiritual, cultural, and political community. Further, they want to preserve or bring back cultural traditions such as requiring women to cover their faces in public and banning modern movies and music. They look to specially trained Islamic religious leaders called **mullahs**, who interpret and uphold traditional Islamic teachings. Some fundamentalists preach that the obligation of every Muslim is to rebel against any society or ruler that does not follow traditional Islamic principles.

Many fundamentalist Muslims see Western culture and society as a threat to Islamic culture. Some fundamentalists encourage negative attitudes towards Western democracies, especially the United States. Their main goal is to drive from power moderate Islamic governments that have adopted foreign customs. In 1991, for example, fundamentalists

murdered the moderate Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in a failed attempt to take over the government.

**Revolution in Iran** So far the most successful effort by fundamentalist Muslims has been in Iran. In the 1960s and 1970s, Iran built a capitalistic economy based on oil revenues. At that time Iran was ruled by a **shah**, or king, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, who strengthened economic ties to Western nations. Muslim religious leaders in Iran resented the shah's apparent embrace of Western values and sought a return to Muslim traditions. However, for many years the shah's secret police prevented any action and silenced all dissent.

Muslims who opposed the shah rallied around Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a Muslim leader living in exile in France. In 1979, Muslim fundamentalists in Iran organized massive demonstrations and forced the shah to flee to the United States. Khomeini returned to Iran from France and formed a new government based on Islamic principles. In this regime, conservative religious leaders had veto power over the actions of political leaders.

The new Iranian government demanded that the United States return the shah to Iran to stand trial. The United States refused, and relations between the two countries grew more and more strained. At the same time, anti-American sentiment increased in Iran. In late 1979, Iranians took American diplomats hostage in the U.S. Embassy in Iran and held them there for more than a year.

**Saudi Arabia** The struggle between fundamental Islam and the modern world has caused political tension in Saudi Arabia, a country that has provided oil and important military bases to the United States. The Al Saud family established the country in 1932 and have ruled as absolute monarchs ever since. The government is based on a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam with no separation of religion and the state. Next to the royal family, the most powerful political force in the country has always been the mullahs who impose traditional Islamic social and political ideas through government sponsored organizations like the Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.

The discovery of oil in the 1950s transformed Saudi Arabia from an isolated, desert nation to a wealthy, urban nation with tens of thousands of foreign workers and a large middle class of professionals. A growing number of Saudis have also started making demands for an elected government. As a result, the royal family has been searching for ways to create a modern economy, culture, and government while placating hard-line Muslim radicals. Since the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, many American critics have accused the Saudi government of indirectly supporting terrorism. These critics claim the Saudi government has funneled money to Islamic radicals as a way to appease fundamentalist critics within Saudi Arabia.

## Section 2 Assessment

### Checking for Understanding

- Main Idea** Use a graphic organizer like the one below to profile each of the countries covered in this section, and indicate whether the country is moving toward or away from democracy.

Authoritarian States		
Country	Controlled by	+/- Democracy

- Define** Muslim, mullah, shah.
- Identify** Politburo, Falun Gong, Bay of Pigs.
- What events in 1979 returned Iran to Muslim control?
- Why is China not a democratic nation?

### Critical Thinking

- Recognizing Ideologies** How does the North Korean government promote its state leader to the people?

### Concepts IN ACTION

**Comparative Government** Choose a country discussed in this section. Research recent political developments in this country. Imagine that you are traveling to the country that you chose. Write a letter to a friend describing the country, its government, and the extent to which the government affects people's lives.