

Iran's Theocracy: Who has the Power?

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GRADE LEVEL
9-12

KEY QUESTIONS
How is a theocracy different from other types of political systems?
Who are the various individuals/groups in the Iranian political system and what role do they play in policymaking (who had the power)?
Where does the Supreme Leader derive his right to rule? How is this similar or different from other countries?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS
Types of political systems
Current Issues
Modern Middle East history
Theocracy in early America

BACKGROUND
<p>As the Islamic Revolution in Iran resulted in regime change and the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini, a new ideology became the foundation of the political system. With the development of a theocratic government, Iranian politics would experience a series of changes under the rule of a religious figure and a group to be known as the Guardian Council. This lesson provides students with an understanding of theocracy as a form of government in Iran and enables students to compare and contrast how it functions in relation to other styles of political rule. In addition, students will identify and analyze the various roles different key stakeholders play within and outside the system in Iran. Who ultimately has the power in Iran when it comes to policymaking or negotiating international agreements (such as the recent nuclear deal with the United States and Europe)? What is the division of power or responsibility between the Supreme Leader, President, Guardian Council, Revolutionary Guard, and Majles (legislature)? What real power does the president have over domestic policy? These are key questions posed to students during this lesson.</p> <p>When looking at the U.S. and Iranian political systems, it appears the two government structures are relatively similar with a popularly elected president represented in both countries. However, Iran is an Islamic Theocracy that puts a high ranking religious figure, the Supreme Leader (currently Ayatollah Khamenei) in general control over much of domestic and foreign policy. In fact, unlike other systems with an executive branch in charge of the military, Iran's constitution gives power to the Supreme Leader to direct the armed forces and security services. The Supreme Leader is also empowered to appoint 6 members to the Guardian Council, a religious body of clerics who have the authority to approve or disapprove political candidates, control the media, and assert power through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard.</p> <p>In recent years, many Iranian citizens have called for reform and raised concerns over the legitimacy of elections and the balance of power. As questions are raised about Iran's nuclear program, who ultimately has the power and influence to decide this question? While democratic elements remain part of the political system, the theocratic government continues to emphasize the religious hierarchy and the power of clerics to influence or make major decisions. Since 70% of the Iranian population is under the age of 35, it will be interesting to see how the system changes in the future. The current regime will be faced with various challenges and this lesson will give students an opportunity to assess which individuals and groups will play a role in addressing those issues.</p>

COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.9](#)

Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.7](#)

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.2](#)

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas

GLOBAL COMPETENCIES

Investigate the World

Recognize diverse perspectives

Communicate ideas effectively

DOCUMENTS

Political Cartoons

*See Appendices 1, 2, 3, 4

KEY TERMS

Theocracy: a form of government in which God is recognized as the supreme civil ruler and God's laws are interpreted by ecclesiastical authorities like priests.

Supreme Leader: the highest ranking spiritual leader in Iran.

Guardian Council: a 12 member council in the Iranian government empowered to vet legislation and oversee elections.

Majles: the Iranian parliament; an Arabic term for special gatherings among common interest groups.

Council of Religious Experts: Islamic theologians charged with electing and removing the Supreme Leader of Iran and supervising his activities.

Islamic Revolutionary Guard: a branch of Iran's military founded after the Iranian revolution to protect the country's Islamic system.

PRE-LEARNING ACTIVITY

Materials:

Whiteboard

Procedure:

1. Brainstorming question: if you were creating a political system, which components and/or characteristics would you include? Take a few minutes to write these ideas in your composition book or notebook. After students have finished, discuss as a class and write their ideas on the board.
2. What do you know about the political system in Iran? List all of the characteristics or details you can think of in your composition book or notebook. Give students time to write down what they know and share a couple of ideas with the students around them (Think, Pair, Share). After students have finished, discuss and write student responses on the board.
3. Utilize one or more of the political cartoons provided to initiate discussion about Iran's theocracy. Place on the document camera and discuss with students. What do they see in the cartoon? What do they think is the perspective of the cartoonist? What conclusions can they draw from their analysis?

ACTIVITY

Materials

Washington Post article: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/06/14/how-do-irans-supreme-leader-and-president-split-power-heres-a-chart-explaining-it/>

Procedure

1. Break students into groups of 3 or 4 and assign each small group one of the following key stakeholders that has an influence on government and politics in Iran: Supreme Leader, President, Guardian Council, Assembly of Religious Experts, Majles, Revolutionary Guard, media, and youth.
2. Students will investigate the role of each key stakeholder affecting the Iranian political system. Most of these groups are within the political structure. However, you may want to include a couple of groups outside the official structure, such as the media and the large youth population. Each group should read the *Washington Post* article about the structure of the political system and the role played by different individuals and groups. Students will also complete research on their assigned stakeholder to find additional information about its specific role and influence.
3. When students have completed their research, have them complete one of the following:
 - A PowerPoint Presentation that discusses their stakeholder's role and influence
 - A song with specific lyrics that embodies the role and influence of their stakeholder
 - A large political cartoon that illustrates the role and influence of their key stakeholder
4. Each group should present their work to the class. Discuss each presentation, comparing and contrasting the role of each stakeholder group. Ask students the question: How do these roles compare to what you know about other political systems (U.S, China, Britain, Russia, etc.)? What similarities and differences exist? Are there advantages and/or disadvantages to each system (such as...)?
5. Simulation Activity: Provide students with an opportunity to debate the nuclear program from each group perspective. What would they propose given the political, economic, and social implications? Here are articles that will help students identify the perspectives within each stakeholder group.
 - The Politics of Iran's Nuclear Program: <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/politics-irans-nuclear-program>
 - The Iranian People's Reaction to the Nuclear Deal: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/farshad-farahat/hello-world-a-message-from-iran-7921796.html>
 - Iran's Supreme Leader Orders Parliament to Vote on Nuclear Deal: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/04/world/middleeast/ayatollah-ali-khamenei-iran-supreme-leader-nuclear-deal-vote.html?_r=0
 - Iran Parliament Wants to Revise Nuclear Deal: <http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2015/07/20/iran-parliament-wants-to-revise-nuclear-deal/>
 - Why Iran's Revolutionary Guard backs a nuclear deal: It's just business: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2015/0603/Why-Iran-s-Revolutionary-Guard-backs-a-nuclear-deal-It-s-just-business>
 - How Iranian media prepared the public for the nuclear deal: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2015/jul/24/how-iran-media-supreme-leader-prepared-the-public-nuclear-deal>
6. Have each group develop a recommendation on the nuclear deal and explain why they support their position. The different stakeholder groups will present their recommendation and rationale. Discuss as a class and analyze how the decision to accept a nuclear deal would be determined within the context of the political system.

EXTENTION ACTIVITY

Option 1

Have students develop a large political cartoon or poster that represents the nuclear deal from the Iranian perspective. Think about what key idea(s) they want to convey and share their work with the rest of the class.

Option 2

Compare and contrast theocracy to other forms of government found across the world. What similarities and differences exist? What advantages and/or disadvantages exist within each system? Write an editorial describing what you perceive to be the best political system.

Option 3

Prepare a news broadcast in which you describe the nuclear deal with Iran from multiple perspectives. This broadcast could include Iranian points of view, along with perspectives from the United States and European Union.

Iran's Theocracy Lesson Plan: Political Cartoons

Appendix 1:



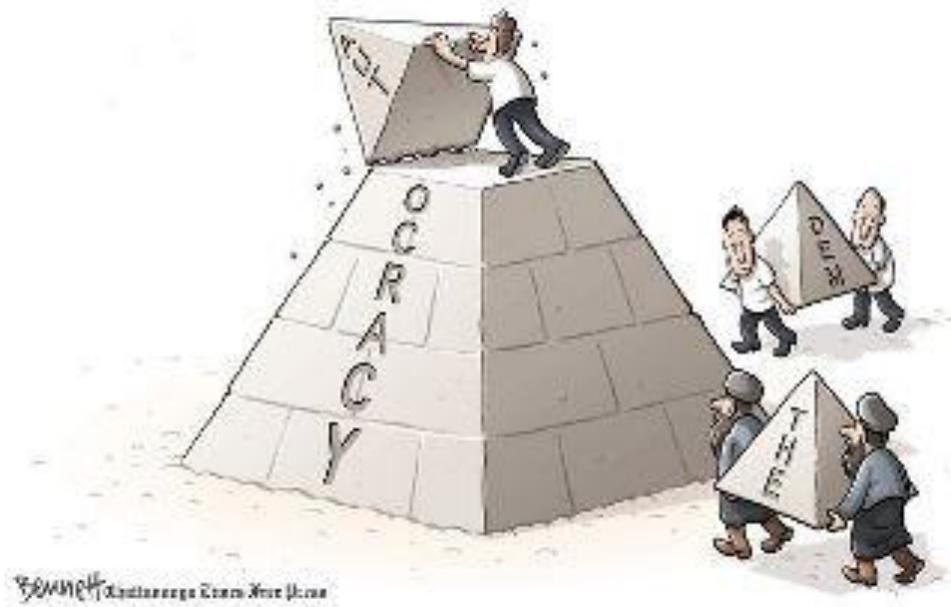
<http://lefteyeonthemedia.files.wordpress.com/2008/10/theocracy-01.jpg>

Appendix 2:



http://iranpoliticsclub.net/cartoons/iran1/images/Students%20&%20Theocracy_gif.jpg

Appendix 3:



<http://wp.production.patheos.com/blogs/dispatches/files/2011/10/ocracies.jpg>

Appendix 4:



<http://www.ihavenet.com/images/Iran-Elections-Theocracy-Democracy.jpg>