A theocracy is a system of government headed by one or more religious leaders who claim to rule by divine authority. In the past, it was common for governments to be tied to an official state religion. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of the rare countries today with this type of government. The state religion is Islam, and its laws are based on the traditional sources of Islamic Law, or Shar'ia. Related 6th grade vocabulary words (Curriculum Standard 6.GO.B.10):

- **Theocracy**: a system of government headed by one or more religious leaders who claim to rule by divine authority
- **Monarchy**: a system of government headed by a monarch, such as king, queen, shah or sultan whose position is usually inherited. A constitutional monarchy is a government which is held accountable to the people via a constitution.
- **Democracy**: system of government in which political control is exercised by the people, either directly or through elected representatives
- **Religion**: a set of beliefs about the nature of the universe, the existence of one God or several gods, the meaning of life, and moral codes of behavior
- **Culture**: a community’s learned behavior and ways of life, including their language, beliefs, customs, and practices. These ways of life are also called cultural norms.

In Saudi Arabia, law is interpreted according to the Hanbali school of thought in the Sunni Islam. The laws also follow the reforms of Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahab. This is why Saudi Arabian Islam is sometimes called Wahabism. One of the reforms of Wahabism was to make the separation of men and women more strict. Genders in Saudi Arabia follow strict rules not only because of the state religion, Islam, but because of the people want to follow their customs. This means it has become a part of the culture. There are normally two areas in any public space, one for men and one for women and their families. The McDonald’s in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, pictured above has two entrances: one for men, and one for families where women are allowed to enter with their male relatives. Many men and women in Saudi Arabia disagree with these restrictions and want to change them, while others consider them an acceptable part of Saudi cultural norms.

In addition to being a theocracy, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a monarchy, which is a system of government headed by a monarch, such as king, queen, shah or sultan whose position is usually inherited. Individuals from a country ruled by a monarchy do not have the same rights that individuals from democracies do. This is because some monarchies are not held accountable to the people they rule. These monarchies are called absolute monarchy. Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy, but recently the government has taken steps to listen to the people more in the past. The national council, or shura, is gaining more power to make changes, especially in regard to individual rights. Women are now able to vote, and are included in the council. It is for this reason that more women are now in the workplace in Saudi Arabia.

The recent reforms of the national shura indicate that Saudi Arabia may be evolving toward democracy because they have improved the level of people’s representation in government. Representing the people’s will in government is the foundation of democracy. Sometimes democracies are called representational democracies to emphasize that they have systems in place for the people to change government. Another aspect of democracy is a constitution. Saudi Arabia does not have a constitution. If it had one, it would be called a constitutional monarchy, and could potentially be considered a democracy.

What students will learn:

Content Statement (Curriculum Standard 6.GO.B.10):

“Governments can be categorized as monarchies, theocracies, dictatorships, or democracies, but categories may overlap and labels may not accurately represent how governments function. The extent of citizens’ liberties and responsibilities varies according to limits on governmental authority.”

With this material, students are learning about the relationship of power between those in power and those they govern (Zimmer, Jarrett, & Killoran, 2016). Different types of government students need to know for Ohio’s 6th Grade Social Studies test:

- Monarchies
- Theocracies
- Dictatorships
- Democracies

Related classroom activity: students get in groups to create laws for safe working conditions based in different legal systems from around the world.