Centralised and decentralised systems of government

Most modern states have more than one level of government. There is the government of the country as a whole: the government of India, the government of France, the government of China etc. The government of a country is usually referred to as the central or national government. Most countries also have regional or provincial governments (sometimes also called states) and local (e.g. town or village) governments as well.

Self-testing Activity 5.1

This means that most countries have to solve the problem of the relationship between these different levels of government: how much power each level has.

- In a country in which all power is held by the central government, we can say the political system is ‘centralised’.
- In a country where a large amount of power is held in regional or provincial (lower levels of government), we can say the system is 'decentralised'.

In reality, the degree of centralisation or decentralisation varies greatly among the countries of the world.

Unitary systems of government

Most modern states, (with some important exceptions), have unitary systems of government. This means that the power of ‘sovereignty’ is held exclusively by a central government.

The central government controls the state.

However, it is also true that most unitary states make provision for a system of regional and local government. They practise at least some degree of decentralisation.
They may do this because the government recognises the special nature or difference of certain parts of the country.

Sometimes it is because the government sees that it needs regional and local governments to help provide government services more efficiently.

Sometimes it may be because it is believed to be a good principle to allow regional and local communities to have power to make policies and decisions about regional and local matters.

In a unitary state, however, it is the central government which has the power to decide how much decentralisation there will be.

The central government designs and implements the system of regional and local government. It also controls the system.

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**Decentralisation of a unitary state**
Regional and local government in unitary states.

In a unitary state the central government usually has a government department called something like a ‘Ministry of Interior’. The country may be divided into regional and local units, e.g. provinces and townships. These are controlled by the central government’s Ministry of Interior. It has the power to appoint the provincial heads e.g. governors, to supervise the working of the provincial governments.

Under this kind of system there can be many levels of government, but the system is designed and controlled by the central government. There may also be a system of elected provincial and township councils, but they will be supervised by somebody appointed by the central government.

Sometimes in unitary states there is a strong tradition of autonomous regional or local governments, e.g. provincial governments or, in many cases, village governments.

In such cases, the work of the central government is supervised at the provincial and local level by staff who are appointed by the central government. However, alongside, separate from the central government administration, there are provincial governments, or village governments, supervised by their own heads and responsible to the provincial community or the village community.

In practice, the way the system works in unitary states may change, from time to time, depending on what approach is favoured by the central government.

Those people who favour strong central control usually do so because it provides a uniform system throughout the country. For example, it enables the central government to appoint people it believes are properly qualified to be governors or village chiefs.

On the other hand, those who favour local autonomy usually do so because they see it as more democratic. It provides for a much greater level of participation by the community in government, because they elect their regional or village government.

Self-testing Activity 5.3
Federal systems of government

When sovereign, independent states voluntarily agree to join together we call it a federating process.

There can be many different outcomes, depending on how much unification the uniting states want.

If they want to work together but do not want to establish a new central government we might call the result an ‘association of states’. An example would be ASEAN, which has a secretariat to help the work of the association but otherwise the member states remain unchanged. Their representatives simply meet and consult when they need to.

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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN was established on August 1967 in Bangkok by five member countries, namely, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Brunei Darussalam joined on 8 January 1984, Vietnam on 28 July 1995, Laos and Myanmar on 23 July 1997, and Cambodia on 30 April 1999.

The ASEAN Declaration states that the aims and purposes of the Association are: (i) to accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region...and... (ii) to promote regional peace and stability ... among countries in the region.

In 1995, ASEAN Heads of State and Government re-affirmed that "Cooperative peace and shared prosperity shall be fundamental goals of ASEAN".

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Early stage of the federating process: association
If the urge to be united is strong enough, the uniting states may agree to establish central institutions with power over certain things on behalf of all of the original states.

If the desire to be united is very strong, enough power may be given to a central government, so that it is recognised as a new sovereign state. In that case it is likely to be referred to as a **federation**. In a federation, or federal system of government, sovereignty is shared between the new state and the original states, which joined together. A constitution is drawn up which shares the powers between a central, or federal, government and the governments of the uniting states. The most well known example is the United States of America.

The European Union (EU) is a grouping which appears to be at an intermediate stage on the way to forming a federation. The EU has a parliament and a currency but there is still no federal government of Europe.

**Self-testing Activity 5.4**
Community And Nation State Module

Topic 5 – Centralised and decentralised systems of government

A federal system of government is one in which there is an independent state, with a constitution which recognise two levels of government: the federal level (the new central government) and the state level.

Federal countries or federations, are made up, by constitution, of constituent states. So as you can see, a federal country is a decentralised system of government. It has a decentralised political system.

A strongly decentralised unitary system may look a lot like a federal system. However, the distribution of power in a federal system is different from a decentralised unitary system.

- In a unitary system, it is the central government which gives power to the lower levels of government.

- In a federal system, it is the member states which agree to give power to a federal government.

In a federal system, the federating states (once they have agreed to join together) may agree to give up most of their power in order to form a strong central government. Or, they may be willing to give up only rather few powers.

Federal constitutions

Whichever the case, the powers of the new federal or central government and the powers of the state governments, are stated clearly in the constitution of the new federation. This constitution is drawn up jointly by the federating states.

Federalism is usually seen as a constitutional way to provide for a secure, division of powers between central and lower level governments.

When a unitary state carries out a decentralising process, the result may be a federal-style constitution, even though it does not result from a federating process. In this case, the central government retains sovereignty. It has simply created a lower level of government in an attempt to create a satisfactory form of regional government system.

Self-testing Activity 5.5

Although there are two quite different paths which may lead to federal constitutions we can think of federalism as a constitutional solution to the
problem of how distinct communities can live a common life together without ceasing to be distinct communities.

In a sense, federalism can be thought of as a way to balance the desire to be separate with the desire to be together.

Using a form of decentralisation with a federal-style constitution is often suggested as a way to ease tensions between ethnic regions of a country.

A federal constitution provides for the division of government powers between two (or more) distinct levels of government.

Decentralisation within the states of a federal system

Within a federal system, there is a central (federal government) and a series of state governments. In such a system, the states may be centralised or decentralised. They, rather than the central government, will usually have the power to determine the amount of power of lower levels of government, e.g. townships or villages. In some cases, the states themselves are also federations.

Self-testing Activity 5.6