PS 4780: Dictatorship & Democracy Around the World

Course Description

Why did North Korea’s Kim Jong Un execute his uncle, and kill his own half-brother with chemical weapons in a Malaysian airport? Why did Bashar al-Assad hold a presidential election in Syria during the middle of a civil war in 2014? Why did the Arab Spring happen, and what explains why some of those countries have since become democracies, while others have slid back into dictatorship? Will China survive and become the next world superpower, or will it collapse? Why did Ferdinand Marcos refer to the martial law era in the Philippines as a “constitutional dictatorship” – and what is a “constitutional dictatorship” anyways?

This course is an introduction to the causes and character of contemporary authoritarian and democratic regimes worldwide: how and why democracy and dictatorship are created, how the leaders of these two types of political systems rule, why they survive, why people resist dictatorship or don’t, and why certain regimes survive or fall. For those of you who have taken coursework on American constitutional democracy, the course will provide a framework for comparison and contrast: what are the alternatives to constitutional democracy, and how do they operate in practice?

We will use academic articles, news stories, and films to study the development and inner workings of democracy and dictatorship. You should come away from this course with 1) an understanding of the major theoretical debates about dictatorship and democracy, and 2) knowledge of how these debates apply to important countries and issues in the world today.