The Swedish System of Government

All public power proceeds from the people. This is the foundation of parliamentary democracy in Sweden. Everyone has the same rights, the same opportunity to have their say, and everyone is free to scrutinise how the politicians and public agencies exercise their power.

In Sweden, general elections are held every four years, with the latest one held in September 2014. Around 7 million people are entitled to vote and thereby influence which political party will represent them in the Riksdag (the Swedish Parliament), county councils and municipalities. People can also influence Swedish politics in other ways – by taking part in referendums, joining a political party or commenting on reports presented by the Government.

The Swedish Constitution
The Swedish Constitution defines how Sweden is governed. It regulates the relationships between decision-making and executive power, and the basic rights and freedoms of citizens. Four fundamental laws make up the Constitution: the Instrument of Government, the Act of Succession, the Freedom of the Press Act and the Fundamental Law on Freedom of Expression. Among other things, the Instrument of Government guarantees citizens the right to obtain information freely, hold demonstrations, form political parties and practise their religion.

The Act of Succession regulates the right of members of the House of Bernadotte to accede to the Swedish throne.

The Freedom of the Press Act sets out the principle of public access to official documents in order to guarantee an open society with access to information about the work of the Riksdag, the Government and public agencies. This law allows people to study official documents whenever they wish. Another principle in the Freedom of the Press Act is the freedom to communicate information. Under this principle, everyone in Sweden is entitled to give information to the media that they consider important and that they feel should be made public. The publisher of the material is not entitled to reveal the source if the individual in question wishes to remain anonymous.

The Law on Freedom of Expression, which came into force in 1992, largely mirrors the Freedom of the Press Act, in regards to the prohibition of censorship, the freedom to communicate information and the right to anonymity.

Fundamental rights
To amend a fundamental law, the Riksdag must pass the amendment on two separate occasions, separated by a parliamentary election. The fundamental laws take precedence over all other statutes and no law may contravene the Constitution.
MAJOR UN CONTRIBUTOR

Sweden is one of the largest contributors to the United Nations and one of the few countries to meet the UN's aid target of 0.7 per cent of GNI (gross national income). Sweden became a member of the UN in 1946 and active involvement in the UN has been central to Swedish foreign policy ever since.

FOREIGN POLICY

Throughout the 20th century, Swedish foreign policy was based on the principle of non-alignment in peacetime and neutrality in wartime. Since 1995 Sweden has been a member of the European Union, and as a consequence of a new global security situation, Sweden has modified its foreign policy doctrine, including playing a more active role in European security cooperation.

NATIONAL REFERENDUMS

A total of six national referendums have been held in Sweden. These polls are consultative in character and the Riksdag may reach decisions that run counter to their outcome. This has only happened on one occasion, in 1955, when a referendum was held on the introduction of right-hand traffic. The Swedish people voted against it but the Government chose to introduce it nonetheless.

Sweden's last two referendums:

1994: Membership of the EU
Result: Yes

2003: Introduction of the euro
Result: No

THE RIKSDAG – REPRESENTING THE PEOPLE

The Riksdag makes the decisions and the Government implements them. The Government also submits proposals for new laws or law amendments to the Riksdag.

The 349-member Riksdag is Sweden's primary representative forum. The entire Riksdag is chosen by direct elections based on suffrage for all Swedish citizens aged 18 or over who are, or previously have been, residents of Sweden. Since 1971, Sweden has had a unicameral (one-chamber) Riksdag.

General elections to the Riksdag are held on the third Sunday of September every four years. Eligibility to serve in the Riksdag requires Swedish citizenship and the attainment of voting age. All elections employ the principle of proportional representation, to ensure that seats are distributed among the political parties in proportion to the votes cast for them across the country as a whole.

Four per cent required

There is one exception to the rule of full national proportionality: a party must receive at least 4 per cent of all votes in the election to gain representation in the Riksdag, a rule designed to prevent very small parties from getting in.

There are currently eight parties represented in the Riksdag (in order of percentage share, from largest to smallest): the Social Democratic Party (Socialdemokraterna), the Moderate Party (Moderaterna), the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna), the Green Party (Miljöpartiet), the Centre Party (Centerpartiet), the Left Party (Vänsterpartiet), the Liberal Party (Folkpartiet) and the Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna).

Appoints the Prime Minister

The Government governs the country but is accountable to the Riksdag. The Riksdag appoints a Prime Minister, who is tasked with forming a Government. The Prime Minister personally chooses the ministers to make up the Cabinet and also decides which ministers will be in charge of the various ministries. Together, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet ministers form the Government. Under the Constitution, the Government – not the head of state (the monarch) – is empowered to make governmental decisions.

Ministers usually represent the political party or parties in power. In many cases, they have a seat in the Riksdag, which they retain during their period in the Cabinet, although an alternate takes over the duties of a Riksdag member appointed to Cabinet. In other words, a Cabinet minister must abstain from voting in the Riksdag. All ministers are, however, entitled to participate in parliamentary debates.

At the official opening of the Riksdag each September, the Prime Minister delivers a Statement of Government Policy.
HISTORY OF SWEDISH ELECTIONS

2014: A minority left-of-centre coalition takes over after the Alliance.  

2010: The ruling centre-right Alliance beats the left-of-centre coalition, but fails to gain an outright majority.  

2006: The non-socialist parties form a four-party coalition government called the Alliance.  

2002 and 1998: The Social Democrats remain in office after both elections, but in order to implement their policies are forced to form a parliamentary alliance with the Left Party and the Green Party.  

1994: The Social Democrats form a new minority government. Starting from this year, general elections in Sweden are held every four years instead of three.  

1991: A non-socialist minority government of the Moderates, Liberals, the Centre Party and Christian Democrats is formed.  

1988 and 1985: The Social Democrats remain in power after both elections.  

1982: The non-socialist parties lose their majority and a Social Democratic minority government is formed.  

1979: The non-socialist parties retain their parliamentary majority, and a new three-party government is formed. In the spring of 1981, the Moderate Party leaves the Government.  

1976: The Social Democrats rule without interruption, except for a period of 109 days in 1936 when Sweden has an interim government.  

The regional level  

At the regional level, Sweden is divided into 20 counties. Political tasks at this level are undertaken by the county councils. The county councils are responsible for overseeing tasks that cannot be handled at the local level by municipalities but which rather require coordination across a larger region, most notably health care. The county councils are entitled to levy income taxes to cover their costs. At the regional level there are also county administrative boards, the government bodies for the counties.

The local level  

At the local level, Sweden is divided into 290 municipalities, each with an elected assembly or council. Municipalities are responsible for a broad range of facilities and services including housing, roads, water supply and waste-water processing, schools, public welfare, elderly care and childcare. The municipalities are entitled to levy income taxes on individuals. They also charge for various services. As a result, municipalities have significant latitude in deciding what services they should offer. They are however legally obliged to provide certain basic services.

The European level  

On entering the EU in 1995, Sweden acquired a further level of government: the European level. As a member of the European Union, Sweden is subject to the EU acquis communautaire – the accumulated legislation, legal acts and court decisions that constitute the cumulative body of European Union law. Sweden takes part in the decision-making process when new common rules are drafted and approved. The Swedish Government represents Sweden in the European Council of Ministers, which is the EU’s principal decision-making body. Some issues previously decided by the Riksdag are nowadays decided at the EU level.
Social Democrat Stefan Löfven was appointed prime minister of Sweden after the 2014 general elections.

THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Sweden’s general elections in September 2014 saw a minority coalition of Social Democrats and Greens take over after the centre-right Alliance.

For many decades, the Social Democratic Party had a dominant role in Swedish politics. However, over the past 30 years or so, power has changed hands several times between the Social Democrats and the ‘non-socialist’ political bloc.

In the 2014 general elections, Stefan Löfven became prime minister – although his coalition of Social Democrats and Greens could not gain an absolute majority. The prime minister’s Social Democratic Party garnered 31 per cent of the votes. Together with the Green Party’s 6.9 per cent, the left-of-centre coalition thereby achieved 37.9 per cent. The centre-right Alliance, which includes the Moderate Party, the Liberal Party, the Centre Party and the Christian Democrats, collected 39.4 per cent of the votes. Since Sweden has a system of negative parliamentarism, meaning that a government can stay in power as long as it doesn’t have a majority against it, the Social Democrats and the Greens could still form a government by themselves.

In short, the 2014 elections left Sweden in a complicated parliamentary situation. A left-of-centre minority coalition is in government and the far-right Sweden Democrats are in a so-called swing vote position, having gained nearly 13 per cent of the votes.

USEFUL LINKS

www.government.se  Government and the Government Offices of Sweden
www.manskligarattigheter.se  The Government’s website on human rights
www.riksdagen.se  The Swedish Parliament – the Riksdag
www.skl.se  The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions