The world’s first known national government was formed in ancient Egypt when Menes united Upper and Lower Egypt around 3100 B.C. Menes is now considered to be Egypt’s first pharaoh (another word for king or ruler). He started the first dynasty, which is a group of rulers from the same family. Ancient Egypt had 31 dynasties, during which over 200 pharaohs reigned, one after the other. Some dynasties lasted for a long time, and others were fairly short.

Pharaohs were not elected by the people. They inherited their positions. Pharaohs often had more than one wife, and the oldest son of the chief wife would become the next pharaoh.

Today, the word pharaoh refers to all rulers of ancient Egypt. However, for much of their history, Egyptians did not call their kings pharaohs. The word did not come into use in Egypt until the Eighteenth Dynasty (sometime between 1539 and 1295 B.C.).

Government and religion were very closely connected. Egyptians believed that the pharaohs were all-powerful gods on Earth. Pharaohs were supreme rulers who issued laws, ran the army, managed the economy, and generally handled all other aspects of Egyptian society.

The pharaoh relied on advisors to help run the country. The priests took care of the country’s important religious needs. High-ranking officials, called viziers and overseers, assisted the pharaoh in running the government. The officials were responsible for areas such as tax collection, royal granaries, and law courts. Each of the 42 districts in ancient Egypt had its own governor, or nomarch. The governors ran the day-to-day operations of their districts. The scribes were another important group of officials. They were ancient Egypt’s writers and recordkeepers. The pharaoh and the government officials had to depend on the hardworking craftspeople and farmers to keep the country running smoothly.

People did not use bills and coins as money. Instead, they paid in goods (usually crops) and services (such as serving in the military or helping to build a monument). The pharaoh did not have a bank but rather a warehouse filled with crops that people had paid as taxes.