

### The First Amendment: Freedom, Stability, and Democracy

For over 200 years, America has been a shining beacon of a prosperous and democratic society. Few documents have been as influential on the world stage as the Constitution of the United States. It is the sacred law of our nation, the charter by which the President takes the Oath of Office, and the legal code that inspired many others around the globe. The Bill of Rights cemented the careful balance of power between the government and the individual as a cornerstone of American democracy. The most profound component was the First Amendment and its promise to our society.

The central tenet of the First Amendment is that the government must not impose ideology on society. Our right to our own opinions is ceaselessly protected by our Constitution and enforced by our institutions. In our society, every citizen possesses the right to peacefully express their views and dissent from the judgment of others. A strong government must be willing to accept public criticism of its conduct. This is a truth so often unrealized by undemocratic dictatorships, who view the complete control of public opinion as a sign of strength. In reality, it is the fear of the people's ability to think for themselves and threaten the status quo. The ability to speak out against the establishment helps prevent the development of vast power imbalances within society, especially the formation of a dominant oligarchy. It ensures that politicians will strive to represent the people's interests, so that the voices of ordinary citizens will be heard in legislative chambers, government offices, and town halls throughout America. An illegitimate regime that thrives on the repression of free speech will ultimately collapse as innate democratic ideas emerge, beginning with the simplest act of challenging authority.

In many countries that are struggling along the path to democracy, violence between opposing factions have had catastrophic effects on government and society. The Caribbean nation of Haiti, for instance, experienced a series of dictators and military coups, followed by political instability, which continues to the present day. This pattern of oppression and poverty is widespread in the least developed countries. Freedom of the press allows for open discussion and dissemination of ideas, which creates well-informed citizens that can exercise their civic duties. It establishes the notion of peaceful disputes that can be settled without partisan violence or the overarching shadow of government propaganda.

Throughout human history, religion has played a significant role in the interactions between people groups. Tragically, intolerance towards other beliefs created strict social hierarchies or instigated ethnic conflicts. In regions like the Middle East, religion is a polarizing force that tears people apart, culminating in violence. The provision of the First Amendment establishing freedom of religion was adopted to separate the religious institutions from the state and became crucial as America gradually became a melting-pot society of immigrants.

Critics of democracy often point to slow progress as a major flaw. On the contrary, this is what the Founding Fathers envisioned: the gradual transition of power. Within the American government, where the system of checks and balances acts to create meaningful debate and compromise before the implementation of any policy. Under authoritarian leadership, there is perceived stability and efficiency, yet the voices of the people are silenced. Power remains dangerously static, absolutely dependent on the will of an individual

dictator. Mao Zedong, the Chinese Communist leader, was a prime example of this principle. During his totalitarian regime, Chinese politics revolved around not the will of the people but of the ideology of Mao, whose policies cost an estimated 65 million lives. The freedoms of the First Amendment allow the people to prevent full consolidation of power, and thus usher in prosperity through constantly evolving ideas and development.

As society changes, our system of government responds. During the Civil Rights Movement, people of all ethnicities unified to purge the institutions of segregation and uplift racial equality in our society. We have the right to organize and petition the government to enact change.

The First Amendment is profound in that the will of the majority prevails, while the voices of minorities are protected. That is the true beauty of democracy. Individual liberty is crucial in order to establish a peaceful and thriving society. The freedoms that we enjoy should not be taken for granted. We must recognize them as both rights and responsibilities to become active citizens in our republic, the government of the people.