

## Freedom of Opinion, As Long as We Agree: The Significance of Article Nineteen

We live in a world filled with unique personalities. Often our environment feels so overpopulated that we find ourselves needing to preserve the aspects that make us distinctive. Regardless of social status or income, everyone has a distinct character, background, and point of view. Further, one of the most positive aspects of living in a democratic society is the opportunity to benefit from other perspectives. The knowledge and wisdom acquired from different viewpoints proves far greater than any individual opinion. The Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, preserves freedom for citizens to express their own ideas, and benefit from the opinions of others. Article Nineteen states, “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” This article is significant because it proves important to a thriving society, though modern leadership often overlooks its message.

Society may function, but will not thrive, with constricted freedom of opinion. The character of a community lies in the culture, the character of a culture comes from the people, and the character of a person relies on their unique expression and beliefs. The philosopher Bhartrihari once said, “Knowledge grows when shared.” When beliefs form solely from material hand-picked by an authority, they will be as original as if they came from a set of instructions.

Unfortunately, these restricted societies have become a reality in many nations, especially theocratic governments. In Islamic countries such as Afghanistan, the strict rules associated with the religion act as a fence to contain self-expression. Restrictions on women force them to pay meticulous attention to details such as clothing, appearance in public, and social interaction. Not only women must carefully mold themselves to the law; strict requirements also concern men. One Afghan reporter recently presented a controversial article relating to women’s rights. He

communicated his unique opinion, even if it opposed Islamic tradition. His boldness will cost him his life. He was sentenced to death at only twenty years old.<sup>1</sup>

Dictatorships such as the North Korean government overlook the message of Article Nineteen as well, carefully monitoring information presented to citizens. Media providers such as television or radio are closely monitored impart only government-approved material. As Andrew Natsios, Administrator for U.S. Agency for International Development states, “The regime in North Korea derives... influence over the minds and hearts of the people through its absolute control and manipulation of all information made available.... By controlling what a person hears, reads, and sees, one controls what he or she thinks and believes.”<sup>2</sup> Inevitably a fair and upright government is free of such totalitarian controls

Some countries divert freedom of self-expression in a much less severe manner, such as the United States. After the tragedy on 9/11, the concept of patriotism immediately became based on opinion. The message “You are either with us, or against us,” intimidated many individuals, who fear becoming aligned with “the enemy.” The loose-ended statement resulted in a society where an opinion that did not endorse the government’s became “un-patriotic.” American citizens are not forced to believe a certain thing, but pressured.

Acknowledgement of Article Nineteen would ultimately benefit societies across the world in ways that would support peace, collaboration, and general happiness of the population. Freedom of expression would provide a greater wealth of knowledge, increased tolerance and understanding of others, and promote flourishing communities throughout the world.

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<sup>1</sup> [Afghan Reporters Death Sentence Draws Wide Condemnation](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/01/24/AR2008012402995.html?hpid=hp). Nora Boustany. 25 January 2008. Washington Post. 26 January 2008. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/01/24/AR2008012402995.html?hpid=hp>>

<sup>2</sup> [Life Inside North Korea](http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2003/21269.htm). Andrew Natsios. 5 June 2003. U.S. Department of State. 28 January 2008 <<http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2003/21269.htm>>