[**Notions of freedom**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1678037/notions-of-freedom)

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‘FREEDOM’ and ‘liberty’ remain two popular words in modern discourse. With the advent of the global human rights regime, people have become increasingly aware of their freedoms. And yet, subjugation plays out in tacit ways which significantly curtails the liberty societies enjoy. This oppression takes place predominantly in the political and economic domains. Appreciating how this oppression takes place requires that we scrutinise how freedom has historically been envisioned.

Theoretical understandings of freedom have evolved over time. As Annelien de Djin argues in her book Freedom: An Unruly History, concepts of freedom have undergone significant transitions. In ancient Greece, freedom was predicated on the ability of individuals to engage in political debate and think critically of social problems.

This freedom of thought rested on economic independence and the leisure time necessary to engage in political activities. The lack of economic agency slaves possessed thus made them ineligible for political freedom.

Here we witness the first imbrications between political and economic freedom. For Athenians, one was only worthy of political freedom if one possessed the economic means and the leisure time necessary to engage in political polemics. An unequal society, therefore, could never be truly free.

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Definitions of political freedom also entailed active political participation. This active political participation meant rigorously engaging in political debate and mobilisation. A society devoid of these physical manifestations of political engagement, thus, could not be classified as free.

Engaging with these historical conceptions of freedom allows us to scrutinise the modern iterations of the word and understand how societies today lack the active political mobilisation or economic freedom to be classified as truly free. The erosion of this mobilisation or economic freedom is a product of contemporary political and economic forces which significantly constrain the freedoms humans can enjoy.

It is these modern forces and their impact that we must critically dissect to understand the visage freedom today embraces. First, as individuals cease to exert control over their economic destinies, they become increasingly responsive to the preponderance of capital in electoral outcomes. This is evident in democracies in Pakistan and the US, where landed elites in the former and large corporate firms in the latter hold significant sway over electoral outcomes.

Equally significantly — and this is where our argument harkens to Athenian definitions of freedom — increasing economic precariousness turns individuals away from active participation to a more passive form of political activism. In particular, under neoliberalism’s salvo against social welfare and real wages, individuals are forced to take on multiple occupations simply to make ends meet. They lose the leisure time or energy necessary to engage in critical thought. This disengagement feeds into a vicious cycle where citizens are increasingly alienated from a political system that further ignores them, thus further limiting freedom.

Aziz Rana carries forward this argument in The Two Faces of American Freedom and highlights how, with the rise of industrial capitalism and wage labour, the American polity shifted from earlier settler colonies actively involved in political participation to a society which now asserts its political weight only every four years in presidential elections. Although sporadic movements such as Occupy Wall Street occur, American politics is largely defined by a dominant centre that churns out similar leaders.

Here lies the subtlety in how our freedom is eroded. Through an economic and political system that significantly curtails our ability to act, to assert ourselves and hence catalyse change, the invisible shackles of a hegemonic centre and neoliberal rationality substantially limit the political choices we can exercise. This is exactly why alternative visions of societies often find refuge at the margins of collective thought.

The inequities built into our democratic and electoral systems further compound this reality and the freedom we exercise. The excessive influence capital asserts in electoral outcomes significantly diminishes the importance of our vote and leads many of us to raise the question: why even vote? This political alienation and ennui in fact explain why voter turnouts remain so low across the world, including in Pakistan, where many remain disillusioned.

A theoretical understanding of freedom thus allows us to better appreciate the world we live in and to dissect narratives of liberty and human rights. Armed with this knowledge, we must move towards shaping a society that allows everyone to enjoy the fruits of liberty and provides us with the platform to exert our political freedom.

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