

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, written in 1789, is the core document of the French Revolution, establishing the values and principles of the French democracy. It was influenced by the U.S. Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, including the Bill of Rights. In fact, key drafts of the French document were written by the Marquis de Lafayette, who served as a general under George Washington in the American Revolution.

Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen

Adopted by the National Assembly during the French Revolution on August 26, 1789, and reaffirmed by the constitution of 1958.

Preamble

The representatives of the French People, formed into a National Assembly, considering ignorance, forgetfulness or contempt of the rights of man to be the only causes of public misfortunes and the corruption of Governments, have resolved to set forth, in a solemn Declaration, the natural, unalienable and sacred rights of man, to the end that this Declaration, constantly present to all members of the body politic, may remind them unceasingly of their rights and their duties; to the end that the acts of the legislative power and those of the executive power, may be compared at any moment with the objects and purposes of all political institutions and may thus be more respected, and, lastly, in order that the grievances of the citizens, based hereafter upon simple and incontestable principles, shall tend to the maintenance of the constitution and redound to the happiness of all. In consequence whereof, the National Assembly recognizes and declares, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following Rights of Man and of the Citizen:

Article I

Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on considerations of the common good.

Article II

The aim of every political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are Liberty, Property, Safety, and Resistance to Oppression.

Article III

The source of all sovereignty lies essentially in the Nation. No corporate body, no individual may exercise any authority that does not expressly emanate from it.

Article IV

Liberty consists in being able to do anything that does not harm others: thus, the exercise of the natural rights of every man has no bounds other than those that ensure to the other members of society the enjoyment of these same rights. These bounds may be determined only by Law.

Article V

The Law has the right to forbid only those actions that are injurious to society. Nothing that is not forbidden by Law may be hindered, and no one may be compelled to do what the Law does not ordain.

Article VI

The Law is the expression of the general will. All citizens have the right to take part, personally or by their representatives, in its making. It must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes. All citizens, being equal in its eyes, are equally eligible to all high offices, public positions and employments, according to their abilities, and without other distinction than that of their virtues and talents.

Article VII

No man may be accused, arrested or detained except in the cases determined by the Law, and following the procedure that it has prescribed. Those who solicit, expedite, carry out, or cause to be carried out arbitrary orders must be punished; but any citizen summoned or apprehended by virtue of the Law, must give instant obedience; resistance makes him guilty.

Article VIII

The Law must prescribe only the punishments that are strictly and evidently necessary; and no one may be punished except by virtue of a Law drawn up and promulgated before the offense is committed, and legally applied.

Article IX

As every man is presumed innocent until he has been declared guilty, if it should be considered necessary to arrest him, any undue harshness that is not required to secure his person must be severely curbed by Law.

Article X

No one may be disturbed on account of his opinions, even religious ones, as long as the manifestation of such opinions does not interfere with the established Law and Order.

Article XI

The free communication of ideas and of opinions is one of the most precious rights of man. Any citizen may therefore speak, write and publish freely, except what is tantamount to the abuse of this liberty in the cases determined by Law.

Article XII

To guarantee the Rights of Man and of the Citizen a public force is necessary; this force is therefore established for the benefit of all, and not for the particular use of those to whom it is entrusted.

Article XIII

For the maintenance of the public force, and for administrative expenses, a general tax is indispensable; it

must be equally distributed among all citizens, in proportion to their ability to pay.

Article XIV

All citizens have the right to ascertain, by themselves, or through their representatives, the need for a public tax, to consent to it freely, to watch over its use, and to determine its proportion, basis, collection and duration.

Article XV

Society has the right to ask a public official for an accounting of his administration.

Article XVI

Any society in which no provision is made for guaranteeing rights or for the separation of powers, has no Constitution.

Article XVII

Since the right to Property is inviolable and sacred, no one may be deprived thereof, unless public necessity, legally ascertained, obviously requires it, and just and prior indemnity has been paid.

Questions

1. Compare and contrast the Article I here that says, "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights." with the U.S. Declaration of Independence which says, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

2. Compare and contrast Article XI in this document with the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that says, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

3. Compare and contrast Article II here where it says, "The aim of every political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are Liberty, Property, Safety, and Resistance to Oppression." with the US Declaration of Independence that states "[all men] are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Vocabulary List

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. preservation
2. exercise
3. liberty
4. forbid
5. ordain
6. arbitrary
7. curbed
8. tantamount

Context Clues

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

1. The aim of every political association is the **preservation** of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man.
a. challenging b. writing c. saving d. assessing
2. No corporate body, no individual may **exercise** any authority that does not expressly emanate from it.
a. use b. ride c. question d. block
3. **Liberty** consists in being able to do anything that does not harm others.
a. happiness b. freedom c. safety d. fairness
4. The Law has the right to **forbid** only those actions that are injurious to society.
a. fight b. challenge c. prevent d. perpetuate
5. Nothing that is not forbidden by Law may be hindered, and no one may be compelled to do what the Law does not **ordain**.
a. continue b. order c. describe d. explain
6. Those who solicit, expedite, carry out, or cause to be carried out **arbitrary** orders must be punished;
a. receive b. plan c. demand d. ask for
7. If it should be considered necessary to arrest him, any undue harshness that is not required to secure his person must be severely **curbed** by Law.
a. restricted b. changed c. edited d. accused
8. Any citizen may therefore speak, write and publish freely, except what is **tantamount** to the abuse of this liberty in the cases determined by Law.
a. more important b. equal c. unfair d. unjust