

PAKISTAN INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT ECONOMICS

2021



# THE NARROW CORRIDOR: HOW NATIONS STRUGGLE FOR LIBERTY

PIDE DISTINGUISHED INVITED LECTURE SERIES:

**WEBINAR BRIEF 14:2021**

3rd Lecture by Professor James A. Robinson  
Held on Wednesday, 13th of January 2021

# THE NARROW CORRIDOR

States, Societies, and  
the Fate of Liberty

DARON ACEMOGLU  
& JAMES A. ROBINSON

Authors of the international bestseller *Why Nations Fail*



Pakistan Institute of Development Economics

Join us for a talk on  
**The Narrow Corridor:**  
How nations struggle for liberty

Speaker  
**Prof. James A.  
Robinson**

The Reverend Dr. Richard L. Pearson:  
Institute Director, The Pearson Institute for the  
Study and Resolution of Global Conflicts  
University of Chicago



Moderator  
**Dr. Nadeem ul Haque**  
VC RIDE

**January 13, 2021 8:00 PM PST**

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## Background

Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) recently organized a Distinguished Invited Lecture Series in which PIDE invited esteemed global scholars of unmatched academic excellence. The 3rd lecture was organized on the 13th of January, 2021 where the guest speaker was Professor James A. Robinson, the author of the renowned best-selling book *Why Nations Fail*, and the current Reverend Richard L. Pearson Professor of Global Conflict Studies at Chicago University. The lecture was titled 'The Narrow Corridor: How Nations Struggle for Liberty, and the central theme of the discussion was to give insight into Professor Robinson's recent book, *The Narrow Corridor*, which he has co-authored with Professor Daron Acemoglu. The lecture session was moderated by Vice-Chancellor, PIDE Dr. Nadeem Ul Haque.

## Introduction

- » Dr. Nadeem Ul Haque initiated the session by welcoming all the attendees and the speaker. Followed by PIDE Faculty member, Fahd Zulfikar, who provided a more detailed description of Professor Robinson's background and pedigree as an academic, author and social scientist.
- » Prof. Robinson started his lecture by mentioning that although he has not been to Pakistan, he does have current research projects on Pakistan and would like to visit Pakistan soon once the COVID-19 pandemic situation normalizes.

## Key Discussion Points

- » Prof. Robinson mentioned that during his lecture he would instead of trying to explicate all contents of his most recent book, *The Narrow Corridor*, would attempt to explain the general model that the book proposes and then go on to describing the implications of the proposed model. The summaries of the model and its implications as described by Prof. Robinson are listed below.
- » **Two Claims about 'Liberty' –**
  - i. The first claim is a subjective one, but one that is often taken as an a priori, that human beings by default want to live in 'liberty'. The concept of freedom being implied here is one that is directly derived from John Locke's definition of "state of perfect freedom" in which in the absence of any political organization; every human being is free to act as they see think without any influence of any other human being. No human being in history perhaps has had such perfect freedom, but the point of discussion here is that all human beings by their inherent nature like more liberty.
  - ii. The second claim that Prof. Robinson made regarding 'liberty' is a somewhat less subjective one i.e. throughout the world today there are large variations in the amount of liberty that human beings have from one society/state to another.
- » **Why is 'Liberty' Important? –** The reason 'Liberty' is so central to the discussion is that very often in a political organization there is a possibility that the ruling state as an entity becomes so powerful that it dominates the society at large and in the process radically reduces the amount of liberty that its subjects/citizens possess. This concept of a dominating state as a prerequisite to maintain political and social order is so appealing that even many prominent scholars such as Thomas Hobbes prescribed the formation of such a powerful state, which Hobbes called the Leviathan, in his seminal book bearing the same name first published in 1651.

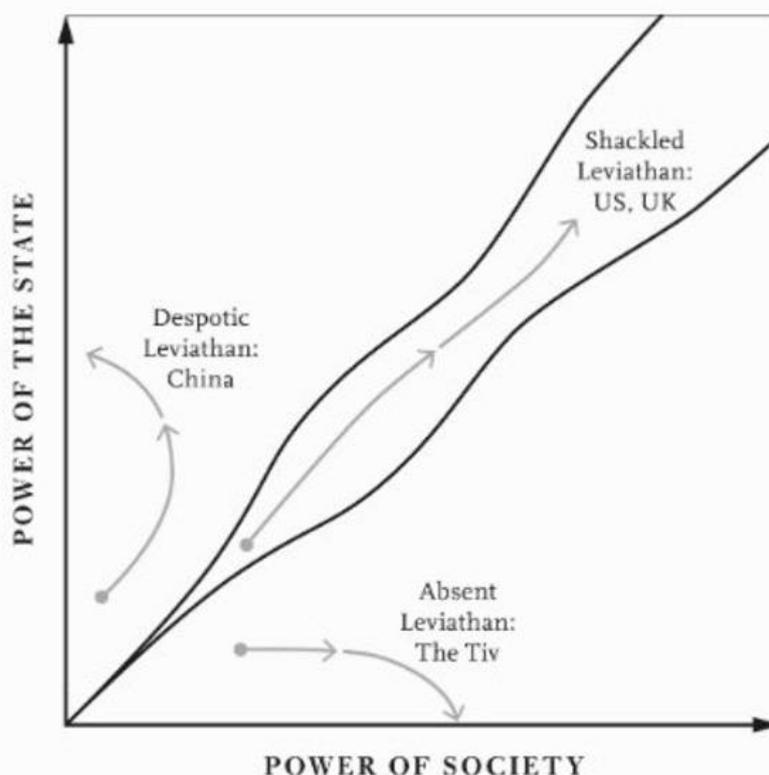
- i. **The Despotic Leviathan –** One present day example of such a powerful state, which is called the 'Despotic Leviathan' in the model, is modern day China. **The liberty of citizens is minimal in a Despotic Leviathan.**



ii. **The Absent Leviathan** – There is also an opposite of the Despotic Leviathan, as a case where the state is largely absent, in the sense that the state doesn't have a monopoly over use of violence. Instead, **political power is decentralized and the society is dominated by a system of kinships and lineages.** An example of such a society is present day Yemen, where even before the current civil war if one was to go outside the capital, it could be observed that the Yemeni State exercised little to no authority over most parts of the country.



- » **The Shackled Leviathan** – The above two examples are extreme opposites wherein one a state dominates over a society (Despotic Leviathan) and in the other the society dominates over a very weak state (Absent Leviathan). Somewhere in between, there is an equilibrium that is the fundamental concept of the model the book proposes. This is what can be called 'Shackled Leviathan'. The state here is powerful enough but its power is checked by the civil society which in turn creates conditions where citizens can enjoy liberty within reasonable confines of the system.
- » **No inherently zero-sum relationship between state and society** – There is not an inherently antithetical relationship between state and society. Although there is a continual struggle between state and society, the fundamental contention of the model of the book is that the strongest states also have the strongest societies. Any attempts from the state to increase its power produce a reaction from the society and consequently both the state and society grow in power. This is called the “**Red Queen Effect**” by Prof. Robinson and Prof. Acemoglu in their book. Present days examples of such states are modern European countries and the United States.
- » **The Narrow Corridor** – There is a narrow corridor within which equilibrium is maintained and both the state and society grow in power. (See Figure 1)



**Figure 1.** The Evolution of Despotic, Shackled, and Absent Leviathans

» **Why are some countries in the narrow corridor and others not? –**

i. ***This is not due to any inherent qualitative differences in cultures, rather because of differing historical initial conditions***, which in the case of European countries were fortuitously more in tune with participatory forms of politics. Once the powerful Roman Empire disintegrated in the West, Western European order was dominated by Germanic tribes and their descendants. An anthropological analysis of these Germanic tribes through a historical lens illustrates that their form of political order was participatory. This same participatory order they brought to larger Europe. This period was followed by the emergence of modern state-building in Western Europe in the 17th Century onwards, something that is well documented by scholars such as Charles Tilly in his work on the formation of nation states in Western Europe.

ii. On the other hand, China, as nation states were emerging in Western Europe, was going through a period where an extremely powerful state in the shape of the Qing Dynasty dominated the political order and the society didn't possess much power with the majority enjoying limited liberty. Centuries of the dominant despotic leviathanian period has had so much influence that even the emergence of the communist republic with theoretical ideals of the emancipation of masses has not effectively checked the despotic dominance of the state over the Chinese society.

» **Not uniquely Western about 'Liberty' and 'The Narrow Corridor'** – After explicating the model discussed in his recent book, Prof. Robinson concluded his lecture by mentioning that there is nothing inherently Western about either liberty or the persistence of the narrow corridor. Systems in all countries go through continual historical processes and any country's position in the narrow corridor is always fragile. According to him, as recent events in the United States have shown, the United States which has been in the corridor for the past few centuries could have easily slipped out. Fortunately, the recent attempts of the state in the US to impose a more despotic order has been counteracted for now by a strong resistance from the civil society and other institutions through which a society organizes.

» **Implications of the 'Narrow Corridor Model'**

- i. Most powerful states also have the most powerful societies. There is not a fundamental anti-theoretical relationship between the two when in the narrow corridor.
- ii. Attaining a Shackled Leviathan in the narrow corridor is not only about constitutional checks and orders. The role that society plays is critical, if not fundamental.
- iii. There is nothing inherently Western about liberty and the narrow corridor. Only because of fortuitous historical initial conditions we observe that most Western countries are in the corridor. Having said that, human history is not static and all countries continue to go through change and the state-society interactive dynamic.



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