

Honorable Mention

11th – 12th Grade

22nd Annual Student Essay Contest | Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum

Choosing Light Over Darkness:

The Benefits and Challenges of Non-Violent Democratic Societies

The darkness of authoritarianism casts a long and sinister shadow across the pages of history. It is a system that robs people of their voice, their dignity, and their dreams. From the horrors of Nazi Germany to the brutalities of Stalinist Russia, the evils of authoritarianism have left scars on the world that can still be felt today. In present-day North Korea, the iron grip of totalitarian rule has crushed the spirits of millions and stifled any form of dissent. The recent return of the Taliban in Afghanistan serves as a harrowing reminder of the dangers posed by authoritarianism, with their reign of terror leading to unspeakable atrocities against women and minorities. It is a system that values power over people, control over freedom, and oppression over justice.

In contrast, non-violent, democratic societies foster stable governance, protect individual rights, and provide opportunities for all members of society to participate in the decision-making process. They uphold the rule of law, ensuring that justice is served, and no one is above the law. Moreover, democratic societies are open and inclusive, encouraging free expression of ideas and the exchange of diverse perspectives. They encourage a sense of community and shared responsibility, where people work together to build a better future for themselves and their fellow citizens.

Despite the many benefits of non-violent, democratic societies, such societies also face a range of significant challenges that can undermine their stability and erode the values they uphold. In recent years, the rise of extremist ideologies and violent rhetoric has emerged as a serious threat to democratic values and institutions by contributing to the growing polarization and radicalization of society.

This isn't a theoretical concern. In many countries, there has been a measurable increase in extremist activity and violence. For example, according to a report by the Anti-Defamation League, there was a significant increase in the number of white supremacist propaganda incidents in the United States in 2020, with more than 5,100 incidents reported. In Canada, the number of hate crimes rose by 7% in 2020, with anti-Asian hate crimes seeing a particularly sharp increase. In the United States, the January 6th insurrection at the Capitol building was a stark reminder of the potential for violence and extremism to threaten the foundations of democracy. Similarly, the recent increase in hate crimes and far-right extremist attacks in Europe highlights the challenges facing democratic societies in the 21st century. These statistics demonstrate the real-world impact of extremist ideologies on democratic societies.

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Ultimately, addressing extremism requires a nuanced approach that balances the need to protect individual rights with the need to prevent the rise in extremism. Democratic societies must continue to work towards building consensus on the values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, while also addressing the root causes of extremism. By doing so, we can promote a society that values inclusivity, tolerance, and peace, while protecting against the dangers of violent extremism.