

2009-2010 Essay Contest Question:

The Effectiveness of Nonviolent Civic Action

Throughout history, when people have sought to create political change, they have often used violent methods. Many of history's benchmarks revolve around conflicts waged violently against oppressive regimes. Yet, there are examples of nonviolent civic actions and campaigns being used, often in combination, to resist and challenge repression, seek justice, develop civil society, and achieve social change. The 20th century, despite its numerous and bloody wars, also witnessed significant movements of strategic nonviolence: Mahatma Gandhi's campaigns against British colonial rule in India; the labor movement Solidarity's struggle for workers' rights in Poland; the student-led campaign OTPOR (resistance)'s crusade to bring down Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia; and churches' efforts in promoting and protecting human rights during the military junta in Chile.

Nonviolent methods ranging from sit-ins, demonstrations, strikes, economic boycotts, and refusal to pay taxes, can be powerful means of bringing about positive change. However, such methods can also be manipulated to destabilize societies as many historians contend occurred in Russia during the years leading up to the Russian Revolution. Some caution that these methods can also undermine efforts at promoting or sustaining democracy as seen in the past decade in Venezuela or Thailand. In addition, not all attempts to protest nonviolently succeed in bringing sustained social and political change, as is the case with the ongoing campaign for political autonomy in Tibet over the past 50 years, or the human rights and democracy campaign in Myanmar (Burma) in recent decades.

A critical question, therefore, is under what conditions will nonviolent civic actions most likely achieve justice, end conflict or lead to positive political and social change?

In a 1,500-word essay:

1. Select two international examples, one successful and one unsuccessful, where nonviolent methods were used to foster significant social and political change.
2. For each example, describe the goals of the nonviolent campaign, the nature of the changes that were sought through nonviolent means, the parties involved, and the specific methods they used. What were the consequences of the nonviolent initiative?
3. Explain why each example was successful or unsuccessful. Explore the obstacles and challenges to bringing about change through nonviolent civic action.
4. Make recommendations for how citizens, civil society groups, nations and/or the international community can best support effective nonviolent efforts that bring about meaningful change and promote peace, justice and equality.