



Global Cities as Reservoirs of Democracy

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Key Findings:

- Cities are where many of people’s most important quality-of-life interactions with government—on which they **judge democracy’s success or failure**—occur. Is the water clean, the power reliable, mass transit usable, streets safe?
- **Targeting large cities**, along with national institutions such as the judiciary, is part of many illiberal national governments’ strategies for consolidating their authority, including **campaigns of disinformation** and attempts to **centralize many municipal authorities**.
- Mayors who are having success in the face of pressure from illiberal national authorities find three categories of practice important:
 - Making **democratic practice part of their appeal to voters**, often incorporating it into campaign slogans as well as governing priorities, and using transparency and innovations in **civic engagement**, such as **participatory budgeting**.
 - Cities find **networks** and inter-city relationships to be valuable tools.
 - City leaders and democratic partners need to consciously think about making space to plan and **raise resources**.

This policy brief draws on the lessons of an October 12, 2021 roundtable held by the City of Budapest, the City of Los Angeles, and New America. Senior advisors to mayors from cities on five continents came together to discuss what happens when cities find themselves facing illiberal national governments. Although each city came to the table with unique circumstances, the discussion highlighted the central role cities play in sustaining democratic values and practices; the common

challenges city leadership faces; and what support they need to push back against the forces of illiberalism.

The world continues to urbanize, with 67 percent of the world’s population expected to live in cities by 2050. Cities are critical to democracy for three reasons. First, cities are where many of people’s most important quality-of-life interactions with government—on which they judge its success or failure—occur. Is the water clean, the power reliable, mass transit usable, streets safe? Second, cities themselves must work through many of the challenges bedeviling multi-ethnic, sustainable, high-tech democratic governance. As such, they are almost inevitably key sites for contestation. Finally, cities play in meeting the emerging challenges shaping democracy and how people assess it, from climate adaptation to digital access to health.

Worldwide, many cities find themselves in a shrinking democratic space at the national level, with illiberal governments threatening media freedom, rule of law, individual rights, and other core pillars of democracy. Participants noted that targeting large cities, along with national institutions such as the judiciary, is part of many illiberal national governments’ strategies for consolidating their authority. The fact that many of these national regimes draw their base of support from rural areas, while big cities are often training grounds for leaders aspiring to higher office, facilitates this approach. Additionally, participants noted that targeting cities by shrinking their budgets and authorities is a part of illiberal governments’ strategy to delegitimize local democratic leadership and by extension democratic institutions, and to make the case for centralizing power under the national government.

Common challenges that cities face include:

- 1) **Recentralization of the administrative state:** Several participants noted that central governments

were attempting to centralize many municipal authorities, such as governance of local institutions including hospitals and schools, as well as city budgets, under national authority. This reduced city governments' ability to deliver for their voters; diminished their access to funding from both internal and international sources; and in some cases also allowed central governments to paint local governments as ineffective. Cities found that they have limited tools to push back against such incursions by the central government. Alternately, some cities faced the withdrawal of resources necessary to perform decentralized services, thus rendering decentralization a "failure." Since many cities lack independent access to municipal finance or securities, actions of national governments may effectively limit their resources to provide successful governance and meet residents' basic needs as well.

2) Disinformation from the central government:

Some participants noted that their city's government faces a campaign of disinformation from the central government and even from other authoritarian governments, often attacking their ability to deliver for voters or attributing local successes to national actors.

3) COVID-19 Crisis: Many illiberal central governments have been slow to respond to the crisis or have taken unhelpful actions in response. At minimum, the demands of the pandemic placed extra demands on city resources. Some governments have been able to use the pandemic to assert more authority over sub-national governments.

4) Public alienation: Several participants noted concern with public alienation from the forms and practices of democracy, and the rising appeal of extremist movements which constituted significant threats to democracy, human rights and public safety at the city as well as national levels.

5) Climate crisis: Several cities who wish to help reduce their carbon emissions and make their cities more resilient in the face of extreme weather face central government refusal to prioritize or fund these critical issues.

Participants reported experiencing that their response options were limited, and that pressure could become quite intense, coming from national governments, citizens themselves, and other illiberal actors outside the country. They had, however, identified a suite of practices that could help strengthen and sustain democratic governance and its champions, which we have grouped into the following three categories:

Engage the Public – Practice What You Preach

Mayors who are having success in the face of pressure from illiberal national authorities have made democratic practice part of their appeal to voters, often incorporating it into campaign slogans as well as governing priorities. They stressed the importance of leading by example: explicitly modeling transparent, participatory, inclusive governance.

• **Participatory governance:** Practices such as participatory budgeting, with meaningful resident engagement, are a highly popular tool of democratic mayors under pressure. Engaging citizens at the city level strengthens trust, provides public goods where they are most wanted, builds habits of democratic practice, and demonstrates that government can deliver. Participants affirmed that city governments need to go out and engage people directly; focus on vulnerable and hard-to-reach communities; and include residents throughout in the process, with genuine impact. Participatory governance can also allow cities to lead by example, demonstrating that there is an effective, open, inclusive, and transparent alternative model of governance to the illiberal national government. Participants also noted that it is important to start with initiatives at a local-scale that give citizens responsibility for their own city.

• **Transparency:** City officials found transparency initiatives to be a useful tool in building and sustaining popular support, and drawing the contrast with secretive illiberal regimes. Open data initiatives and online platforms for residents to engage with policy proposals, as well as exhaustive attention to public communication on topics such as COVID-19 vaccinations, were mentioned as effective strategies.

Build Networks

Participant cities had also found networks and inter-city relationships to be valuable tools. They provided access to best practices and financial resources, but also solidarity and strategy. Officials were able to gain valuable political space through coalition-building; “we need international partners to block and tackle,” said one participant. In some cases, city residents seeing their leaders active and supported internationally also reinforced pro-democracy leadership. They noted, however, that overlapping mandates and proliferation of groups can be a problem -- some mapping and understanding of the space is needed -- and that city officials are far more likely to participate in groupings that deliver practical, tangible benefits that align with governing priorities.

- **Domestic networks:** City governments can build capacity and pool resources by building and reinforcing connections with local authorities in other towns and cities across the country. Such networks can also help cities to push back against a national government’s efforts to deepen urban-rural divisions.

- **International networks:** Cities are building and joining alliances with other like-minded cities, regionally and globally, to share experiences, build visibility, and gain access to alternative sources of funding. This is true of networks that were not explicitly designed to address democratic backsliding, such as the C-40 Cities Climate Leadership Group or the European Union’s Committee of the Regions; for example, cities have worked to enact regulatory changes in Brussels that help cities to directly access EU funding. Networks that focus specifically on cities’ role in sustaining democracy and human rights have begun to emerge in recent years; the Pact of Free Cities, initially comprising Budapest, Bratislava, Prague and Warsaw, aspires to expand. More than thirty communities worldwide have joined the International League of Democracy Cities, founded in 2019. One participant proposed a coalition of African cities to build a direct relationship with the African Union.

Build Space, Capacity and Resources

Participants stressed that illiberal regimes aim to accumulate money, political capital and relationships for themselves at the expense of cities; city leaders and democratic partners need to consciously think about making space to plan and raise resources -- both to deal with challenges to democratic institutions and to succeed at managing pragmatic issues like sanitation and transportation and the larger global challenges, such as climate and technological transformation, that exacerbate them.

- **Facilitate access to alternative funding:** To bolster their programming and governance capabilities and push back against illiberal governments’ centralization efforts, cities will need access to alternative financial resources. Multilateral organizations like the World Bank can provide earmarks within national programs to fund city projects, but cities need more flexible mechanisms that allow them to access funds directly. NGOs, multilateral organizations, and other governments can all play a role in providing funding and other sources of capacity.

- **Fight mis/disinformation:** City officials noted the challenges posed by both explicit campaigns from national governments or illiberal outside forces and polarization among city residents. They stressed the need to be aware of such campaigns, learn from what other cities had faced, and use available resources to respond creatively. They also stressed that local governments need to show focus on local issues and not seem to ignore them in favor of national or international fights. Transparency initiatives, and thoughtful, balanced approaches to media, can also contribute.

- **Use municipal resources creatively:** Cities can make creative use of the resources they have to fight back against disinformation coming from the central government. For example, one city, with little access to traditional media, made use of the surfaces it has access to, including garbage cans and buses, to share messages about how the central government is putting financial pressure on city government.