

Human security, urban governance, and democratization

The role of governance and democracy in helping prevent conflict at the state level is well established: democratic states protect their citizens, respect minority rights, and rarely go to war, among other measures that safeguard human security.⁶⁰ With the day-to-day contact between civilians and the state occurring at the local level, however, the potential for *urban* governance and democracy to equip local communities with non-violent responses to conflict needs to be explored further. Democratization at the local level can empower people to work with local authorities to safeguard their human security, sow the principles of fair and reasonable behaviour at the local level, and help ensure that local governance mechanisms respond to the needs of the demos, rather than the whims of the mob.

Given their innate vitality and diversity, urban spaces are also natural incubators for liberal democratic tendencies and focal points of opposition towards autocratic regimes — witness the largely peaceful urban revolutions in Ukraine (2005) and Lebanon (2005), and urban protests in Thailand (2006), Belarus (2006) and Nepal (2006).⁶¹ Of course, where repressive states are threatened by this urban democratic impulse, human security is imperilled, such as in the razing of thousands of homes in Harare by a Zimbabwean regime suspicious of urban support for the democratic opposition, leaving 700,000 civilians without homes.

Weaving local governance and democratic principles into the urban fabric

Today, weak or ineffective local governance is a source of human insecurity. Many local governments and security apparatuses, especially in the developing world, do not empower their constituents, are controlled by a single individual or group, and are rife with corruption. Many are unable to employ governance tactics designed to resolve and mediate conflict. Some local governments are parties to local conflicts or pawns for armed groups that control public budgets and economic redistribution.

With the majority of the world's people now living in cities, local governments can be encouraged to respect the rule of law and empower people by

⁶⁰ Human Security Report 2005 (2005), p.151.

⁶¹ On Thailand, for example, see McGirk (2006).