RETRACING THE ROAD PATH TO LOCAL DEMOCRACY

Local democracy has advanced considerably along with the decentralisation processes that have developed around the world over the last decades. However, in recent years the decentralisation agenda has lost momentum, being displaced by the rise of solutionism and the localisation processes that emerged from the 2030 Agenda. With populist anti-democratic authoritarianism on the rise in various countries, local power can play a crucial role as a means of resistance, democratic control and coordination of the opposition.

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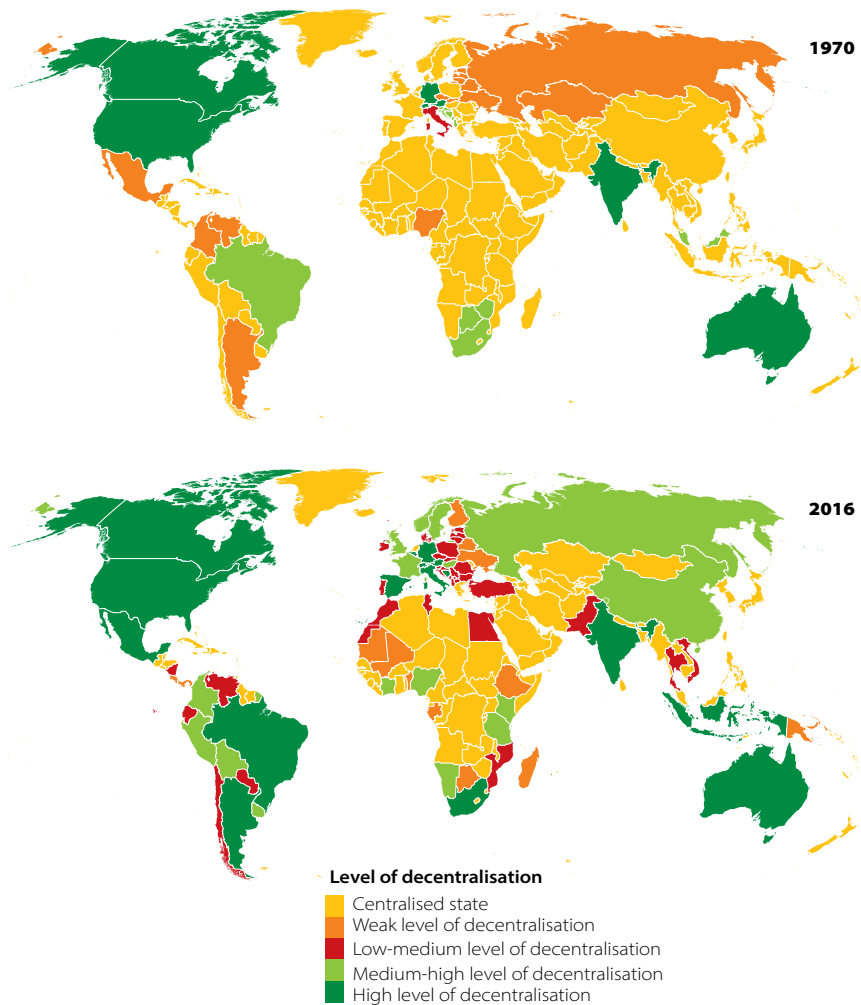Senior Research Fellow and Director of the Global Cities Programme at CIDOB

In 2008, Bertrand Delanoë, then mayor of Paris and president of the organization United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), wrote in the preface to the first Global Report on *Decentralization and local democracy in the world (GOLD I Report)* that "the world is undergoing a quiet democratic revolution … local democracy is gaining momentum all over the world: from the African savanna villages, the highlands of Latin America to the *barangay* in the Philippines" (UCLG, 2008: 9) . Fifteen years on, events in countries like Turkey, Hungary, El Salvador and Tunisia, mean that Carolina Cosse, current UCLG president and mayor of Montevideo, would be hard pressed to speak of "advances" and "consolidation" and would likely have to use the word "regression".

Democracy, decentralisation and local autonomy

Accepting, as we do, the close link between decentralisation and democracy, we may state that local democracy has advanced considerably alongside the decentralisation processes taking place across the world in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (OECD, 2019).

Decentralisation, understood as a way of organising the state, and linked to efforts to bring the exercise of political power closer to citizens, has evolved around the world in both developed and developing countries, and even in more centralist and Jacobin settings (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Forms of Democracy and Decentralisation 1970–2016.

1970

2016

Level of decentralisation
- Centralised state
- Weak level of decentralisation
- Low-medium level of decentralisation
- Medium-high level of decentralisation
- High level of decentralisation

Source: UCLG (2017)

These advances can be linked to the growing consensus since the end of the 1980s on the fundamental role local governments play in processes of democratisation and sustainable development.[1] This consensus has been aided by the political and financial support provided by key multilateral operators, including United Nations agencies like UN-Habitat, the Council of Europe and the European Union itself, which has for years funded significant support programmes for local democratic governance.

In 1985 the member states of the Council of Europe adopted the European Charter of Local Self-Government,[2] among the most vital regulatory milestones related to decentralisation in the international sphere. The signatory countries agreed to safeguard the autonomy of local governments by guaranteeing their political, administrative and financial independence. The Charter, incorporated into the legal system of the 47 member states of the pan-European organisation and implemented in varying ways, expresses the conviction that the degree of autonomy local authorities enjoy can be considered the cornerstone of a true democracy.

DEBATES OVER FISCAL DECENTRALISATION, AUTONOMY AND FUNDING, AND EVEN OVER THE STATE MODEL AND THE DISTRIBUTION OF COMPETENCES, HAVE GIVEN WAY TO COLLABORATIVE LOGICS BASED ON CO-RESPONSIBILITY AND SHARED MANAGEMENT OF THE COMMONS, AS WELL AS DIRECT DEMOCRACY.

With these initiatives, global recognition for decentralisation has been more common in political declarations than normative measures. Yet, it has been on the political agenda. In 1996, the Istanbul Declaration adopted in the framework of the Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) set out the need to advance decentralisation processes through democratic local authorities. Then, in 1999 the Governing Council of UN-Habitat drove the creation of the United Nations Advisory Committee of Local Authorities (UNACLA), among whose greatest achievements was to push through the Guidelines on decentralization and strengthening of local authorities approved in 2007. The guidelines may lack binding character, but they remain the only international framework

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1. This vision was reaffirmed at the United Nations conferences on environment and development (Rio de Janeiro, 1992) and human settlements (Istanbul, 1996), the Millennium Summit (2000) and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, 2002).

2. European Charter of Local Self-Government. Strasbourg, 15th October 1985.

on the subject and they recognise political decentralisation as an essential component of democratisation.

Some of the leading international development cooperation actors have also supported the commitment to decentralisation and local democracy. The European Union, a key example, has for years linked support for decentralisation and local governance to its founding commitment to assist democratisation processes on a global scale. It has done this by setting the political agenda[3] and by bringing resources to the table via programmes based in specific geographical areas, such as URBAL, MED-URBS and Asia-URBS, and thematic programmes like the series of support instruments for local authorities.[4]

The rise of solutionism and direct democracy

However, in recent years the decentralisation agenda has lost some momentum and has been relegated to the background by the rise of the localisation and subsidiarity processes that emerged from the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015. These processes have been the subject of academic analysis (Barber, 2013; Katz & Nowak, 2017) and are financially supported by major operators, particularly US philanthropic institutions. The pragmatic aspect of local governments is recognised – their capacity to solve the problems that most concern citizens. The focus is on their capacity to innovate and on the solutions they bring to the main challenges facing societies, whether that be climate change, the digital transition or the various expressions of inequality.

In the debates around local democracy, institutional and representative issues have become less prominent, while participatory structures and facilitating coordination with the range of actors operating in society have gained importance. Debates over fiscal decentralisation, autonomy and

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3.   See: Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament and the European Economic and Social Committee and Committee of the Regions "Local Authorities: Actors for Development", COM(2008) 626 final; and Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions "Empowering Local Authorities in partner countries for enhanced governance and more effective development outcomes", COM(2013) 280 final.

4.   The first regulation to support decentralised cooperation was adopted in 1998 (Council Regulation (EC) No 1659/98 of 17 July 1998 on decentralised cooperation) and amended in 2004. Subsequently, from 2006 to 2020, the Commission promoted various versions of the thematic programme in support of non-state actors and local authorities.

funding, and even over the state model and the distribution of competences, have given way to collaborative logics based on co-responsibility and shared management of the commons, as well as direct democracy. In some settings this has helped advance processes to strengthen democracy and empower local societies, including highly innovative experiments such as those in Barcelona, Bogotá and Guangzhou.

Reclaiming the decentralisation agenda in order to hold back authoritarianism

Contradictory as it may seem, given the progress described above, in recent years populist and nationalist anti-democratic authoritarianism have been gaining ground in a range of places across the globe. The list of leaders challenging democratic institutions is growing, from the recently deposed Trump in the United States and Bolsonaro in Brazil to incumbents Putin in Russia, Modi in India, Orbán in Hungary, Erdoğan in Turkey, Bukele in El Salvador and Saied in Tunisia, to give just a few notable examples. Using strong, personality-based leadership styles, they focus on solving the supposedly "real" problems people face, arguing that efficiency should prevail over democracy. They concentrate and centralise power, weaken the various forms of democratic control and restrict all types of opposition.

> **LOCAL POWER OFTEN SERVES AS A MEANS OF RESISTANCE, DEMOCRATIC CONTROL AND COORDINATION OF THE OPPOSITION. WITH POLITICAL ALTERNATIVES THAT QUESTION DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS ON THE RISE, THERE IS AN URGENT NEED TO REVIVE THE DECENTRALISATION AGENDA.**

In this context, local power often serves as a means of resistance, democratic control and coordination of the opposition. We saw this in the United States during the Trump administration, and we see it today in countries like Turkey and Hungary, where the mayors of major cities use democratic, liberal values and cosmopolitanism to oppose the central power and its authoritarian mindset. This explains why more and more authoritarian leaders are embarking on processes that aim to recentralise power, dismantle local democracy or simply remove local governments.

The federal structures of the United States and Brazil helped preserve democratic institutions during the Trump and Bolsonaro eras. In Hungary, the European Union serves as a buffer against Orbán's attempts to financially choke the government of the capital city, Budapest. In Turkey, Erdoğan

has judicialised his clash with the mayor of Istanbul, Ekhrem İmamoğlu, while the metropolitan government's importance has served to temper the president's attacks. But in countries like Tunisia and El Salvador weak institutional structures cannot hold back the president's attacks on local democracy (Fernández de Losada, 2023). In Tunisia Kais Saied abolished by decree all the country's municipal councils and now governs the municipalities through regional governors he has appointed. In El Salvador, Nayib Bukele is pushing through a reform that aims to abolish 80% of the country's municipalities and to control local power with an iron fist.

Using international pressure to counteract these dynamics is not easy, as the principle of non-interference in the affairs of a sovereign country is a major limitation. However, marginalising the decentralisation agenda in debates over democratic governance does not help either. Ensuring high-quality policies and solutions are promoted from the local level is crucial. But ensuring that power and competences are distributed in a manner that helps promote such solutions is, if possible, even more vital to guaranteeing democracy. Failure to do so weakens control mechanisms and effective local government. With political alternatives that question democratic institutions on the rise, there is an urgent need to revive the decentralisation agenda. Giving up could have irreparable consequences.

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