

SMART CITIES AND DEMOCRATIC VULNERABILITIES

// BETH KERLEY / ROUKAYA KASENALLY / BÁRBARA SIMÃO & BLENDASANTOS



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Through “smart city” projects, municipal officials around the world are deploying digital tools to collect data about urban life, analyze trends, and automate governance. Billed as cutting-edge solutions for connectivity and efficiency, these projects—which leverage new capacities created by **artificial intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT)**—pose a range of risks to democracy if not implemented following democratic principles of transparency and accountability. If mismanaged, they could serve as vectors for malign authoritarian influence; undermine procedural norms of good governance; and raise the specter of mass surveillance. The **global trend toward democratic backsliding** may exacerbate and, in turn, be exacerbated by these dangers.

This collection, the second in our [“Making Tech Transparent” series](#), surveys the democracy risks posed by smart cities and examines how they are taking shape in two countries affected by backsliding: **Mauritius and Brazil**. It addresses the critical importance of **embedding smart city projects in participatory processes** that reinforce democratic norms, and the obstacles that currently exist to realizing this vision. Key points include:

- Smart cities are ultimately one of many arenas in which democratic principles are colliding with a **technocratic authoritarian vision built on data collection**, one championed by but in no way limited to the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In order to leverage municipal digitalization for democracy and ensure that emerging technologies serve the societies which deploy them, bolstering and expanding mechanisms for **oversight and stakeholder engagement** will be key.
- Vendors based in the PRC, such as Huawei, are prominent in global smart cities sales. The significant presence of Huawei and other PRC-based firms in this industry raises particular concerns around the intertwining of digitalization with PRC political influence, as well as the uses to which the **data collected from smart cities** will be put. Yet risks from the transfer of both governance functions and personal data to private companies extend beyond those cases in which PRC vendors are involved.

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- Often viewed as tools to make governance more transparent, accountable, and inclusive, emerging technologies also present increasingly clear **opportunities for current and aspiring authoritarians**. The trajectory of *Mauritius*, a leading African democracy that has recently struggled with backsliding, illustrates how smart cities fit within a broader arc toward **enhanced digital surveillance capacities** that are ripe for abuse, absent robust checks on executive power.
- Even where democratic principles for the management of smart cities have been elaborated, as we see in *Brazil*, **hasty, opaque, and irregular processes** around the procurement and deployment of these systems continue to undermine adherence to those norms. Thus, innovative approaches are needed to **protect citizens' privacy, mitigate human rights risks, and facilitate public participation** in decision making.

Around the globe, initiatives like “smart cities” are supplying ever more fodder for technocratic visions of absolute control, raising a plethora of risks to human rights, state accountability, and institutional integrity. In this context, embedding digitalization within the robust give-and-take of democratic politics may be the only path toward ensuring that digital data and the imperfect maps it creates serve the interests of the human societies they depict, rather than holding these societies hostage.

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