

Philip N. Howard, **The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam**, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, 238 pp. (\$17.09 Amazon) (paperback).

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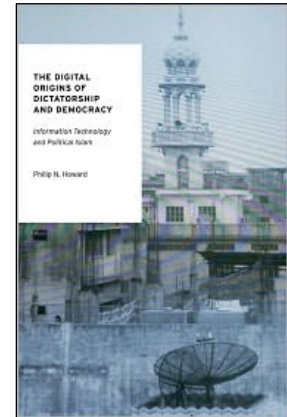
The current political landscape in North Africa and the Middle East serves as a timely backdrop to Philip Howard's *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam*. At a time of political unrest in the region and fast-changing digital media and technology, the author provides a fact-driven analysis in a sea of speculation and sensationalization.

Howard analyzes the ways in which new information and communication technologies (ICTs) contribute to democratic entrenchment or transition in countries with large Muslim communities. To do so, he evaluates ICT use and democratic change in 75 countries with Muslim communities from 1994 to 2010. He argues that the revolution in the Middle East will be digitalized, meaning that transitions will no longer occur without the necessary digital tools. The subtitle recalls Barrington Moore's *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, which posited that strong democratic institutions often sprang from the violent civil wars of previous centuries. Howard tries to demonstrate why the large-scale introduction of ICT into a country often leads to democratization in political Islam. In his analysis, he searches for the ingredients of the modern recipe for democratic transition or democratic entrenchment.

Howard provides a balanced view of the impact of ICT on democracy, drawing on recent examples where information technology impacted democratic institutions. He questions why Iran has not experienced the kinds of clear political outcomes and institutional consequences seen in other authoritarian regimes. He concludes that technology alone does not cause social change. Howard shines light on the overlooked impact of ICT on civil society, suggesting that it is a mistake to treat the jihadist Internet as the most vibrant online Muslim community or as even the most politically significant one. Digital media changed the political landscape in northern Africa and elsewhere where political dialogue emerged in new ways. He believes in Melvin Kranzberg's first law of technology, that "technology is neither good nor bad, nor is it neutral." ICT can be used as tools of freedom or as instruments of oppression that allow active censorship and control in authoritarian Islamic regimes.

The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy examines evidence about digital ICT and changes of production and consumption of political culture. Howard uses quantitative and ethnographic studies, providing empirical evidence and a clear and succinctly defined approach to his analysis.

Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the role of governments and political parties online and their information infrastructure capacity. The existing infrastructure and regulatory system plays a role in the way that new ICT are used. Howard measures technology diffusion for each of the subject countries on the basis of its economic production and analyzes the policies and impacts as compared to other similar developing countries instead of to the developed world. He also explains how Sharia Law and the Koran play a role in telecommunication policy. Both are used as pretexts to censor and maintain control, as



governments can use ICT for propaganda or to enhance the efficiency of the state bureaucracy. As a general trend, most governments have maintained control over their regulatory authority for ICT despite a cosmetic separation from the executive branch and have not yet privatized the national telecommunications provider. Furthermore, Howard divides his sample into four subsets: entrenched democracies, transition states, autocracies, and crisis states. He reviews the recent history of each subset and shows how the pieces of the puzzle fit together.

Next, Howard focuses on the changing role of journalists and citizens in Muslim countries. The Internet is now a crucial democratic information infrastructure. Today, change in the political economy of the news allows Muslims to produce and frame news and events.

Chapter 5 examines the role of ICT in civil society development, illustrating the Internet as a necessary infrastructure for that development. He foreshadows the current landscape in his discussion of the growth of the role of Facebook use in Egypt, citing the April 2008 strike at a textile factory in Mahalla that was planned and organized through the site. This use of Facebook for dissemination of information has a second-order effect of increasing levels of participation both in the streets and online. Facebook became increasingly relevant; by 2009 there were 800,000 Egyptian Facebook members, making it the third most popular website in the country.

Chapter 6 analyzes the applications of ICT used by states to manage collective identity and censorship. Howard argues that ICT has two important roles in the distribution of authority in Islamic culture. First, some citizens are using ICT to alter patterns of cultural production and consumption. Second, new technologies are providing ruling elites better ways to manage cultural production and formation of political identity online.

Describing the multifaceted Muslim communities, Howard defines his terms and explains abstract concepts. He is concerned about accurate measurement; for example, his measure of major democratic transition is a three-point, positive change on the Polity IV scale of democratic institutions. He focuses his analysis on infrastructural conditions (telecommunications policy reform, infrastructure investment, user base) and on contextual conditions (wealth distribution, fuel dependency, size of population and Muslim community, level of education), examining their impact both on political outcomes (new systems of communication for political actors—including states, parties, journalists, civic groups, and elites) and on institutional consequences (democratic entrenchment, democratic transitions, or hybridity).

To become more democratic, states often need to experience technology diffusion that affects political actors. Howard concludes that e-government, wired political parties, digital journalism, and online civic groups all helped usher in democratic transitions or entrenchment. He stresses the importance of online civil society and having the necessary infrastructure to support it. He offers solutions in support of open information infrastructures, suggesting that the way to support democratic Islam is by supporting more open infrastructure. Countries that want to encourage democratization should limit the export of censorship software to these areas. In addition, the international lending community should increase their financing of the construction of public information infrastructure in developing nations.

This timely volume throws significant light on current developments. Howard's research design and mixed-methods approach is rigorous, and he avoids simple generalizations. His deliberate, meticulous attention to the empirical data supports an effective, poignant argument. Howard concludes that democratic transition is impossible without information technologies, because technology diffusion has become, in combination with other factors, a necessary and sufficient cause of democratic transition or entrenchment.