

REVIEW ESSAYS

ISLAM AND TECHNOLOGY: EVOLUTION AND REVOLUTION

Aarti Ramachandran

*The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy:
Information Technology and Political Islam*

Philip N. Howard

(New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 304 pages.

In the heady days of the Arab Spring, as news came across the wire that long-time Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was about to step down, the Twitter universe abounded with jokes about the dictator and his relationship with technology: “He’s trying to Google Map Saudi Arabia but forgot he shut down the internet.”

Ever since the so-called “Green Movement” in Iran in 2009, an uprising that involved social media, the public has been deluged with stories about Facebook, Google and Twitter sparking and sustaining democratic revolutions. Major news networks and prominent newspapers were quick to call recent events in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya the Twitter or Facebook revolutions.

Inevitably, there has been some backlash. With a longer view of history in mind, *Financial Times* columnist Gideon Rachman wondered how “the French managed to storm the Bastille without the help of Twitter.”¹ Rachman is on the right track. No matter how useful or popular they are, tools like Facebook and Twitter cannot advance democracy in a vacuum. Technology indisputably played a role in the Arab Spring, but we need to go beyond a reductionist approach to this phenomenon that leads to shallow, empirically thin conclusions.

Philip N. Howard, an associate professor at the University of Washington’s Department of Communication, succeeds in doing so with his new book, *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam*, a painstaking analysis of how Muslims in seventy-five countries used information and communication technologies (ICTs) over a period of fifteen years, from 1994

to 2010. The book assesses the extent to which ICTs contributed to democratic entrenchment or transition during that time period.

Most of the book is dedicated to a cross-national, comparative analysis of ICT diffusion in Muslim countries, which are grouped into the following four categories: entrenched democracies, transition states, autocracies and crisis states. Howard argues that such a method is far more useful than single-country case studies or a case-by-case quantitative approach.

Howard's purpose is to dispel Western misconceptions about how Muslims use the Internet. As a case in point, he argues that the online presence of Islamic fundamentalism is much less prevalent than civic Islam, contrary to Western belief. Muslims use the Internet to chat, flirt, shop, watch movies and engage in political and religious debates, just like non-Muslims. Since in some authoritarian regimes the Internet is one of the few accessible forums where people can engage in political and religious discourse, it is unsurprising that ICTs became so popular.


Howard's examination is unique, comprehensive and illuminating. He looks at ICT diffusion not just from the viewpoint of the user, but also from that of the provider—in this case, the governments of predominantly Muslim countries. How much do governments earn from ICT diffusion (through remittances, for example)? How many government departments do their business online? What ICT policy reforms have governments embraced? How many political parties in Muslim countries are online? Do civic organizations have a large online presence? How many bloggers have been arrested in the Muslim world? Which countries have the most restrictive censorship policies? Armed with hard data, Howard answers these questions thoroughly and is uniquely positioned to capture technology's actual impact on democratization in Muslim countries.

Howard shows that the diffusion of new information technologies has furthered democratic entrenchment in democratic regimes and improved democratic practices in those that are in transition. Even in authoritarian countries, technology increases government accountability and transparency. Though online mobilization does not always result in regime change, it does improve some aspects of political life.

However, with appropriate caution, Howard identifies some caveats: technology diffusion alone is not sufficient to lead to democratic transition. A small and well-educated population, an active and wired civil society and an economy not dominated by fuel exports are also necessary (though the case of Libya seems to contradict this last finding). In essence, Howard's premise is that technology advances democracy by "evolution rather than by revolution." On the other hand, technology improvements have also helped authoritarian regimes become more sophisticated in their censorship mechanisms, usually with the help of software

tools like Websense and SurfControl.

The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy's thorough research design and mixed-methods approach have been widely praised. The book's strong focus on methodology and theory make it an ideal book for a social scientist, but its dense writing and poor organization make it a difficult read for the layperson. Despite the importance of the subject and the relevance of the topic, the book is sometimes hard to follow. Howard's tendency to synthesize research, methodology, explanations, definitions and anecdotes in the same paragraph burdens the book with an uneven flow. At points, it may be more interesting to pore over the book's intricate tables rather than read the sometimes challenging text.

Nonetheless, parts of the book make for a good read. The prologue describing the events of the Green Revolution in Iran gives an incredibly detailed, behind-the-scenes look at political tug-of-war between the state and the opposition, some of which took place online. For the average reader, these snippets keep the book alive. In the end, however, there is little confusion in the book's overarching message; as Howard puts it: "New information technologies do not topple dictators; they are used to catch dictators off-guard."² 

NOTES

¹ Gideon Rachman, "Reflections on the Revolution in Egypt," *Financial Times*, 14 February 2011.

² Philip N. Howard, *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 12.