

Howard, Philip N.: *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. Information Technology and Political Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010. ISBN: 9780199736416; 304 p.

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„It is clear that, increasingly, the route to democratization is a digital one.“ (p. 201)

This is the concluding remark of Philip N. Howard's book „The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam“. The events of February 2011 in Tunisia and Egypt have confirmed this result: Blogs, social networks, mobile phones have played an important role for the success of anti-regime protest.

Nonetheless, new information and communication technologies (ICTs) do not necessarily make these demonstrations successful: The protests in Iran in 2009, for instance, did not change the contentious election results. However, as the political scientist and sociologist Howard (University of Washington) argues, this does not mean that ICTs are unimportant or „neutral“. The relationship of ICT use and democratic transition may still be causal, but depend on further conditions. In his book, Howard analyzes ICT use and democratic change in 75 countries with important Muslim communities from 1994 to 2010. To gain conclusions about ICTs' influence on democratization, he applies a set-theoretic, comparative method called fuzzy set Qualitative Comparative Analysis, which is discussed in the first chapter. This method analyzes necessary and sufficient conditions or configurations of conditions leading to a certain outcome. Such a method also requires data: Howard criticizes several common measures of ICT diffusion and argues that ICT diffusion should be weighted by a country's GDP. Furthermore, Howard roughly describes his sample by dividing it into four sub-sets: entrenched democracies, transition states, autocracies, and crisis states.

The following chapters identify ICT related causal conditions and discuss them with respect to the outcome (democratic transition or entrenchment). In these chapters, Howard describes general trends, making only short ref-

erences to countries. Country specific information can be taken from tables where the characteristics in question are roughly estimated as so-called fuzzy sets.

Chapter 2 deals with ICT policies: Are ICT services privatized? Is the regulatory authority truly depoliticized? Can privacy of ICT contents be guaranteed? Governments cannot ignore these issues, because the potential benefits of ICTs are high: ICTs can increase remittances and contribute to economic growth. 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 ICTs despite a cosmetic separation from the executive branch and have not yet privatized the national telecommunications provider. Furthermore, ICT policies reflect three trade-offs: Governments try to use ICT for business, but would like to reduce their political impact. They allow personal internet and mobile phone communication, but do not guarantee its privacy. And some countries allow internet use, but try to avoid influences of Western culture.

Chapter 3 focuses on political parties' online presence. Parties in countries with Muslim communities have benefited from lower prices for branded addresses and hosting services and could rapidly catch up with other non-developed countries in establishing websites. Whereas parties in democratic states can address large user communities, avoiding censorship is the crucial advantage for parties in crisis states and authoritarian states. Even if there are less ICT users, these parties reach an international audience or a large diaspora. Howard also remarks that most of these parties call themselves „secular“. While current research often concentrates on internet use for „e-jihadism“, „peaceful“ internet use prevails.

The use of ICTs has also an impact on journalism and media landscapes (chapter 4). People can participate as „citizen journalists“ in cultural production by blogging and posting videos or photos. They disseminate information on human rights violations, which cannot go unnoticed any more. Increasingly, these are valuable sources for professional journalists and bloggers are a serious threat for governments. Like journalists, they are

frequently harassed or arrested.

Online journals and websites of large TV channels provide readers with alternatives to both Western media and their government's „news diet“. Especially in countries where media are under state control or held by a small group of people, online journals abound and blogs and mobile phones have become an antidote to media concentration (p. 130).

Civil society is often defined by its independence from the state (chapter 5). Civil society groups need media beyond state control and as such, they have benefited a lot from ICTs. The internet gives them the opportunity to organize better at lower costs, to learn from other countries and to emulate their example. In general, civil society is marked by a plurality of views, which can now be spread over the internet. This is especially valuable in close-knit societies with a tendency for lopsidedness. Online content in the sample countries is marked by a noticeable importance of religious (Islamic) issues: People often seek guidance for their personal problems, compare online fatwas and discuss issues from an Islamic perspective.

The last descriptive chapter is dedicated to censorship and the production of a political culture. For Howard, political culture „refers to ideological frames that help filter information“ (p. 160). The production of a political culture has significantly grown due to the spread of ICTs in countries with important Muslim communities. There is an increasing use of local languages and cultural production is no more the monopoly of ruling elites. Thanks to ICTs, many people can produce culture at low cost, while it is expensive for the government to control or to destroy it. Meanwhile, a market for censorship services has come into being. Most authoritarian governments have mandated foreign companies with blocking websites. The pretext for censorship is often a ban on pornography, which is tacitly enlarged to include political contents.

So far, Howard's book is a broad introduction into the topic, which may – due to the large sample size – even appear superficial and repetitive. Readers interested in specific countries should consult the valuable bibliography of case studies for the 75 sam-

ple countries. The strength of his book lies in the comparative analysis in the last chapter, which is meant to be a synthesis of the entire study, finally revealing the „ingredients“ of the „recipes“ for democratic transition (p. 183). This analysis controls for a country's wealth, size, educational level, fuel exports, and the size of the Muslim community. Among the results of his analysis Howard lists the solutions with the highest consistency and coverage: For democratic transitions, having a comparatively active online civil society is the most important ingredient of both necessary and sufficient solutions. In small countries and countries with a well educated population, this active online civil society is even sufficient for democratic transitions. For democratic entrenchment, a well developed information infrastructure is important, while it is crucial that the country's economy is not dominated by fuel exports.

Howard's book provides ample evidence for the importance of ICTs in democratic transitions. What is more, he points to the possibilities of supporting democratic transitions by discouraging the export of censorship software or by making reforms of information structures a condition for loans from the international lending community. A big merit of this book is also to shed light on the democratic and secular internet use by Muslim communities. This book is exactly not about political Islam, as the title falsely indicates.

The real novelty, however, is the methodological approach to the question of ICTs' role in democratic transition. Middle Eastern or Islamic studies are still marked by case studies of one or two countries. Howard's method is a bold step towards a more systematic comparison of larger samples, which contributes to the formulation or specification of theories. However, the methodological implications are not formulated clear enough. Despite further information in the annex and on the website¹, previous knowledge about comparative methods is recommendable.

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¹ <<http://www.pitpi.org/>> (31.03.2011).

and Political Islam. Oxford 2010, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 01.04.2011.