Autocracy and Resistance in the Internet Age
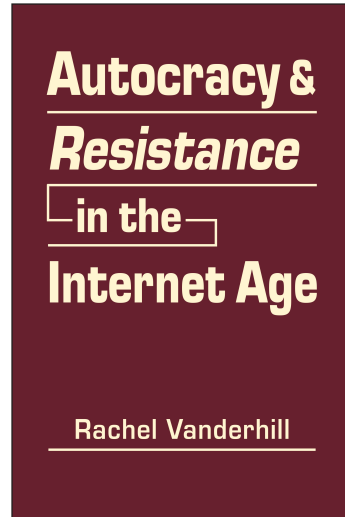
Rachel Vanderhill

**Autocracy &
Resistance
in the
Internet Age**

Rachel Vanderhill

Contents

1

The Revolution Will Be Tweeted . . . Or Not?

When I talk about technology and the internet, people normally pine for them and look forward to a future that will promote liberalization. But people neglect the fact that modern authoritarianism also rises with the development of technology, which makes wider and deeper control possible.

—Sui Muqing[1]

In August 2018, Facebook publicly acknowledged what reporters and others had been documenting for months: that members of Myanmar's military had used Facebook for years to incite hatred and violence against the Rohingya Muslim minority.[2] This acknowledgment is just one example of many of how autocratic governments are using new technology, especially social media, to attack opponents and maintain legitimacy.[3] In 2018, the *New York Times* reported on a number of stories regarding autocratic uses of the internet: the Saudi Arabian government paying people to post false information online to discredit opposition leaders (i.e., troll factories); the increased Chinese government censorship of the internet; and the role of Facebook in the Libyan civil war.

The current negative perception of the influence of social media contrasts with the view in February 2011, when the world was captivated by the story of how Egyptians, such as Wael Ghonim, used Facebook and other technologies to organize antigovernment protests that led to the overthrow of Egypt's president Hosni Mubarak. Commentators,

government leaders, and scholars proclaimed the revolutionary prode-mocratic power of new technologies, especially social media. This initial utopianism surrounding the idea of the internet as a revolutionary force for democratization has given way to more nuanced and conflicted debates about what role this technology has on democratization and authoritarianism. Autocratic governments, such as those in Iran, Russia, and China, have all developed sophisticated tools for monitoring, cen-soring, and manipulating information communication technology (ICT): the internet, social media, text messaging, and mobile technology.[4] How-ever, the events in Egypt and elsewhere suggest that ICT can also be a powerful tool to challenge governments. Therefore, the question arises: What influence does ICT have on authoritarian regimes?

In this book, I investigate how governments and opponents use ICT in authoritarian regimes. How are autocratic governments able to use ICT to prevent democratic challenges and maintain their rule? How, when, and where are antigovernment activists able to utilize ICT to challenge autocratic leaders? Through examining these questions, I sit-uate the debates about the influence of ICT within the broader literature on authoritarian persistence and democratization, something missing from most current analyses of ICT. Applying existing theories about authoritarianism and democratization to debates about ICT offers a more theoretical, rigorous, and comprehensive approach to these ques-tions. I explore the role of ICT in authoritarian regimes through com-paring cases from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and post-Soviet regions. The unusual cross-regional comparison of cases allows me to explore the methods by which people use ICT both to further authoritarian rule and to challenge autocratic leaders. Through this cross-regional comparison, I seek to increase our understanding of the complex effects of ICT on autocratic regimes and how it can both undermine dictators and strengthen their rule.

The Complex World of Internet, Politics, and Society Studies

Examining how people and governments in autocratic states use ICT to influence regime outcomes intersects with a variety of different litera-tures and debates, including writings in the fields of communication studies, social movements, and democratization. Initially, there was debate about whether or not ICT had any influence on politics at all. For example, in an analysis of all authoritarian countries from 1993 to 2010, Espen G. Rød and Nils B. Weidmann found no statistical relationship

between the level of internet penetration and changes in democratization scores.[5] However, much of this research about the effects of the internet on regime change used data that predated the spread of social media applications like Facebook and Twitter, both of which facilitate communication among large numbers of people and aid organization of events in ways that previous forms of technology did not. Furthermore, the events of the 2016 US presidential election highlighted the growing influence of social media on political events. Writing the week after the surprising victory of Donald Trump, *New York Times* correspondent Farhad Manjoo argues that "with billions of people glued to Facebook, WhatsApp, WeChat, Instagram, Twitter, Weibo and other popular services, social media has become an increasingly powerful cultural and political force, to the point that its *effects are now beginning to alter the course of global events*" (emphasis added).[6] In addition, as Clay Shirky writes, the "reason to think that social media can help bring political change is that both dissidents and governments think they can. All over the world, activists believe in the utility of these tools and take steps to use them accordingly. And the governments they contend with think social media tools are powerful, too, and are willing to harass, arrest, exile, or kill users in response."[7] Therefore, many would agree today that "the internet is an indispensable facet of contemporary politics."[8] However, what specific effects this technology has on democracy and authoritarianism is still debated.

Internet and Society Studies
There is an existing rich, detailed discussion about the effects of new technology, especially the internet, on democracy and society. Aspects of this literature build off of the work of Jurgen Habermas on the idea of the public sphere or "publicness." According to Habermas, the nineteenth century saw the development of newspapers, pamphlets, salons, and coffeehouses where people could debate issues, texts, and politics. Through these processes, the public sphere became a political space where rational, reasoned debate arose and was a potential source of opposition to the state.[9] Jodi Dean, Diana Saco, and others have debated what impact, if any, cyberspace and the internet have had on the public sphere. Christian Fuchs argues that there was potential for the internet, because of the nature of many-to-many communication, to help "establish a more participatory democracy."[10] Manuel Castells states that ICTs may lead to the formation of a new type of civil society and that the "internet can contribute to enhance the autonomy of citizens to organize and mobilize."[11] Alternatively, Dean argues that the new technoculture involves a

lure of secrecy, and that the drive to know more and more "sucks the life out of political action" and causes the continual delay of action.[12] In other words, ICTs damage social capital, which Robert Putnam argues in *Making Democracy Work* is necessary for democracy. Habermas himself sees the internet as producing fragmentation and rejection of intellectuals.[13] In other approaches, scholars propose that we need a whole new way of conceiving of democracy postinternet. In *Reformatting Politics,* Jodi Dean, Jon W. Anderson, and Geert Lovink introduce the idea of "postdemocratic governmentality," arguing that networked societies cannot be "conceived within the democratic imaginary" and replace democratic ideas (i.e., representation) with a new set of values.[14] They argue that reliance on the framework of the nation-state no longer works in the age of networked technologies.[15] Recent developments of governments seeking to claim sovereignty over the internet suggest that their dismissal of the nation-state may have been premature.

This interesting and complex conversation is *not* the focus of this book for three main reasons. First, I examine the influence of ICT in authoritarian societies, which I argue are different from democratic societies. Accessing Facebook is not an inherently risky or political act in democratic societies, but it can be in an authoritarian state. Vasileios Karagiannopoulos argues that, in highly repressive societies, the "mere possibility of being provided with the capacity to create a virtual space of personal expression, such as blogs or Facebook groups, is a dissenting, politicizing activity in itself."[16] Therefore, actions that would not be "political" in democratic societies, such as joining an online dating site, are political acts in places such as Iran. The distinctions between autocratic and democratic states means it is likely that the effects of ICT will be different, which justifies studying ICT in authoritarian states separately.[17] Furthermore, this book is not focused on explaining protest movements, but instead its emphasis is on the effects of new technology on authoritarian regimes. Therefore, although this literature offers some insights about how ICT helps opponents of an authoritarian regime (which I discuss further in Chapter 2), it is engaged in a different debate about the quality of democracy. With a few notable exceptions, such as Emma C. Murphy, many of the scholars in this field are explicitly or implicitly discussing democratic societies and concerns about the impact of new technology on democracy. Although a valuable area of research, the effects of ICT on democracy are not the focus of this book.

Second, this book focuses on how online activity transforms and influences "offline" efforts to challenge and maintain authoritarian regimes. I do not engage with the discussion about whether ICT erodes

or improves the public sphere. The debates about the effect of the internet on the public sphere stem from a place where it is possible for people to engage in "a public sphere" separate from ICT. For example, Dean argues that the "new telecommunicational-informational capitalism" has little to do with Habermas's idea of a rational public sphere defined by deliberation and knowledge.[18] The public sphere in authoritarian regimes is different from that in democratic countries. It is not a question of whether or not ICT is the best avenue for political discourse to build a democratic society; the internet is often the only place, if that, where these conversations can occur in an authoritarian regime. Despite the problems associated with this telecommunicational-informational capitalism, it is the only option in many authoritarian regimes for people to express themselves, gain knowledge, and engage in discussions about politics. Again, this is a distinct and different question from what scholars examine when engaged in debates about Habermas, the internet, the public sphere, and democracy.

Third, this is not a book of political theory or communication studies. It is a book rooted in comparative politics theory about authoritarianism and democratization. Furthermore, the major weakness of many debates within communication studies about the influence of ICT on regime type is that it does not engage with the comparative politics literature about how and why authoritarian regimes persist, and how and why they can be overthrown. In contrast, I apply theories of authoritarianism and democratization to questions about how activists and governments use ICT to challenge and support authoritarian regimes, and the effects of those efforts on the regime outcome.

Social Movement Theory

One common form of challenge to authoritarian governments is mass mobilization, primarily in the form of street protests. Therefore, it is logical to consider the insights of the extensive social movement literature on the development, strengths, and weaknesses of recent digitally meditated protest movements. Over the past several decades, research by Doug McAdams, Charles Tilly, Sidney Tarrow, and others about contentious politics has demonstrated the importance of the political context and the strategic choices of movements for understanding collective action and the success or failure of various movements. One of the dominant approaches for studying social movements is the political process model, which focuses on the political opportunity structure (e.g., the institutional structure of government), the configuration of political actors (allies and adversaries), and the strategic interaction

between social movements and authorities.[19] Additional approaches to studying social movements focus on the role of diffusion, the importance of cultural frames, the value of social networks for recruitment of participants, and the repertoires of contention, among other topics.

Although this book draws on some of the insights and theory of social movements—especially ideas about diffusion and how ICT is changing the nature of movements—it is primarily not about social movements. Social movement theory focuses on analyzing the leadership, strategies, and development of particular movements. In contrast, this book focuses on explaining how both opponents and supporters of the government use ICT to attempt to affect regime outcomes. Social movement theory, focused on analyzing and explaining the movement itself, is telling a different story. Furthermore, in at least several of the cases, it is questionable whether the protests meet the definition of a social movement. For example, in the case of Kyrgyzstan, the protests lasted only a few days, there was no institutionalization or organizational structure to the protests, and there was a lack of unity beyond the desire to see the president overthrown. Mario Diani defines *social movements* as "a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on *the basis of a shared collective identity*" (emphasis added).[20] It is difficult to label recent antigovernment activity in Russia, Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, or even Egypt as being defined by "a shared collective identity." In their examination of collective action on the internet, Ulrich Dolata and Jan-Felix Schrape distinguish between "classical social movements," characterized by "thematically focused protest actions" carried out by "established actors," and "loosely networked movements," characterized a "very general" shared identity and widespread use of web-based technology to communicate and organize protests.[21] They categorize the 2011 protests in Egypt, one of the more sustained and institutionalized set of protests examined in this book, as being a "loosely networked movement," not a social movement. In addition, Vincent Durac, discussing the Arab Spring, argues that "protest movements . . . are usually transitory and do not last long. Either they succeed or they are suppressed. . . . Unlike protest movements or insurrections, which only negate the prevailing order, social movements typically construct alternative institutions and value systems."[22] Some protest movements may institutionalize over time into social movements, but it is important to realize that not all protests are social movements. Interestingly, the fact that many of these cases are not social movements may explain some of their failures and weaknesses. Therefore, although I build on some elements of social

movement theory in Chapter 2, overall this book is not about social movements, and is instead focused on explaining the influence and limits of ICT on regime outcomes in authoritarian contexts. I argue that ICT can both aid opposition movements in overthrowing the regime and help autocratic governments stay in power, especially through increased abilities to engage in surveillance and propaganda. To understand the effects of ICT on regime outcomes, we must turn our focus to the literature about democratization.

Democratization and ICT

Initially, there were two major perspectives on ICT and its relationship to regime change: (1) ICT is a powerful tool for democratization; and (2) ICT helps authoritarian leaders. However, more recent research is seeking to move beyond this dichotomy to develop a more nuanced analysis of the role of ICT.[23] Philip Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain, some of the best-known advocates for the prodemocratization argument, found in their study of the Arab Spring that digital media is "a necessary and sometimes sufficient cause of democratization."[24] Other scholars have also found that social media, or "liberation technology," plays an important role in mobilizing people and spreading protests.[25] The second perspective on ICT believes that ICT is influential, but is often used by autocratic governments to suppress dissent and surveil its citizens. One of the best-known examples of this argument is Evgeny Morozov's *The Net Delusion*. Morozov argues that "cyber-utopians" underestimate the ability of authoritarian governments to manipulate the internet for their own purposes. Ronald Deibert and the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto have extensively researched and documented the methods by which governments control cyberspace.[26] In contrast to these perspectives, Nils Weidmann and Espen Geelmuyden Rød have taken a more focused and nuanced approach, seeking to examine the effects of the internet on the various stages of protest in autocratic regimes. Based on statistical analysis of thousands of cases of protest in autocracies, they argue that increased internet penetration actually reduces the occurrence of protest but, once protests begin, can help sustain and spread those protests.[27] Although their analysis addresses only the frequency and size of protests, not regime outcomes, it does offer insight into the complex effects of ICT in autocratic regimes.

Therefore, the debate within the literature raises multiple questions about the influence and limits of ICT on regime outcomes: How do authoritarian regimes utilize ICT to maintain power? How do activists use ICT to challenge the regime? What explains why sometimes the

opposition succeeds in using ICT to overthrow the regime, and sometimes the regime is able to resist this challenge? What explains the regime outcome when "digitally networked protests" occur?[28]

The majority of the literature examining the role of ICT in relation to protests and democratization comes from communication studies and social movement theory. Few analyses or approaches to studying ICT incorporate insights from the vast literature about the causes of democratization and authoritarian persistence into their argument. Existing literature within the field of democratization studies argues that ICT does not determine regime outcomes and, therefore, brushes it aside.[29] Although ICT *by itself* does not cause regime change or determine regime outcomes, it is powerful and should not be immediately dismissed. In addition, structural approaches to democratization, for example, Jason Brownlee, Tarek Masoud, and Andrew Reynolds' *The Arab Spring,* overall undercount the importance of action and agency for explaining regime outcomes. To explain why people choose to engage in antiregime activity in these cases requires considering how ICT influenced those decisions to challenge the regime. Furthermore, understanding the nature of digitally networked protests may be important for explaining the failures of democratization. Therefore, I incorporate existing theory about digitally networked protests with theories about democratization and authoritarian persistence to investigate how activists and governments use ICT in autocratic regimes, and how this affects regime outcomes.

Argument Overview

In this book, I examine how activists and governments use ICT and the effects of those actions on regime outcomes. Drawing on communication studies and theories about democratization, I hypothesize that new technology, especially the rise of social media platforms, has facilitated and enhanced four methods to challenge an autocratic regime: (1) ICT, especially the openness and interconnectivity of this new technology, can reduce the information monopoly of authoritarian governments. Compared to traditional media, such as television, the internet is harder for governments to control. Therefore, the internet offers people a new way to circumvent censorship and to disseminate information critical of the government. (2) The global nature of ICT can facilitate the diffusion of democracy. Being able to evade government censorship also enables people to hear about successful cases of democratization elsewhere (i.e., demonstration effects). (3) The ability to easily share information and

organize large numbers of people can aid the opposition in overcoming the collective action problem. The sharing of information online helps people realize that they have common grievances against the government, an important step in encouraging collective action. Social media platforms, like Facebook, also offer simple and effective ways to organize events such as protests against the government. (4) The combination of new technologies, such as Facebook, cell phone videos, and video-sharing websites, can aid activists in spreading information about government abuses and prodemocracy protests around the world in an effort to shape global public opinion in their favor. When activists are able to effectively use all four of these mechanisms, ICT can be a powerful tool for mass mobilization and, in some cases, regime overthrow.

However, authoritarian leaders have not been passive in response to the threats presented by this new technology, and have been actively adapting new technology to prevent challenges to their rule. In general, authoritarian leaders use three main mechanisms to maintain power: coercion, co-optation, and legitimacy. Building on this existing theory, I hypothesize that as new technology has developed, autocratic leaders have adapted ICT to aid with all three mechanisms, but especially coercion and legitimacy. Authoritarian leaders can engage in defensive actions—censorship and repression—to prevent activists from using ICT to challenge the regime. In addition, as authoritarian governments improve their technological capabilities, they can move from defensive actions to a proactive approach using technology for surveillance and propaganda.

Both activists and autocratic governments have gained new tools and abilities with the development of ICT. The ability of each to successfully use ICT affects the power struggle between autocratic governments and their opponents, and possibly the regime outcome. Once new technology, such as social media, enters a country there are four possible effects on the regime outcome: (1) there are no major protests and no change (i.e., status quo ante); (2) technology aids the development and spread of antigovernment protests, but the regime survives; (3) digitally networked protests lead to regime overthrow (the removal of an autocratic leader through unconstitutional means); or (4) digitally networked protests lead to regime overthrow, and then democracy. What explains the different outcomes? The first, and most obvious, answer to this question is the degree of government control over ICT in a country. The greater the degree of repression, the harder it is for ICT to be a tool of digitally networked protests or regime overthrow. However, this is an incomplete answer as there are cases where ICT was not censored but there was no overthrow, and cases where ICT was censored but it

was still used by an antiregime movement. Explaining the regime out-
come requires moving beyond ICT to consider institutional and struc-
tural factors important for democracy and authoritarianism. Therefore, I
argue that the regime outcome is dependent on factors other than just the
degree of repression. Specifically, I hypothesize that the regime outcome
is also dependent on: (1) the presence and strength of civil society in a
country; (2) the nature of the international environment; (3) the strength
of the authoritarian leader; and (4) the nature of the authoritarian regime.
Civil society organizations provide important leadership and coordination
to help maintain high levels of mobilization that may be necessary for
regime overthrow. If digitally networked protests succeed in overthrow-
ing the regime, a vibrant and diverse civil society also increases the pos-
sibility of democratization. An international environment supportive of
democracy places additional pressure on authoritarian governments to not
engage in violence and to make concessions, whereas having autocratic
international allies helps bolster the regime against internal challenges.
The strength of the leaders, or their coercive capacity and degree of legit-
imacy, will determine their ability to prevail against the protesters. In
addition, authoritarian systems involving extensive networks of patronage
and corruption or powerful, politically active security forces are prob-
lematic for regime overthrow and democratization. In places where
there are existing civil society organizations to help sustain protests,
where the international environment is supportive of democracy, and
where the leader lacks coercive capacity or elite support, ICT is likely to
be a powerful tool of mobilization and regime breakdown.

  ICT can aid mobilization and regime breakdown, but is unlikely to
help the development of a new, democratic regime. The decentralized
nature of digitally networked protests results in a lack of leadership that
is often necessary for transitioning from regime breakdown to democra-
tization. Moreover, although ICT may aid in the formation of shared
grievances against the regime, it can also reinforce existing cleavages and
increase tensions during a transition period. The existence of ICT can be
a powerful and influential factor for regime breakdown, but may be either
ineffective, or even detrimental, during a transition to democracy.

  In this argument, I combine agency-based approaches (explaining
collective action and the strategic choice of activists) and structural-
based approaches (institutional legacy of authoritarian regimes). As
Mark Lichbach states, "The structure-agent problem is at the root of the
question of political protest and social order. The reason is that state
structures and social movements are reciprocally constituted: Authority
begets the resistance that transforms it."[30] The structure-agent problem

is that individuals make history, society, government, and institutions. However, paraphrasing Karl Marx, people do not make history under circumstances of their own choosing. Structures confine people's choices and opportunities. Structural arguments are strong at explaining the causes of revolt, but are weak at explaining how people challenge the regime.[31] Conversely, action- or agency-based approaches, such as one finds in studies of digitally networked protests, are strong at explaining how people used new technology to rebel, but are weak at explaining the regime outcome. The agency-based approaches provide the mechanisms, and the structural aspects explain why. Both types of theories are necessary to explain how people use ICT to challenge the regime and the regime outcome. The significant challenge for social scientists, which I attempt in this book, is to successfully incorporate both dynamics—the macro and micro—into one theory.

A Note About Definitions

Democracy

I define *democracy* as having universal adult suffrage, competitive free and fair elections, and the protection of civil and political liberties, especially freedom of speech and freedom of the press. This definition builds off of Robert Dahl's argument about the role of participation and contestation in democracy, and Philippe C. Schmitter and Terry Lynn Karl's idea that in a democracy, "rulers are held accountable."[32] Universal suffrage is necessary to achieve participation, and competitive elections are necessary to have contestation. To have free and fair elections and hold government accountable, you need the protection of civil and political liberties. Citizens and the press need to be able to publicly criticize the government without penalty for governments to be held accountable and elections to be fair. I chose this definition of democracy to be able to clearly distinguish between democratic states and hybrid regimes, those states that are neither fully democratic nor autocratic.

Nondemocratic Regimes

The wide range of different types of nondemocratic regimes, such as totalitarianism, military oligarchies, dictatorships, single-party regimes, neopatrimonial regimes, and "patronal presidentialism" cause definitional challenges for political scientists.[33] In this book, the cases reflect several different types of nondemocratic regimes: dictatorship, competitive authoritarian, theocracy. I adapt Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan's definition

of *authoritarianism*—political systems with "limited political pluralism," no "guiding ideology," little to no political mobilization, and a degree of predictability—as a general term to refer to all of the nondemocratic regimes examined in this book.[34] Furthermore, authoritarian regimes lack fair, competitive elections. The post-Soviet cases in this book, with the notable exception of Russia, are "competitive authoritarian" regimes, defined by Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way as "civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents' abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage vis-à-vis their opponents."[35] A *theocracy* is an autocratic regime where political and religious power and institutions are intertwined. Iran, one of the cases in this book, is a rare example of a contemporary theocracy.

Information Communication Technology

Why use the term *information communication technology* instead of just "the internet" or "social media?" Although a little unwieldy, ICT has two major benefits over using other terms. First, it refers to a broader and more comprehensive set of new technology. When referring to the internet and social media, we miss the influential dynamics of the ubiquity of mobile phone cameras and the importance of text messaging (or SMSing) for communication. Both of these technologies play a large role in the process of mobilization and are sometimes what people are discussing even when they use the term *the internet*. In addition, the terms *internet* and *social media* rarely incorporate the element of electronic surveillance into their definition or interpretation. Using *information communication technology* more accurately encompasses multiple new technologies. Second, the term is used by other scholars researching and writing about this new technology.[36] Therefore, it is a term already present in the literature.

Methodological Approach

I use qualitative comparative case study methodology in this book for several reasons. The comparative case study methodology involves "analytic narratives" or "causal process observations" to test whether there is empirical evidence supporting or challenging a theoretical argument.[37] First, a comparative case study approach is an effective approach for building theory.[38] Harry Eckstein argues that case studies are a valuable means of building theories, especially in regard to "macropolitical phenomena" involving "considerable magnitude or complexity."[39] I use

"theory-building process tracing" and "explaining-outcome process tracing" to help discern the relationships between and the causal mechanisms linking ICT, protest movements, and regime outcomes.[40] As we are at the early stages of theory development regarding ICT and its political, economic, and social consequences, it is appropriate to use a comparative case study approach and process tracing to aid theory development. Furthermore, given the recent nature of ICT, events involving ICT, democratization, or authoritarianism are rare and complex. Second, this approach, with its focus on exploring why "X affects Y," facilitates the identification of different causal mechanisms and relationships, which is especially well suited for exploring the effects of ICT at this stage of theory development. Third, similar to comparative-historical analysis, this approach also allows for "configurational analysis," the consideration of "how variables work together in combinations."[41] The effects of ICT are interactive, and studying them requires understanding the broader context. Therefore, comparative case study analysis and process tracing aid theory generation, help clarify the causal mechanisms, and enable the investigation of the interactive nature of the effects of ICT.

The cases in this book are either crucial or heuristic cases, and they play an especially important role in theory generation and testing. Crucial cases are "critical" for a theory. John Gerring argues that there are two types of crucial cases: those that are seen as exemplifying a particular theory, and those that are either most likely or least likely cases.[42] In other words, *crucial cases* are cases with results that challenge or confirm existing theory.[43] I argue that the 2011 uprising in Egypt is a crucial case for considering the role of ICT because many accounts of this event see ICT as playing an essential role in the protests against Egyptian president Mubarak. Therefore, how could one study the influence of ICT on democratization in the Middle East and not study Egypt? Armenia and Tunisia are also crucial cases for analyzing the influence of ICT. Armenia is a *most likely* case for ICT to facilitate regime breakdown because there is little repression of the internet in Armenia. However, prior to 2018, repeated protest movements in Armenia failed to bring about regime change or political reform. Tunisia is a *least likely* case for ICT to contribute to regime breakdown because the authoritarian government of Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali engaged in severe repression of the internet. But counter to what many would predict, democratization occurred in Tunisia. These crucial cases, especially because of the diverse range of regime outcomes, provide helpful insights into understanding the limits and sometimes surprising influence of ICT in relation to regime breakdown and democratization. The cases covered in the book are also what Eckstein

labeled "heuristic case studies" and Arend Lijphart called "hypothesis-generating cases."[44] Heuristic case studies allow for the development of theory because there is a focus on finding "potentially generalizable relations" among variables.[45]

Introduction to the Cases

Scholars rarely examine Middle Eastern and post-Soviet states together. Clearly, there are important cultural, religious, and historical differences between the two regions. Furthermore, unlike the Arab Spring, anti-regime protests in post-Soviet states have generally occurred around elections and claims of electoral fraud. However, there are multiple similarities between the two regions in the use and in the restriction of ICT, and these similarities facilitate a cross-regional comparison that is particularly important in theory development. First, authoritarianism remains persistent in both regions. With the notable exception of the Baltic States, no post-Soviet states are democratic. Prior to the 2011 protests, outside of Israel there were no democratic states in the Middle East and North Africa region. Second, despite the persistence of authoritarianism in each region, both demonstrate important variation in the type, nature, and extent of authoritarianism. Post-Soviet states include illiberal democracies, such as Georgia, and one of the most repressive regimes in the world, Turkmenistan. In MENA, Lebanon is an illiberal democracy, and Saudi Arabia is as repressive as Turkmenistan. The regional differences in repression also apply to government control over the internet. For example, in the post-Soviet region, the Armenian and Moldovan governments allowed a free internet, Kyrgyzstan engaged in limited censorship, and the Russian government developed a sophisticated system of surveillance and propaganda. This variation enables cross-case comparisons within the region. The range of different autocratic regimes across the two regions, with the post-Soviet states being competitive authoritarian regimes, Iran a theocracy, and Tunisia a dictatorship prior to 2011, enables the analysis of the different approaches to ICT among autocratic regimes.

Third, states in these two areas also generally have reasonably high levels of access to ICT, with a few exceptions in Central Asia (e.g., Turkmenistan). Fourth, although MENA states did not experience communism like in the Soviet Union (with the partial exception of Yemen), many of the states had predominantly state-directed and state-owned economies until the 1990s. Therefore, the MENA region and postcommunist states both experienced liberal economic reforms and upheaval

during the 1990s and 2000s. Finally, there have been several cases of mass mobilization against autocratic regimes in post-Soviet states with some similarities to the revolts in MENA. In recent cases of antigovernment protests in both regions, activists have utilized some form of ICT to spread information, mobilize people, and organize activities. Therefore, this is a common dynamic across both regions. Cases from these two regions provide rich source material for investigating how people use ICT in authoritarian regimes to challenge or support the regime.

I looked at all of the cases of significant antiregime protests in both regions between 2005 and 2018 that did not involve a foreign military intervention.[46] Significant antiregime protests are those that involve 10,000 or more people, where protesters express goals to change the regime.[47] Protestors may have other goals, but at least one of them must be a direct challenge to the regime. I restricted the scope of study to these types of protests because I was seeking to investigate how activists use ICT to challenge autocratic regimes, and the effects of these protests on regime outcomes. Therefore, protests such as those that occurred in Jordan in 2011 and in Turkey in 2013 are outside the scope of this project because they either involved under 10,000 people or the goal of the activists was reform, not overthrow.[48] I chose this period because it covers the time since the development and spread of new technologies such as Facebook and YouTube.

Although the countries of Ukraine, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain all experienced significant antiregime protests during this period, they also experienced foreign military intervention of various degrees. While ICT can play a role in cases where there is foreign military intervention, such as has been documented in Ukraine and Syria, foreign intervention complicates the process tracing of the effects of ICT on regime outcomes.[49] For example, the Gulf Cooperation Council and Saudi intervention in Bahrain make it impossible to know what would have happened without outside intervention. Furthermore, examining the effects of ICT on the civil wars in Ukraine, Syria, Libya, and Yemen, although important, is a different research project than the one detailed in this book. These cases warrant a separate, dedicated research project that investigates the role of ICT in situations where protests, foreign military intervention, and civil war all occurred. Therefore, to focus on the effects of ICT on authoritarian governments and their opponents, I narrowed the scope to exclude these cases.

The range of twelve cases in this book cover three of the possible regime outcomes: protests that seek but fail to overthrow the regime, protests that successfully lead to the overthrow of the regime, and protests

that lead to overthrow and democratization (see Table 1.1). Russia, Iran, Armenia (2008 and 2013), and Moldova all experienced digitally networked protests that failed to overthrow the regime. Armenia (2018), Kyrgyzstan, and Egypt had digitally networked protests that resulted in regime overthrow but not democratization. In Tunisia, digitally networked protests helped overthrow the regime and the country developed democracy. As I sought to understand the influence and limits of ICT on regime outcomes, I engaged in only limited comparisons with cases such as Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan, where there have been no significant antigovernment protests between 2005 and 2018. When investigating causal mechanisms, cases where there is no change provide limited analytical assistance.[50] To develop theory, I focused on the strongest possible cases for ICT—in other words, the cases where there actually were mobilization and attempts to challenge the autocratic regime. These are the cases where we would expect ICT to have had some effect.

There are multiple cases within four countries: Armenia, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, and Moldova. These provide especially helpful explanatory value, as the repeated cases of protest within the same country offer insight into the changing nature and influence of ICT. For example, Armenia had antigovernment protests in 2008, 2013, and 2018. As Chapter 4 discusses, the level of internet penetration and usage of social media expanded significantly in Armenia over the decade between the first case and the most recent one. The within-country comparisons help control for other variables and enable stronger conclusions about the possible influence of ICT.

Table 1.1 Cases and Regime Outcomes

Regime Outcome	Cases
Regime survives	Armenia 2008
	Iran 2009
	Moldova 2009
	Russia 2011–2012
	Armenia 2013
	Moldova 2015–2016
	Iran 2017–2018
Regime is overthrown, but no democratization occurs	Kyrgyzstan 2005
	Kyrgyzstan 2010
	Egypt 2011
	Armenia 2018
Regime is overthrown and democracy is established	Tunisia 2011

The combination of these twelve cases, reflecting a variety of different regime outcomes, allows for theory development and preliminary testing of hypotheses about the relationship of ICT to authoritarianism, mass mobilization, and democratization.

In building the case studies, I drew on survey data, data on internet penetration and social media usage, firsthand accounts from activists, and newspaper reporting to investigate the role of ICT in the development of protest movements in each case. I used government reports, statistical data (e.g., information on trade relations), reports from nongovernment organizations, and the existing academic literature to examine the strength of civil society, the international environment, and the nature of the authoritarian regime.

Plan of the Book

Chapter 2, the theoretical core of the book, begins by situating the ongoing debates about ICT within the broader literature about authoritarian persistence and democratization. In this chapter, I explore the main mechanisms by which ICT may have an effect on regime breakdown, hypothesize how authoritarian governments can successfully prevent ICT from aiding democratization, and then propose a theory explaining regime outcomes. The chapters that follow consist of case studies, most of which include cross-regional comparisons. In Chapter 3, I compare and contrast the cases of Iran and Russia, two countries where authoritarian regimes have survived antigovernment digitally networked protests. These two countries provide insights into how authoritarian governments are able to suppress, monitor, and censor ICT. The Russia case focuses on the 2011–2012 protests against Vladimir Putin and the subsequent increased repression of the internet. The Iranian case discusses the 2009 Green Movement, where Iranians utilized ICT to help mobilize protests against alleged electoral fraud in the presidential elections. After that, I examine the 2017–2018 outbreak of antigovernment protests in Iran. The Iranian government violently suppressed both the 2009 and 2017–2018 protests.

In Chapter 4, I look at the 2008, 2013, and 2018 protests in Armenia and the 2009 and 2015–2016 protests in Moldova. Armenia and Moldova are both crucial cases when considering ICT's democratizing influence. At the time of the protests, Armenia and Moldova had an uncensored internet with unrestricted access to alternative news sites, Facebook, and foreign news sources. In addition, Armenian and Moldovan activists used ICT to organize protests. Armenia and Moldova are crucial cases because if, as some argue, the presence of ICT is necessary and

sometimes sufficient for democratization, then it is highly likely that we would see activists using ICT to bring about democracy in both countries. However, despite some recent positive developments, the prospects of democratization in Armenia remain low, presenting a possible challenge to existing theory. An understudied case, Armenia's unique situation of combining a competitive authoritarian regime with a free internet provides interesting insights into the role of ICT and the persistence of authoritarianism. In Moldova, the 2009 protests surrounding the parliamentary elections had only a limited and indirect impact on political reform. Furthermore, the president at the time remained in office for months after the protests. Although the 2015–2016 protests were larger and lasted longer, they also failed to overthrow the regime or bring about substantive political reform.

In Chapter 5, I compare Kyrgyzstan and Egypt, which have each experienced digitally networked protests and regime overthrow. In these two cases, I was able to examine the role of digitally networked protests in regime overthrow and the postoverthrow period. The Kyrgyzstan case examines the protests leading to the overthrows of Presidents Askar Akayev in 2005 and Kurmanbek Bakiyev in 2010.[51] Activists in both Kyrgyzstan and Egypt used ICT to mobilize antigovernment protests that contributed to the downfall of autocratic leaders. However, neither country has developed democracy as an outcome of these protests, raising questions about the different roles of ICT in regime overthrow and democratization.

The last case study, Chapter 6, focuses on Tunisia, which experienced both regime overthrow and democratization. In Tunisia, activists utilized ICT to help inform people of government abuses and to mobilize protests. With the regime outcome of democratization, Tunisia suggests that ICT may be a powerful tool to help mobilize antigovernment protests, but that democratization is a distinct process where ICT may have little positive effect. In the conclusion, Chapter 7, I review and tie together the arguments made in the preceding chapters and discuss the broader implications of ICT on regime outcomes. I close by discussing the prospects for democratization and authoritarian persistence in each region.

Notes

1. Sui Muqing, quoted in Mozur, "China Presses Its Internet Censorship Efforts."
2. Mozur, "A Genocide Incited on Facebook."
3. In this book, I use the terms *authoritarian* and *autocratic* interchangeably.
4. Kendall-Taylor, Frantz, and Wright, "The Digital Dictators."

5. Rød and Weidmann, "Empowering Activists or Autocrats?"

6. Manjoo, "Social Media's Globe-Shaking Power."

7. Shirky, "Political Power of Social Media," p. 39.

8. Karagiannopoulos, "Role of the Internet in Political Struggles," p. 171.

9. Murphy, "Theorizing ICTs in the Arab World," p. 1132.

10. Fuchs, *Internet and Society,* p. 133.

11. Castells, *The Power of Identity,* vol. 2, p. 417.

12. Dean, *Publicity's Secret,* p. 163.

13. Cited in Fuchs, *Internet and Society,* p. 244.

14. Dean, Anderson, and Lovink, "Introduction," p. xvi.

15. Ibid., p. xxi.

16. Karagiannopoulos, "Role of the Internet in Political Struggles," pp. 162–163.

17. Weidmann and Rød, *The Internet and Political Protest in Autocracies,* p. 14.

18. Dean, *Publicity's Secret.*

19. Kriesi, "Political Context and Opportunities."

20. Diani, "The Concept of a Social Movement," p. 9.

21. Dolata and Schrape, "Masses, Crowds, Communities, Movements," p. 10.

22. Durac, "Social Movements, Protest Movements," p. 245.

23. Weidmann and Rød, *The Internet and Political Protest in Autocracies.*

24. Howard and Hussain, *Democracy's Fourth Wave?,* p. 26.

25. Abbott, MacDonald, and Givens, "New Social Media and (Electronic) Democratization"; Rawal and Nixon, "Re-Tweet to Democracy?"; Kulikova and Perlmutter, "Blogging Down the Dictator?" The term *liberation technology* comes from Diamond, "Liberation Technology."

26. There are multiple relevant articles by Ronald Deibert; one recent example is Deibert, "Cyberspace Under Siege."

27. Weidmann and Rød, *The Internet and Political Protest in Autocracies,* pp. 144–145.

28. I am using Zeynep Tufekci's term "digitally networked protests" for describing protests organized by ICT, see *Twitter and Tear Gas.*

29. For example, see Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds, *The Arab Spring.*

30. Lichbach, "Contending Theories of Contentious Politics," p. 403.

31. Ibid., p. 415.

32. Dahl, *Polyarchy,* pp. 4–5. Schmitter and Karl, "What Democracy Is . . . and Is Not," p. 4.

33. Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation;* Bratton and van de Walle, "Neopatrimonial Regimes and Political Transitions in Africa"; Hale, *Patronal Politics.*

34. Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation,* pp. 44–45.

35. Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism,* p. 5.

36. See, for example, Rød and Weidmann, "Empowering Activists or Autocrats?"; Fung, Gilman, and Shkabatur, "Six Models for the Internet + Politics"; Hussain and Howard, "What Best Explains Successful Protest Cascades?"

37. Analytic narratives incorporate both narrative—stories and context—and theory. Bates et al, *Analytic Narratives,* pp. 3 and 10; Haggard and Kaufman, *Dictators and Democrats,* p. 22.

38. Alexander L. George argues comparative case studies can be used as the "building blocks for theory development." George, "Case Studies and Theory Development," p. 54.

39. Eckstein, *Regarding Politics,* pp. 119–120.

40. "Process tracing is a research method for tracing causal mechanisms using detailed, within-case empirical analysis of how a causal process plays out in an actual case." Beach, "Process-Tracing Methods in Social Science."

41. Thelen and Mahoney, "Comparative-Historical Analysis," p. 7.

42. Gerring, *Social Science Methodology,* pp. 219–220.

43. Eckstein, *Regarding Politics,* p. 158.

44. Lijphart, "Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method," p. 691.

45. Eckstein, *Regarding Politics,* p. 143.

46. There also were major protests in Morocco in 2011, known as the February 20 Movement. Although there is some dispute over what the protestors were demanding (see Hoffman and Konig, "Scratching the Democratic Façade"), overall they focused on economic and political reform and did not call for the end of the monarchy. As Irene Fernandez Molina states, what set the protests in Morocco apart from the rest of the Arab Spring was the protestors did not "question the monarchical form of the state and the position of Mohamed VI as a monarch." Molina, "The Monarchy vs. the 20 February Movement," p. 437.

47. Studies of post–Cold War antiregime protests have found that protests involving 10,000 participants and lasting for more than a day present a moderate threat to an authoritarian regime. Therefore, I consider significant mobilization to involve protests greater than 10,000 and lasting more than a day. Brancati, *Democracy Protests,* p. 37.

48. Although Turkey had large and sustained protests in 2013, the main focus of those protests was about environmental issues, especially the status of Gezi Park, not the overthrow of the regime. The protesters generally did not call for the removal of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan or a change in government. Therefore, this is not as relevant to the question of ICT and regime outcomes.

49. For an example of the research on Syria, see Lynch, Freelon, and Aday, "Blogs and Bullets III." For example of the research on Ukraine, see Golovchenko, Hartmann, and Adler-Nissen, "State, Media and Civil Society in the Information Warfare."

50. Beach, "Process-Tracing Methods in Social Science."

51. Although the 2005 protests in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, involved less than 10,000 people, the combined number of protestors in other cities was more than 10,000. In addition, it is necessary to study the events of 2005 to understand the 2010 protests in Kyrgyzstan.