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**POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE INFORMATION  
REVOLUTION IN ASIA**

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This chapter addresses two interrelated questions—how has IT changed political dynamics within the countries of the Asia-Pacific region? And how are governments using IT to govern? To answer the first, which requires investigation of political dynamics, we look largely at the “bottom-up” actions and initiatives of citizens, civil society, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and political parties, from organizing protests of government policies to overthrowing sitting regimes. In answering the second question, we will examine “top-down” initiatives of governments that use technology to deliver information and services, generally termed electronic government or e-government. The division between these two topics is not always rigid nor, as we will see, is there necessarily a correlation between the two phenomena in a given country. Singapore, a country whose internal political dynamics have been little altered by information and communication technologies, is a world leader in e-government, for example.<sup>1</sup> We will examine these two topics looking separately at one-party dominant states, where a ruling party uses restrictions on communication to retain power, and at liberal democracies in Asia.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>We will focus primarily, but not exclusively, on politics and governance within nations, because despite all the predictions about the decline of the nation-state, the lives of most people are still governed by their local polities. Discussion of cyberwarfare is beyond the scope of this report. See Arquilla and Ronfeldt (1996, 1997).

<sup>2</sup>For the purposes of this report, we distinguish between liberal democracies (that is, democracies that guarantee individual rights for citizens, particularly freedom of expression and assembly) on the one hand and “one-party dominant” states on the

We might expect that the effect of IT would be different in these different political contexts—common wisdom holds that IT will undermine closed regimes and even encourage democratization.<sup>3</sup> As we will see, however, hard and fast distinctions cannot be made between the political effect of IT on closed versus open regimes.<sup>4</sup> IT has sometimes had a significant political effect on both.

### **BOTTOM UP: THE EFFECT OF IT ON INTERNAL POLITICS**

The rise and spread of information technology in a society has the potential to alter power relationships between citizens and their state. Politics and governance rely on the communication of messages and ideas, and technology can bolster political power by influencing the speed, destination, and anonymity of those communications. IT is never the sole motivator for political flux, but a medium by which it occurs. Nevertheless, “technology is one of the significant causes of social and political change.”<sup>5</sup> Harnessing IT may alter the momentum in a political contest, and a shift in momentum can become a shift in political reality.

IT can affect the internal politics of a state in several ways. For example, IT can make it easier for fringe political parties, NGOs, or dissenters, whether formally organized or not, to challenge a ruling party or a given policy by distributing messages broadly and by allowing supporters to organize easily. When information flows more freely, citizens can more easily gather facts with which to hold leaders accountable, particularly when the traditional media will not challenge the government. When opposition groups harness its transgressive power, IT can actually assist in regime change by facilitating the distribution of criticisms and protest venues.

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other. The latter category describes countries where a ruling party has retained power for generations and includes a range of countries from “electoral” or illiberal democracies, such as Singapore, to true dictatorships, such as North Korea. Liberal democracies in Asia also vary in their openness to vigorous competition for alternative political parties, with Japan being on the less-encouraging end of the spectrum.

<sup>3</sup>For more on the thesis that IT promotes democratization, see Hill and Hughes (1998, p. 2). See also Kedzie (1996).

<sup>4</sup>See Kalathil and Boas (2003).

<sup>5</sup>Nye (1999).

Politics in different Asia-Pacific countries have felt the IT revolution in a variety of ways. In some Asian countries, IT has already clearly influenced political events. In others, IT has not affected politics noticeably at all. In yet others, a future influence is highly likely. We look first at the one-party dominant states in Asia.

### **One-Party Dominant States: IT Influenced**

The internal politics of some current and former Asia-Pacific one-party dominant states, such as Indonesia, China, and Malaysia, have clearly been influenced by IT. Other such regimes, such as North Korea, Myanmar, and Singapore, have not been the locus of notable political activity enhanced by information and communications technology (ICT). For one-party dominant states, the Internet and IT pose a paradox they must resolve—they offer enticing commercial advantages yet can empower dissent and threaten regimes by giving citizens access to new information and a platform for discussion. Controls that limit the Internet’s political potential also reduce its commercial value.<sup>6</sup>

**Indonesia.** The most dramatic example of information technology’s political effect on an Asia-Pacific dictatorship is Indonesia, where IT contributed to the downfall of President Suharto.<sup>7</sup> In the last years of his 30-year reign, “the Internet was used extensively by the urban middle-class opposition to get around the regime’s censorship of broadcast media.”<sup>8</sup> For example, the news magazine “Tempo,” banned in 1994, found an eager online audience for the website it created in 1996, “Tempo Interaktif.”<sup>9</sup> Estimates are that in the first six months of the site, 10 percent of the Indonesian online population had logged in. In addition to news sites, listservs became a popular medium for political discussion. One in particular, *apakabar*, organized by a professor at the University of Maryland,

<sup>6</sup>See Hachigian (2001, pp. 118–133).

<sup>7</sup>Indonesia was not the first country where IT had a hand in regime change. Organizers in Thailand were the first in Asia to use cell phones to generate a political movement. In 1992, cell phones, although not widely used at that time, played a role in organizing the street protests to challenge Thailand’s military coup. See Zunes (2000).

<sup>8</sup>Sen and Hill (2000, p. 194); see also Wong (2001, p. 385).

<sup>9</sup><http://www.tempoco.id>.

carried passionate political discussions as well as detailed descriptions of events in Indonesia, such as the arresting of political activists, more quickly and often more accurately than the traditional media. The power of this online assembly was revealed first in 1995 when a legal aid organization working in Indonesia posted an “urgent action” message that decried the death of a labor activist in East Java, whose death many attributed to the military. Within hours of its posting, hundreds of pages of faxes poured in from around the world to the Office of the President, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Foreign Affairs. The village girl from East Java became a workers’ heroine.<sup>10</sup> A few years later, when political momentum for Suharto’s ouster had reached a critical point, students used the Internet to “plan their moves” in the massive nationwide demonstrations that led to the regime’s collapse in 1998. Students occupying the parliament building used laptops to send messages to the outside world.<sup>11</sup> Sen and Hill postulate that it was not just the utility of the Internet as a political platform that made it a popular tool of opposition groups, but that “the very freedom of the Internet became a constant reminder of the absence of openness and freedom in other media.”<sup>12</sup>

Although Internet penetration was then and is still now relatively low in Indonesia, several factors allowed the net to empower those in opposition to Suharto. First, many Indonesians share passwords and accounts, thus reducing costs to get online. Second, Internet cafes, or “warnet,” were starting to become popular and brought affordable access. There are now some 2,000 such cafes in Indonesia.<sup>13</sup> Some proprietors helped their clientele locate the opposition sites. Government-sponsored public Internet kiosks also multiplied. Third, the traditional media covered much of the online political discussions, thus both advertising the existence of the forums and carrying their message. Last, the Indonesian government was not willing or able to censor the online political activity. It wanted, as many other Asian countries, to encourage the information economy and did not

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<sup>10</sup>Wong (2001, p. 384).

<sup>11</sup>Sen and Hill (2000, pp. 194, 200). See also Marcus (1998).

<sup>12</sup>Sen and Hill (2000, p. 210).

<sup>13</sup>Purbo (2002).

have the technical or legal structures in place to block sites or monitor e-mail traffic.<sup>14</sup>

**China.** IT has also influenced politics in China, albeit in a more nuanced way.<sup>15</sup> China is unique in the Asia-Pacific region—no other government is attempting to both encourage and control IT as completely.<sup>16</sup> Because the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) realizes that it must sustain economic growth to keep its hold on power, the government is promoting information technology growth of every variety, investing billions in infrastructure, and encouraging competition in the telecommunications industry. The Tenth Five Year Plan for the economy issued in 2001 even mentions the importance of “popularizing” information technology. At the same time, the government blocks Internet users from accessing certain political websites based overseas and encourages a high degree of self-censorship among domestic commercial websites through a plethora of strict regulations.<sup>17</sup> A number of activists, academics as well as ordinary citizens, have been arrested for voicing anti-party ideas on the Internet. Moreover, any formal, organized challenge to the political authority of the CCP, online or off, is forbidden. Thus, unlike in 1990s Indonesia, technology is not used widely for antiregime political organizing in China because there is little such activity.

Despite these measures, the Internet in China is a much more free and pluralistic medium than traditional newspapers, magazines, and TV. Ideological challenges to government policies abound on the Internet, although most users are not seeking subversive political information. And to the extent that there have been, in the recent past, attempts to organize political parties, as in the case of the now-outlawed China Democracy Party, the Internet did play a critical role. Political dissenters based outside China and spiritual groups such as

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<sup>14</sup>Sen and Hill (2000, p. 205).

<sup>15</sup>A number of writings offer full discussions of the Internet in China, among them Foster and Goodman (2000); Kalathil and Boas (2003); Hachigian (2001); Hartford (2000); Harwit and Clark (2001); Qiu (1999/2000); and Guo (2002).

<sup>16</sup>For more on the thesis of China being unique, see Hachigian (2002, pp. 41–58). For more on the media in general in China, see Lynch (1999).

<sup>17</sup>For a discussion of the role of U.S. corporations in abetting censorship, see Gutmann (2002).

the Falun Gong also make sophisticated use of IT.<sup>18</sup> Underground dissident journals such as *The Tunnel* and *VIP Reference* forward their publications to hundreds of thousands of Chinese e-mail accounts from the United States. Because authorities disperse any such efforts before they reach the point of gathering any popular momentum for political or social change, no concrete political effect from these activities is evident.

Although dissidents are not gaining much traction, Chinese political dynamics, at the central and local levels, are nonetheless being altered by IT. The potentially most powerful political effect of increased technology access in China comes not from ideological challenges, but from ordinary citizens with an increased ability to hold their government accountable. Information about what their governments do (and do not do) is more freely available online, and Internet forums offer a place in which to discuss such information safely. Websites and bulletin boards that encourage discussions of political topics such as corruption, pollution, women's rights, and HIV have created a new public sphere for political discussion. A survey by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has found that users in China do view the Internet as a forum to express their political opinions and as a source for political information.<sup>19</sup>

An example of this phenomenon occurred when a school in rural Jiangxi province exploded in March 2001, killing 38 children. The local officials claimed that a lunatic suicide bomber caused the blast. But regional tabloids and foreign media reported what they heard from parents—that firecrackers that the children were being forced to make to supplement the school's income had exploded. People read these accounts on the web and discussed them in chatrooms. "They want to cover up the child labor and the use of schools as workshops, so they have found a dead man as a scapegoat," one posting said. When discussions became too heated, the forums were shut down. By then it was clear that the story was beyond the control of the state media, however, and then-Premier Zhu Rongji issued an extremely rare apology. A similar incident occurred in July 2001

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<sup>18</sup>For a detailed look at the issue of dissent and the Chinese Internet, see Chase and Mulvenon (2002).

<sup>19</sup>Guo and Bu (2001).

when local officials tried to cover up facts surrounding a flood at a mine in Guangxi. Local reporters, who could not cover the story themselves for fear of government reprisal, e-mailed their version of events to regional papers, which began to report on the hundreds of casualties. Eventually the central government sent an investigative team that led to the arrest of the mine owner.<sup>20</sup> Because fighting corruption is a major priority of the central government in China, it does not often make an effort to hide these incriminating stories about local officials.

Regime criticism is also directed at the central government. The Hainan Island spy plane incident in 2001, in which a Chinese pilot died and an American flight crew was held by China for 12 days, prompted strong anti-American but also anti-Beijing sentiment. Until censored, chat-room visitors chided their leaders for being “soft” and too old. These sorts of incidents are rare so far, but they illustrate the power of information technology to spread quickly politically sensitive information that can be used against governments. They show how Internet is “crystallizing public dissatisfaction with government.”<sup>21</sup>

In the long run, at times of crisis, this dynamic could facilitate political change. If China’s strong economy falters badly, or some other incident triggers a major political disruption, IT would make the story almost impossible to contain. Citizens could learn what foreign media were reporting about the incident and could talk to each other online in a way that would have been impossible earlier. If momentum for protests built up, e-mail would make them easy to organize. And unlike at Tiananmen Square in 1989, the country would learn how authorities handled the protesters.

**Malaysia.** Malaysian citizens are also looking to the web for accurate information on political events. The Barisan Nasional Party has ruled since 1969, and because the regime controls the traditional media very tightly, citizens search the Internet for information. Unlike in China, though, the Malaysian government has decided not to censor the Internet for the most part. The government has pinned its

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<sup>20</sup>For more analysis on the powerful combination of media loosening and technology in China, see Kalathil (2002).

<sup>21</sup>Kalathil and Boas (2003).

hopes for the growth of its mostly market-driven economy on information technology and the Internet. Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad has promoted the “knowledge economy” as a centerpiece of his regime and has invested millions in the “Multimedia Super Corridor” (MSC), Malaysia’s answer to Silicon Valley. It promotes and enables Internet access, even for the poor, and places few or no restrictions on online political content. To ensure that no policy would hinder IT growth, the Malaysian government made a clear, public decision, codified in the MSC “Bill of Guarantee,” not to censor the Internet, including foreign websites. Although the Malaysian government carefully controls all print and television media, and journalists who write stories criticizing the regime risk their careers, local independent online political journals, such as Malaysiakini.com, have been repeatedly harassed by the police but not shut down. Columnists who were banned from mainstream media find a professional home with these virtual journals. Such sites, frequented by average white collar workers,<sup>22</sup> generate independent reporting that “would not be tolerated in any of the mainstream media,” including stories that criticize the ruling coalition’s policies and reveal scandals.<sup>23</sup> Malaysiakini has become “an institution for Malaysians seeking information on the Malaysian political system.”<sup>24</sup> Their stories embarrass the ruling coalition and possibly erode support for the party. Thus, Malaysiakini leaders question how long the government will keep its promise not to censor the Internet.

Dissident groups and NGOs also use the web in Malaysia. When Prime Minister Mahathir fired his reform-minded deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, in 1999 and imprisoned him on dubious charges, dozens of pro-Anwar sites sprung up, many hosted in the United Kingdom and the United States, to organize international condemnation. NGOs in Malaysia have used international listservs to organize campaigns to pressure the government on human rights issues, including the struggle of the indigenous peoples in Sarawak.<sup>25</sup> Although IT has not been responsible for a dramatic political shift in Malaysia, the media

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<sup>22</sup>Wong (2001, p. 385).

<sup>23</sup>Chin (2001).

<sup>24</sup>Wong (2001, p. 386).

<sup>25</sup>Wong (2001, p. 381).

and others' use of the Internet has certainly changed the tenor of political dynamics and has created a channel and audience for any future political movement.

### **One-Party Dominant States: Little IT Influence**

IT does not necessarily alter politics in closed regimes. There are a number of one-party dominant states in the Asia-Pacific region where IT has had no major effect.

**Myanmar and North Korea.** Myanmar and North Korea have been successful in controlling the Internet, as they do all other media, very strictly. They do so in large part by restricting access to IT. In North Korea, Internet access is illegal. No Internet service providers and no North Korean servers allow citizens to access the Internet.<sup>26</sup> (North Korea, however, does vigorously promote computer literacy and has opened one Internet cafe for foreigners.) The current regime in Myanmar, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), has made unauthorized use of a computer or modem punishable by 7–15 years in jail. Recently, one government-controlled Internet cafe opened in Yangon, but exorbitant membership charges prevent all but about 600 citizens from having e-mail accounts. Few people in either country have mobile phones. There are also complete restrictions on political organizing of any kind. Thus, civil society and political parties, to the little extent they may exist inside North Korea and Myanmar, are not using technology for political change. This situation could change if either country were to open up their economies in an effort to promote growth. Now that countries must compete for highly valuable but mobile and often fickle foreign capital, countries without IT infrastructure and Internet access will have great difficulty winning over investors.

Despite the controls within Myanmar, opposition groups based outside the country, many in Thailand, have been increasingly active. These groups, supplied with laptops and Internet connections by international democracy-promotion organizations, have linked with other campaigners around the world “to form a transnational movement that has pressured the SPDC to an extent many assert

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<sup>26</sup>“North Korea Online This Year” (2001); Lee (2000, pp. 25–60).

would have been impossible without Internet use.”<sup>27</sup> An umbrella organization, the Free Burma Coalition, has used grassroots online organizing to pressure the U.S. government to impose sanctions and convince large corporations to withdraw from Burma. It is unclear whether these efforts have had a notable political effect within Myanmar, but they have certainly affected the international debate.

**Vietnam.** Vietnam is pursuing a strategy similar to that of China—allowing IT but attempting to control its influence. Internet cafes have been blossoming by the thousands in urban Vietnam, and “doing the chat” is popular among teenagers. Yet, the government built a firewall beginning in 1998 that reportedly blocks well over 3,000 political and pornographic sites. Authorities shut down offending websites and have arrested individuals for posting articles about democracy. The government is now considering penalties for cafe owners who allow customers to visit antigovernment or pornographic websites. Although antiregime discussions among Vietnamese and the diaspora are commonplace, it is unclear what the political import of those discussions will be.<sup>28</sup>

**Singapore.** IT has not had an effect on politics in the illiberal democracy of Singapore either. Singapore, ruled by the People’s Action Party since 1959, is not restricting IT in the least. In fact, the government is encouraging, even forcing, its population to adopt information technologies. As mentioned earlier, per-capita use of the Internet in Singapore is very high. But government controls and political apathy have teamed to make Singapore cyberspace fairly apolitical. Just as the government closely controls all traditional media, it also keeps careful watch on any online political activity. In 1996, the Singapore Broadcast Authority (SBA) issued the Internet Code of Practice, which prohibits all material on the Internet that might threaten the “public interest, public morality, public order, public security, [and] national harmony” or that “offends against good taste and decency.” Regulations make website hosts legally responsible for any content that appears on their sites. ISPs must

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<sup>27</sup>See Kalathil and Boas (2003).

<sup>28</sup>See Dang (1999); also <http://www.interasia.org/vietnam/dang-hoang-giang.html>; “Vietnam to Crack Down on Net Access” (2002); also <http://www.guardian.co.uk/internetnews/story/0.7369,775745,00.html>.

register with SBA but “are not required to monitor the Internet or its users.”<sup>29</sup> These regulations encourage self-censorship, but the SBA claims that it “has not taken action against anyone for objectionable content on the Internet.” A few widely publicized incidents in the 1990s revealed, however, that the government had been monitoring individual web browsing.<sup>30</sup> Current policy states, “SBA does not regulate personal communications, such as Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and e-mail. It does not monitor individual access to Web pages.” Recently, with the presence of opposition parties growing on the Internet, and the then-approaching November 2001 elections, the government drafted new rules to allow closer monitoring of political websites.

Nevertheless, opposition party websites do exist and do carry criticisms of the ruling party. A few NGOs also host independent political websites that likewise post critiques of government policies.<sup>31</sup> But “these sites have a long way to go before they may be in a position to make some significant impact on the political scene.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, in the near term, it is unlikely that the Internet and IT generally will, as Oehlers has said, “engender any process of fundamental political change” in Singapore.<sup>33</sup> This is as much due to a lack of interest in political activism on the part of the general population as to government control of political activity. As one journal commented, “Singapore is a safe, modern, high-rent enclave in an increasingly dodgy neighborhood. Why fool around with opposition politics?”<sup>34</sup>

### **Liberal Democracies**

IT has played a role in the politics of liberal democracies as well as in the one-party dominant states of the Asia-Pacific region.

<sup>29</sup><http://www.sba.gov.sg/internet.htm>.

<sup>30</sup>Wong (2001, p. 383).

<sup>31</sup>Oehlers (2001). Sintercom, a popular nonprofit, uncensored, online forum, closed down in part because the editor was dismayed at broad content regulations that left him vulnerable to government prosecution. How (2001).

<sup>32</sup>Oehlers (2001).

<sup>33</sup>Oehlers (2001); see also Kalathil and Boas (2003).

<sup>34</sup>“No Laughing Matter” (2001).

**Philippines.** The most profound example of IT's role in an Asian democracy comes from the Philippines where, as in Indonesia, IT has been credited with a role in actual regime change. Even before the corruption accusations against then-President Estrada began to surface in 2000, text messaging and the Internet had become channels for political debate and organization among citizens. Websites that criticized and poked fun at his regime—some 200 by one estimate—proliferated soon after Estrada took power.<sup>35</sup> Civil society groups, such as the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), posted on their website detailed reports in the summer of 2000 on conflicts of interest in President Estrada's finances. Another well-known site, e-Lagda.com,<sup>36</sup> initiated a cyber petition that aimed to collect a million signatures in 21 days for the ousting of Estrada.<sup>37</sup> Although it gathered only 115,000 names, the effort established a group of connected and dedicated citizens who were ready to respond when the political climate became receptive a short time later. Listservs likewise came into their own as a political medium in the Philippines around the Estrada controversy. Dozens of lists circulated commentary, jokes, poems, satire, pictures, and essays focused on Estrada's removal, before such opinions surfaced in the traditional media.<sup>38</sup> The participants were largely ordinary Filipinos, although the worldwide diaspora also joined in. Observers note that other than the President's official website, the pro-Estrada voices on the Internet were all but silent.

Most important to the actual organization of protests were mobile phones.<sup>39</sup> Mobile phone penetration is high in the Philippines and text messaging is a wildly popular application, with many millions of messages sent each day.<sup>40</sup> Filipinos were swapping thousands of jokes and slogans about President Estrada through their handsets well before the Senate impeachment trial got under way in early

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<sup>35</sup>Pabico (2000).

<sup>36</sup>"Lagda" means "signature."

<sup>37</sup>[www.elagda.com](http://www.elagda.com).

<sup>38</sup>Eder (2001, pp. 23–24).

<sup>39</sup>See Guest (2001).

<sup>40</sup>"Digital Divide" (2001).

2001.<sup>41</sup> Some of the websites that hosted anti-Estrada discussions added text messaging to their distribution channels. Then, in January 2001, when a committee of senators voted to keep sealed financial evidence widely believed to be incriminating of Estrada, the public began to gather at a historic shrine less than an hour later. Anti-Estrada forces relied on text messaging to organize these efforts—sending out details of planned gatherings—meeting times, locations, and proper attire. Eventually, as many as a million citizens joined the protests, and Estrada stepped down less than a week later. One mobile phone company found its daily average jump by nearly 60 percent to 70 million a day during the week of protests,<sup>42</sup> and other estimates put the total over the four-day period at 160 million per day. Some companies had to supplement their equipment with mobile cell sites to continue providing reliable service. As one text message that was widely circulated after the ouster put it: “CONGRATULATIONS! THANK U 4 SUPPORT N DS HISTORICL EVENT. [ESTRADA] WIL GO DOWN N PHIL. HSTORY S BEIN D 1ST PRESIDNT OUSTD BY TXT.”<sup>43</sup>

In the case of the Philippines, the various technologies reinforced one another—websites and listservs built a community, text messaging and e-mail organized the community, and TV images motivated the community. IT certainly changed how events transpired, although it likely did not change the ultimate outcome. Now “cyberactivism,” as one Filipino commentator dubbed it, continues in the Philippines. Even local candidates develop websites and many send out campaign text messages, although the number they can send is limited by election laws.<sup>44</sup> A number of independent election sites host discussions of candidates and issues, and sites such as PCIJ’s continue to investigate and publicize possible government corruption.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup>Williamson (2000, p. 4).

<sup>42</sup>Bagalwis (2001).

<sup>43</sup>Bagalwis (2001).

<sup>44</sup>Bariudad (2001). See also [www.akbayan.com](http://www.akbayan.com) for an example of a citizen’s movement website.

<sup>45</sup>Pabico (2001).

**Indonesia.** In Indonesia, with the transition to a democratic system now complete, political parties still use the Internet. But because of the media freedom that has come with democracy, and the still low percentage of users, it is not as critical a technology to internal politics as it was in the transition period when Suharto was ousted. Activists, students, and NGOs, however, have continued to use the Internet to rally the international community, as Burmese activists have. A leader of a separatist group in Aceh recently argued that the Internet is the only way his independence movement can communicate with international powers, a critical factor for success.<sup>46</sup> David Hill argues that the independence of East Timor was also aided by an international network of human rights and other civil society organizations, student groups, and hackers. Operating through news-groups, listservs, websites and e-mail, they coordinated with East Timorese leaders to publicize human rights abuses by the Indonesian military and attacked Indonesian government websites, using the “sophisticated tool” of the Internet to turn the world’s shame about East Timor into a “political victory.”<sup>47</sup>

**South Korea.** In South Korea, a democracy with now expansive media freedom and very high Internet penetration, the 2002 Presidential election became a textbook example of the power of IT. Analysts argue that the success of Roh Moo-hyun was “largely due” to his Internet-based supporters’ organization, called “Nosamo.”<sup>48</sup> With 80,000 members, the group was able to raise more than \$7 million over the Internet and bring thousands to campaign rallies with text messaging, without the typical payments for lunch or bus fare. Half a million visitors logged onto Roh’s site every day. A Korea University political scientist who followed the elections said “It is almost a cultural revolution.”<sup>49</sup> Internet voting was also tested. The ruling Millennium Democratic Party sanctioned voting via Internet in the party primary for a small portion of eligible votes.

The April 2000 national parliamentary elections were an earlier example of IT’s political influence. Six hundred small civic groups

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<sup>46</sup>Hill (2002, p. 25).

<sup>47</sup>Hill (2002, p. 25).

<sup>48</sup> “MDP Begins Internet Voting for Presidential Primary” (2002).

<sup>49</sup>Demick (2003).

banded together to press the National Elections Commission (NEC) to release criminal records of all the candidates. When the NEC did so, on its official website, the umbrella group used the information to create a “blacklist” of 86 candidates, many of whom were revealed to have serious criminal records. The NEC site registered 1.1 million visitors on election day, according to the supervising official who called the response “explosive” and “beyond our imagination.”<sup>50</sup> Importantly, although the mainstream papers did not report the damaging information at first, once the information was widely available on the Internet, they did. In the end, 58 of the 86 blacklisted candidates, including some with well-established careers, lost their contests. The coalition organizers concluded that the collaboration of groups was possible only through “meetings” on the Internet, and one analyst who followed the race closely stated that without the Internet, the coalition’s effect would have been “very much limited.”<sup>51</sup> Finally, South Korean NGOs, thousands of them, lobby the government for various policies, often using the Internet as a base and connecting with NGOs abroad.

**Japan.** As in the case of closed regimes, there are a number of democracies in Asia where IT has not had a discernible effect on politics. In Japan, despite its leadership in technology production, the Internet and other new technologies have not yet been greatly influential in politics. This reflects a general lack of dynamism in Japanese politics as the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has a firm grip on power. One impediment has been the 1950 law that governs elections, which has been interpreted to prohibit online campaigning. A government task force is evaluating that policy and will likely recommend changes. Despite the ban, 78 percent of Diet members from eight major political parties have established websites. To comply with regulations, they do not update the sites during election season.<sup>52</sup> Another factor that contributes to the lack of IT influence in Japanese politics is the disproportionate influence of rural voters who have less Internet access. An incipient exception to the otherwise sleepy state of IT influence on politics might be the activism of NGOs in Japan. In one case, for example, Japanese con-

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<sup>50</sup>Struck (2000). See also Chon (2000).

<sup>51</sup>Struck (2000).

<sup>52</sup>“Govt, LDP May OK Internet Campaigns” (2002).

sumer groups opposed to genetically modified foods have established websites to promote their view and have used the Internet, in part, to organize coordinated rallies across Japan.<sup>53</sup>

**India.** In India, as we will see in the following section, local governments have made impressive strides in using technology, especially for a relatively poor country. However, at this stage, technology has not played an influential role in India's politics. Many of the large political parties do have websites, and some of them are updated frequently. But parties are not using the Internet or other advanced technology to mobilize citizens or to gather input from them in part because IT penetration is quite low among the general population. NGOs appear to be using the web, as in other Asian countries, to network with international counterparts and to raise awareness of certain policy issues. For example, according to one account, in 2001, an Internet-based campaign by India's grassroots organizers and a network of environmental activists in Maine managed to redirect 20 tons of mercury headed for India back to the United States.<sup>54</sup>

**Australia.** Australia's political parties are using the Internet, but the effects of this trend are not yet significant. Although many parties have robust informational sites, there is little evidence to indicate that the parties are using IT to interact with potential supporters or in other innovative ways. As Gibson and Ward have concluded "[d]espite our high hopes for levels of web campaigning in Australia, it would appear that the parties have failed to seize the initiative. [Their] sites [do] too little to engage with users, acting more as futuristic posters than interactive gateways. . . . While a 'wired' citizenry may be a prerequisite for active online politicking, it is clearly not sufficient."<sup>55</sup> There are a number of independent efforts to foster a public dialogue on policy issues using the web as a convenor.<sup>56</sup> It is unclear at this point whether these efforts will generate a meaningful dialogue that might otherwise not have taken place. As we will see

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<sup>53</sup>Takada (1999).

<sup>54</sup>"Internet Activism in Asia" (2002).

<sup>55</sup>Gibson and Ward (2002).

<sup>56</sup>See, for example, [www.onlineopinion.com.au](http://www.onlineopinion.com.au), [www.apprn.org](http://www.apprn.org), and [www.crikey.com.au](http://www.crikey.com.au).

below, Australia has taken the lead on some aspects of e-government and e-democracy.

### Analysis and Future Trends

Technology does not discriminate by regime type in its influence. Technology has contributed to regime change in Indonesia and the Philippines, helps Chinese citizens hold their government more accountable, affects the international debate on Myanmar, empowered the East Timorese independence movement, and is changing elections in South Korea. IT has had a strong effect in select authoritarian and democratic regimes and no effect in others (see Table 2.1).

What are the drivers of IT's influence on politics in the Asia-Pacific region? More research is needed to draw definitive correlations, but some preliminary observations are possible. First, and obviously, some degree of flux in the underlying politics of a state must be present before IT can have an effect on changing politics. In a country with staid politics, for whatever reason, be it a democracy such as Japan, where bureaucracy is so thick that it resists any change, or a dictatorship such as North Korea, where the regime allows no political challenges, or an illiberal democracy such as Singapore, where neither the regime nor the populace seems to crave change, IT will have little political effect because there is no underlying political movement. A second condition that must be met for IT to have an effect on politics is some degree of technology penetration, at least among the middle class. In every Asian country, some more than

**Table 2.1**  
**IT Influence on Politics, by Government Type**

Influence of IT on Politics	Type of Government	
	One-Party Dominant States	Liberal Democracies
Visible influence	China Indonesia Malaysia	Philippines South Korea
No significant influence	Myanmar North Korea Singapore	Australia India Japan

others, the “digital divide” is large. But when the middle class has access, citizens can use those channels for political change, as they did in Indonesia and the Philippines. Last, government controls of the media have a bearing on the political effect of IT. In such countries as Myanmar, where not only is access limited but those few with access to the Internet can surf only a list of preapproved sites, there is little room for political activity. Although it restricts online content somewhat, China nevertheless permits citizens to engage in political activity on the web if they stop short of calling for an end to the regime.

We also observe that a frequent presumption about one-party dominant states—that all are trying to control the Internet as much as possible for fear of its political effect—is not true (see Table 2.2). As we have seen, one-party dominant states are responding to IT in a wide variety of ways. At one extreme, North Korea and Myanmar are attempting to exclude the Internet. On the other end of the spectrum is Malaysia, which is encouraging its spread and not censoring its use. China and Singapore are adopting compromise approaches. It is not clear that one-party regimes that welcome IT are more likely in the long run to be undermined than those regimes that exclude it.

**Table 2.2**  
Degree of Restrictions on Internet Political Use and Content, by Type of Government

Severe Restrictions on Online Political Content and Use, Through Limits on Access	Significant Restrictions on Internet Access or Online Political Content and Use, or Both	Moderate Restrictions on Political Content and Use; Promotion of Public Internet Access	Negligible Restrictions on Online Political Content and Use; Promotion of Internet Access
<i>Myanmar</i> <i>North Korea</i>	<i>China</i> <i>Vietnam</i>	<i>Singapore</i>	Australia India Indonesia Japan <i>Malaysia</i> Philippines South Korea Thailand

NOTE: One-party dominant states are shown in italics; liberal democracies are in normal type.

The economic growth that IT can generate may benefit a sitting regime more than the increased political opportunities of its citizens will hurt it. That is certainly true for Singapore. Malaysia and China are also taking this bet, hoping that liberalizing cyberspace will lead them to a future like Singapore, not Suharto's Indonesia.

In Asian countries with sizable IT penetration, at least among the middle class, IT will no doubt play a role in future moments of political crisis or disjuncture. This is especially true in countries where the likelihood both of significant political disruptions and of technology penetration is high, such as in China and Malaysia. Also, if closed regimes that have excluded IT, such as Myanmar and North Korea, attempt to open their economies to stimulate growth, they will have to permit IT, and then they may experience disruptions as their disenchanted populations find national and international online communities. In addition, IT will be used increasingly by NGOs to bring domestic and international pressure to bear for certain policy changes. As in every other region of the world, the international community will have an increasing influence in internal Asian politics, as the examples of Myanmar and East Timor reflect. Finally, political parties in the liberal democracies will likely increase their use of IT, but this effect will be sporadic and will depend upon the rise of political challengers that eschew traditional channels.

### **TOP DOWN: GOVERNMENTS USING IT**

In addition to the sometimes profound changes IT has enabled in bottom-up politics, IT is also reshaping the way Asia-Pacific governments conduct the business of government. Trends in e-government are what this section will examine.

Since the mid-1990s, countries from every corner of the earth have embraced IT. Technology was often portrayed as a miracle cure for all the many ills of government. IT, it was argued, would single-handedly save money, bring government closer to more people, increase transparency, and reduce corruption. This enthusiasm has gradually given way to a more sober assessment, and currently most

agree that “[IT] is a tool, potentially powerful yet essentially no different from a photocopier or a car. . . .”<sup>57</sup>

E-government initiatives can have three primary benefits—increased access to information about government programs and policies, better service delivery to citizens and businesses, and greater citizen involvement in government decisionmaking. In some countries, simply the increased transparency associated with readily available, but static, information about the identities of responsible government officials, about how to contact them, or about the proper procedures for a given service, is a potentially large change. For many governments, the holy grail of e-government is Internet-based transactions that save money and allow citizens and businesses easy, anytime, anywhere service. To achieve this sort of “one-stop shop,” historically “stove-pipe” government agencies must coordinate their activities because “transformation comes not from moving services online, but from redesigning the organization and processes to put the citizen at the center, integrating across agencies to simplify interaction, reduce cost and improve service.”<sup>58</sup> Last, IT has the potential to enhance democracy by allowing citizens to participate in debates as they happen, overcoming boundaries of geography and giving many people and organizations access to information once restricted to the powerful few. We do not examine in depth another advantage of technology from the point of view of some governments—an increased ability to monitor the citizenry.

As with the effect of IT on politics in Asian countries, the picture when looking at top-down e-government is quite varied in Asia. Some countries are e-government leaders where others have but simple websites. Overall, IT’s “wonderful potential has been hardly used in most Asia-Pacific countries” for e-government.<sup>59</sup> Unlike with the case of internal politics, IT has not lead to dramatic changes in the *substance* of government in any country. In some countries, however, changes in the form of government have been so substantial that they are approaching changes in substance. In others, such as China, e-government could lead to actual changes in governance

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<sup>57</sup>Wescott (2001, p. 3).

<sup>58</sup>Accenture (2002).

<sup>59</sup>Wescott (2001, p. 6).

in the future by disguising government reform under the cover of hardware and software.

The Asian governments that routinely place within the top ten in the world for e-government according to various survey groups include Australia, Singapore, Hong Kong, New Zealand, and Taiwan (see

**Table 2.3**  
**Rankings of e-Government**

	Accenture <sup>a</sup>		United Nations <sup>b</sup>			World Mar- kets/Brown <sup>c</sup>	
	Rank (of 23)	Category (of 4)	Rank (of 144)	Score (3.25 Is Top)	E- govern- ment Capacity (of four levels)	Rank (of 196)	Percent
Australia	4	Visionary challenger	2	2.60	High	3	50.7
China			93	1.04	Minimal	83	30.2
Hong Kong	8	Visionary challenger					
India			79	1.29	Minimal	69	31.8
Indonesia			75	1.34	Minimal		
Japan	17	Emerging performer	27	2.12	High	38	34.9
South Korea			15	2.30	High	47	33.4
Malaysia	19	Platform builder				16	39.0
New Zealand	14	Emerging performer	3	2.59	High	26	36.8
Philippines			68	1.44	Minimal	52	32.8
Singapore	2	Innovative leader	4	2.58	High	8	43.4
Taiwan						2	52.5
Thailand			103	.94	Defi- cient	71	30.8
Vietnam			90	1.10	Minimal	53	32.8

SOURCES: <sup>a</sup>Accenture (2002). This study looked only at Internet-based e-government. <sup>b</sup>United Nations (2002). This survey looked solely at the web presence of U.N. member states at the national level. <sup>c</sup>World Markets Research Centre (2001). This survey looked only at websites.

Table 2.3).<sup>60</sup> Others are devoting significant amounts of time and resources to e-government but have not reached a level of global sophistication; those include Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaysia. Countries such as India and China have remarkable pockets of innovation in local polities but are in the early stages overall. North Korea, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Indonesia have not developed robust e-government programs.

### One-Party Dominant States

**Singapore.** Of the one-party dominant nations in Asia, the city-state of Singapore is undoubtedly the most advanced in e-government. Singapore routinely ranks among the top three in the world for its e-government program. It began earlier and advanced more rapidly than most other Asian countries. A program to train government workers in information technology began in 1981.<sup>61</sup> The year 1995 was the transitional year in which the government went from virtual ignorance of the Internet to having all of the 36 government agencies and ministries online.<sup>62</sup> Now all bureaucrats in Singapore communicate by e-mail. At the same time, Internet penetration among the population increased rapidly, now exceeding 50 percent, and the government has placed Internet kiosks in community centers, making online service delivery to most citizens a viable option.<sup>63</sup> All ministries have a web presence, coordinated through a central portal. And unlike many other governments in Asia and elsewhere, where users must eventually print out information and consummate transactions manually, Singapore allows many transactions to be started and completed online, from renewing a driver's license to enrolling in school. By October 2001, according to the government, 1,700 out of 2,600 total public services offered were available online, and government plans project that all citizen and business transac-

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<sup>60</sup>It is important to note what the surveys are actually measuring. Most judge only government websites, as opposed to other delivery methods. Most are focused on services as opposed to "e-democracy" efforts.

<sup>61</sup>International Telecommunications Union (2001, p. 30).

<sup>62</sup>See Quah and Hai (2002). Also see Kalathil and Boas (2002).

<sup>63</sup>Access prices in Singapore are lower than in many other countries. See International Telecommunications Union (2001, p. 20).

tions with the government will be available online in 2003.<sup>64</sup> Singapore was one of the first countries to pass legislation to legally recognize the use of electronic signatures.

E-Citizen, [www.ecitizen.gov.sg](http://www.ecitizen.gov.sg), among other services, allows users to apply for a birth certificate, a government job, maternity leave, or government housing online. The portal is organized around online “towns” that reflect the needs of citizens rather than lines of government bureaucracy. “Business Town” features a one-stop licensing center for some small businesses, allowing application to all necessary government agencies at one time, cutting processing time from six to eight weeks down to two.<sup>65</sup> “Family Town” offers such options as “find a soulmate,” “get married,” and “care for your child.” “Sports Town” allows citizens to book tickets to sporting events as well as calculate their fitness quotient. Housing Town, Transportation Town, and Health Town are other destinations.<sup>66</sup> Singapore has brought technology to the courts as well. Registered users can file small claims online at [www.smallclaims.gov.sg](http://www.smallclaims.gov.sg). Also, in one of the few e-government programs to use mobile phones in Asia, the Supreme Court recently launched an SMS service to alert citizens to the times and dates of trials.<sup>67</sup> Not surprisingly, efforts to include citizen input in government policies have not been emphasized in Singapore.

**China.** Compared to Singapore, China’s e-government is rudimentary overall. Conditions in some local areas, however, have allowed progressive e-government initiatives to flourish.<sup>68</sup> The case of China is also important as it raises the question of whether technological reform can enable real political reform. Rhetoric about e-government in China is certainly thick. The government declared 1999 to be “Government Online” year, requiring certain percentages of government offices to establish websites. Now there are close to 10,000 “.gov.cn” sites in China,<sup>69</sup> but the vast majority of government

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<sup>64</sup>“E-government” (2002, p. 2).

<sup>65</sup>See “E-government” (2002, p. 5).

<sup>66</sup>For more on E-Citizen, see Holmes (2001, p. 24).

<sup>67</sup>Accenture (2002, p. 37).

<sup>68</sup>For more on China’s e-government initiatives, see Zhang and Woesler (2002).

<sup>69</sup>According to China’s official statistics, as of January 2003. See [www.cnnic.net.cn](http://www.cnnic.net.cn).

websites still simply post basic, often outdated, information or “brochure-ware,” to attract foreign investment and do not deliver information or services that benefit citizens or businesses. Efforts to computerize and harmonize internal government workings also proceed, but at a slow pace. The central government is constructing a series of Intranets for tax, banking, agriculture, and other systems, that are to link local bureaus throughout the country to the center. These now 20 “Golden Projects” are designed to improve Beijing’s control over activities in the provinces. “Golden Tax” and “Golden Customs” are already paying dividends, with tariff payments in 2000 up by 22.8 percent.<sup>70</sup>

Some ministries in China are moving quickly down the e-government path. Already businesses can use the Customs Administration website to find out what duties they will owe on certain goods, and the Ministry of Agriculture’s intranet permits documents to be approved and reviewed online, as well as the more efficient collection of farming data.<sup>71</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Trade’s robust website reportedly gets 720,000 hits per day.<sup>72</sup> Also, the People’s Bank of China is issuing “smart cards” with financial histories to businesses. To get a loan, officers of the company must produce the smart card. The central government is also actively using IT for propaganda delivery. It has invested millions of dollars in establishing mega news portals that relay the Communist Party line on current events. As of May 2001, there were 12 such government-sponsored sites.<sup>73</sup>

*Provincial and Local Examples.* The real energy for e-government in China, however, is at the provincial and local level where some Chinese officials are embracing e-government. Especially in the coastal and wealthier cities, some progressive officials have focused on e-government improvements, even those that involve greater citizen input to government decisions. According to a survey by Fudan Uni-

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<sup>70</sup>Zhang (2002, p. 163); see also Cartledge and Lovelock (1999) and Kalathil and Boas (2003).

<sup>71</sup>Kalathil and Boas (2003).

<sup>72</sup>Zhang (2002, p. 177).

<sup>73</sup>Zhang (2002, p. 168).

versity, 28.4 percent of “ordinary people” surveyed in ten large Chinese cities had visited a municipal government website.<sup>74</sup>

The city of Beijing has a unified portal that links 123 agencies and districts in the city. In 2000, in a decision uncharacteristic of a communist bureaucracy, the municipal government asked outside experts to independently rate the quality of its websites. Criteria included clarity and timeliness of posted information, and other cities were used as comparisons. Poor performance motivated subsequent website improvements. In addition, the city is enabling better citizen communication with government. The website solicits e-mail suggestions from citizens or invites them to “criticize work you’re dissatisfied with.”<sup>75</sup> Beijing officials have anecdotal evidence that the mayor’s office and city departments have responded promptly to citizen complaints forwarded through e-mail about problems such as pot holes.<sup>76</sup> In the high-tech zone of Beijing, the Zhongguamen Science Park, home to over 6,000 companies, has streamlined its registration process. Instead of a minimum of 15 visits to various offices, which took at least 15 days, new companies can register with the e-park entirely online, no matter where they are located, and can track which official is reviewing their documents. The application process now takes three days. The monthly reporting of commercial data that e-Park companies must do is also now entirely online.<sup>77</sup>

Shanghai is perhaps the city in China most vocal about its e-government progress. More than other cities, Shanghai appears to want to use e-government to reorganize and reform the city bureaucracy. As the Vice-Mayor put it in a recent speech, e-government should be used to “break the traditional organization border of the administrative organs, re-organize the business process according to the needs of the public and enterprises, pay more attention to providing the society with wide, effective and personal services.”<sup>78</sup> The main Shanghai portal, [www.shanghai.com](http://www.shanghai.com), gets 100,000 hits a day, and a “mayor box” solicits opinions from the public. One part of Shang-

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<sup>74</sup>Jiang (forthcoming).

<sup>75</sup>Wescott (2001, p. 14).

<sup>76</sup>Interviews with Beijing government officials, February 2001.

<sup>77</sup>See [www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/egov/zhongguancun\\_cs.htm](http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/egov/zhongguancun_cs.htm).

<sup>78</sup>Speech by Yan (2002).

hai's effort is focused on harmonizing the government's social service programs. Officials are instituting a system of smart cards for all Shanghai citizens that identify citizens and contain their medical records and information about their health insurance, unemployment benefits, workers compensation, and pension so that records about individual citizens are portable and easily shared among different government bureaus dealing with citizens' social welfare. This system, with an abundance of personal information in government databases, will, of course, also give Shanghai more control over its citizens.

Finally, the Communist Party Secretary of Nanhai, a small city of one million in the south of China, is a true believer in information technology. Nanhai boasts an online metals exchange, an agricultural export site, and a mayor's mailbox. In addition, all schools are wired to each other, and there is an online medical clinic where people can ask medical personnel for advice. An e-procurement system posts bid solicitation but does not allow online bidding. A legal case tracking system called "e-court" allows parties to track the status of any case in the court system through the web. And the central website, [www.nanhai.gov.cn](http://www.nanhai.gov.cn), provides a detailed overview of the government's workings.

*Implications.* These projects, of course, are not representative. Most local governments in China are concentrating on the very first steps—computerizing government processes, establishing intranets, and posting generic information. But these unusual initiatives raise an important question—are these reforms in the name of technology masking true reform of the Communist bureaucracy? It is true that "many Party cadres and others genuinely desire some degree of political reform. . . . These officials see informatization as a force breaking down dusty hierarchies within the state structure and fostering new organizations in a middle layer between state and society."<sup>79</sup> Forward-thinking officials hope to harness the momentum from the excitement over IT in China to push through needed reforms, where past efforts have failed. This is an urgent but extremely difficult undertaking. Chinese bureaucracy is huge, complicated, opaque, and multilayered. Its fragmented, overlapping

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<sup>79</sup>Kalathil and Boas (2003).

lines of authority travel both vertically and horizontally, and it is still heavily dependent on paper documents with official stamps. The Communist Party itself has an independent but parallel structure.

That many government offices now post their hours, their responsibilities, the names of officials in charge, and the requirements and procedures for getting certain licenses, permits, and approvals is in itself a significant step. In the Fudan University study, ordinary people and government workers both chose the ability of people to get “political information” as the way e-government will most improve government, even over greater government “efficiency.”<sup>80</sup> They also responded that more “responsible” government should be the top priority for government reform.

In addition to greater transparency, the possibility that e-government will enable greater citizen input into government decisionmaking is potentially potent. At the national level, a few experiments have invited citizen input into central government decisionmaking. In 2002, cell phone users were invited to send text messages to the annual meeting of the National People’s Congress, China’s legislature. Officials said the move was designed to create a “new channel to become familiar with public opinion,” and in the first day of the session, over 2,000 messages were logged.<sup>81</sup> It is unclear the degree to which the legislators, not elected by the populace, were exposed to the messages and what their effect was. Also, according to an account by a state news agency, when the tenth Five Year Plan was being drafted, over 10,000 suggestions were sent via e-mail to official websites, and China’s State Planning Commission took up 300 of them.<sup>82</sup> At this stage, the future import of these few forays by the national government into techno-democracy is difficult to gauge. They could represent reform in the disguise of technology—a palatable way of increasing the voice of the people by bureaucrats who understand that the Party must change. More likely, they are show pieces designed to make the regime seem more modern but not to foster real change. In either case, if these initiatives are successful at increasing the citizenry’s belief that they are being represented, or

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<sup>80</sup>Jiang (forthcoming).

<sup>81</sup>“Reach China’s Politicians via SMS” (2002).

<sup>82</sup>“Internet: Bliss and Pain to the Chinese” (2002).

even incorporating their actual input, without threatening the regime's power, perhaps they will be expanded.

At the local level, some efforts at citizen involvement may be more genuine. As noted above, many local governments now have e-mail boxes and there is anecdotal evidence that at least some inquiries are read and responded to. Hangzhou, a smaller coastal city, has gone further. There the government has invited to meetings citizens who sent particularly thoughtful suggestions by e-mail. The mayor's office also conducted an online poll about whether firecrackers should be allowed during Spring Festival. Citizen voting, no matter how trivial the issue, is a notable occurrence in China.

In the long run, e-government in China has the potential to make a difference to governance. Citizen expectations of transparency and participation may ultimately be hard to reverse, and pressure could build for deeper changes. It is difficult at this early stage to predict whether or when e-government will have a tangible political effect.

**Hong Kong.** Now also part of China, Hong Kong has been pursuing an advanced e-government program distinguished by its extremely close partnership with the private sector. The main government portal is entirely financed and maintained by ESD Services Limited, which charges user fees and permits some private sector advertising. By October 2001, the site [www.esd.gov.hk](http://www.esd.gov.hk) had attracted 18 million visitors and had concluded over 950,000 transactions.<sup>83</sup> Users can apply for birth certificates, register to vote, sign up for a marriage license, and download legislative proposals, among a variety of other services. These services are available through any computer with Internet access and are also offered on specially designed kiosks installed throughout the city. E-procurement is also a focus, with the government aiming to carry out 80 percent of government tenders online by the end of 2003. In March 2002, the Hong Kong government announced that it would issue new "smart cards" to all residents by 2003 that will contain a digital thumbprint and photo of the holder. Many have expressed concern about possible identity theft by hackers.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>Accenture (2002, p. 55).

<sup>84</sup>Yu (2002).

**Others.** As for other one-party dominant states in Asia, Malaysia has made headway in a few discrete areas of e-government, such as Web-enabled bill payment systems for citizens.<sup>85</sup> It is also initiating a program called “MyKad,” an identity card that functions as a driver’s license and will also hold “eCash.” The government estimates that 20 million Malaysians will hold the card by 2007.<sup>86</sup> Such cards may be designed to increase the government’s ability to monitor citizen activity. Despite its uneven progress, given the regime’s focus on technology and technology education for its citizens, Malaysia could advance quickly. In contrast, e-government in North Korea and Myanmar consists now and in the foreseeable future of a few government websites with propaganda for tourists and the media. No relevant information or services are available for citizens.

### Liberal Democracies

**Australia.** The liberal democracies of Asia are also implementing e-government to varying degrees. Along with Singapore, Australia also consistently ranks among the most advanced e-government leaders in the world. Its sophisticated e-government program delivers over 100 government services to citizens and businesses online. Unlike most countries, Australia also keeps close track of its progress on e-government at the national level, with all government departments regularly reporting on their progress against standard measures.<sup>87</sup> The National Office for the Information Economy (NOIE) coordinates all government initiatives for e-government and the information economy.<sup>88</sup> A single portal, [www.australia.gov.au](http://www.australia.gov.au), connects visitors to all government web pages, and progress toward a full e-procurement system is well under way. The “Business Entry Point,” [www.business.gov.au](http://www.business.gov.au), allows businesses to conduct transactions not only with the national government but with state and local entities as well. Such cross-governmental coordination is still very rare in e-government schemes. Seventy five percent of all income tax forms

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<sup>85</sup>See Accenture (2002, p. 62).

<sup>86</sup>Accenture (2002, p. 35).

<sup>87</sup>Accenture (2002, p. 13).

<sup>88</sup>[www.noie.gov.au](http://www.noie.gov.au).

are filled electronically through the tax office website.<sup>89</sup> Australian job seekers can submit their resumes online on a national job database, [www.jobsearch.gov.au](http://www.jobsearch.gov.au), on which Australian companies post vacancies. Another of its flagship programs is the online federal court, [www.fedcourt.gov.au](http://www.fedcourt.gov.au), which allows litigants to submit documents electronically.<sup>90</sup> The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, [www.hreoc.gov.au](http://www.hreoc.gov.au), allows for online filing of discrimination complaints. A recent survey showed that one in four Australians had visited a government site during July 2001.<sup>91</sup>

But most unique in Asia is Australia's progress in "e-democracy." At both the national and local levels, Australia has found innovative ways to use IT to involve citizens in government debates and decisionmaking. The Australian Senate, for example, "is one of the few parliamentary chambers in the world to grant electronic petitions the same status as those signed by hand. The Senate also accepts electronic submissions to committee deliberations."<sup>92</sup> The NOIE noted in a March 2002 statement that "Australia's position as a world leader in eGovernment continues to be reflected in progress regarding e-democracy."<sup>93</sup>

Australia's state of Queensland has published an "E-Democracy Policy Framework," which promises that by late 2002, the government will post issues on its website and solicit citizen feedback, provide online access to documents such as policy papers and draft bills; broadcast Parliamentary debates online, and develop a system to accept petitions to the Queensland Parliament online. A large team of government officials is dedicated to implementing this plan, coordinated by the specially designated "E-Democracy Unit." The parliament of another state, Victoria, is actively seeking to grow its e-democracy programs from the efforts at increasing transparency to those that allow citizen interaction.<sup>94</sup> In Brisbane, citizens can regis-

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<sup>89</sup>Holmes (2001).

<sup>90</sup>Accenture (2002).

<sup>91</sup>Accenture (2002, p. 38).

<sup>92</sup>Gibson and Ward (2002, p. 4).

<sup>93</sup>National Office for the Information Economy (2002).

<sup>94</sup>[www.vic.gov.au](http://www.vic.gov.au). More about the e-democracy inquiry of Victoria's parliament can be found at [www.parliament.vic.gov.au/sarc/Current%20Inquires.htm](http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/sarc/Current%20Inquires.htm).

ter to participate in the “Your City Your Say” online mediated discussions on subjects that change weekly.<sup>95</sup>

**New Zealand.** New Zealand is on the brink of launching a number of ambitious e-government programs, from a unified government portal to complete online services. The government has constructed a comprehensive website devoted to explaining what e-government is and where the implementation stands from month to month. New Zealand is distinguishing itself by working closely with its citizens to build the applications that are most desired.<sup>96</sup>

**South Korea.** South Korea has a well-developed e-government structure, with a one-stop portal, [www.egov.go.kr](http://www.egov.go.kr), and many online services available to businesses and citizens. One of the focuses of the Korean e-government initiative has been to fight corruption. For example, a key benefit of the National Tax Service’s Tax Integrated System, [www.nta.go.kr](http://www.nta.go.kr), is that the computerization and analyses of citizen tax information makes it more difficult for tax officials to unfairly single out citizens for audits. It also makes the once millions of face-to-face meetings with tax officials unnecessary, reducing opportunities for official mischief.<sup>97</sup> An electronic procurement system confers similar advantages. Perhaps the most well-known of Korea’s anticorruption initiatives is the “Online Procedures Enhancement for Civil Applications,” or “OPEN” project in the capital city of Seoul, [www.open.metro.seoul.kr](http://www.open.metro.seoul.kr). Corruption in the municipal government became a major problem as Seoul grew rapidly in the 1990s. City officials computerized those services that citizens, in a survey, had chosen as the most inconvenient or subject to irregularities. These services are now available via the Internet where the procedures are posted, department and staff in charge listed, and phone numbers given. Applicants can monitor which official is reviewing their application and where it is in the process. A survey indicated that 84 percent of citizens who used OPEN thought that it had increased transparency.<sup>98</sup> Newly elected President Roh solicited recommendations for his cabinet online, in an early sign of his interest.

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<sup>95</sup>Holmes (2001, p. 275).

<sup>96</sup>See <http://www.e-government.govt.nz/> for more on New Zealand’s e-government.

<sup>97</sup>Wescott (2001, p. 13).

<sup>98</sup>See World Bank (2002c). See also Park (n.d.).

**Taiwan.** The E-Taiwan Project is to make Taiwan “fully digital” by 2008, at a projected cost of over \$1 billion, which includes broadband access for six million households in addition to ambitious e-government plans. Interestingly, Taiwan is also taking a page from the NGO handbook and using the Internet in its effort to bolster its diplomatic status in the international community. In May 2002, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched an Internet letter campaign to promote its bid to join the World Health Organization (WHO) as an observer, asking its citizens to write to the WHO Director General.<sup>99</sup> Former President Lee Tung-hui also recently launched a pro-independence Internet radio station designed to influence the local and international debate surrounding Taiwan’s status in relation to the People’s Republic of China.<sup>100</sup>

**India.** India presents a situation somewhat similar to that of China. At the national level, India has not made e-government a priority. Neither computerization of services, nor bureaucratic integration, nor efforts to use IT to enhance citizen participation are very far along. But a few states in India have conducted bold experiments in e-government, many of which have made an appreciable difference in their citizens’ lives. In Andhra Pradesh, for example, which has pioneered many innovative e-government applications, the Computer-aided Administration of Registration Department (CARD) system has reformed a once corrupt, opaque, and inefficient system of land registration. When a parcel of land changes hands in India, the details must be recorded and fees paid to the government—1.2 million deeds are registered each year in the state. The procedure once involved several complicated steps, offered opportunities for unofficial brokers to profit, and took a week’s time to complete. CARD now operates with much greater transparency at computerized counters in over 200 locations in the state and registering a deed takes an hour.<sup>101</sup>

In 2000, the award-winning “Gyandoot” program established an Intranet that links hundreds of villages in Madhya Pradesh, a very poor,

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<sup>99</sup> Wu (2002).

<sup>100</sup> “Vice-President, former President Attend pro-Taiwan Internet Radio Launch” (2002).

<sup>101</sup> See World Bank (2002b). See also Satyanarayana (2002).

rural state. At kiosks distributed around the state, with the assistance of attendants, farmers can check market prices of agricultural products themselves, thus avoiding profiteering middlemen. Among other services, villagers can also lodge complaints with the government and much more easily obtain land title documents that they need every season to obtain bank loans. During the project's first 11 months, the 31 Gyandoot kiosks were used nearly 55,000 times.<sup>102</sup> Despite these and many other progressive projects that can be found throughout India, most government functions, in most places, remain inefficient and opaque.

**Japan.** Just as IT has had little effect on Japan's internal politics, Japan's steps into the e-government realm have been very limited thus far. In fact, use of government services online actually *decreased* from 2001 to 2002.<sup>103</sup> Given its status as a major producer and user of IT products in Asia, and its relative wealth, this is surprising. Explanations include the terrible financial posture of the government and perhaps the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the entrenched ruling LDP for increased transparency for government operations.

The January 2001 IT blueprint for the country, the *eJapan Strategy*, promises a more aggressive push for e-government, at the local and national levels, in the future. The government plans to have all administrative services available online by the end of 2003.<sup>104</sup> One of the most innovative programs is Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's e-mail newsletter. In its first month, two million citizens subscribed to the weekly "magazine" that describes government goings-on from the Prime Minister's point of view—a useful political tool. The leading opposition party, Minshuto, has followed Koizumi's lead and is now soliciting policy proposals from voters on the Internet. Among other advanced programs is a site that allows businesses to review open bids for government services, [www.jetro.go.jp](http://www.jetro.go.jp), and a well-organized employment site that brings together open positions with job seekers. The Ministry of Justice allows users to search bills online at [www.moj.go.jp](http://www.moj.go.jp). Also, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport, [www.ochi.mlit.go.jp](http://www.ochi.mlit.go.jp), offers an interactive land title

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<sup>102</sup>See World Bank (2002a). See also Holmes (2001, p. 26).

<sup>103</sup>"Asia-Pacific Shows High Use of Gov't Online Services" (2002).

<sup>104</sup>See Nakagawa (2002).

search.<sup>105</sup> Japan's real e-government potential lies in SMS. With cell phones so pervasive, and texting so popular, Japan could offer a wealth of services and information to citizens via their phones. To date, only some traffic and postal information has been available.

**Philippines.** Although making relatively minor strides in e-government overall, the Philippines has a number of worthwhile efforts under way focused, as is South Korea, on reducing corruption.<sup>106</sup> The national budget system is remarkably transparent, for example, with all accounts payable for all agencies, and amounts released to vendors all posted online so that contractors can check bureaucrats' statements against the official books.<sup>107</sup> The Bureau of Customs has developed electronic systems for processing customs clearance documents and making payments. The time for reconciling customs payments has gone from four months to a few days.<sup>108</sup> The bureau also launched three mobile-phone-based services in February 2002 to streamline the payment of duties and allow surfing of the bureau website via cell phone.<sup>109</sup>

**Thailand.** The Thai government wants to develop a robust e-government program—it is passing the necessary enabling legislation, developing a policy framework, and designating the personnel to implement the plan.<sup>110</sup> But it is wrestling with a number of hurdles, including the lack of IT access in rural areas where most of the population lives, lack of literacy in English/lack of Thai content, incompatible systems in different parts of the government, and inadequate training of officials.<sup>111</sup> The best progress seems to be in wiring schools and offering free Internet access through the SchoolNet program. As of January 2002, over 4,200 schools were online. Other pilot projects in e-customs and e-voting are also under way.

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<sup>105</sup>Accenture (2002, pp. 60–61).

<sup>106</sup>For a comprehensive study of Philippine e-Government, see Lallana et al. (2002).

<sup>107</sup>Wescott (2001, p. 13).

<sup>108</sup>Wescott (2001, p. 16).

<sup>109</sup>Lallana et al. (2002).

<sup>110</sup>See Koanantakool (2002).

<sup>111</sup>Amin (2001).

### Analysis and Future Trends

As with the case for bottom-up initiatives in internal politics, the effect of IT on government does not correlate to government type. As a group, the liberal democracies tend to have pursued e-government to a greater degree, but not categorically—India is much less advanced than Singapore. The priorities of governments do appear, not surprisingly, in what e-government applications they chose to emphasize. Australia concentrates on e-democracy, for example, whereas India's programs focus on development.

E-government in some Asian countries is providing concrete dividends to some individual citizens and businesses: They waste less time with routine government interactions, they pay fewer bribes, they are better informed about government policies, and they can comment on them no matter how far away they live. Government in Singapore and Hong Kong is faster and easier to negotiate; government in South Korea is less corrupt; government in Australia and New Zealand is more democratic, partly because of technology. The critical question is whether these incremental changes will amount to fundamental alterations in the way governments govern or citizens and government relate to one another, that is, determining when, as Lawrence Lessig puts it, a "difference in degree . . . ripens into a difference in kind."<sup>112</sup> As Joseph Nye has said, "The effects on central governments of the . . . information revolution are still in their early stages."<sup>113</sup>

Because e-government is implemented so differently in various Asian countries, there are few sweeping generalities to be made about its future substantive progression. In most countries, e-government will likely continue to develop on its current course, although e-government plans are always vulnerable to changes in leadership. Singapore will continue to push the envelope of progressive initiatives that make government seamless, ease the lives of citizens and businesses, but still leave the ruling party in control. Transparent, largely accountable and responsive governments, such as Australia and New Zealand, will continue to involve citizens in the

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<sup>112</sup>Lessig (1999, p. 21).

<sup>113</sup>Nye (1999, p. 11).

business of government, perhaps to the point of changing the way policies are formed. South Korea's government will become more efficient and transparent as the focus on corruption continues. Japan may make a leap toward bolder programs, but the bureaucracy will fight any initiatives that promise real transparency and responsiveness. India's entrepreneurial local officials will sustain their pursuit of exciting, but relatively small, programs. There is a chance that e-government will usher in more significant government reform in China, a country where technology has sometimes been a window of clarity in an otherwise opaque, corrupt, and unresponsive system.

In the future, governments will follow the private sector in testing new delivery mechanisms for e-government, such as SMS. Also, the government and the private sector will grow more intertwined as technology companies look for new markets and governments realize that they need private sector expertise to succeed. This partnership will raise difficult questions of cost allocation, data ownership, and privacy. Asian countries will continue to grapple with the current obstacles to e-government—security concerns, bureaucracies resistant to change, lack of consistent leadership, lack of enabling legislation, lack of computer skills among government workers, low literacy, low technology penetration, and budget constraints.

## CONCLUSION

The effect of the information revolution on politics and governance in Asia presents a varied picture, one not easily organized by government type. IT has been responsible for political change in liberal democracies and one-party dominant states alike. Likewise, different governments from across the ideological spectrum have used and ignored the possibilities of IT for governance.

Three trajectories will determine the future role of IT on politics in Asian countries. First, IT's effect will reflect the degree of future technology penetration in a given population and what population segments benefit. Second, the political momentum within a polity for political stasis or change will define those who might seek to harness IT. Last, the ability and desire of the government to control challenges to its authority will influence whether IT-enabled political movements do cause lasting shifts. In any political transitions that do occur in any wired country in Asia, IT will no doubt play a large

role. Moreover, NGOs will continue to exploit its potential to exert domestic and international pressure for policy change. Finally, e-government has the potential to usher in significant change in the relationship between government and citizens, but most such shifts will be gradual.