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# The Internet and Power in One-Party East Asian States

The Internet presents a dilemma to leaders of authoritarian states and illiberal democracies. It promises enticing commercial advantages, such as transaction cost reductions, e-commerce possibilities, and foreign trade facilitation. Yet, by giving citizens access to outside information and platforms for discussion and organization, the Internet can also help politically empower populations and potentially threaten regimes.

Contrary to popular assumption, the response to this dilemma is far from uniform—not all one-party states try to maximize their control of the Internet.[1] Leaders of one-party states use a wide variety of strategies to retain their power in the age of information technology (IT). In East Asia, North Korea and Myanmar fall at one end of the spectrum, severely restricting all public use of the Internet. Three countries—China, Vietnam, and Singapore—have adopted compromise strategies that moderately restrict access, content, or both. Malaysia lands at the other extreme, actively promoting IT and Internet access, permitting almost all online political content.

The debate between the determinists, who argue that the Internet will vanquish dictators, and the instrumentalists, who insist that authoritarian governments can control or even harness the Internet, frame many analyses of one-party states and IT.[2] Yet, this debate obscures an important question about why leaders of one-party states choose to employ certain strategies to address the political potential of the Internet. The subtle choices regimes make about how to treat the Internet are designed to reinforce their broader strategies for retaining power, and those choices do not predict regime viability in a clear way. Accounting for all the ways in which leaders retain power, one-party regimes that welcome the Internet are not more likely to

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fail, based on that fact alone, than those that attempt to protect themselves from its influence.

## The Conundrum of Information Technology

At a basic level, leaders maintain power through physical force and through various strategies of mental persuasion.[3] Among methods of mental persuasion, two are most important. One is a government's use of ideology and propaganda to convince a population of its generosity, effectiveness, and legitimacy. The ability to "structure the symbolic environment" in a way that leads citizens to accept a regime's political legitimacy is a key source of persuasive power that derives from information control.[4] Another method of persuasion involves providing material benefits to citizens who, in turn, will be inclined to view their government favorably. All states use a combination of physical and mental techniques. In liberal democracies, political leaders rely predominantly on persuasion—elections afford ruling parties legitimacy, while personal freedoms and frequently high standards of living satisfy citizens. Authorities physically contain those few who violently challenge the state. One-party states similarly use varying combinations of physical intimidation and methods of persuasion, often relying on careful information control.

> Not all one-party states try to maximize their control of the Internet.

Introducing the Internet to the general public changes a regime's ability to use physical power (or the threat of it) very little. Its introduction can, however, greatly affect a regime's persuasive power, based on information control or on the promise of material benefits. Changes in technology, such as the printing press, radio, TV, telephones, and fax machines, which allow control over information to seep to the people, can increase the difficulty of shaping public opinion through a consistent barrage of propaganda and an intolerance of alternative viewpoints. In a networked society, those hostile to a regime can acquire new capabilities because the Internet allows anonymous, fast, borderless, and relatively inexpensive communication. Academics can post critical articles and dissidents can organize. Curious Internet users may more readily uncover news about events in their own country on the Web. Virtual public spaces where many can communicate simultaneously can also be politically significant in a one-party state.

The ability to "grow the economy" and improve citizens' standards of living, the second critical way that many regimes retain power through persua-

sion, can improve through the introduction of IT. IT, including the Internet, holds promise for commercial benefits that can increase standards of living. For example, China's telecom sector is one of its most profitable.

The Internet demands that states consider whether mental persuasion based on ideology or based on material betterment is more critical to them. The Internet's current architecture makes the most potent steps a government can take to control content on the Internet a damper on the very commercial benefits it may seek. For example, forbidding public access to Web sites hosted abroad sharply reduces access to global market information and capital flows. Speed is also critical to business, and attempts by government to block many Web sites often slow the entire network. Because privacy of financial information is essential for e-commerce, encryption must be allowed. The attributes of the Internet that promote commercial growth—speed, breadth, and privacy—improve the Net as a tool for noncommercial purposes as well.[5] With commercial use of the Internet will come political use.

The leaders of East Asian one-party states have developed various methods for balancing the Internet's impact on ideology and prosperity, thus maintaining control. Those leaders that rely largely on ideology and propaganda place the most severe restrictions on Internet access and content, forgoing economic benefits. Those that place a greater emphasis on increasing prosperity for their citizens embrace the Internet, loosening information flow and taking the associated political risks.

The following analysis challenges the common assumption that the surest way for a one-party state to retain control in the age of the Internet is to prohibit the technology. On balance, the Internet may not detract from the power of regimes that can effectively leverage its commercial potential to deliver higher standards of living to its people.

## Responses of One-Party States

The following analysis categorizes these approaches, somewhat artificially, into four types of restrictions placed on Internet access and online political content and usage—severe, significant, moderate, and negligible—and examines the costs and benefits of each approach to the regimes.

### SOLUTION ONE: SEVERE RESTRICTIONS

Some one-party regimes, often attempting absolute control of information in the public sphere, place severe restrictions on public access to the Internet as well as on availability of online political content. In East Asia, North Ko-

rea (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea [DPRK]) and Myanmar (Burma), both military dictatorships with closed economies, have responded to the "dictator's dilemma" by prohibiting virtually all access by the general public to the Internet.[6]

*Internet access.* In North Korea, Internet access is illegal. No Internet service providers (ISPs) and no North Korean servers allow citizens access to the Internet.[7] Although South Korea is one of the most wired countries in the world, with Internet penetration beyond 50 percent, North Korea is one of the least. Thus, only a small handful of elites in North Korea, with special government dispensation and unusual access to power, telephone lines, and hardware have Internet access through optical lines supplied by China.[8]

> Those that rely on ideology and propaganda severely restrict Internet access and content.

Myanmar has likewise chosen severe restrictions on public access to the Internet. The current regime, 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. Even those few are not permitted direct access to the Internet; surfing is limited to a finite list of preapproved sites.

Moreover, lack of infrastructure investment in both countries compounds the effect of government restrictions on access. In North Korea, the power grid is famously unreliable, telecom infrastructure is weak, and personal computers outside the government number only 100,000. Fixed telephone-line penetration is a dismal 4.8 percent, and mobile telephone service is scarcely available. Because no North Korean ISPs exist, Internet access requires an unaffordable long-distance call to China or Japan. IT infrastructure in Myanmar is also very weak. Only six telephone lines are available per 1,000 people, and the regime is the sole provider of Internet services.

*Political content and usage.* The government closely controls all traditional media in North Korea and Myanmar and severely punishes even private criticisms of the government. The DPRK censors computer games for any subliminal anticommunist messages. Because the North Korean general public has virtually no Internet access, the government has not concerned itself with regulating Internet content.

In contrast, despite so few Burmese having Internet access, in January 2000 the government announced broadly worded regulations. These regula-

tions prohibit "any [online] writings detrimental to the interests of the Union of Myanmar" and postings that are "directly or indirectly detrimental to the current policies and secret security affairs of the government," as well as online "writings related to politics."[9] Creation of a Web page requires prior, explicit government permission. Enforcement of restrictions on the political use of the Internet in Myanmar, in part through the work of military intelligence informers, is apparently rigorous.

Restrictions inside Myanmar do not prevent its dissident and exile communities from significant use of the Internet. These communities, based in Thailand, the United States, and elsewhere, have used the Internet to spread messages widely about the brutal tactics of the SPDC and to organize campaigns discouraging foreign investments.

*Costs and benefits.* Despite their severe restrictions, both North Korea and Myanmar have acknowledged the economic potential of IT. Although banning the Internet, a recently adopted North Korean policy proclaims, "If the country's information industry is developed to a higher level, the DPRK's national economy will be developed as well."[10] No doubt China's embrace of IT has influenced the DPRK. The Education Ministry has announced mandatory computer education at all universities and high schools, and "Computer Genius Training Centers" are being established nationwide. Kim Jong-il himself is described in official publications to have "extraordinary knowledge" about computers. At the end of 2000, the Great Leader reportedly asked U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright when she visited Pyongyang for her e-mail address.[11]

> Those that emphasize increasing prosperity embrace the Internet.

E-mail does exist in North Korea. Although the government prohibits access to the Internet, a national intranet, known as the Kwang Myong network, reportedly links at least 1,300 North Korean computers in government departments, research institutes, industrial complexes, and universities. Most surprisingly, the domestic IT industry in North Korea has shown some commercial promise: in June 2001, a South Korean company announced that it would import North Korean software that diagnoses medical conditions based on handprints, and North Korean animators have worked on foreign films.

As in North Korea, the leadership of Myanmar's SPDC appears to understand IT's potential. Its military intelligence chief, General Khin Nyunt, has said, "Burma is fully aware of the importance of information technology in nation-building."[12] Most primary schools reportedly have "multimedia" classrooms.

Despite clearly appreciating the connections between IT and economic growth, North Korea and Myanmar have all but outlawed public access to the Internet. Why? They are caught in a vicious circle. Because North Korea will not or cannot deliver economic growth and has not used improved living conditions as a strategy to maintain power, its economy is consequently not adequately industrialized or computerized to take great advantage of the Internet. The situation is similar for Myanmar's mixed, largely agrarian economy, though it is growing more rapidly. Neither country is willing or able to make the large investments in IT infrastructure and education that China and Singapore have; therefore, IT can make only an incremental difference economically.

Furthermore, any incremental growth from IT is not worth the political risk to regimes that rely on controlling information dissemination to the public. The risks of empowering largely disgruntled populations could be high. Forbidding public access to the Internet clearly prevents, better than any other policy would, unwelcome political content or online organization.

> In the DPRK, computer games are censored for subliminal anticommunist messages.

This approach is also advantageous because simple rules are easier for security forces to enforce. Unlike in China, the security forces in North Korea and Myanmar do not confront difficult questions of what online content is permissible to view—for the general public, simply no surfing is allowed. Likewise, they need not monitor or shut down domestic opposition Web sites because none exist. In sum, because the economic payoff is smaller, and the political risk larger, leaders of North Korea and Myanmar are less willing to allow their people online than the other countries that restrict access to some degree.

Yet, this approach carries real peril. Forbidding public Internet access places these countries at a remarkable disadvantage when trying to attract foreign investment. In an era when countries must compete for highly valuable but mobile and often fickle capital, a country without IT infrastructure and Internet access will have great difficulty wooing investors. Moreover, these regimes forgo the many applications of IT that can help alleviate poverty.

The North Korean and Burmese governments use the Net, however, to send their own political messages to the outside world. A handful of North Korean government Web sites, replete with propaganda, some in English, are hosted in China and Japan.[13] In addition to hosting its own sites, such as

www.myanmar.com, the SPDC uses its new access to the global debate to counter accusations against it more effectively.[14] For example, through e-mails to reporters, the regime attempted to characterize a heated confrontation with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi in 2001 as a harmless exchange. "Junta members use the Net to misinform, divide, and intimidate," one activist claims.[15] A local cartoonist laments that once the junta had only guns, but "now they have the Internet. We do not. They know everything."[16]

### SOLUTION TWO: SIGNIFICANT RESTRICTIONS

Other one-party regimes have reacted to the Internet not by banning it, but by placing significant restrictions on Internet access and on online political content and usage, or both. In East Asia, China is the main proponent of this strategy, though Vietnam is following a similar path. China is attempting the most challenging balance of any East Asian country: its leadership both encourages growth of the Internet (to gain the material benefits) and actively regulates its political content (to stem the erosion of propaganda control).[17]

*Internet access.* At all levels, the Chinese government actively promotes the Internet. State-owned companies are building the telecom infrastructure at a blistering rate, with plans to invest $120 billion during the next five years. China Telecom, the major telecom provider, has added new fixed lines at the rate of two million per month and announced in March 2001 that it will bring broadband to 20 million customers in the next five years.[18] Web access via mobile telephone is available in large cities. Internet cafes, ubiquitous in urban areas, have even sprung up in small towns. The government is also working to reduce prices for online access and has plans to break up China Telecom and encourage competing networks.

These efforts have had a major impact on the IT sector. Users have increased from one million at the end of 1997 to nearly 34 million today—more than 2 percent of the population, according to government statistics. Now even the standard Internet user demographics—young, wealthy, educated, urban males—are shifting to reflect a more diverse online population. The number of registered sites under China's designated suffix ".cn," which are only a portion of the total sites hosted in China (many just use ".com"), also continues to increase rapidly, growing from 48,000 in January 2000 to 127,000 by the end of 2001.

Vietnam, with its still largely state-run economy, tolerates but does not enable Internet access the way China has. Users number approximately 130,000, still less than 0.2 percent of the population of 77 million. Aside from undeveloped telecom infrastructure (only three telephone lines serve every 1,000 people in Vietnam), prohibitively high fees keep the online

population low. In April 2000, however, the government announced a plan to spend 10 percent of its higher-education budget on increasing Internet access at universities. Internet cafes have blossomed by the thousands in urban Vietnam and are the only way most individuals can access the Internet. "Doing the chat" is popular among Vietnamese teenagers.[19]

*Political content and usage.* While feverishly promoting Internet access, the Chinese government also invests in content control schemes. One technique of content control involves blocking individual sites. Too many Web sites exist to block all pornography and objectionable politics comprehensively, so the government's choices can appear somewhat random. On a given day, savetibet.org is blocked but freetibet.org is not. China blocked the Web site of the *New York Times* for years until its editors had the opportunity to complain directly to President Jiang Zemin, while the site of *USA Today* has never been blocked. China reserves more intense and thorough efforts at blocking for high-priority campaigns such as the crackdown on the spiritual group Falun Gong.

Many Web surfers have learned to use proxy servers, which launder requests for prohibited sites through "clean" ones. Recently, however, government operatives have begun efficiently blocking proxy server sites as well. Meanwhile, several groups are developing mechanisms to defeat the latest government tactics. This cat-and-mouse dynamic is a direct by-product of a policy that allows Internet access but seeks to filter the content accessed.

Regardless, blocking sites is not China's primary mechanism for controlling content. Rather, the self-censorship that the regime promotes among individuals and domestic Internet content providers (ICPs) is the most effective way the regime controls what Chinese viewers see. The predicate to this self-policing is a tangle of regulations that give the authorities maximum discretion to pursue almost anyone for almost any Internet-related activity. Extensive regulations issued in 2000 prohibit content that subverts state power, "disturbs social order," "preaches the teachings of evil cults," distributes pornography, slanders others, or harms the "honor" of China. Regulations issued in January require ISPs immediately to transmit to authorities "subversive" information they discover. Despite these rules, however, Chinese surfers casually visiting illegal sites are very unlikely to face prosecution.

Domestic ICPs are aware that, under these broad rules, security forces can shut them down for an offense at any time. Thus, they carefully comply with content standards to avoid scrutiny. Sites hosting chat rooms employ monitors to delete explosive content; others run software that deletes key terms. Self-censorship is effective because these domestic ICPs, with content in Chinese tailored to the mainland audience, are very popular, despite the wealth of international offerings.

Arrests, well publicized in traditional media, also reinforce self-censorship. During the past few years, as Internet users have multiplied, cyberpolice have stepped up their prosecution of Internet content violations, arresting a few dozen democracy organizers, human rights activists, Falun Gong members, scholars, and other dissidents. In the first prosecution of its kind, a Chinese court last year sentenced Guo Qinghai to four years in jail for posting prodemocracy articles on Web sites based not in China, but abroad. Through self-censorship and active sponsorship of Web sites, the Chinese government uses the Net to transmit its own messages.

Vietnam's control efforts are less nuanced, focusing largely on architectural controls. The Vietnam government built a firewall, starting in 1998, that reportedly blocks more than 3,000 pornography sites and thousands of political sites, as well as proxy sites that allow circumvention of the blocks. This firewall makes all Internet access during peak hours extremely slow. ISPs reportedly comb regularly through the accounts of their subscribers for illegal materials.

> At all levels, the Chinese government is actively promoting the Internet.

*Costs and benefits.* China has primarily encouraged the growth of the Internet because of the economic benefits. This decision originated in 1978 when Deng Xiaoping, opening China to the West, chose to replace ideology with economic growth as the cornerstone of party legitimacy. The continued power of the Communist Party depends heavily on its ability to improve its people's standard of living.

China's leaders realize that, as the country's exposure to the global economy grows—a trend now accelerated by its membership in the World Trade Organization—Chinese businesses must embrace new technologies to stay competitive. If not "wired," they risk being shut out of the increasingly Internet-based supply chains of foreign buyers.

The Internet sector also promises to attract valuable foreign capital and accompanying technology. Initial public offerings of Chinese Web companies on the NASDAQ raised more than $400 million between July 1999 and July 2000. Beijing also hopes that the Internet will reform bloated state-owned enterprises. Another significant economic benefit flows directly to the state—massive telecommunications revenues, which increased more than twentyfold in the 1990s and totaled $37 billion in 2000.[20]

China's balancing strategy, however, has costs. Because it has not prohibited the Internet or allowed people to use it freely, the costs of enforcement associated with Beijing's compromise approach are significant. Although data

on actual expenditures are not available, the engineers trying to create government blocking techniques are expensive to employ. Likewise, the hiring and training of thousands of cyberpolice is pricey but necessary as Internet usage is widespread. Unlike in North Korea, where access is prohibited, or in Malaysia, where surfing is unrestricted, Chinese security forces must track actual use to determine whether it comports with government standards.

Domestic Web sites are another costly enforcement target. Hundreds of thousands of Web sites are based in China, but anticommunist, prodemocracy, Falun Gong, and other sites are prohibited. Security forces must weed through these sites to find the illegal ones.

**Unlike China's policy, implementation of the Singapore model is relatively inexpensive.**

The Chinese government incurs a second type of cost in unwelcome political activity facilitated by the Internet, which places an unprecedented tool in the hands of the few Chinese now dedicated to political change. For example, e-mail was critical to the growth of the now-outlawed China Democracy Party. The leaders of the Falun Gong, based in New York, have organized protests in Beijing. Activists at underground dissident journals, such as the *Tunnel* and *VIP Reference*, send their publications to hundreds of thousands of Chinese e-mail accounts from the United States.[21] Academics from all points on the political spectrum regularly post criticisms of the Communist Party on electronic bulletin boards.

Another potential, and potentially large, cost to the government is the increased ability of citizens to hold the government accountable. A recent survey by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences found that users view the Internet as a forum to express their political opinions and as a source for political information.[22] 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—exploding firecrackers that the children were forced to make had blown up the school. People read these accounts on the Web, and the discussions in one chatroom became so popular and heated that the operators shut it down. By then, the story was clearly beyond the state media's control, however, and Premier Zhu Rongji issued an extremely rare apology. Finally, if Beijing had less restrictive and complicated Internet policies, commercial benefits from networking might be even greater.

Nevertheless, China's balancing act thus far has worked relatively well for the ruling Communist Party. IT investments produce revenues and help modernize the economy, and except for a few small instances, IT has not

had notable political ramifications. Vietnam has gained less economic benefit from IT because it has invested less and its relatively crude control methods slow down network connections, but the regime has likewise not faced grave political challenges facilitated by the Internet.

### SOLUTION THREE: MODERATE RESTRICTIONS

Regimes using the "light restrictions" approach, such as Singapore, promote public Internet access and impose moderate restrictions on political content and use. Largely, they seek the Internet's commercial potential, worrying less about the political consequences.

Singapore is a de facto one-party state with a very open economy. Although elections occur regularly, the People's Action Party (PAP) has ruled continuously since 1959. Opposition parties, although permitted to operate, face frequent lawsuits by PAP and other obstacles. PAP has presided over impressive economic growth and social improvements. The gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in Singapore is higher than in many European nations.

*Internet access.* Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Singapore made huge infrastructure investments in fixed-line, mobile, and broadband networks.[23] As a result, the Singapore Broadcast Authority (SBA) Web site can boast, "Singapore has one of the highest Internet penetration rates in the world, with Internet users growing from 240,000 in 1996 to more than 1,940,000 in 2001," more than 50 percent of the population.[24] Domestic Web sites have also sprouted, quickly growing from 900 sites registered in 1996 to more than 32,000 today. Ninety-nine percent of the island, including businesses, homes, and schools, is wired for broadband. By the end of 2002, every school in Singapore will supposedly have one computer for every two students and 12 Internet connections for every classroom.[25] Singapore's e-government system is one of the most sophisticated and advanced in the world, allowing most transactions with the government to occur online.

*Political content and usage.* Singapore officials heavily regulate opportunities for offline public political speech; people wishing to use the Speaker's Corner, an outdoor area designated for unstructured public speech, must preregister with the police. Not surprisingly, the government also heavily regulates Internet usage. In 1996 the SBA issued the Internet Code of Practice, which broadly prohibits material on the Internet that might threaten the "public interest, public morality, public order, public security, [and] national harmony" or that "offends … good taste and decency." Regulations make Web site hosts legally responsible for any content that appears on their sites. ISPs must register with SBA but "are not required to monitor the Internet or its users." ISPs must, however, prevent their subscribers from accessing 100 select Web sites the SBA deems to be "contrary to community values."[26]

These regulations encourage self-censorship, but the SBA claims that it "has not taken action against anyone for objectionable content on the Internet." The SBA asserts that its "light touch" allows offenders to "rectify the breach" before the SBA acts. A few widely publicized incidents in the 1990s revealed, however, that the government had monitored individual Web browsing. 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."

Opposition party Web sites must register with the SBA, but several have carried criticisms of PAP and have been allowed to operate. The few independent political Web sites are similarly free to post critiques of government policies.[27] With the presence of opposition parties growing on the Internet, however, and the then-approaching November 2001 elections, the government drafted new rules to allow closer monitoring of political Web sites. Along with other restrictions, the new rules banned campaigning on political Web sites not run by parties.

*Costs and benefits.* Singapore's content management policy appears to have worked well for PAP's economic agenda. The current program, which caters to business interests, has no obvious commercial disadvantages. Moreover, unlike China's policy, implementation of the Singapore model is relatively inexpensive. The government has not attempted a technically complicated campaign to block large numbers of pernicious sites, nor has it spent state resources to train legions of cyberpolice.

Neither have the political costs associated with Singapore's Internet policy been heavy. Restrictive political-content policies have not sustained popular outcries, and yet relative online freedom has not turned the Web into a hotbed of dissent. The masses are not using political sites for organizing, and the Internet is unlikely to "engender any process of fundamental political change."[28] Citizens no doubt appreciate the technology the government makes so accessible to them. As one journal commented, "Singapore is a safe, modern, high-rent enclave in an increasingly dodgy neighborhood. Why fool around with opposition politics?"[29]

## SOLUTION FOUR: NEGLIGIBLE RESTRICTIONS

Some one-party states, such as Malaysia, promote and enable Internet access, even for the poor, and place few or no restrictions on online political content. The Barisan Nasional (BN), or National Front, has ruled Malaysia since 1969 and until recently has imposed almost no restrictions on political use of the Internet. The government has pinned its hopes for the growth of its mostly market-driven economy on IT and the Internet.

*Internet access.* Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad has promoted the "knowledge economy" as a centerpiece of his regime. Sustained infrastructure investments have enabled every fifth person to have access to a fixed telephone line. Mobile telephones have become so popular—one in 10 Malaysians have them—that a national debate erupted over whether a husband can take the first legal step toward divorce by sending his wife an SMS (short message service) text message via his cell phone. Since 1995 the government has invested billions in the "Multimedia Super Corridor" (MSC), Malaysia's answer to Silicon Valley.

The Malaysian government has placed greater emphasis on delivering Internet access to the poor than many other Asian countries. Computers are stationed in rural post offices; cybercafes serve even small towns; and "Mobile Internet Units"—buses equipped with personal computers and modems—travel the countryside, introducing remote communities to computers and the Internet. Mahathir has even badgered Muslim clerics to use the Internet. As a result, from 30 users in 1992, 10 percent of Malaysians now have Internet access.

> No neat conclusion about what approach will promote regime longevity can be drawn.

*Political content and usage.* To ensure 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 Web sites. Although the Malaysian government carefully controls all print and television media, and journalists who write stories criticizing the regime risk their careers, the government has harassed local, independent, online political journals, such as Malaysiakini.com, but not shut them down. These sites generate independent reporting that "would not be tolerated in any of the mainstream media," including stories that criticize the ruling coalition's policies and break scandals.[30] Columnists banned from mainstream media find a professional home with online journals. From the regime's perspective, at best these articles embarrass the ruling coalition; at worst, they erode support for the party.

The government is now considering restrictions that may dampen the climate of free political expression on the Internet. While giving assurances that the government is not inclined toward censorship, Mahathir has said that he wants to find a way to "prevent negative content from affecting the stability and peace of our community."[31] Minister Datuk Rais Yatim, from the Prime Minister's Department, has announced future rules that would punish those who use the Internet to "create public disorder" or "incite vio-

lence" against the government—phraseology that could give the government a very broad net.

*Costs and benefits.* Malaysia's approach has the lowest possible enforcement costs related to policing online political content and the best chance of garnering all possible commercial benefit from the Internet. Yet, Mahathir's regime may regret permitting the forum for free political dialogue to develop, especially because foreign investment in the IT sector has been less than spectacular. In fact, Steven Gan, editor of Malaysiakini.com, speculates that the resurgence of government interest in content regulation is directly tied to the lack of foreign investor interest in the MSC.[32]

## Not as Simple as You Think

A common assumption is that one-party states faced with the threat of the Internet will ban it or try to control online political activity completely and that these strategies, if successful, hold the best hope for the regimes' continued survival. Among one-party states in East Asia, however, attitudes toward the Internet vary greatly. Policy calculations, based on broad decisions about how to maintain power, are subtler than simple attempts to maximize control of the Internet, and no neat conclusion can be drawn about what approach will be most successful in promoting regime longevity.

The unreconstructed regimes of North Korea and Myanmar maintain their power largely by convincing their populations through propaganda that the regimes are beneficent and that the countries are prospering; when ideology fails, intimidation and force are available. Improving material conditions is not a leading strategy (though it has been a tactic for Myanmar more than for North Korea). Thus, the Internet's commercial benefits are not particularly available or appealing to these regimes, and the Internet's democratization of information is highly threatening.

In its push for modernization, China is moving from a Maoist model that similarly relied on uniformity of thought and physical control toward a strategy that focuses instead on raising the standard of living and tolerating pluralism. China's sometimes inconsistent and contradictory posture toward the Internet reveals the underlying tensions in this approach. Leaders realize they must allow citizens some freedoms, online and off, to enlarge the economy, but they fear letting go of too much control too soon.

On the other end of the spectrum are two relatively more forward-looking regimes. With regular, if not heavily contested, elections and a growing standard of living, Singapore has also used the Internet to reinforce its choices in governance. The government carefully tailors light restrictions on political use to avoid any commercial impact.

## Comparison of East Asian One-Party States

| Country | Internet strategy/ degree of restriction | GDP per capita PPP[1] | Real GDP growth rate[1] | Political rights[2] | Civil liberties | Economic openness[3] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| North Korea | Severe | $1,000 | –3% | 7 (Not Free) | 7 | 5.00 |
| Myanmar | Severe | $1,500 | 4.9% | 7 (Not Free) | 7 | 4.10 |
| Vietnam | Significant | $1,950 | 5.5% | 7 (Not Free) | 7 | 3.85 |
| China | Significant | $3,600 | 8% | 7 (Not Free) | 6 | 3.55 |
| Singapore | Light | $26,500 | 10.1% | 5 (Partly Free) | 5 | 1.55 |
| Malaysia | Negligible | $10,300 | 8.6% | 5 (Partly Free) | 5 | 3.10 |

**Notes**

1. Estimate for 2000 from the CIA World Factbook, http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/ (accessed April 15, 2002).

2. Information in the Political rights, Civil liberties, and Economic openness columns available from Freedom House, *Freedom in the World Survey 2000–2001*, http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/freeworld/2001/countries.htm (accessed April 12, 2002). The survey rates political rights and civil liberties on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the most free and 7 the least free. The designation of Free, Partly Free, or Not Free, determined by the combination of the political rights and civil liberties ratings, is meant to indicate the general state of freedom in a country or territory.

3. Gerald P. O'Driscoll Jr., Kim R. Holmes, and Mary Anastasia O'Grady, *2002 Index of Economic Freedom* (Dow Jones & Co., 2001), http://www.heritage.org (accessed April 15, 2002).

In an attempt to maximize the Internet's commercial potential, Malaysia has allowed significantly more freedom for political content online than in its traditional media. As a small country seeking foreign investment and depending on economic growth, its leadership is gambling that being on the IT vanguard is more important than controlling online political use, despite the political price.

All of these approaches to IT have limitations, and none have been truly tested. North Korea and Myanmar have prevented their populaces from using the Internet, but they will face a painful transition when and if standards of living become so low that they decide they must open their economies to retain power and have to allow public Internet access. China has so far managed to use IT to benefit its economy but will pay any real political costs only during a major economic or political crisis.[33] The truth of events would be very difficult to contain, and networks of citizens are more easily mobi-

lized. Finally, Singapore and Malaysia have wrung every possible commercial benefit from IT that they could and so far have not paid a great political price. Yet, any viable opposition group now has a powerful tool to use.

Ultimately, why regimes prevail and why they fail is an extremely complex issue that depends on a multitude of political, economic, social, and other factors. This analysis makes clear that one-party regimes that welcome the Internet are not, based on that fact alone, more likely to fail than those that attempt to protect themselves from its influence.

U.S. efforts to promote progress toward democracy must account for these variations. Increasing Internet access abroad is a worthwhile activity where it can contribute to pluralization, economic growth, improved education, and better healthcare. However, it is unlikely to trigger political change in regimes that would welcome such efforts.

## Notes

1. The term "one-party state" refers to states ruled by the same party continuously for at least a generation. This definition encompasses authoritarian governments, such as North Korea, and illiberal democracies, such as Singapore. Both have been accused of attempting to control the Internet.

2. See, for example, Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor Boas, "The Internet and State Control in Authoritarian Regimes: China, Cuba, and the Counterrevolution," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Information Revolution and World Politics Project Working Papers*, no. 21 (July 2001), http://www.ceip.org/files/pdf/21KalathilBoas.pdf (accessed April 15, 2002); Geoffrey Taubman, "A Not-So World Wide Web: The Internet, China and the Challenges to Non-Democratic Rule," *Political Communications* 15 (1998). For discussions of the relationship of information technologies and democracy, see Christopher R. Kedzie, *Communication and Democracy: Coincident Revolution and the Emergent Dictator's Dilemma* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1997); Pippa Norris, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and the Internet in Democratic Societies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

3. Joseph Nye, when referring to international power, cites "soft power" and "hard power." See, for example, Joseph S. Nye and William A. Owens, "America's Information Edge," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 1996): 20–36. See also Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Daniel C. Lynch, *After the Propaganda State* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999). This binary division is a simplification, of course, and omits important cultural and historical dynamics of societal governance.

4. Lynch, *After the Propaganda State*; see also Viktor Mayer-Schoenberger and Gernot Brodnig, "Information Power: International Affairs in the Cyber Age," *Kennedy School Faculty Research Working Paper Series RWP01-044* (November 2001), http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=292949 (accessed April 10, 2002).

5. Lawrence Lessig argues that commercial pressures will eventually make the Internet a less anonymous environment less hospitable to dissident forces. Lawrence Lessig, *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

6. Taylor Boas, "The Dictator's Dilemma? The Internet and U.S. Policy toward Cuba," *The Washington Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (summer 2000): 57–67.

7.  "North Korea Online This Year," *Korea Times*, February 15, 2001; Ho-chul Lee, "North Korea's Information Technology Revolution" in *The Korean Peninsula in the 21st Century: Prospects for Stability and Cooperation* (Washington, D.C.: Korean Economic Institute, 2000), pp. 25–60 (symposium volume).

8.  U.S. Department of State, "Korea, Democratic People's Republic of," *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices—2001*, http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2001/eap/8330.htm (accessed April 11, 2002). Some observers report that foreign businesses may soon have satellite access to the Internet. See Tim Beal, "Information and Communications Technologies in the Two Koreas: Contrasts, Commonalities, Challenges" (paper presented at the fourteenth International Conference, New Zealand Asian Studies Society, University of Canterbury, November 28–December 1, 2002), p. 10.

9.  Sandy Barron, "Burmese Junta Uses Net to Increase Power," *Irish Times,* February 7, 2000; "Myanmar Issues Tough Restrictions Even Before It Allows the Internet," Associated Press, January 21, 2000.

10. "DPRK Set on World's Top in IT," *PK Report from Pyongyang*, no. 161 (May 2001), http://www.korea-np.co.jp/pk/161st_issue/2001052702.htm (accessed April 12, 2002).

11. "An American in North Korea," *Economist*, October 28, 2000.

12. Barron, "Burmese Junta Uses Net to Increase Power."

13. Beal, "Information and Communications Technologies in the Two Koreas," p. 9. One of few restrictions on Internet content in South Korea is that surfers must receive permission from the Ministry of Unification before using any information on these sites publicly. For more on South Korean restrictions, see Leon Petrov, "North Korea in Cyberspace," December 30, 1999, http://north-korea.narod.ru/dprk_int.htm (accessed April 15, 2002).

14. Viola Krebs, "The Impact of the Internet on Burma," *First Monday* 6, no. 5 (May 2001), http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue6_5/krebs/index.html (accessed April 15, 2002).

15. Barron, "Burmese Junta Uses Net to Increase Power."

16. "Myanmar Issues Tough Restrictions Even Before It Allows the Internet."

17. Much of the information in this section is based on interviews conducted in China in the spring of 2000 and 2001. See also Nina Hachigian, "China's Cyber-Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 80, no. 2 (March/April 2001): 118–133, http://www.rand.org/nsrd/capp/cyberstrategy.html (accessed April 15, 2002). Informative articles about China's approach to the Internet are Khalathil and Boas, "The Internet and State Control in Authoritarian Regimes"; Katherine Hartford, "Cyberspace with Chinese Characteristics," *Current History* (September 2000); Eric Harwitt and Duncan Clark, "Shaping the Internet in China," *Asian Survey* XLI, no. 3 (May–June 2000): 377–408.

18. Ken Grant and Peter Lovelock, "MFC Internet Update," March 8, 2001.

19. Hoang-Giang Dang, "Internet in Vietnam: From a Laborious Birth into an Uncertain Future," *Informatik Forum* (January 1999), http://www.interasia.org/vietnam/dang-hoang-giang.html (accessed April 12, 2001).

20. Ken Grant and Peter Lovelock, "MFC Internet Update," February 22, 2001. China's central government is also using the Internet's infrastructure to "strengthen its ability to exercise administrative control" and in theory allow it to control the economic growth that the Internet and an open economy will generate. Among some 13 "Golden Projects" designed for this purpose, "Golden Tax," for example, is intended to make hundreds of local tax bureaus more accountable by connecting them to the State Administration of Taxation. See Simon Cartledge and Peter Lovelock, "Special Subject: E-China," *China Economic Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (1999): 19–35.

21. James Mulvenon and Michael Chase, *You've Got Dissent* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2002) (forthcoming).

22. Liang Guo and Wei Bu, *Hulianwang Shiyong Zhuangkuang Ji Yingxiang De Diaocha Baogao* (Survey on Internet Usage and Impact) (Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, April 2001). A Chinese version is available at http://www.chinace.org/ce/itre/ (accessed April 15, 2002).

23. For more information on the history of the Internet in Singapore, see Waipeng Lee, "Singapore," in *Internet in Asia* (Singapore: Asian Media Information and Communication Centre, 2001). See also Gary Rodan, "The Internet and Political Control in Singapore," *Political Science Quarterly* 113, no. 1 (1998).

24. Http://www.sba.gov.sg (accessed April 15, 2002).

25. Mark Warschauer, "Singapore's Dilemma: Control vs. Autonomy in IT-Led Development," *Information Society*, http://www.gse.uci.edu/markw/singapore.html (accessed April 12, 2002).

26. Http://www.sba.gov.sg/internet.htm (accessed September 9, 2001).

27. Alfred L. Oehlers, "The Internet and Political Change: Some Thoughts on Singapore" (paper presented at the Internet Political Economy Forum, "Internet and Development in Asia," Singapore, September 14–15, 2001). Sintercom, a popular nonprofit, uncensored, online forum, closed in part because the editor was dismayed at broad content regulations that left him vulnerable to government prosecution. How Tan Tarn, "Sintercom Founder Fades Out of Cyberspace," *Straits Times* (Singapore), August 22, 2001.

28. Oehlers, "The Internet and Political Change."

29. "No Laughing Matter," *Economist*, May 26, 2001.

30. James Chin, "Malaysiakini and Its Impact on Journalism and Politics in Malaysia" (paper presented at the Internet Political Economy Forum, "Internet and Development in Asia," Singapore, September 14–15, 2001).

31. "Several Asian Countries Clamp Down on Net," *SiliconValley.com*, http://www.siliconvalley.com/cgi-bin (accessed August 15, 2001).

32. "High-Tech Slump Threat to Malaysian Press Freedom," Agence France Press, June 3, 2001.

33. For more on this thesis, see Hachigian, "China's Cyber-Strategy."