

# Briefly Noted

*The Rise of Digital Repression: How Technology is Reshaping Power, Politics, and Resistance*, by Steven Feldstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 346 pp., cloth \$29.95, eBook \$19.99.

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*The Rise of Digital Repression* offers a powerful synthesis of how governments are employing advanced digital tools to assert control, shape political narratives, and counter dissent. As people increasingly rely on online platforms, authoritarian regimes have simultaneously harnessed technological capabilities to augment disturbing programs of repression. Digital repression strategies provide these regimes unparalleled power to monitor personal communications, disrupt political organizing, and manipulate public conversations. A senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and former deputy assistant secretary of state in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Steven Feldstein provides a thorough investigation of the motivations for digital repression and presents new field research from Thailand, the Philippines, and Ethiopia.

Early in the book, Feldstein develops a conceptual framework for digital repression and identifies five principal techniques: surveillance; censorship; social manipulation and disinformation; Internet shutdowns; and persecution of online users for political content. Assessing the relationship between

digital repression and political systems, he contends that authoritarian governments have a higher likelihood of relying on these techniques to reinforce power. The book further analyzes the role of Chinese companies in supplying advanced repressive tools to autocratic and illiberal regimes. Intriguingly, Feldstein finds that companies in democracies are just as active as Chinese firms in selling repressive technology. Therefore, he argues China is not the primary driver of digital repression in individual countries; rather, governments pursue digital strategies based on a range of internal factors including political leadership, state capacity, and technological development.

The original case studies constitute the primary contribution of the book, as each country exhibits a notable intersection between digital technology and repressive political strategies. Thailand offers insights into how an autocratic state with a history of censorship and political suppression utilizes information controls and traditional repressive methods to control dissent. The chapter on the Philippines examines democratic backsliding and a unique strategy of social manipulation and disinformation to

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advance political objectives. Lastly, the Ethiopian case explores the impact of political reform, shutting down the Internet, and ongoing surveillance and censorship.

The book's final chapter is compelling, as it traverses ideas and solutions for how democracies can fight back against digital repression. Feldstein discusses strategies civil society groups can adopt to raise the costs of repression and counter the proliferation of repressive digital tools provided by authoritarian states like China and Russia. While Feldstein proposes some actionable steps for responding to digital repression—using international forums to raise reputational costs and spread awareness and pressuring technology platforms to restrict capabilities available to repressive governments—he acknowledges that larger states with more consistent patterns of digital repression, such as China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey, are less susceptible to these strategies. In his concluding thoughts, Feldstein chillingly asserts that there are few checks to limit how China deploys

increasingly intrusive technology. Given that China provides crucial equipment that enables a considerable number of countries to monitor their own citizens and disrupt political challenges, readers may find themselves wanting more from Feldstein in terms of practical prescriptions for tackling the behavior of Chinese firms.

This caveat aside, *The Rise of Digital Repression* offers a well-researched and formidable analysis of digital repression and the urgent challenges it poses to democratic governance. Presenting a catalogue of relevant questions, Feldstein delivers an accessible yet nuanced discussion of digital technologies and political trends, while proposing innovative ideas and strategies for civil society activists to counter the digital autocratic wave. The book serves as a timely warning to democracies that the repressive policies of autocratic states warrant the continued scrutiny and attention of policymakers to revamp protections, safeguards, and standards of use.