

## COMMENTS ON

### **“The Internet and State Control in Authoritarian Regimes: China, Cuba, and the Counterrevolution” by Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas<sup>1</sup>**

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I was very pleased to be invited to participate in this session on the Internet and e-commerce in Cuba. The phenomenal growth of the Internet during the last decade has quickly come to dominate nearly all facets of communication and development in the modern world, and its importance as an instrument of economic and political transformation has been touted as the “great equalizer” in the political and economic worlds.

Nonetheless, Kalathil and Boas’s paper argues to the contrary—that the growth of the Internet can be efficiently controlled and channeled by authoritarian regimes to serve their own purposes, without allowing the media’s assumed political liberalization element to flourish. This is an important distinction to make since the “common wisdom” has assumed that the presence of the Internet in a country would necessarily imply greater political liberalization and a quickened expansion of civil society. In the case of Cuba, this obviously has broad ramifications for government, NGO, or individual policy initiatives that seek to encourage the growth of the Internet in Cuba as a means of promoting a democratic opening.

One particularly useful aspect to this paper is its comparative methodology. By utilizing the China

case, which is frequently seen as a potential political and economic model for Cuba, we are shown that all Internet policies are not created equal. China’s more proactive approach to molding Internet usage among its population has not threatened the regime’s political domination and, concurrently, has promoted greater economic growth.

A few criticisms: First, the authors themselves frequently make declarations that there exists great uncertainty regarding the Internet’s liberalization benefits in the long-term. This has the effect of almost rendering their entire argument moot. To tighten up the analysis, further research should not be on whether the Internet might help to bring eventual liberalization but instead should focus on whether current levels of Internet coverage have had any concrete effect on opposition groups’ intercommunication. This would provide a basis from which to extrapolate greater data and increase its prospective predictive power.

Second, there is an apparent contradiction in the authors’ assertion that the Cuba regime might “eventually relax the restrictions on individual Internet access to capture some of this black-market revenue.” Since, the authors had previously stressed that Cuba would

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1. The paper by Kalathil and Boas is not included in this volume. It is available at <http://www.ceip.org/files/publications/wp21.asp>.

not liberalize Internet access given its potential in enhancing opponents' communication against the government, this line of argument seems to come full-circle.

Lastly, one essential fact that is not examined is the availability and cost issues of the Internet in Cuba (or China). Given the island's well-known regression into greater relative poverty in the post-Soviet era in terms of purchasing power, it would seem that an assessment of the average Cuban's ability to afford Internet service would be an indispensable starting point.

These small criticisms notwithstanding, Kalathil and Boas have presented a fine piece of research, which

presents us with a crucial foundation upon which to gauge future Internet development on the island. Their history of the development of the Internet in both countries is valuable, basic information for future research. Moreover, this opens up another line of research in the literatures on authoritarian regimes and democratization, one that is being written parallel to the phenomenally swift development of instant global communication. But the most important and practical aspect of this work is that it dispels the common assumption that the Internet will be a type of democratic Trojan horse for the Cuban people in the foreseeable future.