

All in the Family

Philip Bowring

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Senate and Congressional contests will see family names of other former presidents and those long prominent in provincial politics and land-owning. But the Philippines is not unique. Dynastic politics thrives across Asia to an extent found in no other region apart from the Arabian peninsula monarchies.

The list of Asian countries with governments headed by the offspring or spouses of former leaders is striking: Pakistan has Prime Minister Asif Ali Zardari, widower of Benazir Bhutto, herself the daughter of the executed former leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Bangladesh has Sheikh Hasina, daughter of the murdered first prime minister, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. In Malaysia, Prime Minister Najib Razak is the son of the second prime minister, Abdul Razak. Singapore's Lee Hsien Loong is Lee Kuan Yew's son. In North Korea, Kim Il-sung's son Kim Jong-il commands party, army and country and waiting in the wings is his son Kim Jong-un.

In India, the widow Sonia Gandhi is the power behind the technocrat prime minister, Manmohan Singh, and her son Rahul is showing political promise and being groomed in the hope of filling the post of prime minister, first occupied by his great grandfather Jawaharlal Nehru. In Japan, Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama is the scion of a Kennedy-like political dynasty: His father was a foreign minister, and his grandfather was a prime minister.

Indonesia's last president, Megawati Sukarnoputri, is the daughter of its first, and family ties could well play in the next presidential election when the incumbent, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, must retire. In Myanmar, the durability of the opposition to the military owes much to the name of Aung San Suu Kyi's independence-hero father as well as to her stoicism.

Thailand lacks obvious political dynasties but that is likely because there is already a monarch. South Korea's rough and tumble democracy would seem to leave little scope for dynasties but even there, the political career of Park Chung Hee's daughter, Park Geun Hye, has benefited much from her father's reputation.

In China, family connections help immensely but the party is still a relatively meritocratic hierarchy. Vietnam is similar. In the Philippines, it is easy to blame dynastic tendencies for the nation's stark economic failures. But its problems go much deeper into the social structure and the way the political system entrenches a selfish elite. It is a symptom not the cause of the malaise.

In India, the Gandhi name has been an important element in ensuring that Congress remains a major national force at a time when the growth of regional, caste and language based parties have added to the problems of governing such a diverse country. In Bangladesh, years of fierce rivalry between Sheikh Hasina, daughter of one murdered president and widow of another, have been a debilitating factor in democratic politics. But their parties needed their family names to provide cohesion and without them there could have been much more overt military intervention. Ms. Megawati was a poor leader but just by being there helped the consolidation of the post-Suharto democracy. Dynasties can be stultifying too. In Malaysia, the ruling party was once a grassroots organisation where upstarts like former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad could flourish but over time it has become a self-perpetuating patronage machine. Too many of the key players are the offspring or relatives of former leaders.

There are more fundamental problems, too. Most current Asian dynasties trace themselves to the post-1945 political transformation. In that sense they have become a crutch, reflecting a failure to devise systems for the transfer of power to new names, faces and ideas.

Dynasties are a poor commentary on the depth of democracy in their countries. Without parties with a coherent organisation and a set of ideas, politics becomes about personalities alone and name recognition more important than competence. Parties run by the elite offspring of past heroes easily degenerate into self-serving patronage systems.

So dynastic leadership in Asia's quasi-democracies can provide a focus for nations, a glue for parties, an identity substitute in countries that used to be run by kings and sultans. But it is more a symptom of underlying problems than an example to be followed.