

# PROJECT SYNDICATE

## Dynastic Asia

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SINGAPORE – To the extent that culture matters in politics, the recent spate of leadership changes in Northeast Asia suggests that Asian societies are more tolerant – if not supportive – of dynastic succession. South Korea’s recently elected president, Park Geun-hye, is the daughter of Park Chung Hee, who ruled the country from 1961 to 1979. China’s incoming president, Xi Jinping, is the son of Xi Zhongxun, a former vice premier. Japan’s new prime minister, Shinzo Abe, is the grandson and grandnephew of two former Japanese prime ministers, and the son of a former foreign minister. Kim Jong-un is the son and grandson of his two predecessors in North Korea.

This pattern is not confined to Northeast Asia. President Benigno Aquino III of the Philippines is the son of former President Corazon Aquino. Prime Ministers Najib Abdul Razak and Lee Hsien Loong of Malaysia and Singapore, respectively, are also sons of former prime ministers. In India, Rahul Gandhi is waiting in the wings, preparing to step into the shoes of his great-grandfather (Jawaharlal Nehru), grandmother (Indira Gandhi), and father (Rajiv Gandhi). In Pakistan, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari – son of President Asif Ali Zardari and the assassinated former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, and grandson of former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto – recently made his political debut. Is dynastic succession becoming the norm throughout Asia?

There is no denying that a distinguished lineage gives political candidates an advantage over rivals. But it is also clear that having distinguished relatives is no guarantee of success. Consider the checkered record of former Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Her father was a respected president; yet she could well be remembered as one of the country’s most corrupt.

The key issue is leaders’ attitude when they assume office. If they do so with a sense of entitlement from their lineage, they are likely to fail, as Arroyo did. Fortunately for East Asia, most seem to approach power with a keen sense of duty and a commitment to strengthening their countries.

The term “princeling” is probably an unfair description of China’s Xi. After all, he hardly can be said to have led a charmed life. After his father was purged by Mao Zedong, he went to work in the countryside, even before the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution, experiencing firsthand all of the hardships that many of his generation endured. Having risen to the top, he feels no sense of entitlement. From all accounts, he feels an even greater sense of responsibility to prove that he gained his position on the basis of merit, not privilege.

Xi must also be aware that the children of the People’s Republic’s second generation of leaders face considerable public resentment, owing to their rapid accumulation of wealth. That explains his focus on combating corruption. If he fails to do



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so, he will be deemed a failure, and the Chinese Communist Party's political monopoly may end sooner than anyone anticipates. Xi carries a huge burden on his shoulders.

So does Park Geun-hye. Like Xi, she had to struggle to reach the top. Her father lifted South Korea out of poverty and turned it into an economic tiger. But his rule was also brutally repressive. To make matters worse for Park, many of her predecessors are perceived as failures. Two former presidents, Roh Tae-woo and Chun Doo-hwan, were prosecuted; another, Roh Moo-hyun, committed suicide. There are also unkind rumors swirling around outgoing President Lee Myung-bak.

South Korea is clearly a successful country that is struggling to define itself. In theory, it should be celebrating its economic and cultural achievements. In practice, as a small country in a troubled neighborhood – and with North Korea a constant source of tension – it lives in existential anxiety. And Park, whose victory has not diminished her people's ambivalent attitude toward her father, must know that healing the obvious divisions in South Korean society will not be easy.

The most difficult job is the one that awaits Rahul Gandhi. No single party can dominate Indian politics as the Congress Party has done since independence, implying a future of difficult and quarrelsome coalitions. In these circumstances, India needs, above all, decisive leadership. Yet, like Hamlet, Rahul seems uncertain. He could have taken the job several years ago, if he had chosen to do so. His hesitation must reflect a deep anxiety.

Yet his reluctance is understandable. Again, dynastic succession does not ensure success. Malaysia's Razak, for example, has made an enormous effort to reunify his country with his "1Malaysia" message. Yet all the indications are that he will face an extremely hard-fought election in 2013. Though unlikely, his Barisan Nasional coalition could fall apart. No such prospect faced his predecessors.

In Japan, Abe is universally regarded to have performed badly in his first stint as Prime Minister in 2006-2007, despite his distinguished lineage. Now he takes over an even more troubled country with huge domestic and external challenges. Few are betting on his succeeding.

In short, Asia's pattern of dynastic leadership does not render it immune from the challenges that the rest of the world faces. As Asia creates the world's largest middle class – projected to grow more than three-fold, from 500 million to 1.75 billion, by 2020 – it will also have to cope with demands for more competent and more accountable governments. In Asia today, uneasy lies the head that wears the crown.

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