Politics as Family Business: Political Dynasties in Democratic, Developing Countries

Queen of Tears. Crash Landing on You. The Heirs. Reborn Rich. What do these Korean dramas have in common? They all portray the chaebol[1] heir and heiress storyline. In *Queen of Tears*, the lead character is Hong Hae In, a third-generation chaebol heiress. Hae In's grandfather established the Queens Group and serves as its chairman. The Hong patriarch is about to retire, and part of the drama's plot is determining who among his relatives will inherit his position. Hae In is the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Queens Department Store. Her father and husband are the vice chairman and legal director of Queens Group, respectively. Her younger brother is the CEO of Queens Mart. Her uncle used to be the CEO of Queens Distribution.[2]

Ferdinand Marcos Jr and Sara Duterte, president and vice president of the Philippines, correspondingly. Paetongtarn Shinawatra, new prime minister of Thailand. All of them are heirs and heiresses, though not of chaebols like the Queens Group, but rather, inheritors of political dynasties – politicians that pass on or exchange elective positions with family members to maintain their grip on power. Their respective patriarchs 'bequeathed' posts in government, not positions in private, family-owned companies. Their conglomerates are not in the automotive, electronics nor shipbuilding industries. Their family business is in the field of politics. Or better put, politics is their family business.

This case study probes the ubiquity of political dynasties in democracies. It focuses on developing countries where political and economic institutions can be extractive – concentrating power and resources in the hands of a few – and hence, provide a natural hotbed for entrenched and widespread political dynasties. It presents the examples of the Philippines and Thailand: two of the most dynastic countries in the world, with different systems of government. The Philippines demonstrates dynastic governance under a unitary presidential system, while Thailand is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary government. The case study illustrates how political dynasties are built and maintained, and discusses their impact on governance and development. It considers the critical question – to ban or not to ban – before brief concluding remarks.

Dynasties in Democracies

Many countries democratised to end hereditary rule.[3] Yet the electorate of numerous democratic countries continue to vote for leaders based on an inherently monarchical principle: familial ties to former leaders. They often cast their ballots for the spouses, children and other relatives of politicians who have previously held office. In almost half of all democracies around the globe (36 out of 89, or 41%), voters recently elected at least one head of government who is a relative (ie spouse, child, or sibling) of a previous ruler.[4]

In democratic settings, elected officials are considered "dynastic" if they have relatives (by blood or marriage) in elective public office in past or present administrations.[5] Therefore, political dynasties are families in democratic governments that have "successfully retained political power through maintaining control over at

[1] The Korean term "chaebol" refers to the family-controlled conglomerates dominating South Korea's economy. See: https://www.britannica.com/money/chaebol
[2] Emma Wagner, "Queen of Tears Cast & Character Guide," March 16, 2024, https://screenrant.com/queen-of-tears-cast-characters/
[3] Siddharth Eapen George and Dominic Ponattu, "Like Father, Like Son? How Political Dynasties Affect Economic Development," Harvard University, August 30, 2018, https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/siddharthgeorge/files/sid_dynasties_draft_27aug2018.pdf
[4] James Loxton, "Hereditary Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 35, no. 3 (2024): 146–59, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2024.a930433
[5] Ronald Mendoza et al., "Interrogating the links between dynasties and development in the Philippines," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 8, no. 3 (2023): 765–86, https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911231182490

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least one elective position over successive generations."[6] They epitomise the sequential expansion of clout by a kinship group[7] as they inherit and accumulate wealth and power over time.[8] Members of the family extend their political control by dynastic succession, taking turns serving in the same post, or by dynastic domination, occupying several positions simultaneously. Dynasties with sequential linkages are called thin dynasties, whereas those with concurrent linkages are described as fat dynasties.[9] Most thin dynasties eventually become fat dynasties over time: starting out with the control of one elective position, before transitioning to monopolise other positions.

The ubiquity of political dynasties among democracies is evident in virtually all major world regions and across a wide array of countries – from the least developed (eg Bangladesh, Malawi) to the most developed (eg Canada, Iceland); the youngest democracies (eg Indonesia, South Korea) to the oldest ones [eg Belgium, the United States (US)]. As of April 2025, no less than 12 democratic countries have incumbent heads of government whose fathers and husbands previously held the position: Nauru, the Philippines, Thailand and Samoa in the Asia-Pacific; Mauritius, and São Tomé and Príncipe in Africa; Estonia and Greece in Europe; Guatemala, Honduras and Uruguay in Latin America; and Canada in North America.[10]

Political dynasties are expectedly common in non-democratic polities (ie autocracies and monarchies) where power is inherited – passed on from one family member to another. Yet they are surprisingly as common, if not more prevalent, in democracies where, in principle, citizens vote for their leaders in free and fair elections.[11] Save for absolute monarchs, there are currently more democratically elected heads of government whose fathers were previous rulers than autocratic leaders for which the same is true.[12]

The Bush, Clinton and Kennedy dynasties in the US are the archetypal examples of political dynasties cited widely in popular and scholarly publications. And so are other political dynasties in Western democracies, such as the Cameron, Johnson, Kinnock and Miliband dynasties in the United Kingdom, and the Trudeau dynasty in Canada.[13] Elsewhere, the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty is well-known for monopolising the prime ministership in India for all but four of the country's first 42 years of independence. Other prominent political dynasties were established by former dictators like General Park Chung Hee in South Korea, General Omar Torrijos in Panama and Ferdinand Marcos Sr in the Philippines. All their children won the presidency under democracy: Park Geun-Hye, Martín Torrijos and Ferdinand Marcos Jr.[14]

Dynasties in Democratic, Developing Countries

While political dynasties exist in both democratic developing and developed countries, they operate under starkly different institutional arrangements. Known as the "rules of the game" in any society, institutions are the formal rules and informal norms that shape human interactions and thus govern social, political and economic life.[15] Developed countries generally have inclusive rational-legal institutions characterised by robust rule of law, broad political and economic participation, and well-established checks and balances. Conversely, developing countries typically have extractive institutions that concentrate power and resources in the hands of a few – the political and economic elite – and enforce few constraints on their exercise of power and control of resources.[16]

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[6] Jose Ramon Albert et al., "Regulating political dynasties toward a more inclusive society," Philippine Institute for Development Studies, August 2015, www.pids.gov.ph/publication/policy-notes/regulating-political-dynasties-toward-a-more-inclusive-society
[7] Julio Teehankee et al., "Introduction: Political dynasties in Asia," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 8, no. 3 (2023): 661–70.
[8] Jemma Purdey, "Political families in Southeast Asia," *South East Asia Research* 24, no. 3 (2016), 319-27.
[9] Mendoza et al., "Dynasties and development."
[10] Loxton, "Hereditary Democracy." Updated to include Thailand.
[11] Teehankee et al., "Political dynasties in Asia."
[12] Loxton, "Hereditary Democracy."
[13] Teehankee et al., "Political dynasties in Asia."
[14] Loxton, "Hereditary Democracy."
[15] Douglass North, "Institutions," *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 5, No. 1 (1991), https://www.jstor.org/stable/1942704
[16] Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (Crown Publishers, 2012).

Given these institutional variances, the incentives and disincentives for political dynasties, and the motivations and norms of dynastic governance are also different. Wary of the serious legal consequences of graft and corruption, few candidates in developed countries openly seek rents and reap profits from holding public office. Politicians are also aware that wealth is not directly linked to political office – given the strong and impartial infrastructures of law that govern both the political and economic markets. Equally important, electoral competition is subjected to public scrutiny: candidates know they will not easily win elections simply because of their familial ties to former or incumbent elected officials. In fact, belonging to political dynasties hardly secure electoral victory in many developed countries, especially in recent years. This is evident in examples like Hillary Clinton's repeated (failed) efforts to win the US presidency.[17]

By contrast, in developing countries where the rule of law is feeble, political dynasties tend to treat public office as a "source of their families' power, prestige and wealth."[18] Viewing elected positions as familial property, they believe that it is "only natural that they inherit and transfer their office from generation to generation as a kind of tradition or bequest." Many dynastic candidates, even those who lack the required professional qualifications, run for office brimming with confidence – banking on their family name recognition, massive wealth, patron-client networks and other resources that give them substantial electoral advantage over non-dynastic candidates. Only a handful of dynastic candidates are seen to be genuinely pursuing public interest – the majority "only pay lip service to such agendas."

On the whole, a range of factors make political dynasties more likely and powerful in developing countries: weak political party systems, flawed electoral processes (ie prohibitive cost of electoral campaigns; pervasive vote-buying), defective checks and balances, rampant corruption, widespread clientelism, weak civil society, and high poverty and inequality.

Dynasty Building and Maintenance

Against the backdrop of governance shaped by extractive institutions, politicians build and maintain political dynasties through a myriad of strategies, such as charisma; a steady stream of economic, social and political capital; alliance; and violence. Political dynasties begin with a highly charismatic founding figure – almost always a patriarch – who gains power via popular appeal (eg the Philippines' Joseph Estrada), revolutionary movement (eg Indonesia's Sukarno) or populist platform (eg Thailand's Thaksin Shinawatra). Their relatives may succeed them in power through inherited charisma that legitimises leadership succession through family ties. People may vote for these relatives because they are viewed as political surrogates of the patriarch or simply due to name recall.[19]

Most political dynasties arise from families endowed with substantial financial resources. The family banks on this economic capital to fund costly political campaigns, buy votes, build alliances and retain patronage networks. This economic power is usually tied to landholding and business ownerships.[20] Social capital is also key. Dynasties are embedded in wider familial and social networks, some are fellow political officeholders, some are bureaucrats, some are business tycoons, while some are media and show business personalities. All of them can be mobilised to support dynastic politicians during elections and other political activities.[21] Then there is the patronage network: political dynasties accumulate social capital from the electorate by passing on voters' allegiances from one relative to another.[22]

[17] Yoshinori Nishizaki, *Dynastic Democracy: Political Families in Thailand* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2022).
[18] Nishizaki, *Dynastic Democracy.*
[19] Teehankee et al., "Political dynasties in Asia"; Sheila Coronel, "The seven Ms of dynasty building," Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, March 14, 2007, https://old.pcij.org/stories/the-seven-ms-of-dynasty-building/
[20] Coronel, "The seven Ms of dynasty building."
[21] Edward Aspinall and Muhammad Uhaib As'ad, "Understanding family politics: Successes and failures of political dynasties in regional Indonesia," South East Asia Research 24, No. 3 (2016), 420-435, https://doi.org/10.1177/0967828X16659571
[22] Erica Yu, "Controlling political dynasties in the Philippines: A breach or a promotion of freedom?," *Erasmus Student Journal of Philosophy* no. 20 (2021): 11-19 https://www.eur.nl/en/esphil/media/2021-07-esjpedition-201-1?download=1

Dynastic heirs also inherit significant political capital from their forebears: recognition from a prominent family name, powerful network, strong political machinery, and access to public office and state resources. Collectively, these electoral advantages give birth to an intangible yet vital political capital: the inherited incumbency advantage, or the benefits that candidates receive due to their familial connections to an incumbent politician that make them more likely to win elections, compared with non-dynastic candidates.[23] There are no permanent friends or foes in politics, and political dynasties embody this principle to the core. To capture and continue holding power, dynasties constantly form and break alliances and networks, including political marriages that expand the reach of clans through networks consolidation. Some political dynasties rely on violence to eliminate rivals and instil fear among voters.[24]

Institutional factors also contribute to the formation and dominance of political dynasties. These include the unintended consequences of democracy, as illustrated by the inadvertent effects of decentralisation, direct elections and term limits, as well as the weakness of the political party system. As a key democratic principle, decentralisation ideally enhances public service delivery and improves constituents' welfare. However, given the lure of power monopoly ascribed to the high returns of occupying elective offices,[25] it can inadvertently reinforce the propagation of local hegemonies like political dynasties among developing countries.[26] The launch of decentralisation, especially with the adoption of direct local elections, provides a springboard for local strongmen to reinforce and expand their power by forming political dynasties.[27]

The implementation of direct voting system, which came with the drive for democratisation, sometimes led to another unintended effect: proliferation of patronage politics.[28] Poor and disenfranchised people who cannot rely on the state and other formal institutions for basic services seek to associate themselves with people in power or those with access to power.[29] Voters living in circumstances of scarcity, poverty and inequality, particularly those in rural areas, are held captives of the patronage system – giving their votes to local bosses[30] in exchange for favours, money, jobs and livelihood opportunities, and preferential access to state resources.[31] Amidst dysfunctional formal channels, the influential and powerful political dynasties offer access to government resources through informal networks.[32]

An incumbency advantage creates a barrier to entry for newcomers to the political arena. To level the playing field and uphold the alternation of power, some governments impose term limits to remove such advantage for incumbents seeking re-election. However, in dynastic democracies, the incumbency advantage spills over to the family members of incumbents, making them more likely to win elections than non-dynastic candidates,[33] and thereby renders term limits meaningless.[34] Political dynasties circumvent the legal

[23] Pablo Querubin, "Family and Politics: Dynastic Persistence in the Philippines," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 11, No. 2 (2016): 151-181, http://dx.doi.org/10.1561/100.00014182
[24] Coronel, "The seven Ms of dynasty building"; Purdey, "Political families in Southeast Asia."
[25] Teehankee et al., "Political dynasties in Asia."
[26] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Public governance indicators: A literature review," January 2007.
[27] Yoes Kenawas, "The Rise of Political Dynasties in a Democratic Society," Northwestern University, May 16, 2015.
[28] Orathai Kokpol, "Electoral Politics in Thailand," in *Electoral Politics in Southeast and East Asia*, ed. Aurel Croissant et al. (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2022), https://library.fes.de/fulltext/iez/01361inf.htm
[29] Sirilaksana Khoman et al., "Foreign Investment, Corruption, Investment Treaties and Arbitration in Thailand," in *Corruption and Illegality in Asian Investment Arbitration*, ed. Nobumichi Teramura et al. (Springer Singapore, 2024), 393-421.
[30] Kokpol, "Electoral Politics in Thailand."
[31] Napon Jatusripitak, "The Promise and Peril of Patronage Politics for Authoritarian Party-Building in Thailand," ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, December 14, 2022, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/ISEAS_Perspective_2022_119.pdf
[32] Michael Montesano and Tita Sanglee, "Rethinking Thailand's Local Elections: Beyond the Shadow of National Parties and Political Big Houses," Fulcrum, February 11, 2025, https://fulcrum.sg/rethinking-thailands-local-elections-beyond-the-shadow-of-national-parties-and-political-big-houses/
[33] Pablo Querubin, "Family and Politics."
[34] Jan Fredrick Cruz and Ronald Mendoza, "Does Dynastic Prohibition Improve Democracy?," AIM Rizalino S. Navarro Policy Center for Competitiveness, August 2015, https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/gdc/gdcovop/2018333003/2018333003.pdf

restriction by passing on or exchanging elective positions with relatives – made easier owing to the absence of inclusive institutions that create and maintain a pipeline of alternative leaders.[35]

The supremacy of dynasties is also a consequence of weak or absent countervailing political institutions. Foremost is poor political party institutionalisation. The organisational weakness of political parties in recruiting qualified leaders and running their elections is a key reason why wealthy and powerful elites, including those from political families, have been able to lord over elections, especially at the local level.[36] With a frail political party system, the roles of candidates and their networks are amplified by mobilising political support during elections.[37] This makes elections personalistic: "nothing more or less than individuals, rather than discernibly broader interests or ideologies."[38] Dynasties flourish in such personalistic elections. Given their massive wealth and vast clientelistic networks, coupled with political parties' deficient resources, political dynasties either become the face of political parties (ie national parties fielding dynastic candidates and relying on dynasties to perform well in elections)[39] or run the party themselves (ie creating, leading and abandoning parties as they deem fit).[40]

Are Political Dynasties Good or Bad?

There are two competing views on political dynasties: the predatory vis-à-vis the benevolent perspective. Given the monopoly of elective positions by members of the same family, the predatory lens views political dynasties as extractive institutions that have inimical impact on governance, socioeconomic outcomes and national development. While this view dominates the debate on political dynasties, there is a lesser-known alternative perspective – the benevolent lens or the "dynasties as stationary bandits" argument. It contends that if political dynasties behave like stationary bandits, they may paradoxically foster development and reinforce desirable socioeconomic outcomes in their jurisdictions – as a byproduct of their vested interests.

The Predatory View: Dynasties as Extractive Institutions

Political dynasties represent a classic example of extractive political institutions. They manifest elite persistence as relatives occupy elective positions successively (thin dynasties) or simultaneously (fat dynasties) – concentrating political and economic power within their families.[41] In this predatory view, political dynasties undermine political competition, deplete resources to secure political and economic dominance, erode accountability and perpetuate corruption.[42]

Political dynasties make elections uncompetitive and contradict the democratic principle of "equal access to opportunities for public service."[43] Given their disproportionate electoral advantage in terms of massive economic, political and social capital, political dynasties create an uneven playing field that hinders non-dynastic candidates from winning polls. Once in office, the winning dynastic candidates may use the power of the state to serve their family's interests rather than their constituents' welfare – expanding influence,

[35] Ronald Mendoza et al., "Term Limits and Political Dynasties in the Philippines: Unpacking the Links," *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review* 20, No. 4 (2020): 88–99, http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3356437
[36] Aspinall and Uhaib As'ad, "Understanding family politics."
[37] Amalinda Savirani, "Survival against the odds: The Djunaid family of Pekalongan, Central Java," *South East Asia Research* 24, No. 3 (2016): 407-419, https://doi.org/10.1177/0967828X16659731
[38] John Sidel, "Take the Money and Run? 'Personality' Politics in the Post-Marcos Era," UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies, September 1998, cids.up.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Take-the-Money-and-Run-vol.2-no.3-July-Sep-1998-2.pdf
[39] Kenawas, "The Rise of Political Dynasties."
[40] Arjan Aguirre, "Party-Movement Interactions in a Contested Democracy: The Philippine Experience," in *Rethinking Parties in Democratizing Asia*, ed. Julio Teehankee and Christian Echle (Routledge, 2023).
[41] John Emmanuel Villanueva, "Political Dynasties and Human Development Investments: Evidence of Linkage from Rizal Province, Philippines," *Philippine Journal of Public Administration* 64, No. 2 (2020), journals.upd.edu.ph/index.php/pjpa/article/view/8628
[42] Ronald Mendoza et al., "Political dynasties, business, and poverty in the Philippines," *Journal of Government and Economics* 7 (2022): 1-11, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jge.2022.100051
[43] Cruz and Mendoza, "Dynastic Prohibition."

amassing wealth and defending business interests through the politicisation of state institutions, manipulating public funds, misappropriating state financial resources, and taking bribes through government contracts.[44] Political dynasties make public office "an exclusive family franchise, a provider of more benefits to family interests."[45] As enunciated by anti-dynasty advocates: "Dynastic politicians will always be confronted with a conflict of interest when faced with a choice between maximising benefit for the family and maximising benefit for the people under their rule."[46]

Corruption is one of the most intractable governance problems when it is perpetrated by political actors with the most power, just like political dynasties. In fact, one way that politicians circumvent systems of accountability and avoid punishment for corruption is by being members of political dynasties. Once dynasties are established, they "create an environment so hostile to those trying to examine their behaviour that few prosecutions for corruption occur," essentially shielding members from legal and political retribution. Hence, dynasties "allow politicians to get away with shocking levels of corruption and are very difficult to root out."[47] When members of a single family occupy various elective positions in a particular jurisdiction, the system of checks and balances is severely compromised. In fat dynasties, intimidation, violence and corruption may prevail as elected officials – related by blood or marriage – collude with each other.[48]

The Benevolent View: Dynasties as Stationary Bandits

While the predatory lens dominates the debate on political dynasties, there is an alternative perspective that views political dynasties in a different light: the "dynasties as stationary bandits" argument. It posits that governance under political dynasties may possibly lead to desirable socioeconomic outcomes and reinforce development if they behave like stationary bandits – leaders who have a vested interest in the stability and long-run productivity of the territories they control.

Stationary bandits maintain domestic order and provide public goods to sustain economic activity, so that they can continue to generate and extract wealth for themselves and their families. Intending to monopolise power in their jurisdictions for a long time, these leaders may govern well and promote development in their jurisdictions to some extent, even if they harbour extractive and bequest motives. This contrasts with roving bandits: leaders who do not consider prospects for future exploitations as they do not expect to stay in power long enough. The latter prioritise short-term gains and immediate returns.[49] They indiscriminately extract wealth and strip resources to optimise their economic interests at the expense of the people they are supposed to serve.[50]

Whereas term-limited politicians may feel the pressure of popular demands and shun tough decisions that are crucial for sustained economic development, the stationary bandits argument asserts that political dynasties provide reformist politicians with an extended time in office that enables the pursuit of long-term goals. The sequential tenure in office among relatives bolsters familiarity, continuity and stability, which bodes well for the longevity of government programmes and projects.[51]

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[44] Kenawas, "The Rise of Political Dynasties."
[45] Roland Simbulan, "Why Political Clans and Dynasties are Enemies of Genuine Democracy and Human Development," University of the Philippines, July 31, 2012, https://halalan.up.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Roland-Simbulan-Why-Political-Clans-and-Dynasties-are-Enemies-of-Genuine-Democracy-and-Human-Development.pdf
[46] Yu, "Controlling political dynasties."
[47] Daniel Bruno Davis, "Dynasties and Corruption: How Dynasties Threaten Accountability for Corruption" (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2022), https://doi.org/10.18130/t924-8q73
[48] Amita Legaspi, "Experts suggest prohibition on 'fat dynasties'," *GMA News Online*, February 15, 2018, https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/643537/experts-suggest-prohibition-on-fat-dynasties/story/
[49] Mancur Olson, "Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development," *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (1993).
[50] Mendoza et al, "Political dynasties, business, and poverty."
[51] Mendoza et al., "Political Dynasties in the Philippine Congress"; Rollin Tusalem and Jeffrey Pe-Aguirre, "The Effect of Political Dynasties on Effective Democratic Governance: Evidence from the Philippines," *Asian Politics and Policy* 5, No. 3 (2013): 359-386, https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12037

Legacy and bequest motives are also key in this alternative view: given their concern for the electoral success of their relatives, incumbent dynastic officials are motivated to govern effectively and perform well in office. Further, recognising the pecuniary benefits of implementing growth-oriented initiatives that could benefit their families in the long run, even rent-seeking dynastic politicians will be inclined to enact reforms that reinforce sustainable economic growth. Hence, it is possible for political dynasties to foster development in their political bulwark while also growing their family's wealth and influence. They may invest in economic development to widen their business connections and maintain popular support.[52]

Political Dynasties in the Philippines and Thailand

Among democratic countries in Southeast Asia, a region where democracy itself is relatively young, the Philippines and Thailand have the greatest concentration of political dynasties. Four-fifths of the Philippines' Congress belong to political dynasties. In Thailand, close to half of the parliament are dynastic (42%). These are eye-catching figures even internationally: the prevalence of dynastic politicians in the legislature is 6% in the US, 10% in Greece and Argentina, 22% in Ireland, 24% in India, and 33% in Japan.[53]

The Philippines

The Philippines, officially the Republic of the Philippines, is a democratic country that follows a unitary presidential system of government. Sovereign power is shared among three co-equal branches: the executive, legislative and judiciary. The president, both the head of state and government, is directly voted by the electorate and serves for a single term of six years (ie the Constitution does not allow re-election). Meanwhile, the vice president, elected separately, may serve for a total of 12 consecutive years (ie two successive six-year tenures).[54] The bicameral Congress represents the legislative branch, which is composed of the Senate ("Upper House") and the House of Representatives ("Lower House").

The Upper House comprises 24 senators who are nationally elected and do not represent any legislative district. Like the vice president, they serve six-year terms, subject to a limit of two consecutive terms.[55] Meanwhile, the Lower House is composed mainly of district representatives (80%) voted at the constituency level, while the remaining 20% is allocated to sectoral (party list) representatives elected at large. They serve three-year tenures, with a maximum of three successive terms allowed (ie maximum of nine consecutive years in office).[56] At the local government level, provincial governors, municipal and city mayors, chairpersons of *barangays* (villages), as well as members of local legislative bodies are all democratically elected, with the same term limits as district and party list representatives.[57]

The most comprehensive scholarship on political dynasties in Southeast Asia hails from the Philippines, "where a deeply embedded system of dynastic rule through its democratic institutions remains as strong today as it has ever been."[58] Indeed, it embodies "the paradigmatic case of dynastic democracy in Southeast Asia,"[59] as political dynasties, described by scholars as "exceptional in their persistence and scope,"[60] are the most

[52] George and Ponattu, "Like Father, Like Son?"; Mendoza et al., "Political Dynasties in the Philippine Congress"; Mendoza et al, "Political dynasties, business, and poverty."
[53] Cielito Habito, "Dynasties: Our spreading cancer," *Inquirer.net*, August 13, 2024, https://opinion.inquirer.net/175965/dynasties-our-spreading-cancer
[54] Senate Electoral Tribunal, "1987 Constitution," accessed January 10, 2025, https://www.set.gov.ph/resources/philippine-constitutions/1987-constitution/
[55] Senate of the Philippines, "History of the Senate," accessed January 10, 2025, https://web.senate.gov.ph/about/history.asp
[56] House of Representatives, "House of Representatives: Constitutional Mandate," accessed January 10, 2025, https://www.congress.gov.ph/about/
[57] Weena Gera, "Scalar politics in Philippine urban disaster management: reframing metropolitan governance for local resilience and sustainability," *Erdkunde* 72, no. 4 (2018): 287–311, doi.org/10.3112/erdkunde.2018.04.03
[58] Purdey, "Political families in Southeast Asia."
[59] Nishizaki, *Dynastic Democracy.*
[60] Mendoza et al, "Political dynasties, business, and poverty."

pervasive and enduring here. The ubiquity of dynasties in the Philippines is not only known within the region, but also notorious globally. As Nobel laureates Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson put it: "the extent to political dynasties in the Philippines is off the chart compared to any other country in the world."[61]

The phenomenon of political dynasties in the country originated with Spanish colonisation in the 16th century,[62] proliferated during the transition to independence and adoption of electoral democracy in the early 20th century,[63] and became a permanent fixture of the political landscape since the imposition of term limits under the 1987 Constitution, and the implementation of the 1991 Local Government Code which outlines the country's decentralisation policy.[64] There is a long history of intergenerational continuity of dynastic rule here,[65] with most dynasties surviving – and even thriving – through three colonial regimes (ie Spanish, American and Japanese rules) and five republics.[66] For over a century, the same 106 political families (more or less), continuously occupied seats in the House of Representative from 1907, when the first national election was held, up to recent years.[67]

As of August 2024, close to 80% of the country's lawmakers, or four out of five elected officials in the Senate and the House of Representatives, belong to political dynasties.[68] The sitting president, Ferdinand Marcos Jr, is the son and namesake of former president, dictator and kleptocrat Ferdinand Marcos Sr. He took over the presidency from Rodrigo Duterte, the father of incumbent vice president Sara Duterte. Two other previous presidents, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and Benigno Aquino III, are also scions of former presidents: Diosdado Macapagal and Corazon Aquino. They all have a long line of relatives occupying elective positions in present and past administrations.

At the subnational level, the proportion of local government officials related to other incumbents (ie fat dynasties) grew dramatically between 1988 and 2022: from 41% to 78% among provincial governors; from 18% to 69% among vice governors; from 26% to 57% among municipal and city mayors; and from 20% to 41% among vice mayors. After the 2022 elections, a third (31%) of all subnational elective seats (around 5,500 of close to 18,000 positions) were occupied by politicians belonging to fat dynasties. Families consisting of eight or more members simultaneously holding elective positions is becoming the norm, rather than the exception.[69] Based on the current trend, political dynasties are projected to comprise nearly 70% of all local government leadership positions in the Philippines by 2040.[70]

The Marcoses and Dutertes, the country's two most powerful political dynasties, joined forces in 2022 to secure the electoral victories of Ferdinand Marcos Jr and Sara Duterte. This alliance was necessary for the Duterte clan to shield outgoing president Rodrigo Duterte from prosecution by the International Criminal Court on charges of murder as a crime against humanity owing to his bloody war on drugs. For the Marcos dynasty, it served as a route back to the presidential palace. The partnership, of course, was always one of convenience. As both clans geared up for the 2025 midterm elections, a critical indicator of success in the upcoming 2028 presidential elections, cracks in the relationship between the two families began to surface – culminating in the impeachment of Sara Duterte in February 2025, and the arrest and transfer of Rodrigo Duterte to the International Criminal Court in March 2025.[71]

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[61] Bernardo Villegas, "Pros and Cons of Dynasties," July 2, 2015, https://www.bernardovillegas.org/index.php?go=/Articles/518/
[62] Carla Teng, "Asia's Political Dynasties: Philippines," Asia Media Centre, May 24, 2023.
[63] Cruz and Mendoza, "Dynastic Prohibition."
[64] Ronald Mendoza et al., "Term Limits and Political Dynasties."
[65] Nishizaki, *Dynastic Democracy.*
[66] Teehankee et al., "Political dynasties in Asia."
[67] Cruz and Mendoza, "Dynastic Prohibition."
[68] Habito, "Dynasties: Our spreading cancer."
[69] Mendoza et al., "Term Limits and Political Dynasties"; Mendoza et al., "Dynasties and development."
[70] Ronald Mendoza and Miann Banaag, "Dynasties Thrive Under Decentralization in the Philippines," Ateneo School of Government, January 2017, http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2875583
[71] Natashya Gutierrez and Naomi Selvaratnam, "The Philippines's two most powerful dynasties formed an alliance. Now they're at war," *ABC News*, March 18, 2025, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-03-18/marcos-duterte-family-feud-philippines/105048194

The Marcos-Duterte landslide success in the 2022 polls has been attributed to massive political machinery, consolidation of patronage networks, fusion of ethnolinguistic bailiwicks that covered all three of the country's major island groups (ie Marcos clan's Ilocos in Luzon and Leyte in Visayas; Duterte clan's Davao in Mindanao), populism, online disinformation and an electoral alliance ("UniTeam") among the country's well-known political dynasties "masquerading as political parties" (eg Marcos, Duterte, Macapagal-Arroyo, Estrada, Villar, Zubiri and Gatchalian clans).[72] Wealth surely helped as well. Ferdinand Marcos Jr spent over ₱623 million (US$10.8 million), dwarfing the average election spending of six other presidential candidates at ₱152 million (US$2.6 million). Sara Duterte's campaign expenditure totalled over ₱216 million (US$3.8 million), while seven other vice-presidential aspirants spent only ₱48.5 million (US$845,000) each on average.[73]

Though not all dynasties are fond of bloodshed, in the Philippines, the use of violence by political dynasties against their opponents or anyone who dares to voice dissent "is a fairly established practice."[74] The Ampatuan clan of Maguindanao province[75] in Southern Philippines (Mindanao) is a quintessential example. In the words of an Ampatuan militia member: "In Maguindanao, the word of the Ampatuans was the law. It was either you said yes to [them], or you got yourself killed for daring to say no."[76] In what is now infamously known as the Maguindanao Massacre of November 2009, around 200 armed men of the Ampatuan dynasty's private army gunned down 58 people during an election-related event. The ambush took the lives of the relatives of a Mangudadatu scion set to challenge an Ampatuan for governor. Several journalists were also killed.[77] It was the worst incident of political violence in the country until March 2023,[78] and to date, the "single worst massacre of journalists in history."[79]

Historically, dynastic families have been able to exploit their influential positions to amass wealth and further their economic interests. In the 1950s to 1970s, under the guise of promoting industrialisation and economic independence, they capitalised on their privileged access to various state-sponsored benefits, including monopolistic licenses, lucrative franchises, cheap foreign exchange, favourable (yet often unrepaid) loans, tax exemptions and subsidies. Most political dynasties in the Philippines draw their economic prowess from investments in agriculture and landholding. Hence, they prevented the passage and implementation of genuine land and resource tenure reforms in the post-Martial Law era (ie 1986-present). They discouraged the institutionalisation and development of the political party system. They also perpetuated warlordism and reliance on paramilitary groups and private armies that wreak havoc to this day.[80]

Empirically, evidence shows that Philippine provinces and municipalities led by political dynasties suffer from poor governance (as measured through the good governance index) and inferior public goods provision (eg lack of access to primary healthcare; deficient infrastructure development).[81] This dismal delivery of public goods and services persists despite the proclivity of dynastic politicians to spend more compared to non-dynastic officials. For instance, fat dynastic municipal mayors, particularly those related to their vice mayors, tend to spend more than non-dynastic mayors on policies and programmes pivotal to economic growth and

[72] Julio Teehankee, "Beyond nostalgia: the Marcos political comeback in the Philippines," London School of Economics and Political Science, July 2023, https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/119819/
[73] Author's own calculations, based on Rappler's tally of statements of contributions and expenditures (SOCEs) provided by the Commission on Elections (rappler.com/newsbreak/tracker-candidates-spent-most-statement-contributions-expenditures-2022/); three presidential and one vice-presidential candidates failed to file their SOCEs; USD 1=PHP 57.32, as of April 9, 2025 (Oanda).
[74] Purdey, "Political families in Southeast Asia."
[75] Following a plebiscite in September 2022, Maguindanao was split into two: Maguindanao del Norte and Maguindanao del Sur. See: https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/maguindanao-province-referendum-09192022115041.html
[76] Human Rights Watch, ""They Own the People" The Ampatuans, State-Backed Militias, and Killings in the Southern Philippines," November 2010, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/philippines1110.pdf
[77] Human Rights Watch, "They Own the People."
[78] Human Rights Watch, "Philippines: Events of 2023," 2024, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/philippines
[79] International Federation of Journalists, "Philippines: Full justice still denied 14 years on from Ampatuan journalist massacre," 2023, ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/article/philippines-full-justice-still-denied-14-years-on-from-ampatuan-journalist-massacre
[80] Coronel, "The seven Ms of dynasty building"; Cruz and Mendoza, "Dynastic Prohibition."
[81] Tusalem and Pe-Aguirre, "The Effect of Political Dynasties on Effective Democratic Governance."

poverty reduction, including construction of schools, hospitals and roads. However, such higher local government expenditure does not translate to higher economic growth or lower poverty incidence, suggesting that the increased spending is likely driven by poor government performance, mismanagement, corruption, rent-seeking and other types of inefficiency.[82]

A recent study found that dynastic provinces, particularly those controlled by fat dynasties, are particularly prone to public procurement corruption risk (eg non-compliance to the Government Public Procurement Reform Act; lack of transparent and competitive public bidding).[83] Many members of political dynasties are notoriously linked to corruption although most, if not all, get away unscathed. As reiterated by the Transparency International and Chr. Michelsen Institute:

> *Corruption enables political clans and dynasties in the Philippines to maintain their grip on power by enriching themselves while in office, then using the proceeds of corruption to entrench their political power. The lack of checks and balances and the weakness and inefficiency of anticorruption institutions allow corruption to thrive in the highest echelons of the government.*[84]

Except for former president Joseph Estrada, who was sentenced to life in prison for corruption but later pardoned by Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo[85] who succeeded him, no other elected official above the post of governor has ever been convicted of corruption. Some dynastic senators, such as Ramon Revilla Jr, Juan Ponce Enrile and Jose Ejercito Jr (son of Joseph Estrada), were jailed in relation to the misuse of discretionary funds but eventually either released on bail or acquitted of most of the charges.[86] Aside from human rights abuses, the Marcos family is also infamous for corruption – with estimates of up to US$10 billion plundered from state coffers. However, the Marcoses and their cronies have eluded legal retribution due to a judicial system that remains vulnerable to corruption and continued influence from the Marcos dynasty.[87]

Several studies provide compelling evidence that political dynasties exacerbate poverty in the Philippines, especially among provinces outside of Luzon where the country's administrative and political capital, Metro Manila, is located.[88] More ominously, the country's poorest provinces serve as fiefdoms of the fattest political dynasties, or those with the greatest number of relatives concurrently holding elective office among local governments.[89] For example, Maguindanao and Basilan (also in Mindanao) are consistently two of the poorest provinces in the Philippines, with poverty incidence hovering around 30% to 66% from 2018 to 2023.[90] Ironically, these provinces are also home to some of the most affluent and powerful political dynasties in the Philippines – with rival clans slugging it out with their respective private armies.[91] In the same period, the share of fat dynastic politicians in the two provinces ranged between 32% and 53%.[92] Indeed, in provinces with fatter dynasties, poverty and underdevelopment are more entrenched.[93]

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[82] Dean Dulay and Laurence Go, "When Running for Office Runs in the Family: Horizontal Dynasties, Policy, and Development in the Philippines," *Comparative Political Studies* 55, No. 4 (2022): 588-627, https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140211024292

[83] Daniel Davis et al., "Corruption risk and political dynasties: exploring the links using public procurement data in the Philippines," Economics of Governance 25, No. 1 (2024): 81-109, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10101-023-00306-4

[84] Lasha Gogidze, "Philippines: Overview of corruption and anti-corruption efforts," Transparency International and Chr. Michelsen Institute, August 14, 2023, https://www.u4.no/publications/overview-of-corruption-and-anti-corruption-in-the-philippines

[85] Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo herself has been jailed for misuse of public funds and electoral fraud. She was acquitted in 2016, under the presidency of her known ally, Rodrigo Duterte. See: www.theglobalist.com/philippines-rodrigo-duterte-corruption-elections/

[86] Eric Batalla, "Grand corruption scandals in the Philippines," *Public Administration and Policy* 23, No. 1 (2020): 73-86.

[87] Ruben Carranza, "Under Marcos Again, What Lies Ahead for Filipinos," International Center for Transitional Justice, June 6, 2022, https://www.ictj.org/latest-news/under-marcos-again-what-lies-ahead-filipinos

[88] Mendoza et al, "Political dynasties, business, and poverty"; see also Davis et al., "Corruption risk and political dynasties."

[89] Mendoza et al., "Political Families and Poverty: And why Congress should pass an anti-dynasty law," *GMA News Online*, August 10, 2015, https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/opinion/content/532105/and-why-congress-should-pass-an-anti-dynasty-law/story/

[90] Philippine Statistics Authority, "2023 Full Year Official Poverty Statistics of the Philippines," August 15, 2024.

[91] Jeoffrey Maitem, "Dividing Maguindanao province tightens ruling families' bases in region, analysts say," *Benar News*, 2022, https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/maguindanao-province-referendum-09192022115041.html

[92] Mendoza et al., "Dynasties and development."

[93] Mendoza and Banaag, "Dynasties Thrive Under Decentralization."

Thailand

Thailand, officially the Kingdom of Thailand, adopts a democratic regime under a unitary constitutional monarchy. The administration of state affairs adheres to a parliamentary system of government. The king serves as the head of state, while the prime minister is the head of government. Sovereign power is divided into three branches,[94] and the legislature, known as the National Assembly, is bicameral. The Lower House is composed of 500 elected Members of Parliament (MPs): 400 constituency MPs and 100 party list MPs.[95] However, the 200 senators in office as of April 2025 were not elected by universal suffrage – they were voted through a complex, multi-stage process in which candidates from various professional and social groups cast their votes among themselves at the district, provincial and national levels. In contrast, the previous senators were entirely selected by the military junta.[96]

Senators and MPs serve five-year and four-year terms, respectively. Senators are ineligible for re-election, while MPs have no term limits. The prime minister, who need not be an elected MP, is selected through a simple majority in a parliamentary vote, officially appointed and sworn in by the king, and may only serve for a maximum of eight years in office, whether by consecutive or non-consecutive tenure.[97] At the subnational level, presidents and council members of the Provincial Administrative Organisations (PAO), municipal mayors and council members, as well as chairpersons and council members of *Tambon* (Subdistrict) Administrative Organisations are all democratically elected for four-year terms. Provincial governors are appointed by the Ministry of Interior, except for the Bangkok City governor who is elected on four-year tenures with a two-term limit.[98] The stints of mayors and PAO presidents are also limited to two consecutive terms.[99]

While officially serving as the head of state, the king, representing the Thai monarchy, is not confined to a symbolic realm. In fact, his power extends to the political sphere and influences governance heavily – leading to a political system described as "democracy with the monarchy standing above politics." The king may make or break governments, as he holds extra-constitutional powers to advise, criticise, as well as to intervene in legislative processes, public policies and public administration. The crown's "moral check and balance on government" manifests through the interference of the so-called "network monarchy" – an extensive network of royalists consisting of privy counsellors, state bureaucrats, public intellectuals and leading businessmen. Thailand's politics and policies have operated within the grasp of this institution.[100]

Once labelled as having the "highest number of political dynasties in the world,"[101] the dominance of dynasties (locally known as *Baan Yai* or "Big Houses") in Thai politics is a historically and culturally deep-rooted norm,[102] though not as deeply entrenched as in the Philippines. Unlike the Philippine dynasties that flourished since the beginning of 20th century, it was only in 1932, when Thailand replaced absolute monarchy with constitutional monarchy, that a "kaleidoscope of political families" emerged, making the country's electoral

[94] The Government Public Relations Department, "Administrative system of Thailand," 2022, https://thailand.go.th/page/thai-politic
[95] Tan Tam Mei, "How Thailand's general election works," *The Strait Times*, May 6, 2023, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/how-thailand-s-general-election-works
[96] Emma Kenny, "Explainer: How Thailand's Senate Elections Work," International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, May 8, 2024, https://www.idea.int/blog/explainer-how-thailands-senate-elections-work
[97] Bangkok Post, "Paetongtarn Shinawatra elected Thailand's 31st prime minister," August 16, 2024, https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/2848292/paetongtarn-shinawatra-elected-thailands-31st-prime-minister; Tan, "How Thailand's general election works"; Kenny, "Explainer: How Thailand's Senate Elections Work."
[98] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Country Profiles of the World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment (Thailand)," June 2022, https://www.sng-wofi.org/country-profiles/thailand.html
[99] The Nation Thailand, "Pita promises to lift two-term limits on local administrators," June 1, 2023, https://www.nationthailand.com/thailand/politics/40028193
[100] Khorapin Phuaphansawat and Puangchon Unchanam, "Monarchy and Thai meta-policy: the early years of Rama X's reign," in *Policy Analysis in Thailand*, ed. Ora-orn Poocharoen and Piyapong Boossabong (Bristol University Press, 2023), 107-136.
[101] Bangkok Post, "Thai 'political dynasties' top world," October 14, 2013, https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/374504/thai-political-dynasties-top-world
[102] Paul Chambers et al., "The persevering power of provincial dynasties in Thai electoral politics," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 8, No. 3 (2022): 787-807, https://doi.org/10.1177/20578911221142132

democracy "tenaciously dynastic." Since 1932, a total of 714 political dynasties arose in all but one of the 77 Thai provinces, including the capital Bangkok. Out of the 3,453 MPs elected between 1932 and 2020, almost half (1,426) came from these families. The parliament, "the institutional linchpin of Thailand's democratic state," has turned "incrementally and insidiously into a family-dominated institution."[103]

Family rule in the country has expanded significantly since 1973, when a student-led uprising ousted the military-controlled bureaucratic regime. A new election was not held until 1979, and semi-democratic stability lasted until the 1991 coup. During this period, political dynasties solidified their influence in electoral politics. The brief 1991-1992 junta government, followed by a renewed push for expanded democracy, created even more political space for dynasties to germinate. Their power expanded not only at the national level but also at the local level, where elections were introduced in 1994. Dynasties in Thailand were at the peak of power by the late 1990s. However, constitutional reforms, the coups of 2006 and 2014, and national ideological shifts disrupted their entrenched power.[104]

Nonetheless, there has been a resurgence of political dynasties since the end of junta rule in June 2022,[105] none more obvious than the return to power of the Shinawatra family, Thailand's most prominent political dynasty. In August 2024, the Thai parliament elected Paetongtarn Shinawatra as prime minister – just two days after erstwhile prime minster Srettha Thavisin was ousted by the Constitutional Court, a royalist institution over which the king wields great influence. Paetongtarn is the fourth member of the Shinawatra dynasty to hold Thailand's highest office after her father Thaksin, aunt Yingluck and uncle-in-law Somchai Wongsawat. The Shinawatra dynasty has been involved in the business of politics since 1969, with different family members serving as constituency MP of Chiang Mai province, their bailiwick, or party list MP – starting from Paetongtarn Shinawatra's grandfather and granduncle, to aunts, uncles and cousin.[106]

The Shinawatra dynasty's recapture of the Thai prime ministership was facilitated by a grand compromise between forces aligned with Thaksin Shinawatra, represented by the Pheu Thai Party, and the conservative royalist-military establishment, which had previously worked tirelessly to quell the former prime minister's political influence through military coups, party dissolutions, constitutional engineering and judicial interventions. The alliance was forged to prevent the Move Forward Party, the official winner of the 2023 general election, from establishing a new coalition government and gaining power. The Move Forward Party is known for its progressive political agenda and advocacy for institutional reforms, including the amendment of the lèse-majesté law (crime of insulting, defaming, criticising or threatening the monarchy).[107]

The electoral supremacy of political dynasties in Thailand is generally more fluid than those in the Philippines: more political families in the former have risen and fell over the years compared to the latter. As a result, Thailand has had fewer multigenerational political dynasties – despite MPs in Thailand outnumbering their counterparts in the Philippine Congress. Contrary to the Philippines where several political families managed to stay in parliament for more than a century, only a few families in Thailand have held parliamentary power continuously – with a maximum stint of only half a century, especially since 1932. Out of the 714 political families, only 67 (9.4%), including the Shinawatra and Chidchob dynasties, secured seats before 1973 and continued to do so in the 2000s.[108]

Unlike the Philippines' dynasties that relied heavily on agriculture and landholding investments, most Thai multigenerational dynasties derived their economic capital primarily from owning businesses in non-

[103] Nishizaki, *Dynastic Democracy.*
[104] Nishizaki, *Dynastic Democracy*; Chambers et al., "The persevering power of provincial dynasties."
[105] Chambers et al., "The persevering power of provincial dynasties."
[106] Bangkok Post, "Paetongtarn Shinawatra elected"; Yoshinori Nishizaki, "Dynastic Democracies: Reflections on the 2019 and 2023 General Elections in Thailand," *Georgetown Journal of Asian Affairs* 10 (2024): 60-67.
[107] Napon Jatusripitak and Mathis Lohatepanont, "After the Grand Compromise: Voter Profiles in Thai Politics," ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, March 28, 2025, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/ISEAS_Perspective_2025_25-.pdf
[108] Cruz and Mendoza, "Dynastic Prohibition"; Nishizaki, *Dynastic Democracy.*

agricultural sectors like manufacturing, telecommunication, construction, transportation and banking. For example, the Pothasuthons of Suphanburi province have massive investments in the manufacturing and transportation sectors. Meanwhile, the Shinawatra dynasty is known for their highly profitable companies in the computer and telecommunication industries.[109] A single family that retains political control over a province is an exception rather than the norm here. Some of these exceptional dynasties are the Chidchobs of Buriram, Khunpluems of Chonburi and Thienthongs of Sa Kaeo.[110] This is in contrast with the Philippines, where a single political dynasty dominating a province is a common occurrence. A few examples from a long list are the Singsons of Ilocos Sur, Ynareses of Rizal, Dimaporos of Lanao del Norte and the Tans of Sulu.[111]

Some political dynasties in Thailand also employ violence, although not as many as in the Philippines. For example, in the early 2000s, the Chidchobs relied on violence to intimidate and eliminate competition.[112] Somchai Khunpleum, the patriarch of the Khunpleum dynasty and dubbed as the "Godfather of Chonburi province," masterminded the murder of a political rival in March 2003. He was jailed in 2013 but was granted parole in 2017.[113] More recently, in December 2024, Soonthorn Vilawan, Prachin Buri PAO president and patriarch of the Vilawan dynasty, was arrested along with six of his aides for the murder of Chaimet Sitsanitphong, his adopted son and a provincial council member. The killing reportedly stemmed from a heated argument linked to the February 2025 local elections. The victim's wife will run for PAO president, so he sought the support of Soonthorn Vilawan, but the latter reportedly preferred to support another candidate.[114]

As in the Philippines, patronage is an invaluable weapon for Thai political dynasties. The Thienthong clan, one of the country's most enduring political dynasties, is a good illustration. The family has conquered the local government of the poor, rural Sa Kaeo province in eastern Thailand and influenced national governance through family members representing the province and other constituencies in the parliament since the 1970s. Aside from a highly successful logistics business, the Thienthong dynasty's continued dominance is also ascribed to their ability to provide direct support to their constituents. "They go down to every area and when there's work or there are requests for help from the locals, they help," shared one supporter of the Thienthong clan. Another supporter remarked: "When my cousin died, I went to ask them to be in charge of the funeral and they did, so that's why I cannot abandon them."[115]

Political dynasties in Thailand are associated with the "most insidious form of corruption" – often perpetrated by high-level officials in government at both the national and local levels. The process of prosecuting corruption cases is arduous, especially if the accused or their relatives are sitting in power, or when the monarchy intervenes.[116] For example, former prime minister and billionaire tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra was charged with graft and abuse of power. After 15 years of self-imposed exile, spent mostly in Dubai or London, he returned to Thailand in 2023. He served a few months of his eight-year jail sentence in a police hospital – not in a prison cell – before being pardoned by the king.[117] This was part of the grand compromise mentioned earlier.[118] Aside from murder, Somchai Khunpleum was charged with corruption involving the sale of an area

[109] Nishizaki, *Dynastic Democracy.*
[110] Kongkirati, "Evolving power of provincial political families."
[111] Angela Ballerda et al., "71 of 82 Philippine governors belong to political families," Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, December 8, 2024, https://pcij.org/2024/12/08/governors-political-dynasties-philippines-provinces-elections/
[112] Purdey, "Political families in Southeast Asia."
[113] Bangkok Post, "Somchai Khunplome, 'Godfather of Chon Buri', dies at 82," June 17, 2019, https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1696676/somchai-khunplome-godfather-of-chon-buri-dies-at-82
[114] Wassayos Ngamkham, "Investigators recommend prosecuting PAO chief for son's murder," *Bangkok Post*, February 25, 2025, https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/2967821/investigators-recommend-prosecuting-pao-chief-for-sons-murder
[115] The Straits Times, "One family, five candidates: Political dynasties rule rural Thailand," November 22, 2024, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/one-family-five-candidates-political-dynasties-rule-rural-thailand
[116] Sirilaksana Khoman et al., "Foreign Investment."
[117] CNA, "Thai PM Paetongtarn Shinawatra survives no-confidence vote," March 26, 2025, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/thai-pm-paetongtarn-shinawatra-survives-no-confidence-vote-5024491
[118] Napon Jatusripitak and Mathis Lohatepanont, "After the Grand Compromise."

within the Khao Maikaew forest reserve to be used as a garbage dump.[119] In Mahasarakham province's Tha Khon Yang municipality, Supachai Butraraj, who served as mayor after his uncle, was ousted by the Ministry of Interior on grounds of corruption. Supachai Butraraj's wife and cousin (son of his uncle) then took turns serving as mayor after him.[120]

The dynasty-poverty connection is also apparent in Thailand. For instance, Mae Hong Son in the Northern region, and Sisaket and Kalasin in the Northeastern region are mired in persistent poverty – consistently among the poorest provinces in the past two decades.[121] Chiang Rai in the Northern region has recently joined the list.[122] Local governments in these provinces are led by dynastic politicians. Mae Hong Son is the poorest Thai province, where one in four constituents, or 24.6% of population, live below the national poverty line as of June 2024.[123] The Wanchaithanawong dynasty, which operates three construction firms, has monopolised the Mae Hong Son PAO presidency since 2006. In 2020, the family's business in politics expanded to Chiang Rai, a neighbouring province, as the sister of Mae Hong Son PAO president won the PAO presidency there. Other relatives have occupied seats in the Senate and House of Representatives. In Sisaket, the PAO president's post has been held by members of the Traisoranakul clan since 2004. The PAO president's sisters are serving as constituency MP and senator, while a brother-in-law was constituency MP between 1995 and 2006.[124] In Kalasin, members of five old political clans – Bunreung, Chaisiwamongkol, Na Kalasin, Sirikul and Sri Traret dynasties – and their supporters comprise the majority of PAO council members.[125]

The expanding electoral success of women since 1973 has bolstered their political representation in Thailand. While this improved gender parity in leadership roles in politics and governance, most of the women elected at both the national and local positions belong to political dynasties, heightening barriers to entry for non-dynastic women candidates. As their husbands, fathers and brothers leave office due to term limits, the wives, daughters and sisters vie for elections to replace them. Or worse, while the male relatives are in still office, the female family members run for other positions[126] – making full use of the inherited incumbency advantage. This is a mirror image of the situation in the Philippines.

Political Dynasties: To Ban or Not to Ban?

There are a host of reforms that need to be implemented to prevent the concentration of political and economic power in the hands of a few, like the elite or political dynasties, especially among developing countries like the Philippines and Thailand where extractive institutions abound. Among these are strengthening the political party system, reinforcing civil society's oversight, bolstering accountability mechanisms to deter graft and corruption, and prioritising policies that address existing inequalities and promote social mobility. Nonetheless, the debate on political dynasties ultimately boils down to the question: should democratic governments ban political dynasties from contesting elections for public office? Taking the associated reforms as a given, there are three policy options: institute reforms without prohibiting political dynasties; implement reforms, along with the total ban on political dynasties; and a partial ban on dynasties in tandem with reforms.

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[119] Bangkok Post, "Somchai Khunplome."
[120] Suthikarn Meechan, "Power and local networks in Northeast Thailand after the 2006 military coup" (PhD diss., University of Canterbury, 2023), https://doi.org/10.26021/14958
[121] The Nation Thailand, "6 provinces in Thailand suffer persistent poverty, as gaps get smaller in some, NESDC report reveals," December 17, 2023, https://www.nationthailand.com/thailand/40033884
[122] The Nation Thailand, "Provinces with the most and least number of poor people," February 17, 2022, https://www.nationthailand.com/in-focus/40012451
[123] United Nations Development Programme, "SDG Profile Mae Hong Son," June 18, 2024, https://www.undp.org/publications/SDG-profile-maehongson
[124] Yoshinori Nishizaki, "Family Ties that Bind: Decentralisation, Local Elites and the Provincial Administrative Organisations in Thailand," *TRaNS: Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 11, no. 1 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2022.8
[125] Meechan, "Power and local networks in Northeast Thailand."
[126] Nishizaki, *Dynastic Democracy.*

Institute Reforms Without a Political Dynasties Ban

Those opposing initiatives to ban political dynasties argue that it is unnecessary – that instituting associated reforms on political parties and accountability measures will suffice. Further, they assert that an anti-political dynasty law violates the right to vote and be voted upon, undermines the democratic principle of equal access to public office and unfairly disqualifies deserving dynastic candidates from running for office.[127] Manny Pacquiao, a former world boxing champion turned dynastic politician in the Philippines, had this to say about banning political dynasties: "Our constitution, our law, states that everyone has a right to run as long as you are qualified. When you don't allow a person to run, you strip them of their rights, which contradicts the law." After a failed bid for presidency, Manny Pacquiao is seeking a senate comeback (he was a former senator) through the May 2025 elections. His brother, wife, son and sister-in-law are also vying for various positions.[128]

Implement Reforms with Total Ban on Political Dynasties

Advocates of political dynasties ban contend that implementing associated reforms will not suffice and may be for naught without an outright proscription of dynasties. They also argue that "rights are not absolute and are subject to reasonable regulation." For instance, the right to property can be limited by land reform laws, while freedom of expression may be regulated by laws forbidding hate speech. They assert that the same logic applies to the right to vote and be voted upon. They insist that the prevalence of dynasties makes elections uncompetitive, contradicting the principle of "free choice of candidates." In their view, banning dynasties does not infringe the right to equal access to public office, so long as the limits imposed are reasonable.[129]

Anti-political dynasty statutes exist in several Latin American countries, namely Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Paraguay. Most are focused on national positions: president, vice president and Congress representatives. In Brazil, Colombia and Paraguay, there are anti-dynasty provisions even for local government posts. The proscription typically spans up to the fourth degree of consanguinity (ie relations by blood) and second degree of affinity (ie relations by marriage).[130]

The Philippines' 1987 Constitution has an anti-dynasty provision. However, enabling legislation by the Congress, 80% of whom come from political dynasties, is required to enforce the regulation. "You cannot expect a house full of dynasties to pass an anti-dynasty legislation – it's like asking Dracula to guard the blood bank," shared political scientist Julio Teehankee.[131] In a bid to curb the dominance of dynasties, Indonesia's Regional Elections Law No.8/2015 prohibited relatives of incumbent regional heads from contesting local elections. However, in July 2015, the Constitutional Court overturned the provision, stating that it curtails citizens' constitutional rights to run for election.[132]

Implement Reforms with Partial Ban on Political Dynasties

While the previous two policy options represent the extreme ends of a spectrum, a middle-ground choice is to impose a partial ban on dynasties, in tandem with the associated reforms. This entails allowing dynastic succession but proscribing dynastic domination, or the simultaneous occupation of various elective posts. As proposed by economist Ronald Mendoza: "allow dynasties to have their members succeed each other in political office but bar them from running for and securing different government posts all at the same time."[133]

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[127] Cruz and Mendoza, "Dynastic Prohibition."
[128] John Mendoza, "Manny Pacquiao on political dynasty: 'Everyone has right to run'," *Inquirer.net*, October 7, 2024, https://www.inquirer.net/416483/manny-pacquiao-on-political-dynasty-everyone-has-right-to-run/
[129] Cruz and Mendoza, "Dynastic Prohibition."
[130] Cruz and Mendoza, "Dynastic Prohibition."
[131] The Straits Times, "All in the family: Philippine political dynasties tighten grip on power," May 4, 2022, https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/all-in-the-family-philippine-political-dynasties-tighten-grip-on-power
[132] Savirani, "Survival against the odds."
[133] Amelia Ylagan, "Again, the political dynasties issue," Philippine Institute for Development Studies, February 19, 2018.

Conclusion

Chaebols, like Hae In's family in the global hit *Queen of Tears*, have a counterpart in politics: political dynasties. These kinship groups treat politics as a family business. They monopolise political power through dynastic succession, whereby family members take turns serving in the same elective position (thin dynasties), and by dynastic domination, whereby relatives occupy multiple positions simultaneously (fat dynasties). While dynasties exist in both developed and developing countries with democratic governments, they are more entrenched and widespread among developing countries due to the prevalence of extractive institutions.

As the experiences in the Philippines and Thailand show, regardless of differences in governance structure and historical and social underpinnings, political dynasties can cleverly exploit formal institutions and informal norms to establish and maintain control of elective posts, steering local and national governance towards their family's interests – away from the welfare of their constituents. Empirically, there is mounting evidence indicating that governments controlled by political dynasties are strongly associated with bad governance. Such misgovernance, in turn, leads to poor socioeconomic outcomes.

The supremacy of political dynasties among democratic, developing countries reflects a broader state failure to build inclusive institutions that equitably distribute power and public goods, and ensure robust and effective measures for efficient, transparent and accountable policymaking and implementation. In the face of poverty, inequality and unreliable institutions, marginalised people will continue to rely on and therefore vote for members of political dynasties who promise access to work and livelihood opportunities, land grants, financial assistance and other state resources. This is a vicious cycle. As political scientist Amado Mendoza puts it:

> *When the poor farmers need land to till, who do they run to? When they need funding, who doles out the money to them? In times of calamities, who do the poor look to? [It is] those dynastic, traditional politicians who will surely still be around term after term, listening to the needs of the less privileged, mourning with them at wakes and funerals. That is the never-paid debt of gratitude.*[134]

Those who benefit from the dysfunctional system will do everything in their power (of which they have a lot) to maintain the status quo: the political dynasties themselves, their cronies, their patronage networks and the businesses that help fund their electoral campaigns. As long as elections remain exorbitantly expensive, and political parties stay poorly institutionalised – lacking in ideology and loyalty, and deficient in funding – non-dynastic candidates will continue to face an uphill battle against the mighty dynasties. Worse, elections may as well be a game of "if you can't beat them, join them" – non-dynastic politicians building their own political dynasties once in office. Clearly, the outlook is bleak, but institutional reforms are not completely impossible.

Discussion Questions

1. What key historical, institutional and socioeconomic factors have driven the emergence and persistence of political dynasties in democratic, developing countries?
2. In what ways do political dynasties in the Philippines and Thailand resemble or differ from political dynasties in other democratic, developing countries? What are the most significant similarities and differences in their origins, strategies and impacts?
3. How do political dynasties affect governance and development? Specifically, what is their impact on the quality of governance and attainment of desirable socioeconomic outcomes?
4. Should democratic countries prohibit members of political dynasties from running for public office? What are the potential benefits and drawbacks of implementing such a ban?

[134] Ylagan, "Again, the political dynasties issue."