
Political Dynasty and Discrimination: The Female Leaders of South Asia

On 10 December 2019, the previously unfamiliar Sanna Marin, 34, catapulted to international headlines in the wake of becoming elected as the new Prime Minister of Finland, consequently becoming the world's youngest incumbent State leader and Finland's youngest ever Prime Minister. The world appeared mesmerized by her age and gender, coupled with the fact that Marin was now at the helm of leading the country's coalition government consisting of five parties, all of which are led by women. International media celebrated Marin's unexpected rise to power as a '*feminist victory*', perceiving her premiership as a manifestation of Nordic gender equality.

In the contemporary era, Western nations are increasingly praised for their liberalist stance vis-à-vis women in leadership positions. From Margaret Thatcher to Vigdís Finnbogadóttir - first female Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and the world's first democratically elected female President of Iceland respectively – women in the West have steadily been gaining more political power in the course of the past few decades. While it is commonly perceived that the Western world is at the forefront of the campaign of women's rights, the question is raised whether having a female leader provides definitive proof that a country has attained gender equality.

According to this measure, South Asia, a region long associated with patriarchy and the subordination of women, was in fact the front-runner in the race for gender equality when Ceylon, or present-day Sri Lanka, elected Sirimavo Bandaranaike as the first female Prime Minister in the world in 1960. The international audience, it seems, has forgotten the glorious days of the South Asian region, marked by the rise of numerous female leaders, well ahead of the emergence of a similar phenomenon in the West. This article highlights the erstwhile prominence of dynastic female leadership in the South Asian region, particularly prosperous throughout the 1960's until the 1990's. Yet, albeit the desire to flaunt with the level of progressiveness as exhibited by their female leaders, South Asia presents us with a paradox. Prevailing clientelist structures and family-based political networks have produced and fostered processes of dynastic succession, particularly evident in the case of the region. In order to diminish the power of political dynasties, and instead embrace and promote genuine female empowerment and leadership, the countries of South Asia must redirect their efforts into encouraging higher levels of participation in governance by women from more marginalized communities. Only in this manner can South Asia truly claim to work towards female emancipation in terms of all levels of governance. While this article does not explore

the overall phenomenon of contemporary female participation in politics, it attempts to highlight the necessity for South Asian States to reconsider their conception of female leadership.

Brief Introduction to the Female Leaders of South Asia

Prior to the 1960's, stereotypical perceptions of gender reigned as much in the South Asian region as they did in the West; whereas politics or the public life of polity was presumed to be a natural sphere for men, the natural sphere for women was presumed to be private. This was exceedingly conspicuous in the distrust expressed by the general public vis-à-vis the announcement made by Sirimavo Bandaranaike - widow of the assassinated Prime Minister of Ceylon, Solomon 'Solla' Bandaranaike – informing that she was taking over his party's leadership in 1960. *"What does she know of politics?"* a cousin of the deceased Prime Minister scornfully asked. *"In Solla's time, Sirima presided over nothing fiercer than the kitchen fire"*, continued Paul Pieris Deriyaganala, who had been best man at the Bandaranaike's wedding. Few forecasts have proved so mistaken. Sirimavo Bandaranaike was the first woman to become head of government in a modern State, when Ceylon elected her as Prime Minister in 1960. Born into an aristocratic Kandyan family, Sirimavo carried on her husband's program of socialist economic policies, neutrality in international relations, and the active encouragement of the Sinhalese language and culture. As with several of Asia's political dynasties, the Bandaranaike family tradition of leadership continued into the next generation. Her daughter, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, whose husband was also assassinated, became Prime Minister and then President in 1994 (with Sirimavo again becoming Prime Minister under her Presidency).

Perhaps the most famous female leader in South Asia was Indira Gandhi, also popularly referred to as the *'Iron Lady of India'*. Born into a Kashmiri Pandit family in Allahabad, she was the only daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister. First appointed Prime Minister in 1966, she harvested widespread public support for agricultural improvements that eventually resulted in India's self-sufficiency in food grain production. Although initially perceived as a puppet by the Congress party leaders during her first term, Indira developed into a strong leader whose greatest achievement arguably lied in India's decisive victory over Pakistan in the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971, occurring during the last two weeks of the Bangladesh Liberation War, eventually culminating to the formation of independent Bangladesh. But in the period between 1973 and 1975, Indira encountered an economic downturn, a mass campaign for her removal led by Gandhian activist Jayaprakash Narayan, and a court case that had the potential to strip her from office. This ultimately led Indira to declare a State of Emergency – a period when democracy blinked out of existence – characterized by inter alia the imprisonment of her political opponents and censorship of the

press. Yet, at the end of her term in 1977, Indira had gone on to become a dominating figure in her country's politics, encapsulated by the 1974 proclamation made by Congress party president Dev Kant Barooah: *"India is Indira and Indira is India"*. Although elected to a second term as Prime Minister in 1980, she was subsequently assassinated by two of her bodyguards in 1984 who sought retribution for the deadly confrontation at the holy Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab. While many remember Indira for her iron leadership, the Emergency is a reminder of the manner in which a female politician became powerful – even possibly dictatorial – and thereafter largely lost the confidence of her own party members and followers. After all, the Emergency remains a black chapter in the otherwise vibrant, democratic history of India.

Benazir Bhutto was yet another member of another powerful political dynasty; her father Zulfikar Ali Bhutto served as both President and Prime Minister of Pakistan prior to his 1979 execution by the regime of General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq. After years as a political prisoner of Zia's government, Benazir would go on to become the first female leader of a Muslim nation in 1988. She weathered Pakistan's political storm for almost three decades, serving as the country's prime minister from 1988 to 1990, and again from 1993 to 1996. In the midst of campaigning for a third term in 2007, she was abruptly assassinated by a 15-year-old suicide bomber who detonated himself during an election rally. The question remains over whether the assassination can be fully attributed to rogue elements, such as the Taliban, or whether the killing can at least in part be blamed on the Pakistani Military.

For almost a span of three decades, as examined in EFSAS Study Paper – ['The rise of Political Islam and Islamist Terrorism in Bangladesh'](#), the premiership of Bangladesh has been altered by two powerful women, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia. And for even a longer duration of time, namely since the 1980's, each of them has led their respective parties, the Bangladesh Awami League and Bangladesh National Party (BNP). Begum Khaleda Zia, widow of former President Ziaur Rahman, was the second woman to head a democratic government as Prime Minister of a Muslim majority country. During her time as Prime Minister in 1991 to 1996, and again from 2001 to 2006, Zia's regime demonstrated a pale imitation of her father's encouraging policy vis-à-vis Islamization. Nevertheless, Zia's intention of maintaining a tight grip onto political power was undermined by her sudden imprisonment in 2018, due to charges of corruption and abuse of power as Prime Minister.

As with many of the aforementioned female politicians, the current Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, is the daughter of a former national leader. Her father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was the first President of Bangladesh, which broke away from Pakistan in 1971. She was Prime Minister from 1996 to 2001, and has held office as Prime Minister since 2009 to the present-day. Much like Benazir Bhutto, Sheikh Hasina was charged with crimes including corruption and murder but managed to regain her political stature and reputation.

In July 2007, an unexpected move was to become a landmark in the history of India. For the first time, a woman was elected not as Prime Minister, but as the President of the largest democracy in the world. At 72 years old, Pratibha Patil was sworn into office for a five-year term with the support of the center-left, a move which the BBC called “*a landmark for women in a country where millions routinely face violence, discrimination, and poverty*”. Although her term in office was marked by widespread criticism and numerous controversies, such as her unusually large number of foreign visits and lenient stance vis-à-vis mercy petitions from death-row inmates, Patil’s victory generally remains considered as synonymous to a step forward towards the upliftment of women in India.

Dynasty and Double-Standards

Regardless of these accomplishments, South Asia presents us with a paradox. Despite the aforementioned examples of powerful women politicians in leading positions, politics in the region continues to be considered a male dominated sphere where women’s political participation is dismal. In fact, governance in all South Asian countries is imbued with a predominantly patriarchal character, reflected in the fact that women form a disproportionately smaller segment of representatives in elected bodies across all levels of governance – and those elected, face severe obstacles in the process of actual participation. The region may have provided the world’s first female elected head of State but has since failed to produce women leaders of the caliber and stature of Sirimavo Bandaranaike or Indira Gandhi.

Whilst many political scientists and policy makers have been captivated by the exceptionalism of earlier South Asian female leadership, acknowledging the extent of its progressiveness in a historical context, *India Today* made a disturbingly accurate assertion in 1989: “*In India the easiest way for a woman to enter politics is to marry a politician*”.¹ Or simply to be born one. Or perhaps to embrace your husband’s political mantle after his assassination. At a closer inspection, the case of South Asia perfectly exemplifies this theoretical supposition; women leaders were mostly the consequence of dynastic political cultures and far off from the ‘ordinary’ woman. Both Benazir Bhutto to Sheikh Hasina, who were violently orphaned, spent a considerable amount of time during their time in power to legitimize their fathers’ political legacies. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, alike Khaleda Zia, lost her husband whereafter she notably gained political legitimacy as the widow of her posthumous partner. This testifies to the fact that politics in South Asia is not only severely violent, but that family connections trump gender prejudice when it comes to high political office. The most important political posts have opened up to women chiefly because of their family ties to prominent male politicians

¹ *India Today*, 30 November 1989.

– the opportunity having been greatly enhanced by their fathers’ or husbands’ deaths, often portrayed as dramatic martyrdom. Thus, the apparent contradiction between the overall status of women in South Asian societies and the startling prominence of a few is less attributable to their having surmounted formidable barriers than their proximity to established male power.

Moreover, the element of social class is particularly relevant to explain the phenomenon of women leaders in South Asia– most of whom clearly are identified as belonging to the elite class. While social class explains much about who holds political power in most societies, it is especially relevant for explaining female leadership roles in societies where the status of women is low as it is in South Asia. Female literacy rests low, access to quality education remains confined, and markedly so, to the elite few. Contrary to the belief that the abovementioned heads of State are the epitome of female emancipation, a closer inspection points to traditional values and patriarchal cultural practices which has prevented women from more marginalized communities from participating in governance and general political decision-making processes. And regardless of this worrying trend, not all female leaders of South Asia have been keen on strengthening or advocating for the rights of their own gender. Benazir Bhutto’s feeble efforts to assist the women of Pakistan was manifested in her unwillingness to confront religious fundamentalists and lack of attempts made at repealing the notorious Hudood Ordinances, instituted during the martial-rule of Zia-ul-Haq. Despite Benazir Bhutto’s initial campaign promise to support women’s rights in the restrictive Islamic country, her vows to Pakistani women evaporated as a result of deeply rooted patriarchy in the country and among its religious leaders.

Naturally, it would be naïve to assume that dynastic politics and social class are limited to women; they are a feature of all South Asian politics. Men of political families – sons or nephews of prominent politicians – are clearly visible on the political arena. Yet, although male political dynasties are in no way an eradicated phenomenon in South Asia – for instance, the Rajapaksa family in Sri Lanka has interchangeably clung onto power with an iron grip for the past decades – space for men to rise in the political ladder through meritocratic means is still considerably larger than their female counterparts.

The silent rules dictating when a woman can attain a leadership position in South Asia, echoing notions of patriarchal political dynasties and double-standards, are in marked contrast to the political success of women like Sanna Marin. Born into a modest familiar environment, defined by her father’s alcohol abuse and her parents subsequent divorce, Marin was raised in a *‘rainbow family’* by two mothers in relatively financially deprived circumstances. Eventually her political career was ignited at a young age, whereby she managed to climb the political ladder at a steady pace. At the time of her inauguration as

Prime Minister of Finland, Marin, was mother to a one-year old daughter and married to her husband. The absence of wealth or a politician husband/father underlines the masculine political world inherently rooted in South Asia where family political ties are usually the main factor behind women's political ascendancy.

Conclusion

While South Asia has claimed some of the most powerful women leaders of the world, a closer inspection reveals that the majority of women leaders have been the consequence of dynastic political cultures. The foregoing sections underline the manner in which South Asian women have generally attained power in ways historically more distinctive and exceptional than leadership routes for men. Once in power, these women have tended to confront particular gender-specific obstacles and stereotypes, often rooted in prevailing doubt of feminine failure being capable of sustaining rational politics. Even Benazir Bhutto, amidst her dedicated feminist politics, acknowledged that she would be far more acceptable politically if married, and thereby conceded to an arranged marriage. Furthermore, the fact that the majority of female leaders come from affluent and dynastic political families undermines the hope for 'ordinary' women to participate in high-level forms of governance.

Attempts at remedying the situation have been made, occasionally delivering some promising outcomes. In 1993, a constitutional amendment in India called for a random one third of village council leader, or Pradhan, positions to be reserved for women. Indeed, both India and Pakistan witnessed record-breaking representation of female legislations in their last elections. The former saw more than 700 women contest seats in the Lok Sabha in the 2019 general elections, of which approximately 11% secured seats – the highest number of victorious female candidates in the electoral history of the country. In Pakistan, the 2018 general election similarly witnessed the highest number of female candidates running for parliament – yet only 4% of these female contestants won seats in the National Assembly. Yet, while using a quota system to provide political representation of women may indeed be a preliminary solution, it risks resulting in an extension of dynastic politics to women whereby daughters and wives of prominent political men will be elected. However, the existence of quotas has the potential to bring in women in massive numbers to local governance institutions and may thereby gradually alter the traditional perception that female '*non-political heirs*' belong to the private sphere.

Despite the encouraging results observed in India's and Pakistan's general elections, much work remains to be done for the South Asian governments. The conditions bringing a few women to political power are sufficiently exceptional and tragic in the lives of the aforementioned individuals that they hardly signify greater general female political power. Governments must tackle the rampant discrimination faced by women on a societal level in

order to assist more women to spread their political wings. In a region where girls continue to be predominantly perceived as a burden and liability, as a result of cultural or religious traditions such as dowry, their education, ambitions and potential are often neglected. Bringing change at the lowest level, coupled with efforts of institutionalizing democratic processes and promoting social mobility, could provide the opportunity for women from more marginalized communities to attain political power through meritocratic processes.

It is time for South Asian countries to relinquish their outdated conception of female leadership - legitimized by the single-minded fidelity to a dead father's or husband's legacy – and acknowledge the real political abilities of women leaders, dynastic or otherwise.



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