Political families in Southeast Asia

Jemma Purdey

> Surname alone does not assure victory. The son of Mayor (Rodito) Ibuna, the one I replaced as mayor, ran but lost in the elections in San Juan. Meaning those who belong to a political clan are not assured of winning unless their parents, siblings or relatives have done a good job in their elective positions. (Former Philippines President, Joseph Estrada, responding to questions about his many family members in present day politics, in Rodel Clapano, 2012)

The political family has an entrenched place within the modern political systems of South East Asian states. Current and former national leaders of the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore are members of political dynasties and elsewhere in the region family networks play central roles in the political lives of these nations. To the international community, democracy and electoral politics signals stability and a commitment to shared standards and values for governance. In the emerging South East Asian democracies, however, family, patronage, nepotism and dynasty are also key ingredients within these polities. Some reflect generations-long traditions of political power-sharing regardless of regime type, whilst others are generated and buoyed by the opportunities presented by the democratic and electoral process itself.

Prominent and emerging scholarship in this field in the study of South East Asia demonstrates the importance and prevalence of dynastic politics in this region. The greatest depth of research in the region on the political family is from the Philippines (McCoy, 2002), with an emerging scholarship on Thailand and Burma. The study of Indonesian political families is also a growing field of scholarship, including studies of dynasties in local government as well as at the national level (Aspinall, 2013; Buehler, 2010, 2012, 2013; Case, 2010; Mietzner, 2010; 2012; Fukuoka, 2012). However, with few exceptions (McIntyre, 2005) these families are examined as a sub-set of corrupt and nepotistic practice, or within the role of elites and oligarchs in electoral politics (Choi, 2011). In the particular study of the political family, scholarship has not extended past the boundaries of these countries and into comparative research.

Post-colonial South East Asia has often defied political comparison; the unique colonial experiences of each country have created a legacy of great diversity of political, legal and social systems, or as Ben Anderson called it, 'the strange history of mottled imperialism in the region' (Anderson, 1998: 4). Recent historical and political research into the nations of the region includes comparisons of its various multi-party systems (Ufen, 2008; Tomsa and Ufen, 2013), personality

Corresponding author:
Jemma Purdey, Faculty of Arts at Monash University, Australia.
Email: jemma.purdey@monash.edu

politics (Dalpino, 2012), oligarchy (Winters, 2011, 2013) and nationalisms (Sidel, 2012), indicating that the potential for further such analysis is significant.

This special issue of *South East Asia Research* seeks to explore the potential for expanding the comparative study of the political systems of the nations of the region as they strengthen their role as globally interactive economies and democracies (Caballero-Anthony, 2005; Tomsa and Ufen, 2013).[1] The focus of this comparison is the place of family, patronage and dynasty in the modern political systems of the region, with articles referring to the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia.

By definition, a family-based approach to the political history of a nation can bring significant new insights. Political dynasty refers to the ability of a family to inherit and to accumulate power and wealth from one generation to the next and frequently functions across a variety of political systems and across time (McCoy, 2002; Teehankee, 2001). Critiques authored in the 1990s (Day, 1996; Day and Reynolds, 2000, Reynolds, 1995) have led to greater emphasis on the 'family' and more nuanced understandings of power relations by historians and anthropologists of South East Asia. Nonetheless, research enhancing our understanding of the role of the family dynasty as a political institution in this region still remains under-represented. As a scholar of the politics of the Philippines, Alfred W McCoy comments as follows:

> Despite the apparent influence of family upon the wider society and its politics, most historians ... have ignored this problem and still treat Philippines politics through its formal institutional structures. Even social scientists, despite an obligatory bow in the direction of the family have generally failed to incorporate substantive analysis of its dynamics into their rendering of the country's social and political processes. (McCoy, 2002: 1)

Studies of dynasties in the Philippines (Coronel et al., 2004: 86–97) suggest that these institutions are built and maintained by a variety of strategies, including wealth accumulation, political machinery, marriage, alliance, myth creation and the media. Moreover, as countries in South East Asia, including the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand examined in this volume, experienced the transition from authoritarianism to democracy over recent decades, both old and new political families and dynasties have used their political muscle and wealth to benefit from and influence this political transformation (McCargo and Uthit, 2005; Teehankee, 2001; Winters, 2011).

This special issue of *South East Asia Research* raises a series of pertinent questions in relation to the family in the politics of the region: why do political dynasties thrive in many South East Asian nations, regardless of the political systems in place? Are modernization and democratization incompatible with dynastic and patrimonial politics? As Camp points out in relation to the family in Mexican politics and its transition to democracy, 'one of the most intriguing questions is the degree to which family linkages are altered in contrast to their presence in the pre-democratic era' (Camp, 2012: 299).

The articles in this volume highlight the importance of an historical narrative within multi-generational studies of families, and we have therefore resisted making a distinction between national and local political families. Instead, the terms 'established' and 'emerging' are used to

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1. This workshop from which the papers in this volume were first collected and discussed was convened by Priyambudi Sulistiyanto and myself at Flinders Asia Centre, Flinders University, Adelaide, 15–16 November 2013. My sincere thanks go to Pak Budi and the Flinders Asia Centre for their support in the design and running of this workshop.

position the families within a temporal and historical context, rather than a geographically or administratively comparative framework (Buehler, 2013; Camp, 2012).

A theme that recurs throughout the collection, and which other studies of political families similarly highlight, is the correlation between heritage and successful incumbency (Dal Bó et al., 2009). Historically based categorizations of these families therefore enable an analysis of continuity and change in the roles and influence of these families over time, and across different political systems. They also allow for those cases where political families shift political focus from the local level to the national and vice versa.

Moreover, for these South East Asian nations, the categorizations 'established' and 'emerging' provide an opportunity to examine the point at which tradition (family dynasty) and modernity (democracy) intersect, and to interrogate the view that political opportunism is the single motive for these families where money politics is the primary tool for those seeking power and influence (Liddle, 2013; Robison and Hadiz, 2004, 2013; Winters, 2011).

The political family in modern South East Asia

Following McCoy et al., this special issue highlights the need to consider the family as a political institution that operates alongside other institutions and sometimes in spite of them; that is, as political actors with agency and strategic intent. The articles enhance understandings of the full range of roles that constitute political influence and participation in the modern democratic state, in both its formal and informal and non-institutional (shadow) forms. This includes the impact of mentoring, networking and family ties as well as the relationships the families have with political parties (Camp, 2012; Huber, 1993; Teehankee, 2013).

A 'family-based' approach allows us to consider the ways in which political legitimacy and moral authority are formed in modern South East Asian democracies where they play a significant role. Within the family itself and in the ways it presents itself publicly, family and national histories are important. Political families promote narratives about their roles as citizens and patriots, servants and leaders of their nation. Common themes, including 'sense of obligation', 'patriotism', 'loyalty' and 'adaptability', resonate for the study of South East Asian political families and provide fertile ground for the comparison and development of existing theoretical discourse in the field.

A deep understanding of family 'tradition' as a motivating agent for pursuing public life builds on studies of oligarchic and patronage systems in these states. As Robison and Hadiz (2004) inform us, as institutions within Indonesian politics and business these families are highly robust, adaptive and opportunistic. But as the cases presented here clearly demonstrate, the political family is *also* highly strategic and ideological in its processes of construction and implementation. Aspinall and Uhaib argue here that this close biographical approach to studying the political family augments existing arguments that see the political family as emerging from political opportunity due to the absence of other institutions in the modern state. Aspinall and Uhaib encourage new approaches to understanding the behaviour of these families, which recognize 'dynasty-building as strategy'. The potential goals range from those which are defensive to those aimed at network and identity resource gains.

Collectively, the articles in this volume identify the characteristics of the political family that have enabled its success. How keenly does this success relate to the external and structural forces that sustain the political family as a central player; and to what extent does success derive from characteristics that are internal, historical, psychological and culturally specific to the particular family unit?

The study of elite democracy

As noted above, this special issue of *South East Asia Research* includes contributions on political families in four South East Asian states: Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia. The approach our authors take is primarily that of case studies focusing on one or several political families. The exception to this is Tadem and Tadem's rich overview of the role of political families in the Philippines, where a deeply embedded system of dynastic rule through its democratic institutions remains as strong today as it has ever been. Given that the most significant scholarship to date on political families in South East Asia comes from the study of the Philippines, unsurprisingly it also emerges as a benchmarking case for this comparative discussion. Tadem and Tadem's overview of the historical context of the political family, leading to a richly detailed discussion of the complex and extraordinary power of these dynasties in present day Filipino politics, can be taken as a blueprint for the futures of the other systems under study (and perhaps also as a cautionary tale). In the Philippines national parliament today, three quarters of the members of the House of Representatives and 84 percent of senators come from political families. As Tadem and Tadem show, these figures are even slightly higher for elected officials at the provincial and local levels.

Four of the eight contributions to this special issue focus on case studies of political families in Indonesia at both the local and the national levels. As a consequence of the proliferation of direct elections at the district and provincial levels since the Regional Autonomy Law of 2005, Indonesia has seen a blossoming of dynastic politics. Buehler (2013), amongst others, has revealed that in some provinces of Indonesia, such as South Sulawesi and Banten, a single family can occupy multiple positions in government and field multiple candidates in a ballot, demonstrating what Aspinall and Uhaib refer to here as horizontal as well as vertical spread. Moreover, as Robison and Hadiz (2004) predicted in *Reorganising Power in Indonesia* – and as the case studies in this special edition demonstrate very well – in the post-reformasi era and with the introduction of direct elections families once close to New Order power through business, political parties and bureaucratic links have simply adapted their approaches. Case studies from Mietzner and Purdey of Indonesia's current two most powerful political families – the Sukarno and Djojohadikusumo families – corroborate Hadiz and Robison's prediction of 'business of usual' in elite post-New Order Indonesia. These powerful families are both relics of the New Order now thriving in the 'open' atmosphere of political horse-trading and economic opportunity. Despite the political currency of the dynastic family, an examination of the place of the political family as an institution, in the way McCoy describes it, remains largely absent from scholarship and is trailing that on other South East Asian nations.

This special issue has in part been inspired by the concern that the rapidly developing field of research into Indonesia's expanding political families has failed to look outwards for sources of comparison and insight in discussions of this political institution's compatibility, or otherwise, with a system of democratic governance. This is a significant oversight, given that Indonesia's neighbouring South East Asian states include democracies of various forms where dynastic politics is alive and well and has, in some cases, been firmly entrenched for some time.[2] We also know that at the same time the involvement of families in the business of politics in these South East Asia nations, including Indonesia, is not new (Hutchcroft, 1998, 2008; Robison and Hadiz, 2004; Sidel, 2004). However, what may be new and

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2. Moreover, although scholarship may be slow to recognize the potential of comparison, it is indeed the case that for two families under close study in this volume – the Djojohadikusumos of Indonesia and the Lees of Singapore – they themselves are making the comparisons with the Indonesian family, explicitly looking to the Lees as a model for their future as an enduring political dynasty.

different from the past are the rapid timelines and particular pathways that the emerging political families have adopted to achieve their successes and which, as our contributors caution, are not guaranteed to last.

Highlighting the need for further theoretical investigation and endeavour, the articles in this special issue and the case studies they present indicate differences in the definition of what constitutes the distinction between a 'political family' and a 'political dynasty'. There is general agreement that a broad definition of 'political family' which extends to informal agency is necessary, be it through links in business, media, political parties or formal and informal institutions of the state. The authors make frequent use of terms such as clan and kinship groups to describe a 'family' unit. Tadem and Tadem go further, extending their definition of the political family to include contacts close to the family but not related by blood. There is also some variance across definitions of what precisely constitutes a 'dynasty'. For some contributors, a family can be described as dynastic when it is able to count individuals across multiple generations who have had significant political influence and agency. For Aspinall and Uhaib and others, a 'dynasty' only emerges when *elected* officials are succeeded in their position by a family member. Nonetheless, in all cases under discussion, the political families include at least three generations of individuals who have occupied significant positions of political agency. As such, the distinction between blood relatives and in-laws and 'other' closely engaged groups becomes a critical one wherein the political family faces questions of renewal and regeneration.

Succession

The issue of succession and grooming is highlighted in each of the case studies included in this volume as a result of which the strategic nature of the 'dynasty', from its creation to its preservation, becomes startlingly clear. As Mietzner, Savirani and Barr demonstrate in their articles, succession within the political family is never certain. Often a rightful or bloodline successor must be overlooked or side-lined, and in extreme cases a non-relative brought in – or as Mietzner describes it, 'outsourced' – to tide over the family until a suitable blood relative is located. In all cases featured in this issue, the issue of re-generation is a central and essential feature. As our authors discover, however much planning and effort these families pour into the successive generations, in the end it is often simply a question of luck. As Aspinall and Uhaib demonstrate with the case of the family of Darwin Ali, no amount of education, ideological coaching and mentoring can guarantee a family member will possess the right blend of charisma, talent or popular appeal. At the same time and complicating matters, as Mietzner and Purdey show for the Sukarno and Djojohadikusumo families, by the third or fourth generation the sense of entitlement to assume a position of political power is also fairly entrenched.

In her article on the Djunaid family of Pekalongan, Savirani explains the risk that this 'sense of entitlement' within younger generations can threaten the dynasty. In this case, not only an absence of political finesse, but a shift in focus from public service (albeit with considerable advantages for the family itself) to solely private concerns for power and wealth accumulation saw the family facing decline until external factors played them back into contention. Indeed, Barr shows how, for the Lees of Singapore, the power of the family machine is such that it is capable of propping up a weaker individual in order to preserve the dynasty at all costs. Barr's detailed analysis reveals the exacting standards and pressure upon family members for whom failure is no option. This pressure boils over into narcissism and authoritarianism once they are themselves in power – assuming their rightful place at the pinnacle of Singaporean politics. This same narcissism is apparent in Mietzner's description of members of the Sukarno family. However, here we see that functioning in an open democracy with popular elections means that candidates cannot avoid the need to establish some kind of rapport with the common person.

A theme which emerges tangentially in these articles, but is greatly in need of further investigation in the context of succession and grooming in the political family, is the question of gender. The case studies in this volume indicate that the idea of 'men first' remains dominant. Nevertheless, we can also conclude that in the selection of an heir, the fundamental attributes of charisma and personal appeal are critical. If the next in line is male but without these attributes, then a woman may be promoted in his stead.

Comparative perspectives

In the workshop discussion that led to this special issue, participants were asked what characteristics they felt were shared between all these families in question. For each of these families their power was patronage-based and included vital links with bureaucracy. Moreover, each could point to an individual who laid the foundations for the ideology and 'family name'. We asked our participants to consider what motivated the family to enter politics, and what was the origin of their sense of obligation or entitlement (or both). We asked what their priorities were and what the family 'ideology' was that informed their position. As Mietzner, Purdey and Barr show on a somewhat meta-scale, these established political families have a clear credo or ideology upon which they often draw to inform policy direction and strategy. For each of the families under study here, both those emerging and established, there is a commitment to a family ideology of some kind, a founding narrative which is built on by each succeeding generation. This ideology is based on historical family figures, family mythology and shared experiences of successes and failures. It is specific and particular to the family as an exclusive unit, but is in various ways made to stand for a wider social experience and basis for political and social policy, representative of the nationalist story.

So whilst Benedict Anderson and others rightly alert us to the differences in the forms of colonial and post-colonial nationalist experience that may inhibit comparison, we can see here a point of comparison well worth making across these unique post-colonial experiences: that is, in the 'uses of history', not only by these nations in the expression of their meta-narrative, but also by political families making claims to power within them. As Purdey details in relation to the Djojohadikusmos' establishment of their own political party, Gerindra, in 2008, the family narrative and the nationalist narrative were explicitly linked, in many ways mirroring the case constructed for the Lee family in Singapore. Likewise, in the Sukarno family we see a singular adherence to an ideology grounded in the foundation of the nation, as the basis of its party, PDI-P. The way this style of storytelling and symbolism is used in political campaigns today demonstrates the salience of historical narrative in relation to successful incumbency for these families. For established families, looking back is critical to plotting a path for the future and their claims to legitimacy among the voters. For the emerging political families who have achieved relatively speedy, albeit wide influence in politics under study here, we see a vulnerability and difficulty in passing the baton to a second or third generation. There is a weakness in the translation of a message and brand past a single individual's profile, unless links to deeper historical sources of community service can be demonstrated and folded into that political brand. As Purdey and Barr show in their case studies here, these narratives are as much contrived and conceived of by political strategists as they are based on real, lived multi-generational experience.

The articles in this special issue reveal the ways in which these political families are deeply embedded in political parties and other institutions of the state and economy yet, most interestingly and importantly, maintain their singular loyalty to the family dynasty above all others. These other links are often short term and highly expedient. Prajak's study of the Chidchob family in North East Thailand is an exemplary case, with the leaders of the dynasty choosing

political allies with an incredible degree of opportunism and regardless of political ideological positions. The loyalty and ideological influence above all is connected to the family and its interests. Other alliances and networks are constantly being formed and broken, and are designed to feed back into the dynastic powerbase.

Turning to the question of what strategies are employed by political families to win power across the different political systems and societies, we address the role of co-option or coercion and intimidation. As Tadem and Tadem describe, borrowing from the works of Sidel and others, in the Philippines the use of violence by political families against their opponents and cronies is a fairly established practice. As Prajak details in the case of the Chidchob family in North East Thailand, violence was employed, often ruthlessly, particularly in the tumultuous period following the 2006 coup, to eliminate and intimidate competition. As Prajak explains, this violence in elections decreased for a time with the decline of local political families and the rise of major political parties and figures and the dominance of ideological politics in Thailand. Violence carried out by and on behalf of candidates including those from dynastic families was no longer seen as a rational or even useful approach to electoral politics. In Indonesia's 2014 Presidential election, many commentators predicted that violence might be employed by or on behalf of the Gerindra party and its leader, Prabowo, head of the Djojohadikusumo family; but in the end this was not the case. Discussion of the differences and similarities in these instances concluded that whilst in the Philippines and Thailand the winner takes all, in Indonesia the political system is more inclusive. Although there are officially winners and losers, participants in the electoral process, including political families, can still gain something from the process through rents, contracts and so on. Moreover, in a system as in the Philippines, where dynasties have such a monopoly on political power, there is quite simply little left to divide up, and as a consequence come higher levels of significant intra-family conflict (between rival families) that have not yet been seen in cases elsewhere.

Vulnerabilities and strengths

A significant discussion centered on the vulnerabilities of these political families, including the role of opposition movements in these societies opposing dynastic politics in the South East Asian nations discussed in this volume. Movements within civil society in these countries oppose corruption and nepotism, so why do they not oppose political families? As Tadem and Tadem argue, the mobilization of civil society movements against dynasties is made more difficult because in many cases they have already been coopted by the dynastic families through social welfare and charity distribution. However, as highlighted in contributions here from Aspinall and Uhaib As'ad, Prajak and Savirani, although it may be concluded that these families are coopting, engaging and deploying the democratic political system for their own benefit, we are reminded that unless the voter remains invested, they are also vulnerable to failure within this system. As quickly as the popular vote can support a celebrity politician or well-known family, it can also punish those who fail to live up to promises, are found to be corrupt or where money politics is played out by rival parties. In Indonesia, Mietzner sees this as a consequence of their relative newness and reliance on patronage networks, rather than on an ideology to which the people can commit for the long term. Hence, we see examples from Aspinall and Uhaib's study of Central Kalimantan where families who are not sufficiently embedded in the community can be more easily punished by the public. As discussed above, without a deeper historical narrative with which to frame the particular family member (either 'real' or invented), families will fail more readily. In contrast, as we see in the Philippines cases and with the Lee and Sukarno families, more established political families appear to be going from strength to strength.

We also ask if it might be correct to claim that crisis periods and transitional moments in these polities are likely to see the creation of new political families. Does the political family, in both its emerging and established forms, flourish in such times of transition, as it appears to have done in Indonesia most recently? Arguably, at such times, not only are we witnessing the weak state in action, but also the political family at its strongest, with all its adaptability, flexibility and capacity to re-shape, retreat and return; and by way of the loyalty of its membership, to do so with the family name and brand intact and its vision unshaken. In the case of the 'Chidchob family political machine' this included a merger with the Thai Rak Thai party for the 2005 election (a former opponent), in the process transforming itself from a political clan with limited, albeit significant local political power, to occupying positions in the national government. As Barr further demonstrates, the Lees represent perhaps the most extreme form of the entrenched dynastic family that is able to deploy its machinery to defend against any vulnerabilities, either in individuals or in the system itself.

The cases presented in this special issue demonstrate in detailed ways the adaptability and ability of the political family to shift and change allegiances and to move between local and national politics within these South East Asian nations. These include established and emerging dynasties, who have been adept at bringing their organizational structures, networks of influence and moral authority particularly in local contexts to align with the party political system of electoral democracy. A crucial factor is the considerable resilience of these families – they are not afraid to fail and then try again – driven in large part by a sense of entitlement, or alternatively obligation to service. Together these factors and the eagerness of the voting publics to identify with a political message that rings familiar, means that the political family, however it is defined, will continue to be a mainstay within these nations for the foreseeable future.

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