

# The challenges to female representation in Asian democracies

Political life in Asian countries is often characterized as a man's world, especially compared to its Western counterparts. Yet we have also seen increasing electoral opportunities for women in the region. Since 2000 alone, women have been elected prime minister in Bangladesh (Khaleda Zia in 2001; Sheikh Hasina in 2008) and Thailand (Yingluck Shinawatra in 2011), and elected president in the Philippines and Indonesia (Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and Megawati Sukarnoputri both in 2001) as well as South Korea (Park Geun Hye in 2012).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, major parties, including the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) of Taiwan, have nominated a female presidential candidate (Tsai Ing-Wen in 2012).<sup>2</sup>

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CURRENTLY THERE ARE seven female presidents and eight female prime ministers worldwide, six from Europe and three from Asia. Furthermore of the forty-one women elected to these offices since World War II, eleven were in Asian countries. More importantly, these women represent the broader political spectrum of the region and have not been limited solely to liberal-progressive parties. The election of South Korea's Park Geun Hye, for example, almost immediately drew comparisons to conservative female leaders from Europe, namely Margaret Thatcher and Angela Merkel. Considering that women comprise half the world's population, the factors that promote or discourage female leadership in politics require greater attention. This analysis adds to this research by connecting evidence from Asia to broader global trends.

## Executive structure

Evidence from Asia provides several challenges to broader claims about female representation. Arguments suggesting that certain cultural contexts restrict opportunities for women have some merit. For example, the Middle East sees the fewest elected or appointed positions for women in politics, with Northern Europe seeing the most. Yet, this should not be conflated with a homogenous influence of Muslim culture, as predominantly Muslim countries, starting with Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto in 1988 and followed by Indonesia and Bangladesh, have elected female leaders. Women have also found electoral success in most former communist regimes, where opportunities within the old regime partially translated into experience valuable in later democratic elections. Yet these cultural or historical experiences alone fail to explain patterns in Asia. Instead of rehashing arguments largely based on vaguely defined cultural distinctions or historical conditions, we present here additional factors that influence female representation. Global evidence suggests several institutional factors that contribute to female success in electoral competition. In terms of elections to executive office, women have been more successful in parliamentary systems than presidential systems. In part this is due to the ways in which heads of government are elected. In a presidential system, candidates must appeal to a broad cross-section of the population, obtaining a plurality if not an outright majority of the vote. This presents a difficult hurdle for any candidate, but especially for women if large segments of the population view women as unfit for office. In contrast, parliamentary systems provide a potentially lower threshold as a candidate can either be elected to parliament through a constituency seat (e.g., United Kingdom) or a party list (e.g., Denmark) and if in the majority party or coalition, then be appointed as prime minister. However, the evidence from Asia shows little distinction by executive structure, suggesting additional factors.

## Male predecessors

One striking characteristic among many of Asia's most successful female candidates has been their familial connections to dominant male figures from previous elections or the democracy movement more broadly. Indira Gandhi, India's first female prime minister, arguably benefited from being the only child of Jawaharlal Nehru. Srimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka, the first female head of

government in the 20th century, was the widow of a previous prime minister. Both female presidents from the Philippines (Corazon Aquino and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo) as well as Indonesia (Megawati Sukarnoputri) were related to former heads of government or major opposition leaders. Park Geun Hye of South Korea remains intrinsically tied to the country's former dictator, her father Park Chung Hee, effectively playing the role of First Lady after North Korean spies assassinated her mother. International coverage of her campaign echoed this connection,<sup>3</sup> with Park supporters opting to positively spin references to her 'strongman' father. The role of familial connections in Asia contrasts patterns seen elsewhere, with only three clear examples of a similar connection in female presidents: current president Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner (Argentina), and former presidents Janet Jagan (Guyana) and Mireya Moscoso (Panama).

The consistency with which, on the national stage, successful female politicians spring from strong political roots of course begs the question whether these candidates would have had similar success without the name recognition. Such name recognition provides at the very least an initial advantage to those otherwise with limited political experience, both in attracting media attention and in assisting in fundraising. Similarly, one must question whether supporters identify a distinct policy from these female leaders or simply associate them with the policies of their male predecessors. For example, despite claims to the contrary, Yingluck Shinawatra of Thailand remains framed by supporters, and opponents alike, as a proxy to her brother Thaksin Shinawatra, ousted in a coup in 2006. Thailand's snap elections in February of 2014 were in part a result of a proposed amnesty bill that opponents claimed would lead to Thaksin's return to the country. Similarly, Park Geun Hye attempted in part to appeal to the nostalgia over her father's transformation of the South Korean economy, the so-called 'Miracle on the Han River', while attempting to distinguish herself in terms of North Korean policy from her predecessor and intraparty rival Lee Myung Bak.

## Filling the quotas

Even if opportunities to the highest office remain in part linked to pedigree, women are seeing greater opportunities in national legislatures. Admittedly, Asian democracies still lag behind their European counterparts: women fill nearly twenty-eight percent of seats in lower house legislators in European democracies labeled 'free' by Freedom House, compared to fourteen percent in Asia.<sup>4</sup> However, even Japan, where female representation in the House of Representatives rarely broke three percent, has witnessed meager increases. Female candidates have also benefited from gender quotas in legislative nominations and seat allocation, although seats set aside for women often do not incentivize party nominations beyond these areas, effectively limiting the number of female candidates overall. In other cases, quotas create a cohort of experienced officials that have a greater chance of winning elections in the future. Similarly, while gender quotas are consistently employed for placement on the party list in South Korea's National Assembly elections, nomination to district races remains rare, with similar patterns also seen in Taiwan. The underlying rationale arguably is that parties remain concerned about whether female candidates can garner a plurality of the vote in district competition.

From left to right: Sheikh Hasina, Park Geun Hye, Tsai Ing-Wen, Yingluck Shinawatra, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

However, part of this concern is predicated on the lack of female candidates with political experience. Simply put, if women are not afforded opportunities to gain campaign and office experience at lower level offices (e.g., city councils), they are unlikely to attempt higher office, much less get a major party's nomination.

## Lower level office

Democracies in Asia face similar demands for greater female representation as seen elsewhere. As these countries gradually expand roles for women in lower level offices, we should expect similar increases in the number of women unrelated to previous leadership that receive nominations and succeed in legislative and executive offices. The pattern of women in Asia with familial ties breaking the electoral glass ceiling, if nothing else, provides role models for the next generation. Whether this familial pattern is a temporary legacy of the third wave of democratization, or a more enduring pattern, is unclear. One way in which Asian countries could take the lead in female representation is through the establishment of term limits for legislative offices and lower level positions, as existing evidence suggests term limits benefit female candidates.<sup>5</sup> Due to incumbent advantages and a declining number of competitive districts, few district races afford women a realistic opportunity to gain seats. Proportional representation systems also potentially create a similar problem in that only a select few women, whether due to quotas or otherwise, are re-nominated. Regardless, until parties across the political spectrum actively recruit women for lower level offices as a means of gaining experience and name recognition, cracks in Asia's glass ceiling will remain limited compared to its European counterparts.

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## References

- Other examples of women in national roles during this time-frame include Pratibha Patil (President of India 2007-2012), Roza Otunbayeva (Kyrgyzstan interim president 2010-2011), Chang Sang (acting prime minister of South Korea in July of 2012), and Han Myeong Sook (prime minister of South Korea 2006-2007).
- While this analysis focuses on Asian democracies, even the People's Republic of China (PRC) has seen a greater role for women, with Liu Yandong elected to the Politburo in 2012 and appointed vice premier in 2013.
- Emily Rauhala. 2012. 'The Dictator's Daughter: Park Geun-Hye May Become South Korea's Next President', *Time Magazine*, December 17. (<http://tinyurl.com/Park-Geun-hye>)
- Freedom House ([www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org)); In contrast, European and Asian countries labeled 'partially free' differ marginally in female representation in lower houses (twenty-two and twenty-one percent respectively). Calculations do not include Taiwan. ([www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm](http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm))
- Leslie A. Schwindt-Bayer. 2005. 'The Incumbency Disadvantage and Women's Election to Legislative Office', *Electoral Studies* 24:227-244.