



## Res Publica - Journal of Undergraduate Research

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Volume 10 | Issue 1

Article 7

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2005

# Why Do South and Southeast Asians Vote for Female Heads of State?

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### Recommended Citation

Wijekoon '04, Lavanga (2005) "Why Do South and Southeast Asians Vote for Female Heads of State?," *Res Publica - Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 10

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/respublica/vol10/iss1/7>

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# Why Do South and Southeast Asians Vote for Female Heads of State?

## **Abstract**

In the post World War II period only fifty women have been elected heads of state of their respective countries. Of these fifty women, eleven have come from South and Southeast Asia, including the first female head of state, Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka<sup>2</sup>. These eleven women represent the second highest number of elected women presidents and prime ministers in a world region, behind Western Europe.

This paper contends that the political cultural variables that influence voters in the South and Southeast Asian region in electing female heads of state include the following: patriarchal perceptions of women, affinity for charismatic leaders, public regard of elite dynasties and public experience of the effects of colonialism.

## **Keywords**

Asians, South Asia, Southeast Asia, women leaders

## Why Do South and Southeast Asians Vote for Female Heads of State?

Lavanga Wijekoon

*She was a woman and inexperienced in the art of politics and cricket.*<sup>1</sup>

In the post World War II period only fifty women have been elected heads of state of their respective countries. Of these fifty women, eleven have come from South and Southeast Asia, including the first female head of state, Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka<sup>2</sup>. These eleven women represent the second highest number of elected women presidents and prime ministers in a world region, behind Western Europe.

Unlike Western Europe, however, the South and Southeast Asian societies from which these women have emerged as elected leaders continue to be associated with patriarchy and the subordination of women<sup>3</sup>. From agrarian economies like Indonesia to relatively liberal polities like the Philippines, men still cling to traditional gender-biased attitudes and perceptions whereby the home and the care of the young and aged are considered the responsibility of women<sup>4</sup>. In Bangladesh, women are often secluded to the domestic sphere as a result of poverty and *purdah*, the veiling and segregation of women<sup>5</sup>. The case of Burma shows that, Buddhism, the dominant religion in the country, is a major influence in creating subservience of women before men<sup>6</sup>. While tradition and religion circumscribe certain freedoms of the female population in this region, some governments have taken an official stance on promoting this situation. The former government of Zia Ul-Haq of Pakistan pursued an Islamization program that idealized the image of women faithful to *chador aur char diwari* (remaining veiled and within the confines of the four walls of one's home)<sup>7</sup>. This manner of gender discrimination in Pakistan has resulted in one of the lowest female literacy levels in the world; barely one sixth of the female population has attended a minimum of three years' schooling<sup>8</sup>. Thus, it is clear that social forces in this region of the world relegate women to the private sphere.

Given the relatively low status of women in this region, one questions why these societies voted for women to lead their respective countries; how so many women have occupied the highest echelons of power while their countrywomen suffered from discrimination, poverty, illiteracy and other societal woes. Many studies have addressed this intriguing paradox. The extant literature on the subject demonstrates that the election of women into

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<sup>1</sup> Donald L. Horowitz, *Coup Theories and Officers' Motives* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), p.157. Comment made by Sir Charles Jeffries on the Sri Lankan head of state, Sirimavo Bandaranaike.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.womenshistory.about.com>

<sup>3</sup> Linda K. Richter, "Exploring Theories of Female Leadership in South and Southeast Asia," *Pacific Affairs*, no.4 (winter 1990-1991), p. 524.

<sup>4</sup> M. Shamsul Haque, "Representation of Women in Governance in Singapore: Trends and Problems" *Asian Journal of Political Science*, no. 2 (December 2000), p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> Mark R. Thompson, "Female Leadership of Democratic Transitions in Asia," *Pacific Affairs*, no. 4 (winter 2002-2003), p.536.

<sup>6</sup> Daw Mya Sein, "The Women of Burma," in "Perspective on Burma," *Atlantic Monthly* 201 (February 1958), p.24.

<sup>7</sup> Anita M. Weiss, "Benazir Bhutto and the Future of women in Pakistan," *Asian Survey*, vol. XXX, No. 5, (May 1990), p.438.

<sup>8</sup> Anita M. Weiss, "Women's Position in Pakistan: Socio-cultural effects of Islamization," *Asian Survey*. Vol. XXV, No. 8 (Aug., 1985), p.867.

these positions of power is a result of the confluence of institutional, structural, and cultural factors. Linda Richter's study (1991) on the political prominence of South and Southeast Asian women demonstrates the interaction between these categories. Her study offers "ideology of patriarchy, familial ties, martyrdom, social class, female lifestyles, the historical context, prison experiences and electoral arrangements" as the most significant explanatory variables to the phenomenon in question<sup>9</sup>. Mark Thompson (2003) presents a similar set of explanatory variables in his study on female leadership of democratic transitions in Asia<sup>10</sup>.

In contrast to the analyses of Richter and Thompson, the scope of this study is narrower. This study identifies the factors that are important to the respective national electorates of this region when making the electoral decisions that result in the elections of female heads of states. It seeks to address the paradox of why individual voters decide to elect women when the patriarchal norms of their societies dictate that women should not be public figures. The voters' general mindsets that lead to these electoral decisions can be represented in the region's political cultures. Thus, this study focuses on the role that political culture plays in the election of women heads of state in the South and Southeast Asian region.

While this approach does not negate the importance of structural factors (e.g. electoral arrangements) or institutional factors (e.g. the candidate's social class), factors which Richter and Thompson's studies have shown to be significant<sup>11</sup>, it provides a closer perspective on the cultural aspect of this political phenomenon. Indeed, the most complete explanation for the phenomenon in question is offered by the combined effect of the different institutional, structural and political cultural variables. This study, which focuses on political culture, is intended to be a complement to the greater body of extant literature on the subject.<sup>12</sup>

This paper contends that the political cultural variables that influence voters in the South and Southeast Asian region in electing female heads of state include the following: patriarchal perceptions of women, affinity for charismatic leaders, public regard of elite dynasties and public experience of the effects of colonialism. Table 1 lists the elected female heads of state of this region that are referred to in this paper.<sup>13</sup> The substantial number of elected female heads of state in this region, shown in the table, affirms that the elections of these women cannot be easily dismissed as a collection of anomalies. The examples of countries like Bangladesh and the Philippines where more than one female head of state have been elected and the cases of Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and India where individual candidates have been elected on multiple occasions, illustrate that the election of women in this region is a recurrent phenomenon that constitutes a discernible electoral pattern.

The variables considered in this study are not independent of each other. For example, the effects of the variable "charisma" are also present in some aspects in the discussion on "public regard of elite dynasties." Another characteristic of this set of variables is that, in most cases, a variable and its influence to the phenomenon will be shared across the polities of the different South and Southeast Asian countries considered.

<sup>9</sup> Linda K. Richter, "Exploring Theories of Female Leadership in South and Southeast Asia," *Pacific Affairs*, no.4 (winter 1990-1991), p. 525.

<sup>10</sup> Mark R Thompson, "Female Leadership of Democratic Transitions in Asia," *Pacific Affairs*, no. 4 (winter 2002-2003), p.536.

<sup>11</sup> The studies of both Richter and Thompson show that these factors are significant in explaining the phenomenon

<sup>12</sup> As Haque (2000) puts it, "It is not only crucial to examine economic structure, institutional patterns, education system, legal provisions and state policy, it is also essential to critically explore gender-related beliefs, norms, and perceptions that exist in various cultures, civilizations, or traditions."

<sup>13</sup> See TABLE 1 in appendix, p.21

A discussion of the effect of political culture in the emergence of female heads of state in this region gives rise to the question of what are the characteristics of the political cultures of the countries of the South and Southeast Asian region that have *not* elected women into the office of chief executive. The case of Vietnam may provide an answer to this query. The political cultures of the countries that did elect women are highly hierarchical and are marked by great class inequality where women with high social status are able to use this identity to legitimize their authority as political figures. However, in post-revolutionary societies like that of Vietnam, social class is less of an issue and thus, women do not have the advantage that high social status confers upon them.<sup>14</sup> Also, according to Neher (1994), unlike the countries considered in this study, Vietnam has a smaller degree of personalist politics, "as the nations' leadership kept their dignity by staying aloof from the people."<sup>15</sup> However, these explanations do not account for the other South and Southeast Asian cases like Thailand, Laos, and Malaysia that also have no record of elected women leaders. Indeed, the cultural contexts of these cases and their influence upon the phenomenon in question deserve scrutiny, but lie beyond the scope of this particular study. In contrast, this study concentrates on the countries that have actually elected women into power and the political cultural determinants in those countries that affected those elections.

#### *Extant Discourse on the Explanatory Variables*

The political cultural approach taken by this study to the phenomenon in question modifies and expands certain variables used in the extant literature. In their respective studies, Richter and Thompson show that a variable is important but stop short of explaining how the variable affects the voters' electoral decisions. For example, while Richter states that familial ties to prominent male politicians are important, she does not elaborate on how the polity perceives these family connections and how this translates into voting behavior that results in the election of women heads of state.<sup>16</sup> This paper, on the other hand, shows how the polities of this region synthesize and internalize a variable such as "familial ties to political elites" through the lenses of their respective political cultures and how these cultural perspectives affect the electoral decisions and voting behaviors that create this phenomenon. In terms of this particular variable, this connection will be explained by showing that the female candidates' familial ties to political elites are important to the larger citizenry because patron-client structures bind the South and Southeast Asian "commoner" to the political causes of elites. The study also argues that the non-elite suffers from an inferiority complex in his or her relations with the elites and will, therefore, choose to be governed by them. The election of these patrician female heads of state is presented as a manifestation of the divide between the elite and non-elite in this region. These are examples of socio-political factors that Richter and Thompson do not elaborate in their studies and seem to take for granted. For instance, the very label that Richter uses for the discussion of this particular factor, which is simply "familial ties" or "social class," reflects this inadequate methodological approach. In contrast, this study considers this factor as "public regard for political elites," in order to capture its political cultural dimensions. Thus, by analyzing the national political mindsets of this region and how it affects electoral decisions, this study makes a logical extension to the variables discussed in previous studies.

Both Richter and Thompson address the effect of patriarchal norms on the emergence of female heads of state in this region. This study refines this particular variable by con-

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<sup>14</sup> Linda K. Richter, "Exploring Theories of Female Leadership in South and Southeast Asia," *Pacific Affairs*, no.4 (winter 1990-1991), p. 529

<sup>15</sup> Clark D. Neher, "Asian Style Democracy," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 34, No. 11 (Nov., 1994), p.952.

<sup>16</sup> Linda K. Richter, "Exploring Theories of Female Leadership in South and Southeast Asia," *Pacific Affairs*, no.4 (winter 1990-1991), p. 528.

tending that patriarchal beliefs significantly affect the phenomenon in question if they manifest themselves within the context of a period of crisis. It shows that the “cult of motherhood,” a patriarchal notion that mothers are caring and incorruptible, which manifests itself in varying forms in the political cultures across this region, is particularly contributory in the election of women in times of crisis.

The extant literature indicates that the colonial experiences of their respective countries affected the personal situations of the women who eventually came into power. Both Richter’s discussion of “prison experiences”<sup>17</sup> and Fernando’s description (2004) of how daughters of political figures were politicized by their fathers’ involvements in independence struggles explain some of the effects of these experiences.<sup>18</sup> This paper, in order to emphasize the political culture of the region’s electorates, shifts the focus from the effects of colonialism on the individual female candidates to the manner in which the effects of colonialism prepared the larger citizenry to accept these women as their countries’ leaders. Therefore, the variable, “public experience of the effects of colonialism” explains how the spread of Western values of gender equality through colonial educational systems, influential colonial individuals and the imposition of laws by the colonial government affected the politics of this region.

The variable of “affinity for charismatic leaders” has not been previously considered in the extant literature. Using Max Weber’s analysis of charisma,<sup>19</sup> this study asserts that these female leaders’ personal situations and the political atmosphere within which they rose to power placed them in a charismatic light. Since personalist politics is an integral component of the region’s political cultures, there is a high affinity for charismatic leaders. Thus, this public perception of the candidate as charismatic is demonstrated as instrumental in the election of these women into political office.

### ***Patriarchal Perceptions of Women***

#### *Background to the South & Southeast Asian Variant of Patriarchy*

The perceptions of South and Southeast Asian women by their societies arise from a highly patriarchal cultural milieu. Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) terms the system of male dominance in South and Southeast Asia as the “classic patriarchy.”<sup>20</sup> Here, a patrilocal-patrilineal complex centers on the operations of the extended household where the senior man has authority over all. The implications of this complex affecting the women of this region are remarkably uniform; they entail forms of control and subordination that cut across cultural and religious boundaries, such as those of Hinduism, Confucianism and Islam.<sup>21</sup> This system extols a public realm of manly virtue and citizenship as independence, generality, and dispassionate reason, thus creating the private sphere of the family as the place to which emotion, sentiment and bodily needs must be confined. The generality of the public then depends on excluding women.<sup>22</sup>

The few women from this region who managed to break out of the “politically irrelevant” private sphere and into the public recognize these deep-rooted gender biases, which as Judith Squires (2000) explains, are “systematic social constructions of masculinity and femininity that are little if at all constrained by biology.”<sup>23</sup> Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan sum-

<sup>17</sup> Linda K. Richter, “Exploring Theories of Female Leadership in South and Southeast Asia,” *Pacific Affairs*, no.4 (winter 1990-1991), p. 531.

<sup>18</sup> Fernando, *The Daily News*, 29 June 2004, p.10.

<sup>19</sup> S.N. Eisenstadt ed., *Max Weber on Charisma & Institution Building* (University of Chicago Press, 1968) p.48.

<sup>20</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti, “Bargaining with Patriarchy,” *Gender & Society*. Vol.2, No.3 (September 1988), p.278.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Judith Squires, *Gender in Political Theory*, (Cornwall, Polity Press, 2000), p.27.

<sup>23</sup> Francine d’Amico & Peter R Beckman. Ed. *Women in World Politics: an Introduction* (Westport, Bergin & Garvey, 1995) p.3.

marized her difficult ascent to power in the face of male dominance thus:

It was a Muslim country with very strong patriarchal tendencies...I found that a whole series of people opposed me simply on the grounds that I was a woman...The clerics took to the mosque saying that Pakistan had thrown itself outside the Muslim world and the Muslim umar by voting for a woman, that a woman had usurped a man's place in the Islamic society...I can deal with political differences, but how do you deal with it when someone says I don't like you because you're a woman and you've taken a man's place?<sup>24</sup>

It is clear that Bhutto felt indignant at the subservient position of women in the Pakistani patriarchy. Her policy pledges articulated in the Pakistan People's Party 1988 Manifesto, such as repealing all discriminatory laws against women and signing the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women reflect her resentment towards the social position of the Pakistani woman.<sup>25</sup> All of these attempts met with stiff resistance from the Islamic political forces of Pakistan and proved to be an insurmountable barrier to realize much of Bhutto's agenda on gender equality.

However, some female heads of state, though enjoying power and a higher status than the vast majority of their countrywomen, did very little to change the status quo, thus implicating themselves in the prevalent patriarchy. The Sri Lankan president, Chandrika Kumaratunga, stated: "I think women must participate in the political processes but, as nature has decided that it is a woman who will have the children...it is a difficult thing."<sup>26</sup> Hardly a clarion call for female representation, the above statement shows that gender biased mindsets are embedded in the political culture to such an extent that women like Kumaratunga, who were capable of rising above the shackles of patriarchy, still perform and acknowledge hegemonic scripts. Similarly, Bhutto's decision to enter into an arranged marriage with Asif Ali Zadari in 1987 also shows a capitulation to the pressures of patriarchy. She describes how the influence of her patriarchal environment deeply affected her personal life: "I couldn't rent a home because a woman living on her own can be suspected of all kinds of scandalous associations...I decided to make a personal sacrifice in what I thought would be a loveless marriage, a marriage of convenience."<sup>27</sup>

Thus, patriarchy emerges as a pervasive and prominent facet of the political cultures of this region. With patriarchal worldviews serving as the lens with which womanhood is evaluated, it is clear that these perceptions dictate that women should be confined to private spaces. However, paradoxically, these very attitudes that relegate women to the confines of the home and a lower status served those few women who came to power as a political advantage.<sup>28</sup> One such patriarchal attitude is the sanctity of motherhood, a highly symbolic feminine attribute that was projected upon and sometimes exploited by these female heads of states during their ascendance to power.

### *A Cult of Motherhood*

Catherine Reissman's study on childless women in India (2000) demonstrates the cultural importance of women to bear children: "Motherhood is [a woman's] sacred duty — a

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.bbc.com>. "Women in Power"

<sup>25</sup> Anita M. Weiss, "Benazir Bhutto and the Future of women in Pakistan," *Asian Survey*, vol. XXX, No. 5, (May 1990), p.438

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.bbc.com>. "Women in Power"

<sup>27</sup> Francine d'Amico & Peter R Beckman. Ed. *Women in World Politics: an Introduction* (Westport, Bergin & Garvey, 1995) p.105.

<sup>28</sup> Mark R Thompson, "Female Leadership of Democratic Transitions in Asia," *Pacific Affairs*, no. 4 (winter 2002-2003), p.536.

value enshrined in religious laws for Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians alike.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the married woman who is childless in India exists at the margins, in a liminal space that is socially betwixt and between. Remaining childless after marriage challenges strong cultural beliefs about the “ordinary and natural” life course for Indian women.<sup>30</sup>

The occurrence of this particular gender construct is quite uniform in the South and Southeast Asian region and Asia in general. Patriarchy dictates that women are of great value when they grow into mothers and into a particular type of mother. A recent study covering 1200 mothers in 12 Asian countries shows that a typical Asian mother is expected to be “a good mother, maid, manager, mediator, and mate.”<sup>31</sup>

In these societies motherhood increases female status and leverage, albeit within their own homes. The mother simile or *matru upamawa* in Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism illustrates the elevated status of the mother in the home. The simile states that the Buddha is the mother of the world, connected to all beings, consoling and compassionate. In the Sri Lankan imaginary, the Buddha is the mother of the world, while it is the mother — and not the father — who is the Buddha of the home.<sup>32</sup> Other social constructs in this region intensify the public regard of motherhood to the point of adulation and worship. This worship of the mother goddess is deeply rooted in the belief in *Shakti* or feminine power, a widespread cultural construct in Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic societies.<sup>33</sup> Thus, religion, tradition and myth consecrate and celebrate motherhood in South and Southeast Asia.

It is clear then that in this region, the woman as a mother is a highly legitimate and respected figure. Thus, when women with families run for political office they are “reassuring” candidates. Although they enter a traditionally male domain in seeking political office, they do so within a traditional gender role. These women can hardly be perceived as the stereotypical “threatening, man-hating feminists, bent upon overturning the patriarchal status quo.”<sup>34</sup>

Dom Moraes’s biography of Indira Gandhi (1980) illustrates this point well. The biographer notes that the acceptance of Gandhi by the Indian male public was “uncomplicated” because “she was a widow, the mother of sons, and she was powerful, like the mother of a household to which a young man returned.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, the sanctity that Gandhi’s identity as a mother gave her made her palatable to a polity unaccustomed to female leadership.<sup>36</sup>

Some female candidates actively portrayed themselves as mothers. For example, Chandrika Kumaratunga of Sri Lanka, during her campaign for the 1994 election that swept her into power by a landslide, often incorporated her identity as a widowed mother of two into her political rhetoric.<sup>37</sup> Thus, she invoked the popular Sri Lankan literary

<sup>29</sup> Catherine Kohler Reissman, “Stigma and everyday resistance Practices: Childless Women in South India,” *Gender and Society*, Vol.14, No.1 (Feb., 2000), p.112

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.115

<sup>31</sup> M. Shamsul Haque, “Representation of Women in Governance in Singapore: Trends and Problems” *Asian Journal of Political Science*, no. 2 (December 2000), p. 59.

<sup>32</sup> Tessa Bartholomeusz, “Mothers of Buddhas, Mothers of Nations: Kumaratunga and her Meteoric rise to Power in Sri Lanka,” *Feminist Studies*, No.1 (Spring 1999), p.213.

<sup>33</sup> TIMEASIA, “Feminine Mystique in South Asia,” Vol.150, No.6, August 11, 1997.

<sup>34</sup> Francine d’Amico & Peter R Beckman. Ed. *Women in World Politics: an Introduction* (Westport, Bergin & Garvey, 1995) p.105.

<sup>35</sup> Dom Moraes, *Indira Gandhi* (Toronto, Little Brown and Co., 1980) p.45.

<sup>36</sup> Dom Moraes, *Indira Gandhi* (Toronto, Little Brown and Co., 1980) p.67.  
Even the Indian films, at the time, extolled the virtue of the type of mother that Indira Gandhi fit into. “Indian films... influence the masses in their attitudes more than any government documentary. [They] portray women as heroines: particularly mothers, widows, abandoned or misunderstood wives...in a sympathetic light”

<sup>37</sup> Tessa Bartholomeusz, “Mothers of Buddhas, Mothers of Nations: Kumaratunga and her Meteoric rise to Power in Sri Lanka,” *Feminist Studies*, No.1 (Spring 1999), p.221.



theme of the “sacrificing mother” to legitimize her candidacy.

The perceptions of Kumaratunga and Indira Gandhi by their respective polities illustrate how South and Southeast Asian cultures recognized and embraced the trope of motherhood as a legitimizing influence on the candidates’ identities. However, this raises the question of whether this identity alone was enough for these polities to vote for a woman. Upon analyzing these women’s paths to power, a significant pattern emerges that indicates that another factor aided their elections: almost all of the women rose to power in the midst of a period when their countries were experiencing a significant crisis in governance. Table 2 presents a brief description of the period of crisis that coincided with each candidate’s election.<sup>38</sup>

This largely consistent pattern of South and Southeast Asian women’s elections during times of crisis is rooted in the electorate’s perception of these women as mothers, and the adulation and respect that the candidates accrue from this maternal identity. Perceptions of female candidates as “maternal” or “caring” become more potent and relevant when the polity is weary and resentful of instability or illegitimacy. Indeed, many of these candidates actively portrayed themselves as the redemptive alternative to the presiding government. For example, when Megawati Sukarnoputri ran against the Suharto regime, she referred to herself as “Mother Mega” and won the public’s acceptance as a figure that would “genuinely care for and soothe an Indonesian public that felt abandoned by the state.”<sup>39</sup> Indira Gandhi, upon her accession to power, was also expected to have a similar cleansing influence on the government; the Indian populace idealized her and looked to her to clean up the game of dirty, corrupt politics.<sup>40</sup> Thus, by invoking the maternal metaphor, the candidates both posited themselves and gained acceptance as the anti-thesis of and solution to the illegitimacy and instability that characterized the presiding regimes.

This redemptive attribute of motherhood and its applications to the elections of female candidates is a common theme in the political cultures of this region. The public evaluates the identities of these female candidates in the context of these ancient mythologies and traditions that speak of the “savior mother.” For example, the Filipino mythological character, *Inang Bayan* (mother of the land), who represents aspirations of justice and independence during times of turmoil was frequently compared by the popular media to the role that Corazon Aquino played in ousting Ferdinand Marcos.<sup>41</sup> A Sri Lankan cook’s testimony during the run-up to Kumaratunga’s election victory also indicates that the general populace made this connection between the candidate’s identity as a mother and the palliative that motherhood bestows: “As a mother she is well-equipped to understand the problems of the island, because she sees them in the light of *paticca samuppada* (the Buddhist concept of regarding relations through compassion, a motherly virtue).”<sup>42</sup>

Thus, the female candidates’ identities as mothers emerge as a political advantage in their elections to heads of state. Even though they were acting in the predominantly male realm of politics, they were doing so in the highly legitimate, symbolic role of the mother. The patriarchies of the region, influenced by mythology and tradition, had created a concept of motherhood that represented incorruptibility and loving care, characteristics that became more potent and relevant during times of crisis. The circumstances in which women won elections as chief executives in these countries have been overwhelmingly those that were marked by high crises in governance. This shows that the trope of mother-

<sup>38</sup> See TABLE 2 in appendix p.21

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>40</sup> D’Amico, p. 48

<sup>41</sup> D’Amico, p.76

<sup>42</sup> Barbara Watson Andaya, “Localising the Universal: Women, Motherhood and the Appeal of Early Theravada Buddhism”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 33(1), (February 2002), p.22.

hood as articulated by the political cultures of the South and Southeast Asian region have aided these women in their elections.

### *Other Patriarchal Perceptions of Women*

Along with the prevalent notion of perceiving female candidates in the light of motherhood, other patriarchal cultural constructs have also aided these women in their ascendance to the office of chief executive. Many South and Southeast Asian women were elected to office upon the death of a related male political figure, such as a husband in the case of Sirima Bandaranaike, or a father in the case of Aung San Suu Kyi. The bereavement these candidates experienced as women elicited sympathy from a patriarchal populace that views them as fragile and weak.<sup>43</sup> These attitudes towards these women have garnered them “the sympathy vote.” That political parties of these countries are cognizant of this effect recently widowed candidates have on voting behavior is well illustrated by the 1994 presidential election in Sri Lanka, in which the widowed Chandrika Kumaratunga ran against Srimala Dissanayaka, who lost her husband (who was a minister and frontrunner in the opposition party at the time of death) to murder several weeks before the election. Corazon Aquino, whose husband was murdered by her rival’s regime, observes the South and Southeast Asian electorates’ tendency to grant sympathy votes to widows thus: “It’s very simple. I just tell my sad story, and people weep... (her party) had to present somebody who has been a victim... and I am the best-known victim.”<sup>44</sup>

Another political cultural aspect that underscores the patriarchy that pervades these countries is the tendency of political parties to nominate women (who will potentially garner votes by virtue of their identities as widows or mothers), as candidates for the chief executive because the male party “veterans” believe that as women they will be easily malleable and could be influenced to carry out these party members’ agendas. For instance, the “Old Guard” of the Congress Party who considered Indira Gandhi to be a “chit of a girl” pushed for her candidacy because they thought that she could be easily manipulated than the usual pool of ambitious and ruthless male politicians. Indeed, certain female heads of state, such as Sirimavo Bandaranaike, were clearly influenced by the powerful males in their respective parties.<sup>45</sup> While this aspect of political culture that views women as “malleable” does not directly speak to the larger polities’ electoral decisions (because the motives of these “party uncles” are mostly kept to themselves), it is important in that it increases a woman’s chances of nomination as a candidate. For example, in the case of Bangladesh’s Begum Khalida Zia, she admits that she would not have considered running for office had the party not requested her to do so.

Since, in many of these cases of female candidacies, party veterans thrust power upon them or the public requested them to take up the mantle of leadership, the electorates perceive these women as “self-effacing” and “modest,” as opposed to the stereotypical male politicians who follow a self-initiated and ambitious path to power. Indeed, this quality of modesty is an essential cultural element of the women of this region. A Burmese shopkeeper articulated his appreciation of this quality in Aung San Suu Kyi thus: “She speaks with modesty. When we listen to government leaders and then to her, I think every Burmese can agree about who is the better person.”<sup>46</sup> Another illustration of the public approval of this characteristic is the instance when Sonia Gandhi, following her convincing election victory

<sup>43</sup> TIMEASIA, “Feminine Mystique in South Asia,” Vol.150, No.6., August 11, 1997

<sup>44</sup> TIMEASIA, “Corazon Aquino,” Vol.154, No.7., August 30, 1999

<sup>45</sup> Donald L. Horowitz, *Coup Theories and Officers’ Motives* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), p.157

<sup>46</sup> Josef Silverstein, “Aung San Suu Kyi: Is She Burma’s Woman of Destiny,” *Asian Survey*, Vol.XXX, No. 10 (October 1990), p.1011.

in 2004, renounced power as India's prime minister, the public media hailed her action as "a noble vedantic renunciation" and even honored her by referring to her as "Saint Sonia" and "Gandhi the Mahatma."<sup>47</sup> Indeed, many of these women, upon being approached by various quarters to take up power, have made it known that they initially declined the offer, but later reversed their decision by making statements such as that made by Sheikh Hasina Wajed: "When one of the MPs called me to inform me that I was appointed (as candidate) I was very angry. I said, I won't do it. But they needed me. I felt it was my duty."<sup>48</sup> The facts that these women were offered the reins of the state (as opposed to them seeking it for themselves), that they initially refused it, and that they later took up the offer for "higher purposes" indicate to the electorates that these women are modest and do not pursue politics for personal gain. Thus, they stand in stark relief, as the more trustworthy alternative, to the corrupt male politicians to whom the politics of this region are accustomed.

### *Affinity for Charismatic Leaders*

Max Weber defines charisma as "a certain quality or qualities of an individual personality by virtue of which he (or she) is set apart from ordinary men (and women) and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualifications."<sup>49</sup> Weber also argues that individuals may claim legitimate authority based on charismatic grounds.<sup>50</sup> Loewenstein (1965), commenting upon Weber's notions of charisma, observes that charismatic leadership is most likely to be found "in those areas of the world in which a popular belief in supernatural powers is still widespread, as in some parts of Asia and Africa."<sup>51</sup> Indeed, in South and Southeast Asia the appeal of "personality" is part of a general emphasis on person-centered politics. (This contrasts with the emphasis on the politics of "issues," for which North Americans pronounce a preference.)<sup>52</sup> The politics of this region often worship charismatic leaders as heroes. The social forces of religion and tradition sanction this idolatry of leaders. For instance, in Buddhist Southeast Asia, religious belief dictates that those in authority deserve their high status because of their good karma. Also, in the Hindu tradition, the concept of the deva-raja (god-king) maintains that the magical powers inherent in rulers provide the basis for their political authority. In these ancient worldviews, the political order is a microcosm of the cosmic order. Therefore, the ruler is to his or her kingdom as God is to the cosmos. Today the leaders of this region continue to wrap themselves in these traditional metaphors that establish and affirm their charismatic authority.<sup>53</sup>

Close analysis of this concept of charisma reveals that the identities of the female chief executives in the South and Southeast Asian region and the circumstances in which they arose to power conform to many elements that bestow charismatic authority upon them. Weber qualifies charismatic authority as a force that is "sharply opposed to bureaucratic and to traditional authority, whether in its patriarchal, patrimonial or any other form... it repudiates the past and is a specifically revolutionary force."<sup>54</sup> Even though the female heads of state of this region benefited from patriarchal norms (such as the trope of motherhood) in legitimizing and enhancing their ascensions to power, their very presence in the highest

<sup>47</sup> S. Gurumurthy, newindpress.com, "Abrupt renouncer to gradual usurper, Sonia's U-Turn?"

<sup>48</sup> TIMEASIA, "Feminine Mystique in South Asia," Vol.150, No.6., August 11, 1997

<sup>49</sup> S.N. Eisenstadt ed., *Max Weber on Charisma & Institution Building* (University of Chicago Press, 1968) p.48.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.46.

<sup>51</sup> Richard Bendix, "Reflections on Charismatic Leadership," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 7, No. 6 (Jun., 1967), p.341.

<sup>52</sup> Sara Dickey, "The Politics of Adulation: Cinema and the Production of Politicians in South India," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 52, No.2 (May 1993), p.350.

<sup>53</sup> Clark D. Neher, "Asian Style Democracy," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 34, No. 11 (Nov., 1994), p.952.

<sup>54</sup> S.N. Eisenstadt ed., *Max Weber on Charisma & Institution Building* (University of Chicago Press, 1968) p.48.

echelon of governance, poses a challenge to the status quo of this male dominated realm. This is especially true when these women, now in power, deviate (with varying degrees of success) from the patriarchal scripts that were written for them during their elections. This became evident when leaders like Benazir Bhutto actively tried to change the greater patriarchal social structure through legislation<sup>55</sup> and when Indira Gandhi gave little heed to the recommendations of the male Old Guard of the Congress Party. Since these women offered their candidacies as the alternative to the corrupt and authoritarian regimes that they were running against, they conform to Weber's definition of "prophets": "individual bearers of charisma, who by virtue of their missions proclaim commandment." As symbols of "feminine, maternal attributes" they heralded a fundamental change in governance and have thus taken on the role of the prophet, and indeed, as Weber notes, follow the "fluid transition from prophet to legislator."<sup>56</sup> Also, since Weber's concept of charisma is born out of "suffering and conflict,"<sup>57</sup> and as mentioned before, these women have endured bereavement and persecution in the midst of a general atmosphere of national crisis,<sup>58</sup> these adverse circumstances further enhance their appeal as hallowed individuals worthy of charismatic authority. Thus, in respect of their presence in the traditional male sphere of politics, the reformist orientations that they bring to office, and the adverse personal conditions within which they arose to power, these women leaders have repudiated the patriarchal scripts that define traditional authority in this region, and thus acquire charismatic authority.

Another factor that gives these women charismatic authority in the eyes of the public are their biological relationships to former male leaders, most of whom were slain and subsequently considered martyrs. Weber explains this as charisma that is "routinized through heredity," which refers to a public recognition that is no longer necessarily connected to the charismatic qualities of the individual, but to the legitimacy of the position that he or she has acquired by hereditary succession. This was especially true of Sirimavo Bandaranaike who was largely considered to lack in charisma but was able to invoke her husband's name and political agenda to bolster her legitimacy as a candidate.<sup>59</sup> An Indian newspaper comments on the manifestation of this aspect of Indian politics: "In India the easiest way for a woman to enter politics is to marry a politician."<sup>60</sup> While Bandaranaike, Corazon Aquino and Indira Gandhi invoked the name of their deceased spouses, in the cases of Aung San Suu Kyi, Benazir Bhutto and Megawati Sukarnoputri, the personas of their fathers, which were firmly connected to the respective independence struggles of their countries, were often invoked during these women's election campaigns.

The charisma of these women is essentially a function of the public's perception of them. Indeed, a leader is charismatic insofar as the followers recognize his or her charisma. Public attitudes towards these female leaders during their election campaigns and the initial period of their governance show that, their charisma was well recognized. The following account of Corazon Aquino's election well illustrates this point: "Filipino culture invited the reassuring intervention of a charismatic leader... This helps explain the meteoric rise of Corazon Aquino from "simple housewife" to beloved leader in a very few months." Thus, the political cultures of this region show warm acceptance of political figures who, through attributes of their own or through attributes routinized through heredity, are perceived as charismatic.

<sup>55</sup> Anita M. Weiss. "Women's Position in Pakistan: Socio-cultural effects of Islamization," *Asian Survey*. Vol. XXV, No. 8 (Aug., 1985), p.867.

<sup>56</sup> S.N. Eisenstadt ed., *Max Weber on Charisma & Institution Building* (University of Chicago Press, 1968) p.257.

<sup>57</sup> S.N. Eisenstadt ed., *Max Weber on Charisma & Institution Building* (University of Chicago Press, 1968) p.48.

<sup>58</sup> See Table 2 in appendix

<sup>59</sup> Baxter et al., *Government & Politics in South Asia*, Westview Press, 1987 p.257

<sup>60</sup> Linda K. Richter, p.528

### Public Regard of Elite Dynasties

As discussed, female heads of state in this region acquire a high public regard, that partly stems from charisma that is routinized through their relationships with prominent male political figures. Since all of these women followed their male relatives to power, their respective polities regard them as elements of political elite dynasties. However, with regard to the women's connections to these dynasties, routinized charisma is not the only factor that contributes to their high level of public support.

These women leaders hail from long-established elite families that command recognition and respect in their respective societies. Historically, traditional indigenous hierarchies like caste systems, prevalent in many of the countries in this region, have created and nurtured their elite status. In Sri Lanka, where the vast majority of members of parliament and heads of state (including the two women heads of state), have been of the higher *govigama* caste, a candidate's caste affiliation emerges as an extremely important factor for general voters in making their electoral decision.<sup>61</sup> The common experience of colonialism in these countries further strengthened the elites' hold on political power. For example, the Spanish colonizers of the Philippines controlled land through the elites, thus increasing the rest of the polity's dependence on these local "middlemen."<sup>62</sup>

The elites and the masses in these countries interact in the context of patron-client relations. This serves as a tangible mode of creating authority. Wurfel (1988) illustrates this relationship with regard to the Philippines: "Peasants and their urban cousins have a deferential style towards elite authority figures. This deference is in part habitual, demanded by generations of patrons. It is also calculating, both because of the favors it helps earn and because of the trouble it avoids."<sup>63</sup> Thus, the deference to elites by the masses is also based on material relations as well as the more intangible effects of routinized charisma.

During colonial times, the elites of this region had the opportunity to acquire an education in the colonial tradition. Thus, the elite's ability to communicate in colonial tongues widened the divide between the elite and the "commoner."<sup>64</sup> Also, as colonial education acculturated the elite in the colonial ways, they became more separate from the masses on both a cultural and economical level. Ironically, the masses still looked to these elites to represent their interests in government. This paradox is partly explained by the great value that is attributed by the cultures of this region to education, coupled with the fact that the elites were those who were equipped with the best education. Today, the educational systems in these countries mirror the inequalities in opportunity between the elite and non-elite. Another modern manifestation of this situation is reflected in the elite's ability to use their wealth to educate their children in Western countries. Table 3 shows the foreign educational backgrounds of many of the women leaders considered in this study.<sup>65</sup>

Thus, the non-elites of these countries have been denied opportunities that were enjoyed by the elites, and continue to be misrepresented by these elites who are culturally and economically separated and have little empathy towards the "commoners" situation. However, these masses profess relatively high satisfaction towards the system that maintains their dependence on the elite.<sup>66</sup> Generations of social inequality created by indigenous caste systems, nurtured by colonialism, and manifested today in lop-sided educational opportunities have created an inferiority complex on the part of the masses towards elite

<sup>61</sup> Baxter et al, p.314

<sup>62</sup> David Wurfel, *Filipino Politics: Development & Decay* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1991), p.5

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p.72

<sup>64</sup> Robert Oberst, "Democracy and the Persistence of Westernized Elite Dominance in Sri Lanka", *Asian Survey*, Vol. XXV, No. 7, July 1985, p.762

<sup>65</sup> See TABLE 3 in appendix

<sup>66</sup> Baxter et al., p.35

dynasties to which the female heads of state of the region belong to. Patron-client relations provide the material underpinning of these inequities. Indeed, this public attitude of deference towards the traditional elite is a significant characteristic of the political culture of this region. This attribute has contributed to the public perception of these patrician women as legitimate figures of authority. It is an extension of the deference that the masses have been showing to the elite dynasties upon which they have dependent for generations. Thus, public regard of elite dynasties emerges as a significant explanatory factor of the election of these women to power.

### **Public Experience of the Effects of Colonialism**

All of the countries that these female leaders come from have a history of colonization by Western powers.<sup>67</sup> As these colonial powers established themselves in these South and Southeast Asian countries, they socialized the local polities in their own political values. With regard to gender issues, the colonial values often clashed with the patriarchal norms that relegated women to a subservient social role. However, these values implemented through the policies of the colonial government and the actions of other influential colonial individuals forced these patriarchal societies to confront their treatment of women. These early inroads to the emancipation of women made the polities of these countries more familiar with the public presence of women and their political participation, and have thus contributed to the rise of the female heads of state of the region.

The educational institutions established by the colonials in these countries encouraged discussion of gender issues and taught upper class locals to question the subjection of women. Although the elite following of these liberal attitudes could be interpreted as their desire to emulate Victorian moral codes (a practice that labeled these elites as “Brown Sahibs”), rather than a result of genuine concern for the situation of their countrywomen, this Western education introduced the debate of gender issues to these societies.<sup>68</sup> Prior to this, gender relations remained frozen in sacred laws and customs.

Although this education was largely limited to the upper classes of the colonies, as these elites assumed power post-independence, they instituted policies that would reflect their liberal attitudes. Policies such as the introduction of formal schooling for women ensured that the effects of this colonial education trickled down to the larger polity as well. Policies followed by the colonizers themselves also helped to familiarize the local polities in the gradual process of granting social and political rights to women. These policies were especially evident in India where the British colonial government banned the deep-rooted Hindu traditions of child marriage and the self-immolation of widows called *sati*. Additionally, widow remarriage, previously castigated by pious Hindus as an “illegitimate desire,” was made legal.<sup>69</sup>

The British also initiated the movement for women’s education in both Sri Lanka and India (and therefore, the states that are now known as Pakistan and Bangladesh, but were part of India at the time), a right denied to these women by the system of *pardah*, or concealment of women from the public eye.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, against the wishes of Indian nationalists, the colonial government imposed a quota system for female legislators in the Indian legislature, a policy that has endured throughout the post-Independence period. The modern form of this policy reserves 30% of the seats in the legislature for women.

<sup>67</sup> See TABLE 4 in appendix.

<sup>68</sup> Tanika Sarker, <http://www.looksmart.com> “Women in South Asia: The Raj and After”

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Nancy Fix Anderson, “Bridging Cross-Cultural Feminisms: Annie Besant and Women’s rights in England and India, 1874-1933”, *Women’s History Review*, Vol.3, Number 4, 1994. p.570

Along with the above effects of the colonial experience, the polities of these countries were also influenced by prominent figures in the colonial society. One such figure was Annie Besant, an Englishwoman who went to India to lobby for the rights of Indian women during British rule. Her efforts were instrumental to the realization of equal suffrage for Indian women in 1921, seven years before British women were given this same right. The effect Besant had on the local polity was evident in the tribute she received in the widely circulated daily *Hindu*: "Annie Besant has proved that women can indeed be noble and great."<sup>71</sup>

Thus, the experience of colonialism exposed the polities of these countries to liberal attitudes towards gender issues. While these attitudes, implemented through policy by both the colonial and post-independence governments, were unpopular among the large conservative, patriarchal segments of society, they did acclimatize the polity to the notion of female political participation and leadership. While the public experience of the effects of colonialism certainly did not make the respective political cultures approve the emergence of women into the public sphere, it did make the political culture more tolerant of female political participation. Whereas previously, gender relations were not the subject of public debate, Western colonial influence provided the catalyst for addressing the situation of women. Thus, the post-independence political culture of these countries have embraced the tension between patriarchy and the movement for female political efficacy, and is now represented by strong local advocates for both sides of the debate. These progressive changes that have come about in the political cultures of this region made the electorates more conducive to accept the women leaders discussed in this paper as the heads of their respective states.

### Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the interaction between political culture and the emergence of female heads of state in the South and Southeast Asian region. Patriarchal notions such as the cult of motherhood, warm acceptance of charismatic leadership, public regard of elite dynasties and public experience of the liberal agendas of colonial rulers are all aspects of the political cultures of this region that have aided in paving the electoral paths to power followed by these exceptional women.

While political cultural attributes may influence political decisions, they do not necessarily determine them. Therefore, the evaluations of the political cultural variables presented in this study must be regarded as complementary explanations to other institutional and structural variables. Indeed, the aggregate effect of these disparate factors must be considered in order to fully explain complex phenomena such as the election of female chief executives in patriarchal societies.

This paper has dealt with these female leaders' respective ascensions to the highest echelon of power. However, there is much evidence that suggests that the political cultural aspects that enabled these women to win elections have also contributed to the women's difficulties in consolidating their authority while in power. Indeed, as Thompson observes, "the ideology of patriarchy dictates that to topple a corrupt regime (as many of these women leaders have done) is one thing, to run a country another."<sup>72</sup> These women's inability to establish their authority as heads of state is evident in the prevalence of both military uprisings against and political infighting within their respective regimes. This particular relationship between South and Southeast Asian political culture and female leadership at the stage when these women assumed office as heads of state provides a potential logical extension to this study.

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p.576

<sup>72</sup> Mark R Thompson, p.540.

## APPENDIX

TABLE 1

COUNTRY	ELECTED HEADS OF STATE
Bangladesh	Sheikh Hasina Wajid (1996-2001), Begum Khalida Zia (1991-96)(2001-present)
Burma	Aung San Suu Kyi (2000)*
India	Indira Gandhi (1966-1977) (1980-1984), Sonia Gandhi (2004)**
Indonesia	Megawati Sukarnoputri (2001-2004)
Pakistan	Benazir Bhutto (1988-90) (1993-96)
Philippines	Corazon Aquino (1986-92) Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001-present)
Sri Lanka	Sirimavo Bandaranaike (1960-65) (1970-77) (1994-2000) Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga (1994-present )

\*Aung San Suu Kyi does not officially hold the office of Head of State and she now languishes in house arrest under the military junta that did not allow her to run for the 1990 elections. However “it is assumed by all who have followed events in Burma that if (she) had been allowed to stand for election, she would have won”<sup>73</sup> Thus, as Aung San Suu Kyi is considered to have achieved a popular mandate her case is considered for the purposes of this study.

\*\*Sonia Gandhi was elected into the office of prime minister but did not accept the post. Like Aung San Suu Kyi’s case, Sonia Gandhi’s is also used in this study by virtue of her popular mandate to govern.

<sup>73</sup> Josef Silverstein, “Aung San Suu Kyi: Is She Burma’s Woman of Destiny,” *Asian Survey*, Vol. XXX, No. 10 (October 1990), p.1015.



TABLE 2

HEAD OF STATE	NATURE OF CRISIS
Sirimavo Bandaranaike	Assassination of husband who was prime minister at the time
Chandrika Kumaratunga	Assassination of president Premadasa and a host of other top political figures
Benazir Bhutto	Accidental death of General Zia, Dissolution of parliament
Indira Gandhi	Death of father and PM at the time, Nehru, Followed shortly by death of Nehru's successor, Shastri
Corazon Aquino	Corrupt and authoritarian Marcos regime
Aung San Suu Kyi	Corrupt and authoritarian military regime
Megawati Sukarnoputri	Corrupt and authoritarian Suharto regime
Sonia Gandhi	(No significant crisis)
Sheikh Hasina Wajed	(No significant crisis)
Begum Khaleda Zia	President Ershad charged and jailed for corruption and illegal possession of weapons
Gloria Arroyo	Massive corruption charges against presiding Estrada government

TABLE 3

HEAD OF STATE	TERTIARY EDUCATION
Benazir Bhutto	Harvard & Radcliffe University, USA
Aung San Suu Kyi	Harvard & Radcliffe University, USA & Oxford University, UK
Indira Gandhi	Bex, Switzerland & Oxford University, UK
Sonia Gandhi	Oxford University, UK
Chandrika Kumaratunga	University of Paris, France
Gloria Arroyo	Georgetown University, USA

TABLE 4

COUNTRY	COLONIZED BY...
Bangladesh	Britain*
Burma	Britain
India	Britain
Indonesia	Netherlands
Pakistan	Britain*
Philippines	Spain, USA
Sri Lanka	Britain

\*Both Pakistan and Bangladesh are considered here to have experiences of colonization because they were part of India during the British Empire.

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