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The study of Women leaders in Southeast Asia

Abstract

In a patriarchal society, the subjection of women to men is a universal custom, so any departure from it appears unnatural. However, since the very early time in Southeast Asia, females enjoyed a relatively high status and independence. They also took important roles no matter in the family or the society. As a result, there were many outstanding women leaders and elite women throughout history.

However, the concept of patriarchy still affects Southeast Asia society. It is more common for a man to hold the position of leader in society. This article studied female leaders of Southeast Asia during the contemporary period to find out factors that supported them to the leading status in their societies, namely Corazon Aquino, the first female to ascend to the presidency in the Philippines' history, Aung San Suu Kyi, the democratic advocate against the Junta in Myanmar, and Megawati Sukarnoputri, the first female president in Indonesia. It is interesting to find that family ties play a crucial role in their way to politics. Then the common thing which all these three women leaders got is gender symbolism. All of them were described by their supporters as “mother” or “ saint” to emphasize their characteristic of purity, mercy, and far away from corruption to contrast with the cheating and lying male leaders. It is also interesting to find that support from religious organizations seems not a vital factor for women leaders.

Keywords

Introduction

The Feminist movements, since the end of 19 century, have campaigned for women's rights from many aspects, including their right to vote, politics, work, equal payment, own property, receive education, equal rights with marriage, and maternity leave. During the period of the Feminist movement, the famous feminist and who himself was a male called John Stuart Mill, wrote a famous essay that is "The Subjection of Women." He described the domination of men over women as the natural order which was commonly and widely accepted by people, as John said, "The subjection of women to men is a universal custom, so any departure from it appears unnatural."¹

Male dominance has long been legitimated in law and custom in current society and lasts for thousands of years. However, the gender division of labor is different; politics and leadership have been viewed as a natural sphere for men. Under this kind of philosophy, Men were naturally to be the leaders in the family, community, company, or even the country; they should have a sense of “the big picture,” while the role of females is limited to the family in most cases. According to the data, in Myanmar, there were only 30 of 664 parliamentary seats, and two ministerial positions are held by women in 2014. In 2020, 65 female parliamentarians currently held seats which only

¹ Mill, J. S. (1869). *The subjection of women* (Vol. 1). Transaction Publishers.

count for 15.29%. The figure in the ASEAN region is 19.8%, much lower than the global figure, which is 25.4%.² The patriarchy becomes a barrier for women to enter politics. However, some women became the president of the country in Southeast Asia during the wave of democratization. They are Corazon Aquino, the first female to ascend to the presidency in the Philippines' history. Aung San Suu Kyi, the democratic fighter against Junta in Myanmar. Megawati, the first female president in Indonesia. This paper is trying to find out if pre-colonial Southeast Asia is patriarchal or not and if these female presidents who emerged during the wave of democratization in Southeast Asia have relied on their family ties or not.

1. Female roles in pre-colonial Southeast Asia

1.1 Patriarchy in pre-colonial Southeast Asia

Until now, the concept of patriarchy has been widely accepted by most of the world's society and lasts for thousands of years throughout human history. In a patriarchal society, it is the men who are holding the leading power. This kind of social system grants male members with higher value, status, and privilege than female members. Whether in politics, laws, religion, education, the army, or the family, the male is holding the leading position. According to Kate Millett, who is well known for her book "sexual politics" and the leader in the women's movement, patriarchy has been used to refer to male domination and the power relationship in which men dominate

² Inter-parliamentary Union. (2020). Women in National Parliament.<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

women. She also pointed out that in a patriarchal society, man is holding the power of the army, industry, technology, higher education, science, government, financial, etc.³ Male dominance has been long time legitimated in law and custom in current society. However, the gender division of labor is different; politics and leadership have been viewed as a natural sphere for men. Under this kind of philosophy, the role of females is limited to the family in most cases. In extreme cases, women cannot work outside, have equal marriage rights, or even get educated.

However, People viewed Southeast Asia as less patriarchal than other parts of Asia. Anthony Reid has argued that women in Southeast Asia have already enjoyed a high degree of economic and social autonomy since the pre-modern period, which is a unique characteristic from other regions. Chou Ta-Kuan, the Chinese diplomat under the Temur Khan, Emperor Chengzong of Yuan, traveled to Khmer. In Chou Ta-Kuan's book, he mentioned that the Khmer women in the Indravarman III period were already like today; they were running most of the small businesses. Besides this, Chou Ta-Kuan also described the tolerance of remarriage and the sexual autonomy for the women that period in his book. In the Philippines, before the colonial period, women also took charge of the important role as the spiritual leader-Babaylan in the community. Datu was usually the man who was the head of the clan. However, Babaylan was not obedient to Datu, that Date and Babaylan worked together. The role of Babaylan was always

³ Millett, Kate. *Sexual politics*. Columbia University Press, 2016.

held by women who were so important for the clan as she was not only a priestess or a cultural figure but also a community doctor or healer.

In the Supernatural realm, the worship of goddesses and female power is significant throughout the Southeast Asia historical period. The Goddess was represented separately from their male counterparts in preclassical Cambodia. The book 《Lost Goddess》 gives the example of Durga Mahishasuramardani, the slayer of the buffalo demon. The image of Durga was found at Ba Phnom, and an inscription was found at Prasat Neang Khmau, ‘tower of the Black Lady. They also found many independent religious establishments dedicated to Lakshmi, who is the Goddess of wealth, fortune, power, luxury, beauty, fertility, and auspiciousness during the preclassical period. What’s more, the inscription recording the establishment of images of Sarasvati (counterpart of Brahma) in the seventh and eighth centuries has been found, the actual sculptures have been destroyed. The worship of the Goddess indicates that the female authority in the supernatural realm in Southeast Asia is an important concept.

1.2 Elite women in pre-colonial Southeast Asia

The Women at the elite level also played a crucial role in contributing to Southeast Asia's history. There are so many women leaders and outstanding women in pre-colonial Southeast Asia. The Trung sisters were viewed as national heroes of Vietnam to lead the first rebellion against the Chinese in 40 AD. According to legend, the

original ruler of Cambodia in around 613AD, according to legend, was a female warrior known as 'Liu Yie' to the Chinese and as 'Soma' in Sanskrit. Mahendradatta was the queen of Bali who ruled before 989–1007 and brought the cult of Durga to Bali from Java. Tribhuwana Wijayatunggadewi reigned Majapahit from 1328 to 1350 which made Majapahit expanded into a giant empire. Burmese Queen Shin sawbu ruled Hanthawaddy from 1453 to 1472. Queen Chiraprapha, the grandmother of King Setthathirath of Lan Xang, ruled Lan Na from 1545 to 1546. Queen Wisutthithewi ruled Lan Na from 1564 to 1578, making Lan Na a stable country during that period. Taj ul-Alam was the fourteenth ruler of Aceh. She became a sultana from 1641 to 1675, being the first of four women to hold the position in succession. Queen Ang Mey was one of few female leaders in Cambodia history who ruled during 1835–1841 and 1844–1845. It is also interesting to find that most of these queens are members of royal and elite families.

1.3 Women's role in contemporary period

Religions and beliefs of Southeast Asia are accused of suppressing women in nowadays society. Although biblically, these religious teaching was meant to keep orders of the communities, translation of these teaching was based conditions of agricultural society of Southeast Asia.

During the pre-colonial period, the Southeast Asia society was still under subsistence agriculture, the division of labor in the family is not apparent. Husband and wife were

working together to do the production for the family. With the development of the economy, subsistence agriculture was replaced by wage employment. Southeast Asia society was also affected by urbanization and industrialization, the division of labor in the household is much more apparent. More and more men were going outside to work. Their income was viewed as the primary income for the family. While women chose to stay at home to take care of the family, women's income was considered a supplement.

2.The analysis of Southeast Asia women leaders' emerge in the wave of democratization

Since the wave of democratization in the 1980s , numerous female leaders have emerged in Southeast Asia. They are Corazon Aquino, the first female to ascend to the presidency in the Philippines' history. Aung San Suu Kyi, the democratic fighter against Junta in Myanmar. Megawati Sukarnoputri, the first female president in Indonesia.

According to the book "The Rise of Women Leaders in the Philippines: A Study of Corazon Aquino and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo" by Jaylyn Silvestre, he analysis the life of Corazon Aquino and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, the two Philippine women who have risen to the presidency in the circumstance of patriarchy country. 4 main factors have been concluded by Jaylyn to explain the rise of Asian women leaders,

which are Family ties, the support from the religion committee, the context of corruption, and gender symbolism.⁴

2.1 Family tie and the legacy of “men”

The family tie is an invisible link between the different family members, which will have a substantial impact on the life of individuals. Thompson analysis why there is the situation that some women succeed in dealing with the sex discrimination and can be chosen as leader of the government in the patriarchy society, he concluded that the main reason is these women are spouses or daughters of eminent politicians who were the martyr in the country. On the one hand, because of the family ties, all these women are from the elite family who was able to get the chance to be well educated especially under the atmosphere of low education rate for women at that time, on the other hand, the kinship ties to male martyrs not only helped the women overcome traditional barriers to political leadership, but they also linked female leaders to their husbands' or fathers' martyrdom which means they were continuing their husbands' or fathers' mission. What's more, in most cases, these women were the only person available in the family of the right age and ability to capitalize on their husband's legacy and martyrdom.⁵A similar thing also happened in American. An article named “Over His

⁴ Silvestre, Jaylyn. "The rise of women leaders in the Philippines: A study of Corazon Aquino and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo." *The Berkeley McNair Research Journal* 11, no. 4 (2001): 165-178.

⁵ Richter, Linda K. "Exploring theories of female leadership in South and Southeast Asia." *Pacific Affairs* (1990): 524-540.

Dead Body” described the careers of female legislators in the U.S. who had assumed political roles on the death of their husbands.⁶ There are very few female top leaders in this patriarchal society without links to politically prominent male relatives⁷, no matter their male relatives are their fathers or husbands.

Aquino was born from a politically elite class family with a background of a good education. She married Benigno Aquino, who was also from a political family.

Benigno has been was one of the most prominent critics of President Marcos. After the dramatic death of her husband, Aquino, she became a replacement for her husband's role participate politics, since then, Aquino changed her role from a housewife to a politician.

Aung San Suu Kyi, Who is "the lady" of Myanmar, and one of the most famous female leadership of democratic transition in ASEAN, has played a critical role in the political development of Myanmar. Family ties had a crucial influence on Suu Kyi's political road. She was the daughter of the Myanmar national hero and political leader Aung San. As Mya Maung described Suu Kyi as an "accidental tourists politician," She went back to Myanmar to visit her ill mother in 1988. Protesters requested her to stand out

⁶ Diane Kincaid, "Over His Dead Body: A Positive Perspective on Widows in the U.S. Congress," *Western Political Quarterly*, vol. 31 (March, 1978), pp. 96-104.

⁷ Antonia Fraser, *The Warrior Queens* (New York: Alfred A. Kn)

to their parade, turning her into the movement's leader overnight.⁸ Since then, Suu Kyi decided to continue her father's mission, and she delivered her first speech to a mass rally on August 26, 1988, at the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon. After that National League for Democracy(NLD) was established by Suu Kyi and other members. She remained under house arrest for almost 15 years from 1989 to 2010, becoming one of the world's most prominent political prisoners. In the 2015 elections, NLD won the polling, and on March 30, 2016, she became Minister for the President's Office, President Htin Kyaw's government. Suu Kyi's family tie led her to the political road and linked her to her father's martyrdom, which won the trust of Myanmar's people.

Megawati Sukarnoputri was the first female president from 2001 to 2004 in Indonesia and the sixth woman to be the leader in a Muslim-majority country. As Aung San Suu Kyi, Megawati was also the daughter of the founding father of Indonesia. Under threats, in 1966, Sukarno was forced to hand over his presidential powers to Suharto. In March 1968, he was placed under home arrest. Megawati became a PDI candidate for parliament in response to the invitation from Soerjadi, who is General Chairman of the Partai Demokrasi Indonesia (PDI). Megawati said:" I had no thoughts of becoming a leader. At the time, I felt that since my children were already independent, I might as well become active in politics." Her joining the PDI was welcomed by her father's followers. On July 23, 2001, the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) removed

⁸ Maung, Mya. Totalitarianism in Burma: Prospects for economic development. Paragon House, 1992.

Wahid from office and later swore in Megawati as the new president. She thus became the sixth woman to lead a Muslim-majority country.

2.2 The support from the religion committee

Religion is the first sense of community. It is also closely interconnected with politics throughout history. Jonathan Fox said, "For every ancient politics entity for which we have records, religion was intimately connected to politics. This is true of Egypt and Greece as well as the Mesopotamian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman empires." The political class and the priestly class were strongly dependent upon each other and significantly influenced the other's decisions. Furthermore, the religious authorities would support the legitimacy of temporary authorities. The temporal authorities would support the religion financially and enforce the religious doctrine with the state's power.

The Roman Catholic Church has also played an essential role in shaping Aquino's presidency's policy agenda and performance. Under the circumstances of Marco's dictatorship, which cost thousands of death and 10 million USD. Jaime Cardinal Sin, the Archbishop of Manila, led the mass non-violent movement named EDSA Revolution. This movement ended the 20-year rule of Ferdinand E. Marcos in February 1986 and brought Aquino to power. Beginning in 1979, the Catholic

Bishops' Conference of the Philippine (CBCP) issued several pastoral letters critical of the Marcos government's economic and human rights policies, while individual bishops such as Cardinal Sin, Francisco Claver, Antonio Fortich, Ireneo Amantillo, Federico Escaler, and Antonio Mabutas, the conservative Archbishop of Davao, published statements and gave speeches admonishing the regime for a variety of shortcomings and failures.⁹ Because the assassination happened frequently, the church leaders spoke out on the necessity for free and honest elections. Under this circumstance, Corazon Aquino was encouraged by Cardinal Sin to participate in the election. Cardinal Sin urged Filipinos to elect those "who embody the Gospel values of humility, truth, honesty, respect for human rights and life," all of which were characteristics related in the popular mind with Mrs. Aquino. He also directed Filipinos to vote according to their conscience, reiterating that the receipt of money to vote was not binding. Furthermore, he warned that God could only forgive a candidate who won by cheating if first the candidate "renounces the office he has obtained by fraud¹⁰", and finally brought Aquino to presidency in 1986.

Buddhists constitute 89% of Myanmar's population. Buddhism and Singha are critical for the stability of Burma society. They even shaped the politics of Myanmar for generations. Before the British colonial period, there are crucial meaningful

⁹ Youngblood, Robert L. "The Corazon Aquino" Miracle" and the Philippine Churches." *Asian Survey* 27, no. 12 (1987): 1240-1255.

¹⁰ Pastoral letter is reprinted in *Bulletin Today*, January 19, 1986, p. 10, emphasis in original.

relationships between Buddhism, kingship, and national identity in Burma. While Buddhism supported the Buddhist King to consolidate the kingship, the King was expected and compelled to defend Buddhism. Sangha, the Buddhist order of monks, was the most influential and respected class in the Burma community. They played an essential role in the harmony of the state. Since the British colonial period, Burma's monks like U Ottama have come to play a decisive role in the country's pro-democracy movement. They were the first nationalists. Aung San Suu Kyi was also the one who followed Buddhism and embrace non-violence philosophy to protest against Junta. In contrast, the Junta lost all credibility and support from the Buddhists during the Saffron Revolution when they shoot the protest monks.

Interestingly, unlike Aquino and Suu Kyi, Megawati Sukarnoputri didn't get much support from the Muslim parties. In contrast, her competitor Suharto made political alliances with hard-line Islamist parties to prevent Megawati's presidential campaign. She was rejected by the religious party leaders as her behavior invoked the Islam Prophetic hadith "Never will succeed such a nation as makes a woman their ruler." In 1998, just one year before the election, several Muslim organizations proposed a plan for a community based on shari'a. They even issued a terse statement that "The President and Vice-President have to be males." Only By the time Megawati's swearing-in ceremony as the fifth president of Indonesia was over, the debate over women's fitness for the presidency had vanished.

2.3 The context of corruption

According to Pak hung , a 1% increase in the corruption level reduces the economic growth rate by about 0.72%, he also found that the most crucial channel through which corruption affects economic growth is political instability, accounting for about 53% of the total effect.¹¹

Marco's corruption and of leadership was a crucial reason for Aquino's candidacy. The Philippine economy was heavily relying on the export business with Americans, it declined much after the death of Benigno Aquino. Marcos's mismanagement led the economy to continue to shrink. So many people lost their jobs, the rate of unemployment increased from 6.25% in 1972 to 11.058% in 1985. Under his corruption rule for more than 20years, the Philippine people were eager to change.

Similarly, the emerge of Aung San Suu Kyi was also during the period of economic downturn. Burma became a socialist republic under the government of the Burma Socialist Programme Party. The economy was deteriorating and people were

11. Mo, Pak Hung. "Corruption and economic growth." *Journal of comparative economics* 29, no. 1 (2001): 66-79.

unsatisfied with the one-party rule. Until 1987, Burma has become from once a rich country to one of the least developed countries in the world. Burma people were not satisfied with this situation, and the student began to riot in 1988 when Aung San Suu Kyi came back.

During the presidency of Suharto, his corruption had made his family rich.

Meanwhile, his government had become a powerful familial tie. Suharto's family strictly controls Indonesia's financial and political resources, Indonesians struggling to have a democratic society, free from the tight grips of the Suharto family's "mafia" network. Megawati, became their hope to rid of Suharto, as she was generally perceived to be free of financial corruption.¹²

2.4 Gender symbolism

It is interesting to find that Gender symbolism played an important role in women's participation in politics. Unlike the male leaders described as powerful, masculine, combative, and hard-line, women leaders are viewed as "mother" or "mother goddesses" who are more softly, merciful, purely, and peaceful. According to Steven, it is no more "natural" to attribute qualities like compassion and mercy to female

¹² Beerkens, Eric. "The student movement and the rise and fall of Suharto." (2000).

deities to characterize actual women as submissive and domestic. Especially when the male leaders have corruption scandals , this kind of purely and the understanding role will resonate with people, which became a big reason to win popularity.

Aquino was viewed as the symbol of "Madonna," who is a pure saint in contrast with the wily and corrupt Marco. In Philippine culture, women were considered less prone to corruption than men. Therefore, even though Aquino's opponent accused her of her inexperience as a politician, she admitted that "I have no experience in cheating, stealing, lying and assassinating political opponents." Immediately her shortage of inexperience for politicians became the advantage, and her role as a politician became the "pure" one.

Gender symbolism is also the critical reason for Suu Kyi's success; too many of Myanmar's people she is known as "Mother Suu." By creating the role of "mother," she is more than a leader and became the "mother" and the hope of Myanmar to win people's trust when Aung San Suu Kyi's news was arrested by the military, a family type of anger and sadness spread in the people's minds.

Megawati benefited from both the role of "avenger" and "mother." Some scholars explain her popularity as a pent-up "enthusiasm for Sukarno." The public became

more and more sympathetic toward her when Suharto tries to expel her from the political domain. Meanwhile, her motherly image – the ibu (mother) factor – calls to the public. She continued to play the "serious game" of political rivalry by not taking any overt action – a personal gesture that had become her political trademark .¹³

Conclusion

Patriarchy has been used to refer to male domination and to the power relationship in which men dominate women. In a patriarchal society, the man holds the power of the army, industry, technology, higher education, science, government, financial, etc. The subjection of women to men is a universal custom, so any departure from it appears unnatural. However, under the influence of the interaction of the history, culture, and religion in pre-colonial Southeast Asia, pre-colonial Southeast Asia is viewed as less patriarchal than other Asia countries. Females are enjoying relatively high status and independence in this region. Also, they are taking important roles no matter in the family or the society. Since the early time in Southeast Asia history, women have already taken jobs as a small business owners, being the spiritual leader in the community. Also, women at the elite level gave many contributions to the prosperity of the countries. Southeast Asia held this special pattern of relations between males and females which is a unique characteristic.

¹³ Haeri, Shahla. *The Unforgettable Queens of Islam: Succession, Authority, Gender*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.

During the wave of democratization in Southeast Asia in the 1980s, , some women became the country's president in Southeast Asia. They are Corazon Aquino, the first female to ascend to the presidency in the Philippines' history. Aung San Suu Kyi, the democratic fighter against Junta in Myanmar. By comparing with the emergence of three women leaders in Southeast Asia, it is interesting to find that Family ties play a crucial role in politics. All these three women were the are spouses or daughters of prominent politicians who were the martyr. Before their father or husband died, they are far away from political life. Their father or husband's "legacy" leads them to take up the mission to politics. Another important issue in the context of corruption, all three women leaders, has emerged under government corruption and the economy falling. People are deeply unsatisfied with the current government and seeking change. Then another common thing that all these three women leaders got is gender symbolism. They were described by the supporter as "mothers" or "saints" to emphasize their characteristic of pure mercy and far away from corruption, compared with the cheating and lying male leaders. Support from the religion committee seems not a necessary reason for selecting women leaders, as Megawati did not receive full support from the Muslim organizations. Only by the time she became the president, the debate over women's fitness for the presidency had become vanished. However, The relatively high status of women, numerous outstanding women in pre-colonial Southeast Asia, and the emerging of women leaders during the wave of democratization doesn't mean that current Southeast Asia is not patriarchal, the content of women leaders is still taking

up a small part.

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