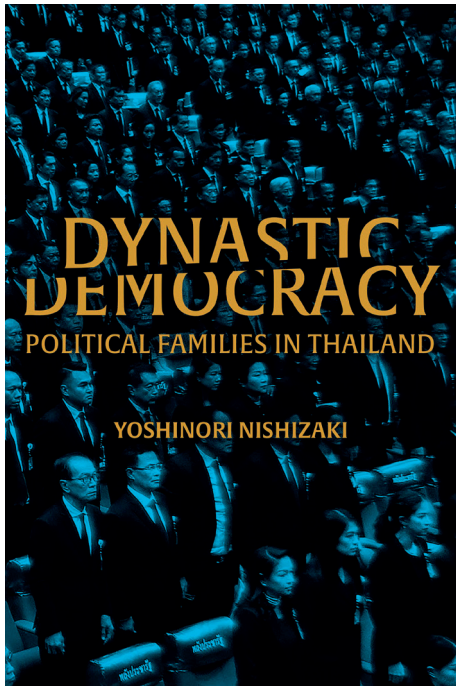


Dynastic Democracy: Political Families in Thailand by Yoshinori Nishizaki (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2022). ISBN: 978-0299338305. US\$79.95.



The notion that democracy in Thailand has been captured by elite families should not come as a surprise to most informed observers of Thai politics. From local political office all the way to Prime Minister, family networks have been central to attaining and holding on to positions of power. However, awareness of the ubiquity of dynastic politics has yet to translate into deeper discussions and systematic understanding regarding how dynastic politics has shaped the development and decay of democracy in Thailand. As a result, dynastic politics has lingered behind the curtain of a political theatre that depicts power struggles in Thailand mostly in terms of class conflicts, urban-rural divides, or ideological opposition between proponents of democracy and military rule.

Nishizaki's *Dynastic Democracy* is best understood as an attempt to expose that this political theatre is, in fact, animated by actors

who are not simply pulling their own strings but are entangled in complex and intertwined networks of families. In Nishizaki's view, these family-based networks, bound together by blood ties or marriage ties, have struggled for power and parliamentary positions in ways that produce broadly visible fluctuations in the political order. Their complicit role in subverting or hijacking democracy at various historical junctures indicates that political dynasties are the real culprits behind why democratization in Thailand failed to produce the kind of democracy that, well, works.

To establish a narrative of how Thai democracy has been captured by, and functioned mostly in the interest of, elite families, the book employs a two-step methodological approach. First, Nishizaki proposes a definition that identifies a political family as a family that has “produced at least two MPs since the first parliamentary election was held in 1933” or “has produced (only) one MP since 1933 yet is directly related by marriage to another family that has produced one or more MPs during the same period” (p. 4). Based on this definition, Nishizaki compiles a dataset that reveals a striking pattern – family rule in Parliament has become more entrenched over time. In other words, Thai democracy has been and continues to be the business of families, with little to no movement toward the kind of pluralism usually imagined or naïvely hoped for by advocates of democracy.

Second, having identified political families, Nishizaki traces their lineages and classifies them into two types: princely and bureaucratic families who served the old regime before 1932 and commoner-capitalist families who have come to dominate

parliamentary politics since 1973. Nishizaki goes to great lengths to paint a vivid picture of who these prominent political families were and are. Drawing from an impressive catalogue of cremation volumes, Assets and Liabilities Declaration Accounts, and commemorative booklets, he meticulously combs through family histories dating back to even before 1932, provides visual illustrations of their kinship networks, and uncovers important connections that one would otherwise miss. The result of this genealogical endeavor is nothing short of encyclopedic – the book will become a go-to reference on political families in Thailand for many years to come, and deservedly so.

Based on his discoveries of the various imprints left behind by these families, Nishizaki makes the compelling argument that elite competition between princely and bureaucratic families and commoner-capitalist families accounts for why Thailand remains perpetually trapped in a “double bind” between military-authoritarian regime and dynastic democracies (p. 168). To summarize, princely and bureaucratic families have struggled to maintain their dominance in Parliament against challengers coming from commoner-capitalist families, who have perfected a recipe for winning elections, using violence, money, and vote-canvassing networks. This caused princely and bureaucratic families to opt for coup d'états and authoritarian rule, which offer them a more reliable framework to convert their family connections with the military and the royal institution into actual political power. Whenever Thailand returned to democracy, commoner-capitalist families also returned to the political scene and have been able to monopolize and exploit public office for private gain. In short, democracy is either toppled by families beholden to the royal-military establishment or undermined from within by families whose dynastic credentials and ambitions render democratic institutions more responsive to their needs at the expense of all others.

In terms of its aims and scope, this overarching argument is comparable to previous arguments made by scholars who are now remembered for developing unique, paradigmatic ways of seeing Thai politics. This includes, for example, Fred Rigg's *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity* (1966) which characterizes politics in Thailand as a narrow competition among bureaucratic cliques with little to no participation from below by an undifferentiated and unorganized mass. Or, to give another example, consider Anek Laothammatas's “A Tale of Two Democracies” (1995) which portrays political conflict in Thailand as emerging from a salient urban-rural divide in terms of worldviews and expectations of democratic politics. Duncan McCargo's “Network monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand” (2006) also comes to mind, and is discussed at length in the book, given the focus on how the royal institution exercises power politically. Nishizaki's *Dynastic Democracy* aspires to similar level of theoretical breadth and relevance as these prior scholarly works but goes much further in terms of making explicit the familial dimension of politics that these works have either taken for granted or downplayed.

Beyond the claim that elite conflicts between two types of families produce failed democracy or absence of democracy in Thailand, the book also makes other theoretical contributions that will likely generate thought-provoking discussions on the role of political dynasties. The most important of these contributions concerns the question of how to historically situate political dynasties in Thailand. Challenging the conventional

wisdom that dynastic politics arrived at the scene only after an abrupt democratic opening in 1973, Nishizaki traces its origin to a much earlier date—1932. Based on the finding that the birth of Thai democracy is synonymous with the emergence of political dynasties, Nishizaki develops two smaller but no less intriguing claims.

The first is what Nishizaki calls “a revisionist interpretation of the incomplete 1932 revolution” (p. 37). Nishizaki discovers that the Promoters behind the 1932 Revolution were drawn from elite bureaucratic families in service of the royal family and were part of the same family networks as the conservative royalist elites, including members of the royal family whose powers they sought to curb. This conflict of interest, according to Nishizaki, lies at the heart of why the Promoters failed to uproot royal influence—they had more to gain by forming intermarriage ties with royalist elites and keeping royal status and privileges sacred than by severing these ties and eradicating royal status and privileges for good. This alternative hypothesis points to the lack of political will and not lack of capacity on the part of the Promoters.

Second, in tracing the emergence of political dynasties to 1932, Nishizaki builds an even larger theory about why dynastic politics is the cause rather than the symptom of democratic failure. Whereas many explanations look to weak parties and ineffective institutions as the source of dynastic politics, along with other ills such as corruption, clientelism, and patronage, Nishizaki inverts the causal arrow and sheds light on the ways in which democratic institutions in Thailand, the Thai Parliament specifically, has been hijacked by political dynasties from the get-go. In other words, it is not that Thai democracy withered due to the supposed arrival of political dynasties—political dynasties were already there to begin with and, as a result, democracy had never flourished. Therefore, any institutional frameworks built on the assumption that quashing dynastic politics would somehow restore democracy were doomed to fail, not least because political dynasties will find ways to get around formal constraints. This idea serves as the underlying theme of two chapters.

In Chapter 4, Nishizaki highlights how political dynasties have been able to take advantage of institutional reforms that were specifically designed to exclude them from parliamentary politics. Specifically, the party-list and the elected Senate have enabled dynastic politicians to fill political offices with their relatives, thereby guaranteeing the continuity rather than the demise of their dynasties. “Family rule,” according to Nishizaki, “is not entrenched in Thailand because political institutions are weak. Instead, political institutions are enfeebled because family rule is robust” (p. 167).

In Chapter 6, Nishizaki elaborates on this idea in his comparison between Thailand and the Philippines, enlarging the scope to address the question of why democratization may fail to produce the kind of pluralist democracy envisioned by the likes of Robert Dahl. Synthesizing the ideas of Martin Shefter, Douglas North, and Francis Fukuyama, Nishizaki argues that the problem is rooted in patrimonial political culture, that is, the tendency “to regard office-holding as a source of their families’ power, prestige, and wealth and see it as only natural that they inherit and transfer their office from generation to generation as a kind of tradition or bequest” (p. 223). Whether this culture becomes entrenched before or after the introduction of electoral institutions has enduring consequences, leading either to chronic forms of political dynasties that become more

nefarious and more pervasive over time or those, like in the United States, that come and go without undermining the pillars on which democracy is built.

As highlighted above, Nishizaki's attempt to historically and culturally situate political dynasties yields a unique and fruitful historical-institutionalist vantage point from which to challenge the conventional wisdom—not just in the current understanding of democratic formation in Thailand but also in how democracy becomes or fails to become institutionalized across comparative contexts. These theoretical interventions will appeal to both Thai specialists and comparativists seeking to make sense of dynastic politics.

In spite of the book's successes, many of which have already been mentioned, *Dynastic Democracy's* overarching argument may leave some readers unconvinced. In striving to offer an alternative grand theory of Thai politics, the book risks oversimplifying complex issues through a dichotomy that leads to a forgone conclusion about political dynasties. To be sure, the book is tremendously successful in terms of demonstrating the prevalence of dynasties in Thai electoral politics, including spelling out who they are and how they have waxed and waned throughout history. Yet, it has not achieved equal success in terms of building a theoretical framework that convincingly captures what—as opposed to who—political dynasties are and why they matter. The depth, nuance and authenticity of the book's empirical raw material are at times lost in translation as the book strives to offer its own interpretation of how dynastic politics has made or unmade Thai democracy.

The issue is partly rooted in how four of the chapters are structured, with intricate details and histories of political families sandwiched in between, rather than integrated into, the arguments. The chapters begin by proposing arguments about political families and proceed, in a formulaic manner, by illustrating these families' networks, offering few analytical guideposts along the way to further develop the claims being made. As a result, the core piece of evidence in these chapters—the presence of family ties among causally relevant actors—is often left to speak for itself without a clear identification of the mechanisms and pathways that lead these actors to take (or refrain from taking) certain actions.

Some of these actions, for example the choice by the Promoters of the 1932 Revolution to compromise with rather than eradicate royalists, may very well produce durable legacies that have important implications for the character or quality of democracy in subsequent periods—the actual outcome that the book seeks to explain by referencing the role of political dynasties. Yet, contingency or agency is rarely seen in the explanation, since it is left implicit that family ties supply both the will and the capacity of families to engage in political actions. This gives rise to a general impression, which ends up becoming the book's unintentional framing, that political outcomes in Thailand are somehow predetermined by the structural conditions of families and, therefore, ought to be understood through the lens of families.

This impression is bolstered by the distinction that Nishizaki draws between princely bureaucratic families and commoner-capitalist families. The problem is not that such a distinction fails to hold up in light of the facts or that there is no merit in viewing Thai politics as a struggle between two types of families. Rather, the problem is

that this dichotomy frequently appears to substitute for an explanation of why political families tend to behave the way they do.

For example, princely and bureaucratic families, by virtue of their familial ties to the institution from which their prestige and privilege are derived, are portrayed as being prone to side with the royal-military establishment, lend support to coups and authoritarian governments, or shy away from forming alliances with commoner-capitalist families. By contrast, politicians drawn from commoner-capitalist families appear forever doomed to fall into depravity, resorting to violence, clientelism, vote-buying, corruption, and misuse of public office. While family ties may indeed be central to explaining these patterns of behavior, the book does not always tell us how. Without drawing an explicit connection between family networks to political action, one is left with the impression that blood and marriage ties not only constrain the scope of possible choices and actions of actors but also inform their identities, interests, and motivations.

It is true that Nishizaki acknowledges the existence of gray areas, implying that readers should not expect the conceptual distinction to apply empirically to all political families. For example, princely and bureaucratic families are sometimes disunited in their methods, even if they tend to share the same common goal of preserving the network monarchy. Meanwhile, commoner-capitalist families are frequently politically divided and cannibalistic, as illustrated in the case of “good” commoner political families affiliated with the Democrat Party who joined hands with the royalist-conservative elites to wrestle power away from “bad” commoner political families (p. 27). Yet, there remains an uneasy tension in treating these cases as exceptions—as small caveats or random errors that should dissolve into the background—especially since neither type of family appears to see themselves in these terms nor operate as a group in pursuit of a goal that necessarily pits one group against the other group.

The book’s focus on the broader historical pattern and dialectical process in which two types of families attempt to outdo one another sometimes precludes other theoretical possibilities that, perhaps, deserve the same level of analytical attention. For example, in Chapter 5, Nishizaki is forced to reconcile with the fact that the royalist elites allied themselves with many commoner-capitalist families, including those previously under the spell of the Shinawatras, to form a political party that would ensure the survival of the military regime through electoral means. The arrangement is framed as a compromise initiated mostly by the regime leader Prayut Chan-o-cha and the network monarchy that he represents. This network monarchy is assumed to be on its last leg and in desperate need for parliamentary backing, which princely and bureaucratic families can no longer deliver effectively. Since this arrangement leads to a higher concentration of commoner-capitalist families in Parliament who are by no means loyal to the regime, Nishizaki interprets the strategy as one that ultimately undermines the royalist project of keeping parliamentary politics untainted by commoners’ touch.

This interpretation is built on and sustains the prevailing narrative that princely and bureaucratic families and commoner-capitalist families remain diametrically opposed, even when they appear to form strategic alliances. Putting the spotlight on this dichotomy, however, comes at the cost of obscuring other salient differences among the same type of families that mattered decisively in 2019—differences between families that pledged

allegiance to the military regime and those that did not, which are hidden in plain sight in Nishizaki's detailed description of families. The book stops short of connecting the dots for readers, opting instead to reaffirm the bigger picture. This is regrettable given that the evidence provided offers fertile ground on which to theorize how some families formed alliances with the regime without alienating their support base, which could help explain why some political dynasties persist while others crumble amidst a regime change.

A closer look at one of the cases Nishizaki explores may shed some light on these questions and underscore the complex circumstances facing political dynasties in the post-2014 period—potentially adding richness to Nishizaki's claim regarding how political dynasties continue to thrive despite the dominance of a military regime that was purportedly on a mission to eradicate them in the first place. The Buranupakorn family, according to Nishizaki, is “a pro-Thaksin family through and through,” especially after they were “persecuted and punished by the royalist elites” (p. 199). Bunlert, former chief executive of the Chiang Mai Provincial Administrative Organization, and his niece Thatsanee were targeted and indeed punished by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) for distributing a letter that criticized the draft of the Constitution in the run up to the referendum in 2016. Although Thatsanee eventually became a Pheu Thai MP, as Nishizaki rightly states, and remains a sharp critic of the junta and the PPRP-led coalition government, the story is different when it came to Bunlert.

Contradicting Nishizaki's account, after Bunlert was suspended and later reinstated as PAO chief by the NCPO under the power of Section 44, he withdrew his support for Thaksin and amended his stance to match the evolving political landscape. First, Bunlert showed up at PPRP's rally in Chiang Mai to declare his support for PPRP's candidates in the 2019 general election. Second, he turned a blind eye to members of his PAO faction who campaigned or organized vote canvassing networks on behalf of PPRP. Third, in the Chiang Mai PAO election in 2020, Bunlert competed for a third term and lost against Pichai Lertpongadisorn, a candidate who received the Shinawatras' blessing. The tide was turned in Pichai's favor after Thaksin posted a video clip on his Facebook page, appealing to Chiang Mai voters directly on Pichai's behalf. Bunlert was made out to be a traitor but, according to former Red Shirt leader Jatuporn Prompan who campaigned for Bunlert, it was the Pheu Thai Party that first reneged on its promise to support Bunlert as candidate for PAO chief.

This series of events suggests that Bunlert was caught in a double bind of his own—between the Shinawatras and the military regime. Ultimately, his motivation to maintain dominance at the provincial level trumped his loyalty to Thaksin and whatever contempt he felt towards the regime that wronged him in the past. Making use of his reputation as a former ally of Thaksin and as the *de facto* leader of a network that remains somewhat autonomous from national-level politics, Bunlert engaged in a careful balancing act that enabled him to stay afloat without being decimated by the military regime or subsumed under Pheu Thai's dominance. There is no telling whether Bunlert will remain opposed or switch his allegiance to Pheu Thai in the future. But one thing is clear—such strategic consideration will be made in light of local dynamics, where longstanding antagonism between princely and bureaucratic families and commoner-capitalist families becomes

secondary to their bid for political survival and dominance, whatever the means. If Thailand's authoritarian regime has relied on the support of the latter families and, in doing so, entrenched family rule by commoners, it will not be simply because the regime was weak but, rather, because commoner families were adept at situating themselves as allies that royalist elites could not do without against the likes of Thaksin or worse.

The case of Bunlert is also striking from the standpoint that he seems to be interested in local office rather than parliamentary position. As Nishizaki indicates, several other actors and families have also shared similar interests in provincial-level politics, for example, the Khunpluems, Asavahems, and Wongwans. The question is why. One might be tempted to assume that these positions offer the right kind of infrastructure for putting together a vote-canvassing or patronage network for winning national elections on behalf of one's own family members or for those who pay the right price. If this assumption is true, then the failure of princely and bureaucratic families to compete with commoner-capitalist families at the election game is, really, a failure at establishing local roots, which warrants its own explanation. Or, perhaps, commoner-capitalist families have come to see local office as an independent source of power that stands the test of time, which needs not be converted into parliamentary positions, although having family members in parliamentary positions may make it easier for those families to sustain local dominance. The motivations of commoner-capitalist families seeking local and national office are, therefore, crucial to complete Nishizaki's analysis of how family rule has become the norm in Thai electoral politics.

The same applies to princely and bureaucratic families. According to Nishizaki, before 1973 "many princely and bureaucratic families were hesitant to venture into electoral politics when Parliament enjoyed relatively little prestige, and its stability or political usefulness was still in question" (p. 19). Elsewhere, Nishizaki elaborates on the decline in princely and bureaucratic elites contesting elections subsequent to an entrenched military rule under Sarit and Thanom in the following terms: "many princely and bureaucratic elites lost a strong interest in bolstering their status and power through parliamentary means. They no longer had to" (p. 82). These remarks suggest that interests in parliamentary positions fluctuate according to their usefulness for families in their pursuit of certain underlying goals such as wealth, status, or security. It is possible, then, to hypothesize that commoner-capitalist families have not simply crowded out princely and bureaucratic families against their will or to the detriment of their well-being. Rather, akin to the situation under the military regimes described above, princely and bureaucratic families may no longer find parliamentary positions to be worthy of their time, energy, and resources in the same way that commoner-capitalist families do.

Nishizaki acknowledges this appearance of decline in interest, stating that in many cases princely and bureaucratic families "have not even put up a fight at the polls" after 1973 (p. 21). Yet, he has not provided an adequate explanation for why this is the case, resorting instead to an essentialist interpretation of how these families "probably see it as beneath their dignity to solicit votes from commoners, especially peasants, in a face-to-face setting" (p. 21). If princely and bureaucratic families have self-selected out of the competition rather than, as the book sometimes suggests, driven out, then the decline

in their share of seats in Parliament may be evidence of something other than electoral disadvantage.

Ultimately, Nishizaki's book contains the seeds of many stories and theories behind the entrenchment of family rule in Thai politics—clearly not all has made its way into the book's overarching argument. From this standpoint, it may be the case that the book's staying power will be based not on its main claim but on the richness of the evidence that it offers. The dataset that Nishizaki compiled, once made available, will also contribute to new research agendas. For example, challenging Nishizaki's own claim regarding how Thai politics has become less pluralistic due to family rule, one might draw a slightly different conclusion from the data, observing, hypothetically, how parliamentary power is no longer concentrated in few families but dispersed in multiple families—a kind of dynastic pluralism.

To conclude, Nishizaki's *Dynastic Democracy* is a monumental achievement in the study of dynastic politics that is worthy of widespread appreciation, consideration and discussion. The book's overarching theoretical claim and smaller discrete arguments will stimulate critical analyses on the issue of political dynasties, providing an intellectual reference point on the question of how democracy relates to dynastic politics. Finally, the aggregate data and qualitative evidence that the book uncovers and organizes according to time periods and types of families will not only set the benchmark but also provide a robust foundation for future research on political dynasties and Thai democracy.

Napon Jatusripitak