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Dynastic Democracy: Political Families in Thailand

YOSHINORI NISHIZAKI

Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2022.

Summary

In *Dynastic Democracy*, Nishizaki Yoshinori shows that political families exist in Thailand and that they are important. The author defines a “political family” as

(1) a family that has produced at least two MPs since the first parliamentary election was held in 1933, or (2) a family that 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)

This definition, as acknowledged by Nishizaki, is an expansion of the one used by most scholars, who only count a family with at least two MPs as a political family (p. 5).

Nishizaki categorizes political families into two groups: royally related “princely or bureaucratic families”—depending on their political and genealogical roots—and “capitalist-commoner families.” Chapters 4 and 5 argue about “the clash between the 2 factions,” reflecting the chaos that Thailand has long been facing. It may be concluded that the author’s main argument is that the fate of Thai democracy has fallen into the hands of these two factions; democracy is either incomplete or temporarily wiped away.

In a sense, it may be said that Nishizaki straightforwardly insists on the significance of the “agency-based explanation” of Thai politics as well as the network politics that host these agencies. Furthermore, the foundational hypothesis that Nishizaki builds his argument on is simply that networks or dynasties (political families) are bad for democracy. Therefore, if he can prove that they still exist and have a significant presence—which he does—then a proper democratic regime is not yet in place.

Such a claim reminds me of the abundant literature on Thai politics during the late 1990s and early 2000s, particularly during and after Thaksin’s first term as prime minister. Both conservative scholars like Anek Laothammatas (1995) and progressive scholars like Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker (2004) and Kasian Tejapira (2006) have a similar perspective on so-called political families, dynasties, and politicians.

Building on the aforementioned claim, Nishizaki arrives at another point in his main argument: it is not Thai politics that has bred political dynasties or families, but the long-rooted political families that have bred the current state of Thai democracy, which is incomplete and decayed. This argument runs counter to the observations of many scholars of Thai politics, who tend to claim that it is the Thai political structure and ecosystem that have produced the conditions for political dynasties to flourish. Nishizaki is almost claiming that it is these political families that behave as

the “structure” itself and have bred the whole ecosystem of the Thai political landscape.

The endurance of political families, as argued by Nishizaki, may be seen from his counterargument against Thai political observers such as James Ockey (2015) and Prajak Kongkirati (2016) that these families emerged at the dawn of Thai democracy in 1932—not in 1973, as most people believe. Of course, there was an awareness of political families from 1932, but most scholars claim that these families are based predominantly in Bangkok or the central plain and not nationwide (see, for example, Prajak 2016). Nishizaki argues otherwise, claiming that these families have long been part of a nationwide network.

The Good

This work’s most obvious and probably unarguable contribution is the information it provides. It clearly illustrates Nishizaki’s information-gathering and synthetization capabilities at a magical level. The number of sources and amount of information—from the cremation volumes to the Assets and Liabilities Declaration Accounts and so forth—that this work has collected is unimaginable. The author seems to be cognizant of this, since he mentions that the book may be extremely boring due to the data overload. This point may be considered both the weakness and the strength of this work from his point of view. I concur with Nishizaki that this is the pinnacle of his work, but the boredom it creates is far from being the book’s worst weakness, as will be discussed later on.

The extensiveness of its data will easily make this book a scholarly reference on the topic for many years to come. The data is not only good in its raw form, but it also provides significant elaborative power for Nishizaki’s argument. One of Nishizaki’s objectives in this work is to confirm the influence of political families as the core factor in shaping Thailand’s political landscape. This is a claim that goes against the recent conventional scholastic opinion on Thai electoral politics, which is founded on a structural change in the way of convincing voters—from charismatic to programmatic, as studied via the clientelistic relationship (Viengrat 2022; 2023). Nishizaki, though he does not deny such a change (p. xv), has made the agency-based claim that political families and network politics still play a much greater role and that, to a certain degree, the widely accepted clientelistic relationship is simply a subset of this dynastic ecosystem (p. xvi).

In order to back such a claim, a tremendous amount of information has to be provided to show the “objective and somewhat undeniable influence” of political families; and the author has achieved this feat. In this sense, the information about the 3,454 MPs throughout Thai parliamentary history that Nishizaki has collected will act as an unsurpassable wall of evidence that political families in Thailand have played a significant role in the development of Thai democracy. Their percentage in the share of parliamentary seats throughout Thai modern political history is not to be scoffed at. Nishizaki has proven that political families (and, by association, agency-based arguments) have been downplayed too much in recent years.

The structural stability of political families in Nishizaki's work would force most observers of Thai politics, particularly the progressive camp, to reconsider their claim on the structural change and dynamic in Thai elections. I believe that this, together with the power of information the author has painstakingly collected, is a huge contribution to academia.

The Bad

Although *Dynastic Democracy* has greatly contributed to our understanding of Thai studies, as mentioned above, it is not flawless. It is actually far from being so. It falls short in four main areas. First, it does not offer much of an original argument. Second, the author is so obsessed with the character of "dynastic families" that he seems to overlook the factors that actually affect and change these dynasties. Third, the work lacks proper criteria to support its claim that political families are significant in Thai politics. And lastly, the work equates "dynastic democracy" with the decay of democracy in a black-and-white manner that is too simplistic.

Nishizaki's arguments make a contribution to some extent, but they are at best unoriginal and borderline irrelevant to the mountain of information that the author himself has meticulously collected and presented. Nishizaki simply tells us, using the data he collected, that political families do exist—but he does not elaborate on their significance. He mentions that dynasties are bad for democracy, and he proposes—albeit not in much detail—reasons for why princely and bureaucratic families carried out coups against the behavior of capitalist-commoners. The volume lacks a discussion of principles and conceptual criteria to explain why political families are bad or why their existence matters. The work simply portrays the role and location of political families as characters in a historical context but barely elaborates on why they matter. What does it mean to have such families? Hence, the arguments made are almost conceptually irrelevant to the impressive data.

Without a proper conceptual framework, this work falls short of demonstrating the importance of political families. Take the Vejajiva family as an example. It is commonly known that Abhisit Vejajiva and Suranand Vejajiva share the same family name and are therefore in the same "political family" as defined in this work—but their political choices and paths have been entirely different. In contrast, the Future Forward Party (FFP), which was dissolved and many of whose members moved over to the Move Forward Party (MFP), was a political cluster of "diehard friends" centered around Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit. Leading members of the FFP and MFP did not share a family name and were not even linked by marriage, but their relationship structure and even political function were like a carbon copy of some political families that Nishizaki refers to. As a result, after reading this book, I do not see the importance of political families in general, as opposed to political clans. From this point alone, argument-wise, I cannot say this work has achieved its goal.

Second, the author is so obsessed with the “vessel” of the dynasty itself that he is almost blinded by all other related factors. To put it bluntly, this is a study of dynastic families that turns a blind eye to changes within the families and their function. Nishizaki is obsessively focused on just the form of the vessel that he has defined. This point is strongly related to the previous shortcoming. It is because the author focuses solely on the form of the vessel that the reader eventually comes to doubt why political families even matter. At this point, we are only told that there are political families formed by blood or marriage, and their number is quite significant. That is all this work conveys.

Indeed, political families still exist. Any sane observer of Thai politics would agree with this claim. But political families that have the unchanged form of a vessel do change their roles. Illan Nam and Viengrat Nethipo (2022) studied the formation and function of the Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT), which is commonly known as the “big political family party” in Thailand. However, the roles that TRT performed were strikingly different from the roles that seem to have been frozen since 1973 as Nishizaki argues. Nam and Viengrat (2022) proved that even though the form of the vessels of political families remains the same, their function does not. Families have to change according to the structural changes brought about by the 1997 constitution and become more programmatic. The Shinawatra family may pass on their power and somewhat own TRT, but this is no longer simply through vote buying and using the charismatic charm of each MP to gain popularity. This is the dynamic of political families that Nishizaki has missed due to his obsession with the static form of political families.

This leads to the third problem. The aim of this work is to portray the “significance of the influence” that stems from political families. The way in which Nishizaki has chosen to do this is by objectively displaying the proportion of seats that these political families share in parliament. This is a sound approach in terms of methodology. But it lacks proper conceptual criteria to distinguish what would be considered influential and what would not be. Take, for example, Nishizaki’s attempt (p. 7) to demonstrate the long-term influence of political families since 1932 in comparison to conventional knowledge, which dates from 1973 onward. He first claims that the average proportion of MP seats won by political families is 41 percent. He then argues that political families have been influential in parliament from the infancy of Thai democracy, when 24 percent of the MPs came from political families during the years 1932–71. These numbers are lower than the average proportion (41%), and there are no criteria to identify what makes them influential. The author does not conceptually elaborate on why we would consider something or some set of information influential, something like “from 20% of the seats acquired onwards.” This is almost like Nishizaki asking readers to understand for themselves what his criteria are, like saying, “If this number is good enough for me, then it should be good enough for you to see my point.” Since 41 percent and 24 percent differ by a significant margin, the measurement of influence is far too weak without proper conceptual criteria.

The last point relates to the previous ones. Not only is Nishizaki too obsessive with the vessel of what he defines as a political family, but he focuses only on the form and continuation of such families without looking at other related issues. This can be seen from early on in the book to the very end, where the author equates “dynastic democracy” with the “decay of democracy.” This is a simplified, black-and-white version of reality. Nishizaki goes so far as to argue that political families seek only personal gain, probably at a cost to others. This might have been true at some point in history, but things have changed a lot, particularly from 1997 onward. It is Nishizaki himself (p. 7) who shares the surprising fact that from 1988 to 2020, political families in parliament were more prolific than ever before: they occupied 46.2 percent of the total seats. But was it not during this very period that Thailand experienced wave after wave of the most progressive movements for better democracy? If political families truly make things worse democratically, then during this period Thailand should have gone back to its womb.

In any case, political progressiveness is not waning. This is because political families have evolved alongside the dynamic developments in history. They are not static in the way Nishizaki has portrayed them. Viengrat Nethipo (2023) captures and clearly depicts the dynamics. Of course, political families might seek personal gain at some points—or even most points—in time, but this does not necessarily mean the decay of the majority and democracy. I would stay on the fence and say that this hypothesis is fundamentally flawed. If someone were to argue that the works and legacies of TRT, commonly known as the big family party, did not contribute anything to the advancement of democracy, any sane observer of Thai politics would disagree or even consider the statement insane. Nevertheless, Nishizaki’s fundamental logic and hypothesis show that he does not argue otherwise. This is why I claim his argument to be flawed.


The Ugly

Following “The Bad,” there is one remaining point of concern. This is Nishizaki’s attempt to propose that political families have existed nationwide since 1932, which goes against the conventional understanding. In principle, I agree with the claim and would like to praise the author’s attempt. However, the starting point that allows him to reach this conclusion is problematic, especially since he singles out Prajak (2016) in this debate. First, most works on this topic—including Prajak’s—acknowledge the existence of political families during the period 1932–73, but they believe that such families were mostly centralized. Nishizaki—with his enormous set of information—has proven this point to be wrong, claiming that these families were not only in the center but across the nation.

However, we see that his definition of a political family is different from that of those who came before, since he has added a marriage relationship into the mix. This means that he has expanded the scope of the entity he would call a political family further than his predecessors. With

this in mind, he has discovered that indeed political families have proliferated since the dawn of Thai democracy, and many of these relationships seem to come from intermarriage between the old elite's political families and the newly emergent ones (Chapter 2). He has even argued this to be the cause for the 1932 democratic revolution not ending well, since the demolition of the elites would cause a conflict of interest for the promoters, who had marriage ties with the elites as well. This is a stunning and great finding on its own. But to deploy it as a counterargument against previous discoveries is rather ugly since previous works, including Prajak's, based their arguments on a totally different definition from Nishizaki's. They did not include an intermarriage relationship in the definition, and Nishizaki knows this well since he has made this point in the book. For me, this counterargument is uncalled for or even unfair.

In any case, I ultimately recommend this book because its positives outweigh its negatives. The hard work of collecting the data alone is worthy of being called the author's lifetime achievement. It will be an encyclopedia on Thai parliamentary politics for many years and decades to come.

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