

May 2013

Female Political Leaders

*For Century Weekly*

Richard N. Cooper

I write from Yonsei University in Seoul, capital of South Korea. Korea is a remarkable country. It was one of the world's poorest countries in 1960, poorer than Ghana, Senegal, and a number of other African countries. Moreover, its future economic prospects were thought at that time to be dismal: it had no consequential natural resources, a high population relative to the arable land available, and above all the Confucian ethic, with its reverence for the past and its resistance to change. Koreans demonstrated just how wrong such assessments can be. For 25 years, from 1965 to 1990, Korean economic output (GDP) grew at 9.7 percent a year, highest in the world. Korea showed that a stable social structure, right incentives for effort, saving, and risk taking, and engagement with the world economy can produce dramatic growth even in an economy with seemingly limited prospects. To be sure, the Koreans occasionally made mistakes, such as the attempt in the early 1970s to launch a program of support for heavy and chemical industries. Only steel and its derivative ship-building succeeded. But unlike many other countries, Korea's leaders recognized and corrected their mistakes relatively early, rather than continuing to pour good money after bad.

Korea's president during the first 14 years of this period of rapid growth was Park Chung-hee, a former general who had led a coup against the corrupt government in 1961. Park's daughter, Park Geun-hye, was recently elected Korea's president in a free and democratic election – the first female political leader in a country with a Confucian tradition, despite the fact that in Confucius' hierarchical scheme women are clearly subordinate to men. She joins eleven other female heads of government around the world – some presidents, some prime ministers, depending on the exact form of government. Angela Merkel of Germany is perhaps the best known, but the list includes Cristina Kirshner of Argentina, Julia Gillard of Australia, Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh, Dilma Rousseff of Brazil, Helle Thorning-Schmidt of Denmark, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, Dalia Grybauskaitė of Lithuania, Joyce Banda of Malawi, Yingluck Shinawatra of Thailand, and Kalma Persad-Bissette of Trinidad – in all about 5 percent of the national heads of government of today.

If we look back over the past half century, there have been an additional 18 female heads of government, starting with Sirimavo Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka in 1960, the first female prime minister. The best known are probably Margaret Thatcher (who just passed away in 2013), prime minister of the United Kingdom (1979-1986), and Indira Gandhi, prime minister of India (1966-1977; 1980-1984). Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Argentina have each had two female heads of government. And there has been one each in Canada, Chile, Guyana, Iceland (just stepped down before an election last month), Norway, Israel, Pakistan, Indonesia, and New Zealand.

All the habitable continents have had at least one female leader—only one, in the case of North America. By region, South Asian countries have been the most receptive, followed by Western Europe

and South America. By major religion or worldview, only orthodox (eastern) Christianity and communism have not produced female political leaders, along with Arab moslems. But the alleged bias of Islam against women in public did not show up in Pakistan, Bangladesh, or Indonesia, all predominantly moslem countries. Ukraine has had a female prime minister, as has France, but both served under strong presidencies, thus were not heads of government. Some leaders slid into office as widows or daughters of preceding male leaders, but most made it on their own. Almost all have been selected in democratic elections. And many subsequently lost elections.

Of course, throughout history there have been female leaders, most prominent among them probably Cleopatra of Egypt, Queen Isabella, co-monarch of Spain, Queen Elizabeth I of England, Maria Theresa of Austria, and Catherine the Great of Russia. But they were selected by inheritance or marriage, not by a wider electorate. And there have been many women behind the throne, such as the Dowager Empress Cixi of China.

Feminists in America and Europe – and perhaps elsewhere – believe there should be more female political leaders, and have even suggested minimum female quotas for legislatures, often a stepping stone to being head of government. The underlying thought is that females would bring different qualities to leadership, and implicitly better qualities, than do males. With a cumulative experience of 29 female political leaders around the world, we perhaps have enough evidence to put those claims to a test. But that is a topic for a different – and more contentious—article.