

Gender, Authoritarianism & the Cult of Personality

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discourse analysis on President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, and President of Türkiye, Recep Erdoğan, and their conclusion that performances of masculinity afford male leaders a malleable and preeminent legitimization technique. In applying Elski and Wood's relationship between masculinity and the consolidation of power to three female despots—two who gained power, in part, by association with their fathers' political legacies, and one who rose to power in the wake of her husband—this article argues that female leaders must inherit, rely on, and maintain a masculine cult of personality to sustain authoritarian forms of leadership. Beyond contributing to academic debates on the role of gender in authoritarianism, the phenomenon at the heart of this article—the relative absence of female dictators independent of male power—deepens our understanding of the structural barriers to female political power.

Although comparatively minimal literature addresses the question of female dictators directly (Montecinos, 2017, p.1), a subset of political psychology and sociology analyses

what factors lead individuals to be complicit and/or complacent with authoritarian political leaders. Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950)—the seminal work in this field—aimed to understand the cultivation of fascism in the Holocaust and World War II; more recent works, notably Peterson and Zurbriggen's (2010) study, have focused attention specifically on the relationship between gender structures and 'the authoritarian personality'. Though not directly answering the question of why there is a relative absence of female authoritarian leaders, Peterson and Zurbriggen (2010, p.1804) find that authoritarian political environments reinforce misogynistic attitudes towards women. Such a finding suggests that the electorate or general population reinforces the nexus between sexism, or systemic advantages for men at the expense of women (Lovisky, et al., 2025, pp.205–206), and authoritarianism, legitimising masculine performances of authoritarianism.

This mutually-reinforcing relationship between patriarchy—broadly defined as 'the dominance of perceived masculinity over femininity and the relative empowerment of men versus women' (Sperling, 2014, p.7)—and authoritarianism at the individual level is further developed by the concept of 'militarised masculinity' (Tapscott, 2020). Tapscott defines militarised masculinity as the processes of socialisation which facilitate and encourage masculinities based on the traits of 'dominance, assertiveness, aggressiveness, independence, self-sufficiency, and willingness to take risks' (Morris, 1996, p.701, quoted in Tapscott, 2020, p.1569), as well as 'sacrifice, compassion and cooperation' (Tapscott, 2020, p.1569), echoing the exceptional qualities of the 'strongman' leader (Ruud, 2023). Tapscott (2020, pp.1565–1566) argues that this particular incarnation of masculinity enables authoritarian leaders to diffuse the power and control necessary for regime durability on the local level by exploiting gender dynamics, tensions, and ambiguities. Such gendered links and processes suggest that masculinity works in tandem with authoritarianism, and, as Elski and Wood (2019, p.733) argue, these links allow male autocrats to create political personas that simultaneously breach and maintain gender norms.

Elski and Wood (2019, p.733) find that performances of masculinity by authoritarian populists, namely Putin and Erdoğan, offer these leaders a degree of malleability in image and power, using different forms of masculinity to consolidate power at opportune moments. Specifically, Elski and Wood (2019, p.733) highlight how this relationship between masculinity and right-wing populism, trending towards authoritarianism, produces a paradoxical 'Janus-faced masculinity of outsiders-yet-insiders, bad-boys-yet-good-fathers'. This

ability of male authoritarians to shape and mould their performances of masculinity to suit their specific governing needs starkly contrasts the narrow, often highly scrutinised parameters of female political leadership where double-standards can be lethal to one's authority (Montecinos, 2017, p.14).

In contrast to the finding that masculinity reinforces authoritarianism, Barton and Huebner (2022, pp.23–24) reflect on how patriarchal societies reinforce the message that femininity is 'weak, passive, deceitful, and manipulative', echoed in Hoskin's (2019, p.687) concept of 'femmephobia', or 'the systematic devaluation of femininity as well as the regulation of patriarchal femininity'. Though Barton and Huebner argue that expressions of femininity should be reconceptualised as powerful (2022, p.31), the dominant dichotomy of masculinity as powerful and hegemonic in contrast to weak femininity forms a prevalent undertone of political competition in democracies and dictatorships alike (Sperling, 2014, pp.12–14). Indeed, as Sperling (2014, pp.13–14) argues, in the context of patriarchy, gender provides a useful 'authority-building strategy', in which performances of masculinity serve as dog-whistles for gaining legitimacy amongst the populace and, on the flip side, characterisations of leaders as feminine can be used by opponents to undermine one's power.

Ultimately, the literature on the relationship between masculinity and authoritarianism proves insightful but disproportionate focus is given to strong-men leaders like Putin and Erdoğan in contrast to women breaking these barriers.

A NOTE ON 'METHODOLOGY'

The case studies of Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Hasina—whose fathers led India's and Bangladesh's independence movements—and Isabel Perón—who married into Juan Perón's regime in Argentina—serve as exceptions to the traditional idea that authoritarianism is a man's game, and therefore illustrate the fragility of female leader's consolidation and maintenance of power. These three women were selected for analysis as illustrative examples of the relationship between gender, authoritarianism, and regime durability, and the long reigns of Gandhi and Hasina contrasted with Perón's brief eighteen months in power offer critical insights into the distinct legitimisation offered by patrilineal inherited power versus a matrimonial relationship to established power. The two case studies of Gandhi and Hasina further point to an interesting relationship between anti-colonial independence movements and cults of personality, suggesting that their fathers' significant roles in national memory deepens their respective reservoirs of political capital.

These case studies, and this article as a whole, brings a new layer of critical analysis to the academic literature on authoritarianism and gender. To do so, the forthcoming case studies draw on a combination of primary evidence and secondary literature to not simply assert that Gandhi, Hasina and Perón were authoritarian rulers, but to critically assess how gender impacted their respective reigns. Curiously, where Elski and Wood (2019) look exclusively to primary speech acts of Putin and Erdoğan to assess the role of gender in their cults of personality, much of the academic literature on Gandhi and Hasina, in particular, focuses on their personality, disposition and 'psychological makeup' (Puri, 1985, p.148). In response to this apparent tendency within the academic literature to analyse female authoritarian leadership through personalistic, politico-psychological terms, this article seeks to add a gendered dimension to such characterisations. Therefore, methodologically, this article takes as its starting point that Gandhi, Hasina and Perón exhibited authoritarian styles of leadership—going beyond this fact to ask how gender and their male counterparts influenced their regime's durability.

PATRILINEAL POWER: THE ENDURING REIGNS OF GANDHI & HASINA

Indira Gandhi

India's first and only female Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi led the state from 1966 to 1977 and again from 1980 to 1984 (EBSCO, 2019). Reflecting Gandhi's upbringing as the daughter of one of the Indian independence movement's leading figures, Jawaharlal Nehru, and her significant role in Indian history, Puri (1985, p.148) notes that '[s] he was its product, as well as its architect'. Among the accounts of her upbringing, many focus on the 'long stretches of abandonment' she experienced as a child, due in part to her father's participation in nationalist movements, making her a 'withdrawn, lonely and reticent but self-reliant person' (Nayar, 1977, pp.325–326). As a young adult, Gandhi shadowed her father and rose through the ranks of the Congress Working Committee, the executive committee of the Congress Party (Nayar, 1977, p.326), though notably her father never named her as his successor (Everett, 2013, p.152). For Morris-Jones (1975, p.458), this upbringing gave Gandhi 'more political experience as a single operator than as a member of a team'. Interestingly, Gandhi's unique familial legacy appears to have endowed her with both preeminent political credibility and a preference for more unitary styles of leadership, building a link between the influence of familial legacy and women's ability to cultivate and maintain authoritarian ruling styles.

In her first years in power, Gandhi was seen as uncertain and insecure, thrust into the political spotlight on the back of her father's legacy, with some characterising her initial cabinet position as merely an attempt at stability and honouring her father's memory after his stroke in 1964, rather than a role of substance (Everett, 2013, pp.173–174). Eventually, her ambitious and dominant political leadership stemmed from the realisation that she enjoyed broad popularity amongst the electorate, later reinforcing her populist centralisation of power (Steinberg, 2005, p.769; Everett, 2013, p.154).

Gandhi, herself seems to have understood the significance of her upbringing on her later political success: defending her controversial declaration of a state of emergency in 1975, Gandhi noted that 'The Indian people have known me from my childhood. All my life has been in the service of our people' (Morris-Jones, 1975, p.453). Declared by the President of India on 26 June 1975 at the request of then-Prime Minister Gandhi, the Emergency was catalysed primarily by popular unrest in response to the Allahabad High Court's finding that Gandhi was guilty of election fraud and Gandhi's decision to remain Prime Minister (Jaffrelot and Anil, 2021, pp.6, 11, 14). The state of emergency enabled Gandhi to rule by decree to subvert constitutional checks and balances to silence opposition to her authority (Klieman, 1981, p.244), culminating in the detention of an estimated 6,229 political opponents and censorship of leading newspapers in regions dominated by the opposition party (Morris-Jones, 1975, pp.451–452). Morris-Jones (1975, p.458) interestingly draws a link between the Emergency and Gandhi's 'disposition', calling her actions in the Emergency and in earlier decisive political moments 'ruthless'. Such sentiments echo her early decisiveness in her first cabinet post, in which she was described as 'the only man in a Cabinet of old women' (Masani, 1975, p.136). Jaffrelot and Anil note that 'the Emergency was first and foremost a *personal* response to a set of challenges to Mrs. Gandhi's authority' (2012, p.312), placing Gandhi's cult of personality at the heart of her authoritarian actions.

The relationship between Gandhi's 'personality' and 'disposition' and her exploitation of a state of emergency to consolidate power thus confirm that masculine performances of cults of personality can often provide the pretext and political capital for authoritarianism, propelling political leaders to a position of immense power in which ruling above the law is possible. Significantly, the combination of authoritarian, masculine leadership style and patrilineal legacy provided Gandhi with latitude and flexibility in her grip on power, as her legitimacy shifted from landslide electoral victories to consolidating power and returning once again to electoral success. Though Genovese

and Steckerider (2013, pp.167–168) argue that '[g]ender mattered for Indira Gandhi in complex and contradictory ways', it was precisely the combination of familial legacy and authoritarianism that allowed Gandhi to supersede the social challenges posed by her sex. It seems that with a strong cult of personality, rooted in anti-colonial history and revered masculine rule, a turn towards authoritarianism was not fatal for a woman's political legitimacy. This finding is reinforced by Gandhi's return to power in 1980, after losing the 1977 elections in retribution for her anti-democratic rule during the Emergency (Klieman, 1981, pp.242–243).

Sheikh Hasina

Like Indira Gandhi, Bangladesh's longest serving Prime Minister, now sentenced to death for crimes against humanity, Sheikh Hasina is the daughter of Bangladesh's

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independence leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, affectionately known by the electorate as *Bangabandhu* or 'friend of Bangladesh' (Khondker, 2017, p.221; Hasina, 2021, p.2). Khondker (2017, p.226) argues that the rise of female leadership in this context can be attributed to 'transferred or derivative charisma', noting that 'Sheikh Hasina was heir to [her father's] charisma'. Importantly, Khondker (2017, p.226) defines charisma as a force which can legitimise 'extraordinary' leadership—one which, in the right circumstances, could certainly legitimise the consolidation of power. Khondker's argument of Hasina's transferred charisma is supported by Hasina's utilisation of her father's image and memory throughout her campaigns and time in office, including the placement of large portraits of her father throughout government buildings

(Khondker, 2017, p.227). Moreover, due to the tragic circumstances of her family's deaths—assassinated by 'disgruntled soldiers'—Hasina 'viewed her main task as completing the mission of her father' (Khondker, 2017, p.228), demonstrating the central role of her father's legacy and charisma in propelling the momentum of her own political successes (Hasina, 2021). Confirming the significance of her father's legacy to her own political image, Hasina (2021) has even published an article titled 'Striving to Realize the Ideals of my Father'.

Chowdhury (2008, p.8) echoes Khondker's concept of 'transferred charisma', arguing that Hasina and her long-time political rival, Khaleda Zia, 'owed their ascent to men'. Chowdhury (2008, p.8) further develops the argument that Hasina and Zia, once in power, 'found it expedient to acquiesce to and accept male hegemony'. Hasina, interestingly, insisted on being called 'sir', not 'madam' (Khondker, 2017, p.231), contributing to the characterisation of her leadership style as masculinised. Ruud (2021) goes so far as to analyse Hasina's regime through the conceptual lens of the 'strongman'. As Ruud (2021, p.414) argues, authoritarian strongman regimes are the result of the 'active building of a regime'. In the case of Hasina, her four terms as prime minister witnessed constitutional changes to coalesce power around her party, the Awami League, effectively transforming Bangladesh into a single-party government during her rule, in addition to the mobilisation of law enforcement to violently target and kill political opponents (Ruud, 2021, pp.414–415, 429). Though Ruud's (2021, p.414) definition of 'strongman leaders' is devoid of any gendered dimensions—perhaps to the detriment of the depth of analysis therein—it is significant that Ruud applies such a lens to Hasina, further reinforcing Elski and Wood's link between gendered traits, a bending of convention, and the consolidation of power.

Though this dynamic is typically used to analyse hyper-masculine leaders, like Putin and Erdoğan, these women prove that the dynamic can be co-opted to legitimise and make possible the reign of female authoritarians. That Hasina ruled for twenty years in total demonstrates the durability of charisma and power consolidated around male nationalist leaders. Fascinatingly, the case studies of Hasina and Gandhi demonstrate that there are two key ingredients to the success and regime durability of female authoritarians: first, their initial political legitimacy and momentum stemming from their fathers' political limelight, and second, performances of masculinity, often militarised or mimicking that of strongmen leadership styles, to reinforce their authority.

Further comparative research is needed to fully understand this specific finding, but this phenomenon suggests that the

relationship between authoritarianism and masculinity can indeed be exploited by women with the right political capital. As a result, female leaders like Gandhi, may use their fathers’ or male counterparts’ political capital and accompanying militarised masculine traits to either complement or obscure their femininity. Such a finding runs counter to the conventional understanding of double standards for women in power, in which women are often viewed as either not feminine enough or too feminine (Montecinos, 2017, p.14).

Moreover, the cases of Gandhi and Hasina are situated in wider academic debates about the prominent role of female leaders in anti-colonial movements and post-colonial democratisation in South Asia (Thompson, 2015). Interestingly, as Khondker (2017, p.224) notes, many South Asian states ‘preceded the Third Wave democratisation with a legacy of female leadership that owed in part to aristocratic politics and in part to a more inclusive anti-colonial struggle’. This mixing of aristocratic and anti-colonial forces that elevated many women, including Gandhi and Hasina, to the highest positions of power reflects the ability of inherited power to sustain female cults of personality and consolidation of power. Both leaders, having risen to power through ‘transferred charisma’ (Khondker, 2017), have mixed track records, suggesting that, like Elski and Wood’s ‘Janus-faced’ performances, inherited power and cults of personality can legitimise the consolidation of power. However, Gandhi’s assassination in 1984 and Hasina’s conviction for crimes against humanity and subsequent escape from the country (Vock and Ethirajan, 2024) raise questions about the limits of female authoritarian power, even when popularity and political capital are inherited from esteemed independence leaders.

MATRIMONIAL MIGHT: PERÓN’S STRUGGLE FOR LEGITIMACY

In contrast to the theory of inherited, patrilineal ‘transferred charisma’ for Indira Gandhi and Sheikh Hasina, how do women who marry into political regimes cultivate and maintain power? Isabel Perón, the third wife of Argentinian dictator, Juan Perón, exhibited greater fragility in her political legitimacy, unable to draw on well-entrenched legacies and decades in the political spotlight. Isabel became the first female president of Argentina in 1974 after her husband, the long-time populist authoritarian leader, Juan Perón, fell ill and required 24-hour medical care (BBC, 1974). Isabel remained in power for a brief eighteen months which many characterise as ‘an unmitigated disaster’ (Weir, 2013, p.256). In the context of ‘political, economic, and military instability—much of which was inherited from Juan Perón’s third administration’ (Weir, 2013, pp.262–263), Isabel’s comparative lack of charisma,

either inherited or cultivated herself, proved fatal to her regime. As Borelli (2015, p.75) notes, the Argentinian press during Isabel’s reign was distinctly critical and antagonistic, ‘highlighting the inability of the president to dominate the political situation’. Significantly, Isabel never carried the charisma that both Juan and his second wife, Evita, enjoyed that was so crucial to the maintenance of Perónism without Perón, although Evita never occupied the highest position of power herself (Weir, 2013).

In contrast to Gandhi and Hasina, Isabel Perón’s first experiences in politics were through her relationship to her husband, and, to complicate matters further for her legitimacy and public image, Perón’s second wife, Evita, was still revered by the public even after Isabel came into the picture (Weir, 2013, p.258). Although Isabel attempted to mimic the style and language of Evita, it appears that ‘transferred charisma’ does not work in such a fashion, reinforcing the necessity of female authoritarians to gain legitimacy from male counterparts (Weir, 2013, p.258). Isabel was frequently Perón’s ‘stand-in’ in the years preceding her own presidency and was even his vice presidential nominee in the 1973 elections (Weir, 2013, p.260). When Perón inherited the presidency from her late husband, the economic climate that had previously legitimised Juán Perón’s personalistic rule had vanished, causing deep divisions amongst Perón’s supporters and requiring Isabel to govern through both economic and political turmoil (Weir, 2012, pp.261–262). Despite her proximity and involvement in Perón’s regime during their marriage, after Perón’s death, the media noted that Isabel lacked adequate qualifications to inherit the presidency, naming her ‘Perón’s delicate heiress’ and decrying her ability to govern the nation through interregnum and instability (Gott, 1974). Where Gandhi and Hasina inherited legitimacy, Perón simply inherited instability from her late husband. The limited availability of English-language sources on Isabel’s brief rule hinders a full understanding of precisely why her reign was characterised as incompetent. However, the instability of her eighteen months in power reinforces the significance of inherited legitimacy for women in power: the problems that defined Isabel’s presidency were inherited from Juán Perón’s third presidency (Weir, 2013, p.262). As such, whether through matrimony or by blood, these authoritarian women have risen to power in the shadow of their male counterparts. Thus, it is perhaps the crumbling of Juan Perón’s regime combined with Isabel’s feminisation in the media that made her brief rule so fragile. The two forces simultaneously working against Perón reflect the greater difficulty for wives to capitalise on transferred charisma, militarised masculinity, and the political capital of their husbands. Therefore, Isabel’s lack of a cult of personality and lack of ‘transferred charisma’ severely hindered

her ability to maintain and consolidate power, demonstrating the significance of not just any form of inherited power but positive paternal legacies, more specifically, as a key ingredient of success for female authoritarians.

CONCLUSION

The case studies of Indira Gandhi, Sheikh Hasina, and, contrastingly, Isabel Perón serve as exceptions to the rule that authoritarianism is a man’s game; however, these leaders perpetuate the mutually-reinforcing relationship between masculinity and authoritarian regime durability. The legitimacy of these women relied on their relationship to their male predecessors, whether that be a father or husband. Interestingly, Gandhi and Hasina’s comparatively long time in power suggests that being the daughter of a well-respected male political figure—in particular, a successful anti-colonial independence leader—offers deeper reservoirs of trust and legitimacy than marrying into political power, where long-lasting acquiescence to the regime is both harder to come by and significantly more fragile. Although we have generally witnessed a rise in women in power over the last several decades and women’s civil and political rights have advanced (Stotsky, et al., 2016, p.4), recent trends of democratic backsliding and the rise of competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way, 2012) remind us that what has been won in women’s rights and power may not be permanent. In this teetering moment, it is important to recognise how deeply entangled masculinity and political power are and how such a phenomenon maintains the fragility of female political power.

Such a conclusion raises several further questions of introspection and exploration that this article hopes may be researched and unpacked further. First and foremost, would the existence of a female dictator, independent of any inherited legitimacy from a male counterpart, be a feminist phenomenon? Where Gandhi and Hasina still had to work their way into positions of power, in North Korea, Kim Ju Ae’s directly inherited power presents a future avenue for analysing how gender manifests itself in inherited legitimacy and power. Drawing on Cynthia Enloe’s *Twelve Feminist Lessons of War*, the solution to the absence of a dictatress is not to advocate for a rise in autocratic regimes led by women, but rather to recentre our understanding of authoritarianism and political power, more broadly, through a more intricately gendered lens. Where authoritarianism simultaneously feeds off of masculinity and reinforces sexism (Eksi and Wood, 2019; Peterson and Zurbriggen, 2010), women’s public and private rights and authority remain inherently vulnerable.

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