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Institutional Foundations Of Succession To The Throne In The Bukhara Emirate: The Problem Of Reconciling Meritocracy And Primogeniture

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ABSTRACT

This article examines one of the key factors in the political decline of the Bukhara Emirate under the Manghit dynasty: the institutional incompleteness of its mechanism of succession. The study considers how the state was destabilised by a lasting antagonism between two foundational principles. The first was meritocracy, which favoured the "most worthy" candidate and had its roots in Turko-Mongol traditions of statehood; the second was primogeniture, the priority of the eldest son, grounded in Islamic law. Drawing on the transfers of power under the emirs Shahmurad, Nasrullah, Muzaffar and Abdulahad, the article traces how this conflict evolved, from early attempts at a pragmatic synthesis to the settlement of dynastic disputes by naked force and, in the end, through the direct intervention of external powers. An analysis of the historical sources shows that the legal vacuum surrounding succession fuelled recurrent internecine strife, obstructed centralisation and weakened the sovereignty of the state, and that it thereby facilitated the expansion of the Russian Empire in the region.

Keywords: Manghit dynasty, succession to the throne, primogeniture, meritocracy, legitimacy, political instability, institutionalisation of the state, qushbegi, Bukhara Emirate, political decline, "Great Game".

INTRODUCTION

The legitimation and transfer of supreme power is one of the central problems in the study of the non-Chinggisid dynasties of Central Asia. The long-term stability and viability of any premodern polity depended directly on the maturity of its political institutions, and above all on its mechanism of succession. Historical experience shows that uncertainty and a legal vacuum in the rules of succession were often the decisive factor behind dynastic crises, internal strife and, eventually, the decline of the state. The Manghit dynasty, which came to power in Mawarannahr in the mid-eighteenth century, offers a clear illustration of this problem. When the dynasty faced the difficult task of legitimising its rule, it had no clearly formulated laws governing the order of succession, and this gap became its principal structural weakness.

The main research task of this article is to analyse the fundamental contradiction inherent in the Manghit system of government. On the one hand stood the meritocratic approach characteristic of nomadic traditions of statehood, which tied the right to rule less to descent than to personal merit, military talent and political wisdom. On the other stood the principle, reflected in Islamic law and in the traditions of sedentary states, that gave the eldest son legal priority (primogeniture) for the sake of stability. The constant collision and mutual negation of these two principles turned each change of ruler in the Manghit state into a largely unpredictable, violent and destructive struggle. The study analyses how the question of succession was resolved in different periods of the dynasty's rule and how this process affected the internal political order of the state, its degree of centralisation and its international position.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS. Under the Manghit dynasty, the absence of a codified body of law regulating the transfer of supreme power remained the most vulnerable and unstable element in the political life of the Bukhara Emirate. The dynasty's system of government became an arena of persistent antagonism between two conflicting principles: the Islamic and customary right of the firstborn (primogeniture) and the Turko-Mongol tradition of choosing the most worthy candidate (meritocracy). Although Islamic law recognised, to a certain extent, the priority of the eldest son in matters of inheritance, the steppe traditions of Central Asia treated the right to rule as deriving from personal qualities, military capacity and political wisdom rather than from birth. The clash between the two approaches was reflected even in the titles borne by the Manghit princes. All the emir's sons by his lawful wives held the common title "tura", which in theory gave each of them equal legal grounds to claim the throne. At the same time, the eldest son received the special title "tura-jan" to mark his status. Yet the interpretation of this title as "beloved son" indicates that it carried no absolute legal force; it was rather a symbolic gesture that depended on the personal will and informal choice of the ruler [7, p. 580]. As a result, on the eve of every change of ruler the question of succession remained open, which bred palace intrigue, armed clashes and, ultimately, the decline of the state.

In the early period of the dynasty, when the foundations of the state were being laid, attempts were made to keep a balance between the principles of merit and legitimacy. The policy of Emir Shahmurad (1785–1800) in choosing an heir is a clear example. According to Mir Abdul Karim Bukhari, when Emir Shahmurad was advised to name his son Haydar as heir, the arguments put forward included not only Haydar's "sound mind" but also the fact that, on his mother's side, he was a grandson of Abulfayz Khan, the last Ashtarkhanid ruler [6, p. 154]. The decision exemplifies a pragmatic policy that rested at once on personal merit (meritocracy) and on the reinforcement of legitimacy through dynastic continuity (legitimation). The urgent steps taken by Utkir-sufi and Khoja Sadiq to summon Haydar from Karshi to the capital immediately after Shahmurad's death [6, p. 154] confirm that the question of the heir had been settled in advance and that a relatively smooth transfer of power was secured. This relative stability, however, was short-lived. It was during the reign of Emir Haydar that

central authority weakened and the real levers of government passed into the hands of powerful court dignitaries, such as the chief minister, the qushbegi. These officials sought to isolate the ruler from political affairs, strengthen their own positions and exert direct influence on matters of succession [2, p. 39]. This in turn intensified factional rivalry at court and further sharpened the struggle for the throne.

The bloodiest and most destructive consequences of this systemic conflict over succession emerged in the struggle for power that followed the death of Emir Haydar in 1826. One of the key factors behind Nasrullah's victory was his alliance with Hakim-qushbegi, an influential dignitary in the capital, who used his standing to win the Bukharan aristocracy and population over to Nasrullah's side [3, p. 225]. On his way to sole rule, Nasrullah acted with unprecedented cruelty. He killed not only the brother who occupied the throne but also, through secret agents, five other brothers who had found refuge abroad, in Kokand and Orenburg [8, p. 190]. He then turned against the powerful dignitaries, led by Hakim-qushbegi, who had brought him to power, and eliminated their influence on government entirely [2, p. 39]. In the end, these actions meant that force fully supplanted law in matters of succession.

Although the centralised despotic regime appeared to have solved the problem of succession for a time, it left the foundations of the state even more fragile. The revolt of Abdumalik against his father, Emir Muzaffar, in 1868 demonstrated in full how dangerous the problem of succession was for the sovereignty of the state. Relying on loyal notables such as Nazarbek and on a military detachment of 300 men [5, p. 122], Abdumalik attempted to seize the strategically important towns of Karshi and Karmana [5, p. 121]. The most tragic aspect of the episode was that Emir Muzaffar, unable to suppress the internal revolt on his own, was compelled to seek help from the administration of the Turkestan Governor-Generalship, specifically from General Abramov [5, p. 121]. This step openly revealed the inability of the Bukhara Emirate to resolve its internal problems and its de facto loss of sovereignty.

The transformation of the emirate into a Russian protectorate did not end the struggle over succession; it merely changed its form. Abdulahad relied first of all on forces loyal to him. He appointed his uncle Astanqul, who had helped him take the throne, to the highest office of qushbegi and, in addition, granted him the strategically important begdom of Hisar [4, p. 299]. At the same time, in order to preserve the political balance and avoid sharp resistance from the old elite, he kept in office Muhammad-biy, an influential dignitary inherited from his father, until the latter's death in 1889 [4, p. 299]. These intricate political manoeuvres confirm that even in the final period of Manghit rule, succession was settled not through legal mechanisms but through a system that rewarded personal loyalty and maintained a balance of forces at court. The emir's practice of appointing loyal men as begs on condition that they meet their financial obligations on time [1, p. 80] is further evidence that personal loyalty outweighed descent throughout the system of government.

CONCLUSION. An analysis of the political history of a century and a half of Manghit rule leads to the conclusion that one of the main causes of the state's persistent instability, and ultimately of its loss of independence, lies in the central element of its political system: the failure to institutionalise succession to supreme power. The dynasty's system of government became an arena of constant collision between two mutually exclusive principles, the right of the firstborn and the principle of personal fitness. This legal vacuum exposed every change of ruler to the threat of civil war and forced the state to spend its resources on internal struggle.

The study has shown that the way in which this conflict was resolved varied over the course of the dynasty's rule. Under Emir Shahmurad there were attempts at a pragmatic synthesis of the two principles, whereas under Emir Nasrullah meritocracy took its harshest form and law was wholly displaced by force. By the reign of Emir Muzaffar, central authority, unable to resolve its internal contradictions, had opened the way for intervention by an external power, the Russian Empire. The problem of succession thus became a factor in foreign as well as domestic politics and contributed directly to the loss of state sovereignty. In the final analysis, the failure to institutionalise political succession was a congenital defect of the Manghit state, one that impeded its long-term development and hastened its departure from the historical stage.

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