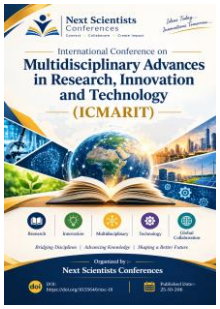
Published Date: - 30-10-2026

Page No: - 281-285



The Dynamics of Dynastic Succession: Strategies of Power Consolidation in the Bukhara Emirate (1756–1920)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the absence of an institutionalised system of succession affected the political stability of the Bukhara Emirate under the Manghit dynasty (1756–1920). Its central argument is that the lack of a fixed rule of inheritance, such as primogeniture, provoked a recurring political crisis at every change of ruler. Drawing on a critical reading of nineteenth-century European and Russian sources and on concepts from historical sociology, in particular patrimonialism, the study contends that the mass political purges, the elimination of dynastic rivals and the confiscations of property undertaken by each new emir were not simply expressions of personal cruelty or "Oriental despotism". Rather, they were a structurally determined and rational political instrument for consolidating power and establishing absolute rule within a decentralised system of government. The article seeks to reassess the nature of power in the emirate by identifying the systemic and structural causes of political violence, which explanations centred on personal factors have often obscured.

KEYWORDS: Bukhara Emirate, Manghit dynasty, succession crisis, political stability, political purge, patrimonialism, institutional crisis, circulation of elites.

INTRODUCTION

Although the Manghit dynasty occupied the throne of Bukhara for more than a century and a half, the history of the emirate, especially from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century, was marked by almost continuous internal conflict and political instability. The sharpest manifestation of this instability was the bloody struggle for power that broke out after the death of each emir. Conflicts among princes contending for the throne, powerful military and political factions, and local rulers seeking autonomy repeatedly brought the state to the brink of civil war. This raises an obvious question: why, despite the dynasty's long rule, did no peaceful and stable mechanism for transferring power from one ruler to the next ever take shape? The main aim of this study is to identify the systemic causes of political instability by analysing the problem of succession in the Bukhara Emirate. The existing literature on the subject, notably the writings of nineteenth-century Russian and European travellers, diplomats and military officers who visited Bukhara, often portrays the violence that accompanied changes of ruler as a product of "Oriental despotism", of the personal cruelty of rulers, or of a "barbarism" supposedly inherent in the peoples of the region. Such accounts record the outward course of events but tend to pass over their underlying causes and the internal logic of the political system. This article departs from traditional narrative description and analyses these events through theories of historical sociology and political science, in particular Max Weber's concept of the patrimonial state. This approach makes it possible to understand

political purges not as morally reprehensible acts but as rational, if brutal, political actions within the specific administrative system of the emirate.

The central thesis of the article is that the political violence and purges observed in the Bukhara Emirate were a logical outcome of a patrimonial system that lacked a clear institutional rule of succession (such as primogeniture). Where power was regarded as personal property and the state was governed as an extension of the emir's household, every claimant had to rely on his own military strength and followers. The first task of a new emir was therefore not merely to ascend the throne but to "re-establish" his power: by physically eliminating all other potential heirs, by breaking the economic and political strength of the elite loyal to the previous ruler, and by subordinating the regional begs. This article analyses these three lines of action as interconnected components of a single overall strategy.

Main Discussion. In the Bukhara Emirate, the accession of a Manghit prince did not end with a simple coronation ceremony. Rather, it set in motion a multi-stage and often violent political process aimed at consolidating power and making it absolute. The main reason was the absence of a clear, institutionalised mechanism of succession. Without a law of primogeniture (inheritance by the eldest son), every prince regarded himself as a legitimate claimant to the throne, and each change of ruler consequently tended to become a period of potential civil war. To secure his position in law and in practice, a new ruler therefore had first to accomplish several systemic tasks. These included eliminating dynastic rivals who might claim the throne, removing from power the old military and political elite loyal to the late emir, subduing regions with centrifugal tendencies and, through these processes, laying the foundations of his own undivided rule. These practices are better understood not as acts of personal cruelty but as the principal, if brutal, means of preserving central authority within a patrimonial state.

The first and bloodiest stage in the consolidation of power was the removal of rival kinsmen from the political scene. In the Manghit dynasty this practice became almost a tradition. Early in his reign, for instance, Emir Haydar, fearing competition from his brother Nasiriddin-tura, who had governed Merv in their father's time, summoned him to the capital and had him executed [10, p. 134]. Later rulers applied this "precedent" even more widely. After the death of Emir Muzaffar in 1885, his successor, Sayyid Abd al-Ahad, took decisive measures against his own brothers. One fled to India and died there; another, who governed the begdom of Hisar, was accused of plotting a revolt and secretly "removed"; a third was imprisoned on some pretext and died in a dungeon [2, p. 122]. The struggle for the throne strained relations not only between brothers but also between fathers and sons. In 1868, after his revolt against his father, Emir Muzaffar, had failed, the heir Abd al-Malik (Katta-tura) was left to wander, unable to find refuge with the begs of Shahrisabz [4, p. 121], and was later forced to flee to the court of Muhammad Rahim, the khan of Khiva [7, p. 318]. Such events point not only to a dynastic crisis but also to the erosion of the emirate's sovereignty. The fact that defeated claimants sought political asylum in neighbouring states intensified geopolitical rivalry in the region and created favourable conditions for external powers, including the Russian Empire, to interfere in Bukhara's internal affairs.

Alongside the dynastic "purge", a wave of repression unfolded against the old political and military elite. A new emir usually regarded the influential and wealthy officials of his father's time as a threat to his absolute power. This was more than a matter of personal dislike: it was seen as a necessary condition for renewing the administrative system and building a chain of

command wholly loyal to the emir himself. In the spring of 1840 Emir Nasrullah executed the powerful Hakim-qushbegi, who for many years had held the reins of government, together with Ayaz-topchibashi, the chief of artillery, and confiscated their property [6, p. 161; 10, p. 139]. The qushbegi's military and administrative influence in the capital was so great that, having given the order, the emir himself thought it prudent to leave the city for his own safety and wait among troops loyal to him [6, p. 161]. Nasrullah feared any influential figure who was not entirely subordinate to him. The fate of Abd al-Samad Khan, an Iranian military specialist who played a key role in modernising the emirate's army, is a telling example. The sources give conflicting accounts of his execution; according to some, he was publicly executed on the Registan square between 1852 and 1856 for treasonous correspondence with the ruler of Shahrisabz [8, p. 179]. These purges went hand in hand with the promotion of people loyal to the new ruler. In place of the old elite, Emir Nasrullah appointed persons of lower social origin or foreigners (Iranians, for example) to key posts, fundamentally reshaping his social base of support [11, pp. 231–232]. Similar processes took place in the other khanates of Central Asia. In Kokand, Umar Khan, who seized power after the death of his brother Alim Khan, at once executed his nephews, Shahrukh-mirza and his brother [9, p. 223]. Muhammad Zuhur, one of the most devoted and capable officials of the previous khan, was dismissed despite his oath of allegiance and tortured so that his property could be confiscated; only a year later, once Umar Khan was fully convinced that he posed no danger, was he restored to an influential post [9, p. 222].

The next key line in the consolidation of power was the subjugation of territories that resisted central authority and the concentration of all economic resources in the emir's hands. The protracted struggle waged by Emir Nasrullah in the mid-nineteenth century to subdue the begdom of Shahrisabz is an instructive example. This conflict involved not only territorial integrity but also dynastic honour and marriage diplomacy [3, p. 62]. The flight from Bukhara of the emir's wife, a member of the ruling family of Shahrisabz, after she had conspired with opponents in the capital, dealt a serious blow to the prestige of the central government and served as a justification for the emir's harsh punitive measures [3, p. 62]. The emir also made wide use of economic ruin against local begs who were not fully submissive or had grown too rich. Such a beg would be summoned to the capital on some pretext and thrown into the kanachakhana (a pit of bugs), and all his property would be confiscated for the treasury [5, p. 187]. The same measure was applied to officials such as qazis (judges) accused of bribery: their property was sold, those who had paid the bribes were compensated from the proceeds, and the remainder went to the emir [5, p. 187]. In such an atmosphere a provincial governor's visit to the emir's court was a kind of "loyalty test" and the most dangerous moment of his career. On setting out from his residence for the capital, a governor could never be sure that he would be allowed to return [1, p. 47]. His fate depended entirely on the emir's mood at the moment and on the intrigues that courtiers whispered to the ruler. For this reason begs had to set aside large sums in their annual budgets for bribes to keep their posts [1, p. 47]. Once political rivals and influential officials had been removed and their property confiscated, the new emir distributed these assets and titles as in'am (gifts or grants) to his loyal supporters, creating a new power base wholly dependent on him. This reinforced the patrimonial character of government and strengthened the emir's personal power.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the intense political violence that accompanied changes of ruler in the Bukhara Emirate was neither accidental nor a consequence of the personal character of its rulers; it had deep systemic roots. The central finding is that the purges were a logical and structurally determined outcome of a patrimonial system of government that lacked clear legal foundations for succession. Uncertainty over inheritance drove every prince to fight for power, and for the victor the most realistic way to stabilise his rule was to establish his own undivided, absolute authority by eliminating all potential and actual rivals. The physical elimination of dynastic competitors, the stripping of economic and political power from the old elite and the subjugation of separatist territories were interconnected parts of a single strategy.

In a broader perspective, the permanent institutional crisis of succession was a principal source of the political weakness of the Bukhara Emirate. Instead of mobilising its resources against external threats or undertaking reforms, the state had to expend its energy on self-destructive internal struggles at almost every change of generation. This chronic internal instability and the fragmentation of the state were among the fundamental reasons why the emirate could not effectively resist the political and military pressure of the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century. Thus, although political purges could consolidate an emir's power in the short term, in the long term they contributed to the decline of the state and, ultimately, to the loss of its independence.

The study suggests several directions for further research. First, a comparison of succession practices in the Bukhara Emirate with those in the khanates of Khiva and Kokand would help to identify both the common and the distinctive features of Central Asian statehood. Second, the economic consequences of property confiscations and the circulation of elites could be examined in greater depth through archival documents, in particular waqf deeds and qazi records. Third, a study of the role of Islamic law (fiqh) in legitimising or contesting power would shed light on the ideological dimensions of political struggle in the emirate.

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