

Privilege or Mandate? Nepo Babies in Biblical Narrative and the Political Reality of Indonesia

Obet Nego¹, Debby Christ Mondolu²

^{1,2}Sekolah Tinggi Theologia Ebenhaezer, Tanjung Enim, Indonesia

✉Correspondence: obetnego0807@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of nepo babies, a term denoting the children of prominent figures who attain power through family connections, in relation to biblical narrative and Indonesia's political realities. Employing a critical qualitative approach combining biblical hermeneutics with critical discourse analysis, the study finds that political dynasties in Indonesia expose a persistent tension between privilege and mandate. Though often defended as legitimate within existing legal and social frameworks, such dynasties frequently erode democracy and deepen social inequality. A parallel pattern emerges in Scripture: hereditary succession alone guarantees neither competence nor faithfulness, as the failures of Eli's sons and Solomon's decline make clear, whereas Joseph and David show that legitimate leadership rests on divine calling and integrity rather than lineage. Drawing on Walter Brueggemann's prophetic imagination, the article argues that the church is called to function as a prophetic community that criticizes unjust power structures and envisions more just political alternatives. It concludes that privilege should be understood as a divine mandate rather than an inherited entitlement, with implications for ecclesial public engagement and a more meritocratic Indonesian politics.

Keywords: nepo babies; political dynasty; public theology; prophetic imagination; Christian political ethics

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji fenomena nepo babies, istilah yang merujuk pada anak dari tokoh berpengaruh yang memperoleh kekuasaan melalui koneksi keluarga, dalam kaitannya dengan narasi Alkitab dan realitas politik Indonesia. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif kritis yang menggabungkan hermeneutika biblika dan analisis wacana kritis, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa dinasti politik di Indonesia memperlihatkan ketegangan yang terus-menerus antara privilese dan mandat. Meski sering dibela sebagai sah dalam kerangka hukum dan sosial yang berlaku, dinasti semacam ini kerap melemahkan demokrasi dan memperlebar ketimpangan sosial. Pola serupa muncul dalam Kitab Suci: suksesi berdasarkan garis keturunan saja tidak menjamin kompetensi maupun kesetiaan, sebagaimana terlihat dari kegagalan anak-anak Eli dan kejatuhan Salomo, sementara Yusuf dan Daud menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan yang sah berakar pada panggilan ilahi dan integritas, bukan pada garis keturunan. Dengan mengacu pada imajinasi profetis Walter Brueggemann, artikel ini menegaskan bahwa gereja dipanggil menjadi komunitas profetis yang mengkritik struktur kekuasaan yang tidak adil sekaligus membayangkan tatanan politik alternatif yang lebih adil. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa privilese seharusnya dipahami sebagai mandat ilahi, bukan hak warisan, dengan implikasi bagi keterlibatan publik gereja dan politik Indonesia yang lebih meritokratis.

Kata kunci: nepo babies; dinasti politik; teologi publik; imajinasi profetis; etika politik Kristen

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of nepo babies has recently come to occupy a prominent place in global public discourse, particularly across popular culture and politics. The term derives from the phrase “nepotism babies” and refers to the children or descendants of well-known figures, whether celebrities, officials, or public personalities, who gain access, opportunity, and

advantage primarily through family connections rather than personal merit.¹ From its origins in the entertainment industry, the term has since migrated into the political sphere, where privilege rooted in lineage frequently provokes ethical controversy for appearing to entrench unequal opportunity.² On the one hand, the public tends to view nepo babies as a form of nepotism that forecloses meritocratic space. On the other, the phenomenon retains a strong social basis precisely because it is embedded in the realities of family ties and inherited structures of power.³

Within the context of Indonesian politics, the phenomenon known as nepo babies manifests most conspicuously through the practice of political dynasty, in which kinship ties become instruments for the consolidation of power. Recent research shows that this dynastic pattern can be found at every level of government, from the village up to the national stage. It is visible in cases of kinship-based politics in Banyumas, in village leadership, and at the national level through the dynastic pattern associated with Joko Widodo.⁴ The Ratu Atut dynasty in Banten and the Aang Hamid Suganda dynasty in Kuningan stand as concrete illustrations of how blood ties function as political capital.⁵ Such practices have drawn sharp criticism for eroding the substance of democracy, narrowing the space for political competition, and widening social injustice.⁶ Political dynasty of this kind threatens the very democratic principles meant to represent the interests of the whole citizenry, producing instead an unequal distribution of political access.

Even so, the phenomenon of political dynasty is not invariably regarded in negative terms. A number of studies indicate that public support for kinship-based politics remains considerable, shaped by emotional closeness, local identity, and the perception that dynastic politics delivers stability.⁷ From a pragmatic standpoint, political dynasty can be read as a mechanism for sustaining continuity of power within a robust patronage system. Some scholars go further, suggesting that dynastic politics can play a role in consolidating power

¹ Jordan Foster and Michelle Maroto, "Nepo Babies and the Myth of Meritocracy," *Sociological Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (April 3, 2025): 215–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2024.2421811>.

² Santa Bahadur Thapa, "The Nepotism and Favouritism in Politics of South Asia," *Studies in Social Science & Humanities* 2, no. 10 (2023): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.56397/sssh.2023.10.01>.

³ Foster and Maroto, "Nepo Babies and the Myth of Meritocracy."

⁴ Tri Rini Widyastuti, F.X. Wardiyono, and Ignatius Suksmadi Sutoyo, "Is There a Political Dynasty in The Head Village Election with Family Ties Candidates?: A Case Study in Pliken Village Banyumas," *Komunitas* 14, no. 1 (2022): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.15294/komunitas.v14i1.35942>; Wijoko Lestariono, "Politik Dinasti Dalam Kepemimpinan Desa," *Jurnal Sociopolitico* 4, no. 1 (2022): 49–57, <https://doi.org/10.54683/sociopolitico.v4i1.58>; Novia Fatimatuzzahra and Dian Suluh Kusuma Dewi, "The Pattern of Joko Widodo's Political Dynasty Practices," *Journal of Local Government Issues* 4, no. 1 (2021): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.22219/logos.v4i1.15407>.

⁵ Iqbal Hafsari, Lusi Andriyani, and Asep Setiawan, "Rekrutmen Partai Politik Dalam Pembentukan Dinasti Ratu Atut Chosiyah Di Provinsi Banten," *Integralistik* 33, no. 2 (July 31, 2022): 90–99, <https://doi.org/10.15294/integralistik.v33i2.37725>; Dina Fadiyah, Rahmi Kania Dewi, and Ayi Karyaana, "Kekuatan Dinasti Politik Aang Hamid Suganda Di Kabupaten Kuningan," *Journal of Political Issues* 4, no. 1 (July 31, 2022): 19–28, <https://doi.org/10.33019/jpi.v4i1.77>.

⁶ Djoni Gunanto, "Tinjauan Kritis Politik Dinasti di Indonesia," *Sawala: Jurnal Administrasi Negara* 8, no. 2 (December 24, 2020): 177–191, <https://e-jurnal.lppmunsera.org/index.php/Sawala/article/view/2844>; Hagi Hutomo Mukti and Rodiyah Rodiyah, "Dynasty Politics in Indonesia: Tradition or Democracy?" *Journal of Law and Legal Reform* 1, no. 3 (2020): 531–538.

⁷ R. William Liddle, Saiful Mujani, and Deni Irvani, "Support for Family Politics and Democracy: Evidence from Indonesia," *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial Indonesia (JISI)* 3, no. 2 (December 14, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.15408/jisi.v3i2.29670>; Yuliana Windisari and Ida Wahyuliana, "Tahta Extended Family Dalam Bias Politik Keekerabatan," *Jurnal Pamator: Jurnal Ilmiah Universitas Trunojoyo* 15, no. 1 (April 16, 2022): 53–65, <https://doi.org/10.21107/pamator.v15i1.13089>.

precisely when democratic institutions face fragmentation.⁸ The dynamics of nepo babies in Indonesian politics are thus ambivalent. On one side they generate problems of injustice, and on the other they are seen as functionally significant for sustaining leadership continuity.

The relevance of scriptural narrative for reading a contemporary political phenomenon such as nepo babies is not a forced analogy but a hermeneutical move grounded in a public theology approach. As Volf has argued, scriptural texts do not function merely as historical documents but as moral resources that continue to address public realities across the generations.⁹ It is within this frame that the leadership narratives of ancient Israel become relevant, since they offer theological patterns of privilege and mandate that can be brought into critical conversation with the political realities of Indonesia. According to Demsky, the biblical genealogies, and the “Table of Nations” in particular, constitute a literary genre that articulates the universal value of kinship and the importance of lineage within ancient Hebrew culture,¹⁰ which demonstrates that questions of inheritance and leadership legitimacy are by no means foreign to the sacred text. Scripture records the transmission of leadership through lineage, with outcomes that range from success to failure. The account of the sons of the priest Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, depicts moral failure born of the abuse of inherited privilege (1 Sam.2:12-17).¹¹ Solomon, by contrast, as the son of David, was able to draw on his position to bring Israel to the height of its glory in the early years of his reign.¹² This suggests that Scripture does not reject hereditary privilege as such, but insists that such privilege must be exercised with moral and spiritual responsibility.¹³ Inheritance, in the biblical sense, is therefore better understood as mandate than as mere entitlement.

The connection between biblical narrative and the phenomenon of political dynasty in Indonesia is significant precisely because both contain the same underlying tension between privilege and mandate. Privilege without integrity can descend into moral crisis and the abuse of power, whereas privilege understood as mandate can become a vehicle for justice and the common good. Theological reflection, in this regard, offers a corrective perspective on the nepo babies phenomenon by insisting that leadership is not merely the product of biological inheritance, but a divine responsibility that demands faithfulness, integrity, and service to the community.

From this discussion a critical question emerges. Can hereditary privilege, within the context of politics and faith, simply be accepted as an entitlement, or must it instead be understood as a mandate that demands accountability? Previous academic studies have largely examined political dynasty from political, legal, and social perspectives, with theological reflection rarely integrated into the analysis.¹⁴ This is the research gap that the present study

⁸ Fery Dona, “Dinasti Politik di Era Otonomi Daerah dalam Perspektif Demokrasi,” *Al-Ahkam: Jurnal Ilmu Syari’ah Dan Hukum* 7, no. 2 (2022): 123–45, <https://doi.org/10.22515/alahkam.v7i2.6254>.

⁹ Adam Possamai and Anthony J. Blasi, “Public Faith,” in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of the Sociology of Religion* (2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks, California 91320: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529714401.n361>.

¹⁰ Aaron Demsky, “The Genesis of Jewish Genealogy,” *Genealogy* 7, no. 4 (November 21, 2023): 91, <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy7040091>.

¹¹ Michael Ufok Udoekpo, “Obiajulu’s Children and the Wicked Sons of Eli (1 Sam 2:11–17),” *European Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 4, no. 4 (October 6, 2024): 10–18, <https://doi.org/10.24018/theology.2024.4.4.140>.

¹² Abdulrahman Ali. F. Alhazemi, “An Analytical Research of Prophet King Solomon’s Leadership Qualities, Decisiveness, and Sagacity,” *The International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies* 8, no. 7 (July 31, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.24940/theijhss/2020/v8/i7/HS2007-017>.

¹³ Alex Davis, “Heavenly Inheritances,” in *Imagining Inheritance from Chaucer to Shakespeare* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 181–223, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198851424.003.0006>.

¹⁴ Halilul Khairi, “Menakar Pengaruh Politik Dinasti Dalam Pemilihan Kepala Daerah Di Indonesia,” *JWP (Jurnal Wacana Politik)* 7, no. 1 (2022): 35, <https://doi.org/10.24198/jwp.v7i1.37770>; Ramlan Darmansyah, Siti Desma

seeks to address. The novelty offered by this article, accordingly, lies in integrating a public theology lens as an analytical framework for reading the nepo babies phenomenon in Indonesian politics, so that theological reflection moves beyond the descriptive and toward a normative, constructive proposal. The thesis advanced here is that the nepo babies phenomenon in Indonesian politics can be adequately critiqued and ethically transformed only when the church is present as a prophetic community that speaks from a public theology perspective, insisting that hereditary privilege is a mandate of service rather than an entitlement simply passed down. Drawing on a public theology framework developed from Walter Brueggemann's notion of prophetic imagination, this article proposes an alternative paradigm, namely leadership as a divine calling that must be tested by integrity, meritocracy, and solidarity with the weak.

METHOD

This study adopts a critical qualitative approach that combines three principal frameworks: biblical hermeneutics, critical discourse analysis, and public theology. Biblical hermeneutics is employed to interpret scriptural texts, both from the Old Testament and the New Testament, that bear on questions of hereditary privilege and the responsibility of leadership, so that theological meaning contextually attuned to contemporary realities can be discerned. Public theology, as developed by theologians such as Walter Brueggemann,¹⁵ Miroslav Volf,¹⁶ and Martin Marty,¹⁷ serves as the primary lens for bringing theological reflection into dialogue with the political realities of Indonesia. Public theology understands Christian faith not as a strictly private matter but as a form of critical engagement with social and political life for the sake of the common good. The critical discourse analysis of Theo Van Leeuwen, meanwhile, is drawn upon to read the phenomenon of political dynasty in Indonesia from the standpoint of Christian ethics, highlighting how the practice of nepo babies in the political sphere reflects relations of power, exclusive access, and the potential for social injustice.¹⁸ In practical terms, the research begins by identifying the relevant biblical texts, proceeds with a review of the secondary literature, interprets the texts through biblical hermeneutics, then applies critical discourse analysis to the phenomenon of political dynasty, and finally synthesizes the two to produce a contextual theological reflection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Nepo Babies Phenomenon in Indonesian Political Reality

In Indonesian politics, the presence of nepo babies is closely tied to the persistence of political dynasties at both the central and regional levels. Political dynasty can be understood as the practice of bequeathing power to immediate family members or close relatives, so that

Syahrani, and Zulfa Harirah MS, "Potret Dinasti Politik Dalam Pengisian Jabatan Administratif," *Journal of Political Issues* 2, no. 1 (2020): 34–46, <https://doi.org/10.33019/jpi.v2i1.28>; Titin Purwaningsih and Bambang Eka Cahya Widodo, "The Interplay of Incumbency, Political Dynasty and Corruption in Indonesia: Are Political Dynasties the Cause of Corruption in Indonesia?," *UNISCI Journal* 18, no. 53 (May 2020): 157–76, <https://doi.org/10.31439/UNISCI-89>.

¹⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 1-19.

¹⁶ Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2011), 1-17.

¹⁷ Martin E. Marty, "Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience," *The Journal of Religion* 54, no. 4 (October 1974): 332–59, <https://doi.org/10.1086/486401>.

¹⁸ Theo Van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Thanh Diem Dang, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*, *VNU Journal of Foreign Studies*, vo 1. 41 (Oxford University Press, 2025).

public office is obtained not through democratic competition but by virtue of blood ties.¹⁹ Within Van Leeuwen's framework of critical discourse analysis, this practice involves a process of selective inclusion in the representation of social actors. Members of ruling families are portrayed as fitting and natural candidates for public office, while non-elite contenders are systematically sidelined, whether through structural barriers or through discourses that cast them as "outsiders".²⁰ This pattern is plainly visible in cases where the families of officials occupy strategic positions in both local and national government, blurring the line between democracy and oligarchy.²¹ The phenomenon reveals how a political system that ought to be open and competitive has instead been infiltrated by mechanisms of kinship-based power reproduction.²² Within this frame, nepo babies have come to symbolize the exclusivity of access and the distortion of democracy. It also makes clear that the problem of political privilege does not stop at procedural justice but reaches into the substance of public ethics.

The public frequently criticizes political dynasty as a form of pseudo-democracy, in which elections continue to be held yet their outcomes consistently preserve the existing status quo of power. Heriyanto argues that political dynasty in regional elections (*pilkada*) has produced electoral injustice, since candidates from political families enjoy clear advantages over independent or non-elite contenders.²³ At the level of discourse, this advantage does not flow primarily from candidate capacity but from what Van Leeuwen terms legitimacy through personal authority (authorization), where a family name and proximity to powerful figures function as authority sufficient to justify candidacy, with no further verification of competence required.²⁴ The implication is a weakening of democratic quality, since not every citizen enjoys an equal opportunity to compete. Fatimatuzzahra and Dewi point to the dynastic pattern of President Joko Widodo, illustrated through the cases of Gibran Rakabuming and Bobby Nasution, as a contemporary example.²⁵ What these cases reveal is that political dynasty is not confined to the regions but is also rooted within the inner circles of national power. Public criticism of the practice reflects a deeper anxiety about the rise of a new elite formed not by accomplishment but by family inheritance.

Beyond this, political dynasty is also frequently associated with oligarchic practices that reinforce closed networks of power. Suftyadi et al. contend that legal and political oligarchy in Indonesia has eroded the principle of meritocracy, since elite interests consistently dominate over those of the people.²⁶ In Van Leeuwen's analysis, this condition reflects the operation of legitimation through *rationalization*, in which the oligarchic network is justified on functional grounds: power must be safeguarded by those already deemed experienced and trustworthy, that is, by the elite families themselves.²⁷ Novillia et al. add that the candidacies of Gibran and Bobby illustrate how local politics can be directly shaped by national patronage. The involvement of President Jokowi, whether direct or indirect, in their nomination processes

¹⁹ Khairi, "Menakar Pengaruh Politik Dinasti Dalam Pemilihan Kepala Daerah Di Indonesia."

²⁰ Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*, 23-54.

²¹ Mukti and Rodiyah, "Dynasty Politics in Indonesia: Tradition or Democracy?"

²² James Loxton, "Hereditary Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 35, no. 3 (July 2024): 146-59, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2024.a930433>.

²³ Heriyanto, "Dinasti Politik Pada Pilkada di Indonesia Dalam Perspektif Demokrasi," *Journal of Government and Politics (JGOP)* 4, no. 1 (2022): 29.

²⁴ Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*, 106-108.

²⁵ Fatimatuzzahra and Dewi, "The Pattern of Joko Widodo's Political Dynasty Practices."

²⁶ Ahmad Rifai Suftyadi, Dini Dewi Heniarti, and A Harits Nu'man, "Oligarchic Politics in the Context of a Democratic Rule of Law in Relation to the Principle of Expediency," *Journal of Legal Studies* 32, no. 46 (December 1, 2023): 67-77, <https://doi.org/10.2478/jles-2023-0012>.

²⁷ Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*, 113-117.

displays a pattern of patronage in which a national figure leverages his influence to advance family members into strategic regional positions.²⁸ Nepo babies in politics, therefore, are not merely a social phenomenon but a structural symptom that fortifies oligarchy. Left unaddressed, Indonesian democracy risks regression, with popular representation reduced to formality. Political dynasty, in the end, functions less as a mechanism of healthy leadership renewal than as an instrument for the reproduction of elites.

From the perspective of law and constitutional governance, the phenomenon of political dynasty also raises a serious dilemma. Ermalinda and Benu show that the Indonesian Constitution still lacks the legal instruments needed to sever the chain of political dynasty effectively. Although regulations such as term limits and prohibitions on nepotism in the bureaucracy do exist, the practice of political dynasty continues to find openings through which to persist.²⁹ Within Van Leeuwen's framework, this is what may be called ambiguous legitimation through formal authority (*authorization*), where the legal architecture is used not to constrain dynastic politics but as an arena negotiable by powerful actors for the perpetuation of their interests.³⁰ Rannie et al. reinforce this finding by pointing to Constitutional Court Decision No. 90/PPU-XXI/2023, which paved the way for Gibran's candidacy, as an instance of how institutional authority can be manipulated to serve a dynastic agenda.³¹ The law, rather than functioning as a check on power, becomes an instrument for legitimating the discourse of dynasty.

Beyond the legal dimension, the phenomenon carries serious social implications as well. Abufatih et al. characterize political dynasty as the “aborted baby of deliberative democracy” because it forecloses the space for inclusive public participation. As a result, citizens frequently feel alienated from a political process that should rightfully represent them.³² In Van Leeuwen's analysis, this alienation occurs through the exclusion of non-elite actors from public discourse, in which the voices of ordinary citizens are categorized as either irrelevant or incompetent to challenge the will of ruling families.³³ Ananda observes that public satisfaction with political dynasty remains low, since it is seen to address not the needs of the people but rather the consolidation of familial power.³⁴ What this makes clear is that political dynasty not only diminishes democracy but also widens the gulf between elites and ordinary citizens. In this context, nepo babies reflect a broader problem of social injustice, where political opportunity is narrowed into the possession of a handful of powerful families.

When all these dimensions are synthesized through critical discourse analysis, it becomes apparent that the nepo babies phenomenon in Indonesian politics is not simply a matter of individual nepotism but a structured discursive system. Gunanto emphasizes that narratives of the continuation of tradition or inherited leadership are often deployed to justify

²⁸ Kiki Novilia et al., “Jokowi’s Political Dynasties: Impact and Its Comparison to Nehru-Gandhi Dynasties,” *Journal of Islamic World and Politics* 7, no. 2 (January 12, 2024): 235–44, <https://doi.org/10.18196/jiwp.v7i2.76>.

²⁹ Jenny Ermalinda and Erlin Martina Benu, “Measuring the Influence of Dynastic Politics in the MK Decision Number 90/PPU-XXI/2023 on Democracy,” *Journal of Multidisciplinary Academic and Practice Studies* 2, no. 2 (May 27, 2024): 203–10, <https://doi.org/10.35912/jomaps.v2i2.2069>.

³⁰ Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*, 106–108.

³¹ Mahesa Rannie, Retno Saraswati, and Fifiana Wisnaeni, “The Phenomenon of Political Dynasty in Regional Head Elections in Indonesia,” *Nurani* 23, no. 1 (June 14, 2023): 69–84, <https://doi.org/10.19109/nurani.v23i1.16477>.

³² Tanuri Abufatih, Asep Maskur, and Subhan Alba, “Dismantling Political Dynasties: Transformation of Pancasila Democracy in the Context of Family Power,” *Politik Indonesia: Indonesian Political Science Review* 9, no. 2 (August 16, 2024): 86–105, <https://doi.org/10.15294/jpi.v9i2.4655>.

³³ Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*, 113–117.

³⁴ Adhe Ismail Ananda, “The Influence of Political Dynasty on the Democracy Climate,” *Constitutional Law Society* 2, no. 1 (March 31, 2023): 9–17, <https://doi.org/10.36448/cls.v2i2.37>.

the practice of political dynasty.³⁵ In Van Leeuwen's terminology, such narratives operate as legitimation strategies through *mythopoesis*, the use of story and tradition to present dynasty as something natural and even noble rather than as a distortion of democracy.³⁶ Purwaningsih and Widodo further find that political dynasty is closely tied to corruption, since familial ties produce loyalties that close off the space for accountability.³⁷ Nepo babies, in this light, are not merely a matter of public ethics but a structural problem that obstructs transparency. The phenomenon calls for critical reflection. Hereditary privilege in politics cannot be viewed simply as an entitlement passed down by birth but must be understood as a mandate to be tested and held accountable in the light of justice, meritocracy, and public responsibility.

Biblical Narrative: Privilege or Mandate?

Inheritance in Scripture is often regarded as an entitlement, yet the biblical narrative makes clear that inheritance carries no automatic guarantee of success. Solomon, for instance, inherited the throne of David as the fulfillment of God's promise, but his life displays a striking paradox between wisdom and moral collapse.³⁸ Although endowed with a discerning heart, his abuse of power and spiritual compromise ultimately brought down his kingdom.³⁹ The wider context of royal succession from Saul to David and on to Solomon further demonstrates that divine legitimacy is not determined by lineage alone but by faithfulness to the commands of God.⁴⁰ Political inheritance in Scripture, therefore, is to be understood not as a guarantee but as a test that demands ethical and spiritual responsibility. This narrative runs parallel to the contemporary question of nepo babies, where hereditary privilege holds value only when carried with integrity.

The failure of nepotism is no less vividly displayed in the story of the sons of Eli. Although they legitimately succeeded their father in the priestly office, the abuse of their hereditary right brought about the wrath of God and ended in destruction.⁴¹ Their contempt for the offerings makes plain that privilege without faithfulness leads only to spiritual and social ruin. A similar trajectory is evident in the line of Saul, which lost its legitimacy despite originating in a chosen family.⁴² These narratives reveal that Scripture consistently resists the assumption that hereditary right secures success. What it affirms instead is moral and spiritual responsibility as the foundational condition for legitimate leadership. The situation closely

³⁵ Gunanto, "Tinjauan Kritis Politik Dinasti di Indonesia."

³⁶ Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*, 117-120.

³⁷ Purwaningsih and Widodo, "The Interplay of Incumbency, Political Dynasty and Corruption in Indonesia: Are Political Dynasties the Cause of Corruption in Indonesia?"

³⁸ Hershey H. Friedman, L. W. Friedman, and R. B. Fireworker, "'An Understanding Heart to Judge Your People': The View of Successful Leadership in the Hebrew Bible," *John Ben Shepperd Journal of Practical Leadership* 1, no. 1 (2006): 103-17.

³⁹ Eben Scheffler, "Royal Care for the Poor in Israel's First History: The Royal Law Deuteronomian 17:14-20), Hannah's Song (1 Samuel 2:1-10), Samuel's Warning (1 Samuel 8:10-18), David's Attitude (2 Samuel 24:10-24) and Ahab and Naboth (1 Kings 21) in Intertext," *Scriptura* 116, no. 2 (December 2017): 5, <https://doi.org/10.7833/116-2-1317>.

⁴⁰ Marcin Konarski, "Przewrót Polityczny Jako Forma Sukcesji Władzy Królewskiej w Monarchii Zjednoczonej Izraela. Od Saula Do Salomona," *Studia Iuridica Lublinensia* 27, no. 4 (June 15, 2019): 51, <https://doi.org/10.17951/sil.2018.27.4.51-70>; Andrew Knapp, "The Conflict between Adonijah and Solomon in Light of Succession Practices Near and Far," *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 20 (July 9, 2020): 2, <https://doi.org/10.5508/jhs29557>.

⁴¹ Maria Hanie Endojowatiningsih, "Anak-Anak Imam Eli (I Samuel 2-3) Dan Refleksinya Bagi Anak-Anak Hamba Tuhan," *Missio Ecclesiae* 11, no. 1 (April 25, 2022): 37-50, <https://doi.org/10.52157/me.v11i1.152>.

⁴² Lowell K. Handy, "The Characters of Heirs Apparent in the Book of Samuel," *Bib Res* 38 (1993): 5-22.

echoes the critique levelled at modern nepo babies, where political inheritance unaccompanied by the quality of leadership carries the potential to inflict real damage upon society.

Jesus himself delivers a sharp critique of the claim that lineage can serve as the basis of spiritual identity. In John 8, Jesus rejects the claim of Judeans who relied upon their status as *children of Abraham*, insisting that true descent belongs to those who live by faith and truth.⁴³ This view emphasizes that blood ties do not automatically place a person within the family of God. Jesus's critique dismantles the exclusivist logic that often functions to legitimate lineage. He shifts the focus instead from biological privilege to the mandate of faith and obedience.⁴⁴ Tallon makes clear that trust, faithfulness, and obedience to God constitute the principal conditions for membership in the kingdom of God.⁴⁵ The implications for reading the phenomenon of political dynasty are significant. The legitimacy of leadership cannot rest upon hereditary bloodlines but must be proven through integrity and service.

Paul's paradigm likewise affirms that God's election is not determined by lineage but by grace and divine calling. In Romans and Galatians, Paul stresses spiritual adoption as a form of inheritance higher than biological descent.⁴⁶ Through the metaphor of "adopted children," Paul shows that all who are led by the Spirit of God are heirs of the promise, irrespective of physical lineage.⁴⁷ This vision overturns the logic of hereditary rule common in the ancient world.⁴⁸ Paul teaches that leadership within the community of faith is not a privilege handed down but a mandate granted through grace. The principle remains directly relevant for a critique of the nepo babies phenomenon, which relies on biological inheritance with little regard for the moral and spiritual calling that ought to accompany it.

Scripture, beyond this, also presents the conflicts and struggles that mark familial succession. The story of Adonijah's attempt to seize the throne from Solomon shows how the politics of inheritance can give rise to intrigue, manipulation, and unhealthy rivalry.⁴⁹ Despite his claim as a son of David, Adonijah failed because he lacked divine legitimacy and the support of the community. The episode illustrates that hereditary privilege without moral recognition ends only in failure. By contrast, a figure such as Joseph displays the transformation from conflict-maker to "conflict-manager" within the family, suggesting that true leadership is determined far more by character and vision than by blood.⁵⁰ These

⁴³ Hymeloug Douanla Josine, "Ethnic Reading of 'The Jews' in John 8:31–59 Through Durkheimian and Barthian Sociological Lenses," *Expository Times* 135, no. 11 (August 10, 2024): 458–67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00145246241257170>.

⁴⁴ Michael Pace and Daniel J. Mckaughan, "Judaean-Christian Faith as Trust and Loyalty," *Religious Studies* 58, no. 1 (March 15, 2022): 30–60, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412520000153>.

⁴⁵ Jonathan Tallon, "Power, Faith, and Reciprocity in a Slave Society," in *Social Control in Late Antiquity: The Violence of Small Worlds* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 59–75, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108783491.006>.

⁴⁶ Caroline A. Schleier Cutler, "The Dispossessed Inherit the World: A Study of Inclusiveness in the Adoption and Inheritance Metaphors of Galatians 3: 23-4: 7 and Romans 8: 14-25" (McMaster University, 2014), <https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/handle/11375/19557>.

⁴⁷ Jennifer Slater, "The First Shall Be Last... – A Biblical Inversion of Leadership Traps and Pressure-Cooker Appetites for Ambitious Statuses," *HTS Theologese Studies / Theological Studies* 76, no. 2 (September 9, 2020): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i2.5963>.

⁴⁸ Timothy Besley and Marta Reynal-Querol, "The Logic of Hereditary Rule: Theory and Evidence," *Journal of Economic Growth* 22, no. 2 (June 15, 2017): 123–44, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10887-017-9140-4>.

⁴⁹ Dariusz Dziadosz, "Dawid i Jego Synowie. Wychowawczy i Polityczny Dramat Na Dworze Królewskim," *Verbum Vitae* 21, no. 1 (January 14, 2012): 39–63, <https://doi.org/10.31743/vv.1537>; Knapp, "The Conflict between Adonijah and Solomon in Light of Succession Practices Near and Far."

⁵⁰ Stanko Gerjolj, "Joseph of Egypt: From A Conflict Maker to A Conflict Manager in The Family," in *Strengthening Families* (The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow Press, 2016), 175–205, <https://doi.org/10.15633/9788374385640.12>.

narratives reinforce the claim that the Bible offers a critical paradigm for engaging the phenomenon of lineage-based politics.

The entire biblical narrative ultimately affirms that inheritance, although significant, is not the principal determinant of leadership legitimacy. The election of David as king, for instance, demonstrates that God often overturns human logic by choosing the young, the weak, or the overlooked.⁵¹ The principle that *the last shall be first* affirms that leadership is a mandate rather than an exclusive entitlement.⁵² God's action reveals that divine criteria often diverge from human standards, with humility, repentance, and dependence upon God established as the central values.⁵³ Scripture, in this way, offers a corrective to nepotistic practices that lean solely upon lineage. Inheritance must be understood as a mandate of responsibility, not as a privilege available for exploitation. This relevance carries particular weight for reading Indonesian politics, where the nepo babies phenomenon demands ethical and theological scrutiny.

Privilege as a Mandate of God

The phenomenon of nepo babies in Indonesian politics displays clear parallels with the biblical narrative, since both bring into view how hereditary privilege can function at once as blessing and as snare. In politics, privilege is often construed as automatic access to power, as is evident in the dynastic practices that have grown more entrenched in both regional and central elections.⁵⁴ Scripture, by contrast, makes plain that hereditary inheritance, although real, must always be tested by faithfulness to God. The failure of Eli's sons and the downfall of Solomon serve as reminders that privilege divorced from faith carries ruin in its wake.⁵⁵ In both the sacred text and contemporary politics, then, privilege is never neutral but always demands accountability. The comparison reveals a genuine point of convergence between theological reflection and the dynamics of modern socio-political life.

There remains, however, a fundamental difference between the two. In Scripture, every privilege is invariably understood as a mandate, that is, a moral and spiritual responsibility to be carried out for the sake of God's people and for the glory of God. The biblical principle of stewardship affirms that human beings are entrusted with the task of managing resources and privileges wisely, justly, and responsibly, for the flourishing of the community and the glory of God.⁵⁶ In the political reality of Indonesia, by contrast, privilege is often treated as an automatic

⁵¹ Randall C. Bailey and Frederick E. Greenspahn, "When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115, no. 1 (1996): 117, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3266821>.

⁵² Slater, "The First Shall Be Last... – A Biblical Inversion of Leadership Traps and Pressure-Cooker Appetites for Ambitious Statuses."

⁵³ Sostenis Nggebu, "Pertobatan Sejati Menghasilkan Transformasi Moral Dalam Kehidupan Daud: Studi Refleksi Mazmur 51," *SOLA GRATIA: Jurnal Teologi Biblika Dan Praktika* 5, no. 1 (July 30, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.47596/sg.v5i1.264>.

⁵⁴ Heriyanto, "Dinasti Politik Pada Pilkada di Indonesia Dalam Perspektif Demokrasi"; Khairi, "Menakar Pengaruh Politik Dinasti Dalam Pemilihan Kepala Daerah di Indonesia."

⁵⁵ Endojowatiningsih, "Anak-Anak Imam Eli (1 Samuel 2-3) Dan Refleksinya Bagi Anak-Anak Hamba Tuhan"; Hershey H. Friedman and Linda Weiser Friedman, "What Went Wrong? Lessons in Leadership from Solomon, the Bible's Wisest and Worst Ruler," *Journal of Values-Based Leadership* 12, no. 1 (January 4, 2019): 6, <https://doi.org/10.22543/0733.121.1237>.

⁵⁶ Aikomo Odunola Motunrayo, "Biblical Mandates as Framework for Stewardship and Youth Empowerment," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* IX, no. IV (May 3, 2025): 2254–65, <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.90400170>; Albert Douglas Honegan, "Subversive Witness: Scripture's Call to Leverage Privilege by Dominique DuBois Gilliard," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 22, no. 1 (March 2022): 143–45, <https://doi.org/10.1353/scs.2022.0027>.

inheritance, requiring neither moral verification nor demonstrable competence.⁵⁷ Mukti and Rodiyah add that this difference is plainly visible in dynastic political practices, which are frequently defended on cultural grounds or in the name of local tradition.⁵⁸ Legitimacy in such cases derives more from networks of power and legal justification than from any ethic of service. The contrast lays bare a gap between theological narrative and modern political practice. The critical question, accordingly, becomes whether our politics will continue to follow the logic of worldly inheritance alone or whether it will draw inspiration from the ethic of divine mandate.

From the standpoint of Christian political ethics, hereditary privilege should be understood not as an entitlement but as a mandate of responsibility. The Book of Exodus underscores God's concern for the marginalized, a reminder that power must be exercised to protect the weak rather than to enrich a narrow elite.⁵⁹ This principle directly challenges dynastic political practices that habitually overlook the voices of ordinary people. Privilege, when understood as mandate, presses leaders to serve rather than merely to retain their hold on power. Hutahaean argues that Christian political ethics teaches every authority to be a trust from God, to be exercised with humility. Power and authority, within a Christian framework, are understood as a mandate from God rather than as personal possession.⁶⁰ Every Christian leader, accordingly, is called to discharge his or her task with the awareness of being answerable to God, and is therefore bound to uphold the values of justice, honesty, and service. Within the framework of public theology, the church as an institution is called not merely to offer spiritual guidance to individuals but also to engage actively in the life of the nation, critiquing unjust structures of power and proposing alternative orders. The church, in this light, must speak prophetically, following the trajectory of Brueggemann's prophetic imagination, in order to reaffirm the meaning of mandate in the midst of a politics inclined toward pragmatism and dynasty.

Meritocracy must also be brought into conversation with Christian spirituality. Scripture demonstrates that God's choices often rest neither on blood nor on lineage but on faithfulness and obedience, as in the election of David, who was chosen despite not being the firstborn.⁶¹ This principle resonates with the modern notion of meritocracy, which holds that leadership must be built upon competence, integrity, and calling.⁶² In the Indonesian political context, this means that aspiring leaders ought to be tested by their record and capacity rather than judged by family origin. Christian spirituality, in this sense, lends genuine support to meritocracy, since it presses character forward as the principal condition for leadership. The concept needs to be cultivated within political and leadership education so that the logic of dynasty no longer prevails.

⁵⁷ Gunanto, "Tinjauan Kritis Politik Dinasti di Indonesia."

⁵⁸ Mukti and Rodiyah, "Dynasty Politics in Indonesia: Tradition or Democracy?"

⁵⁹ Franky, "Gereja Dan Kaum Termarginalkan: Suatu Tinjauan Biblika Berdasar Kitab Keluaran 22:21-27," *Skenoo: Jurnal Teologi Dan Pendidikan Agama Kristen* 2, no. 2 (December 28, 2022): 136–53, <https://doi.org/10.55649/skenoo.v2i2.35>.

⁶⁰ Hasahatan Hutahaean, "Teologi Politik Gereja; Menemukan Dan Memancarkan Tritugas Gereja Dalam Pilkada Dan Pilpres," *Melo: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama* 1, no. 1 (June 23, 2021): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.34307/mjsaa.v1i1.1>.

⁶¹ Nepho Gerson Laoly, "Providensi Ilahi Dan Harapan Manusia: Interpretasi Pemilihan Daud Sebagai Raja Dalam 1 Samuel 16:1-13," *Jurnal Teologi Cultivation* 8, no. 1 (July 31, 2024): 201–18, <https://doi.org/10.46965/jtc.v8i1.2382>.

⁶² Josapat Bangun, "Penerapan Nilai-Nilai Karakter Kristiani Dalam Aktivitas Kepemimpinan Kristen," *HARVESTER: Jurnal Teologi Dan Kepemimpinan Kristen* 7, no. 1 (June 24, 2022): 15–31, <https://doi.org/10.52104/harvester.v7i1.85>.

The role of the church and of civil society is essential in ensuring that privilege does not become ensnared in the logic of dynasty. From the standpoint of public theology, the church is tasked not only with nurturing the faith of its congregation but also with serving as a prophetic voice in the midst of social and political life. Brueggemann, in *The Prophetic Imagination*, argues that the prophetic task of the church is to dismantle the consciousness that supports an unjust status quo (prophetic criticism) while at the same time awakening imagination toward more just social alternatives (prophetic energizing).⁶³ On this account, the church is not merely a religious institution but a prophet willing to speak truth before power. The church, as a prophetic moral community, carries the responsibility of insisting that genuine power must side with justice and the public good rather than with the reproduction of elites.⁶⁴ Civil society, for its part, needs to cultivate a critical consciousness so that the people are not easily caught up in the rhetoric of extended family or political inheritance so often deployed to perpetuate dynasty. The role of public oversight, beyond this, becomes vital for ensuring that the mandate of leadership is exercised with transparency.⁶⁵ The synergy between church and civil society can thus serve as a bulwark against corrupt political practice. The values of genuine democracy will only stand firm when accompanied by an ethical spirituality.

The theological critique of the nepo babies phenomenon ultimately opens up concrete ethical possibilities for Indonesian politics. First, privilege must always be regarded as a mandate rather than as an automatic right, and the church has a role to play in teaching this theology of mandate to congregations who are at the same time citizens. Second, faith-based political education needs to be intensified so that society can become more critical of the logic of dynasty. Third, the church as an institution needs to engage actively in the public sphere by speaking out during elections, forming leaders of character, and building coalitions across civic bodies to safeguard meritocracy. Fourth, by adopting the framework of Brueggemann's prophetic imagination, the church is called not only to critique (prophetic criticism) the dynastic politics that oppress the people but also to imagine and to offer more just alternatives (prophetic energizing) to society. The biblical narrative, in this way, functions not only as critique but also as inspiration for building a more just and dignified political order. A healthy politics, in the end, should strengthen justice, meritocracy, and solidarity rather than merely pass on the privileges of this world.

CONCLUSION

This study departs from the question of whether hereditary privilege in Indonesian politics ought to be understood as a right naturally passed down or as a mandate that demands accountability. Following analysis through biblical hermeneutics, Van Leeuwen's critical discourse analysis, and public theology, the study finds that the persistence of political dynasty is not solely the product of a weak legal structure but rather the outcome of a layered system of discursive legitimation. The strategy of authorization elevates the family name into an authority sufficient to justify candidacy, rationalization wraps nepotism in narratives of efficiency and stability, while mythopoesis presents the transmission of power as the natural

⁶³ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*.

⁶⁴ Oey Natanael Winanto and Johnnie Manopo, "Relasi Gereja, Negara, Dan Masyarakat," *Journal of Religious and Socio-Cultural* 4, no. 1 (January 10, 2023): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.46362/jrsc.v4i1.108>.

⁶⁵ Zakaria et al., "Membangun Gerakan Desa Anti Politik Uang Untuk Pemilu Berintegritas Di Desa Sindangheula Kecamatan Pabuaran Kabupaten Serang," *Jurnal Pengabdian Pada Masyarakat* 10, no. 1 (March 3, 2025): 119–28, <https://doi.org/10.30653/jppm.v10i1.1035>; Saddam Husain Tamrin et al., "Meningkatkan Kesadaran Politik Pemuda Dalam Menghadapi Pilkada 2024 Di Kabupaten Majene," *Jurnal Pengabdian Pada Masyarakat* 10, no. 1 (March 13, 2025): 230–39, <https://doi.org/10.30653/jppm.v10i1.954>.

and even noble continuation of tradition. The hermeneutical reading, beyond this, yields a finding that moves past conventional moral instruction: Scripture structurally deconstructs lineage-based legitimacy as a theological category. What this study uncovers, therefore, is not merely that "biblical figures succeeded because of character," but that Scripture consistently refuses biological descent as an independent foundation for the legitimacy of leadership.

The convergence of discourse analysis and biblical exegesis carries specific implications for the church within the context of contemporary Indonesian politics. The church is called not only to critique dynasty morally but also to function as the producer of a concrete and structured counter-discourse. Brueggemann's prophetic imagination, in this context, is more than a metaphor. Prophetic criticism dismantles the mythopoesis of dynasty, while prophetic energizing offers an alternative narrative of leadership grounded in mandate rather than in blood. What is now known, and was not known before the analysis was undertaken, is that the question of nepo babies is not principally a matter of individual ethics but rather a question of discourse that requires systematic deconstruction. A church that takes this phenomenon seriously, therefore, cannot content itself with preaching about the integrity of leaders. It must be present as a force capable of dismantling the dynastic narrative of legitimation and of building a new and just public imagination.

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