

## POLICY BRIEF (8/8/2025)

### ASSESSING PERSONALIST POLITICS: A DIAGNOSTIC FRAMEWORK TO SUPPORT U.S. FOREIGN POLICY DECISIONS

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#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Personalist political systems, where state power concentrates in the hands of a single individual or tightly controlled elite network, represent one of the most significant risks to U.S. foreign policy, economic partnerships, and democracy support programs. These systems weaken institutions, distort elections, invite foreign authoritarian influence, and increase the likelihood of instability and conflict.

This brief presents an early-warning and diagnostic framework designed to help U.S. policymakers identify the subtle signs that a democratic or hybrid regime is shifting toward personalization. The goal is to give decision-makers a clearer picture of political realities on the ground so the United States can respond strategically, effectively, and at the right time.

My Political Diagnostics Toolkit provides measurable indicators and risk scores that highlight executive dominance, weakening institutions, elite patronage structures, electoral manipulation, and informal governance networks. The model is globally applicable, but African states serve as the first testing ground because the region offers both long-standing democracies (Ghana, Senegal), fragile hybrids (Nigeria, Kenya), and recent collapses (Mali, Burkina Faso, Sudan). These diverse cases provide fertile ground to refine a tool that U.S. agencies can eventually deploy across the world.

#### WHY PERSONALIST POLITICS MATTER FOR U.S. INTERESTS

Personalist regimes create challenges that the United States cannot ignore. When institutions weaken and leaders consolidate control, U.S. development investments become riskier. Misallocated aid can cost millions of dollars and undermine American credibility. As well, U.S. security partnerships become unstable. Militaries in personalist systems often become tools of the executive rather than constitutional actors. Authoritarian powers gain influence, and Russia, China, and Iran have been most successful in countries with weak checks and balances. Elections lose meaning, formal procedures remain, but informal networks determine real outcomes. Civic trust declines.

When citizens feel the democratic process is manipulated, grievances deepen and lead to unrest.

These risks directly impact U.S. programs across Africa, Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. One example: a U.S.-funded governance program worth \$450 million struggled in a West African country in 2023 because early signs of executive dominance went unnoticed until they were entrenched. Had early-warning indicators been available, the program design could have been adjusted sooner. My toolkit aims to close these gaps.

#### THE POLITICAL DIAGNOSTICS TOOLKIT

The toolkit provides a structured, data-driven way to measure political personalization. It produces a Composite Personalization Risk Score (CPRS) using the following:

1. **Executive Dominance Indicators (EDI):** Measures power concentration in the executive.  
Examples: decree usage, tenure extensions, military reshuffling.

2. **Institutional Neutrality Indicators (INI):** Evaluates courts, parliaments, and oversight agencies. Examples: judicial appointments, bypass patterns, anti-corruption politicization.
3. **Elite Network Structure Indicators (ENSI):** Maps political loyalty networks. Examples: cabinet turnover, elite defection punishments, patronage webs.
4. **Electoral Integrity Manipulation Indicators (EIMI)** - Assesses manipulation beneath formal procedural integrity. Examples: election postponements, disqualified candidates, media bias.
5. **Informal Governance & Patronage Indicators (IGPI):** Captures the “shadow” structures beneath the formal political system. Examples: informal revenue channels, traditional authority misuse, unofficial security actors.

These indicators create a risk profile that is measurable, comparable, and usable.

#### **GLOBAL APPLICABILITY**

While Africa serves as the initial pilot region, the toolkit is designed for global use:

- Hungary - executive dominance and judicial capture
- Turkey - elite patronage and electoral manipulation
- Venezuela - informal governance replacing formal institutions
- Philippines - executive overreach and personalized policing structures
- Cambodia - party personalization and weak opposition space

This confirms the toolkit is *not* Africa-confined and that it is globally relevant and analytically universal.

#### **CASE ILLUSTRATION: GHANA (SAMPLE)**

*CPRS Risk Score: 7.55/20 – Medium Risk*

Ghana is widely recognized as one of Africa’s strongest democracies, but even resilient democracies develop subtle stress points.

Early warnings identified through CPRS scoring:

- Slight increase in executive-driven centralization
- Electoral implementation concerns
- Heightened patronage in key ministries
- Growing tension between formal rules and informal practices

This demonstrates the toolkit’s ability to detect quiet shifts early.

#### **HOW THE TOOLKIT SUPPORTS U.S. FOREIGN POLICY**

1. More Accurate Diplomatic Assessments: Embassy political sections can use CPRS indicators to refine cables, scenario forecasts, and stability assessments.

2. Better Aid Allocation Decisions: USAID DRG programs often must decide where democratic assistance is viable. The toolkit helps ensure funds are placed in countries with sufficient institutional resilience.
3. Risk Mitigation for MCC Compacts: MCC relies on governance thresholds. CPRS fills the gap between formal indicators and informal realities.
4. Security Strategy Alignment: AFRICOM and regional security teams benefit from better insights into elite fragmentation and military politicization.
5. Strategic Competition: The toolkit identifies weak points where authoritarian competitors are most likely to gain influence.

#### **WHY THIS MATTERS NOW (URGENCY)**

Over the past 36 months there have been 6 coups in West and Central Africa. There have been multiple suspended constitutions and foreign authoritarian presence has been expanding. There have also been aid program disruptions in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Sudan and most recently, electoral manipulation in Kenya, Uganda, and Senegal. These events illustrate why the work must continue immediately.

Without early-warning diagnostics, the United States risks investing heavily in unstable governments, losing influence to adversarial powers, misreading the health of democratic institutions, and making decisions based on outdated or incomplete information. The United States needs this now, not after labor certification delays.