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The Global Rise of Personalized Politics: It's Not Just Dictators Anymore

No one would dispute that power in Russia today lies firmly in the hands of President Vladimir Putin. But his command over the political system was not always so sweeping. When Putin assumed power after Boris Yeltsin's resignation in 1999, Freedom House ranked Russia as "partly free."[1] During the course of his first four years in office, however, Putin steadily neutralized influential oligarchs and installed loyalists—particularly from the security services—in key positions of power. By 2005, Freedom House had downgraded Russia's ranking to "not free," focusing in particular on Putin's concentration of executive power. Since returning to the presidency in 2012, Putin has continued to accumulate power by monopolizing his control over the media, hollowing out the legislature, systematically disempowering civil society organizations, and marginalizing potential competitors both in and out of government. Today, scholars estimate that Putin and a circle of 20–30 trusted advisors with ties to the military and security services make most of the decisions in Russia, and that the real power resides within an inner circle of just half a dozen individuals.[2] Politics have become so

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personalized that the stability of the Russian system is contingent on Putin's own popularity.

President Recep Erdogan is on a similar trajectory in Turkey—a country long considered a positive model of Islamist-influenced democracy. Erdogan used a failed July 2016 coup attempt to accelerate his efforts to dominate Turkey's institutions. Following the attempted coup, Erdogan proceeded to purge his regime of dissenting voices, including those from within his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), the military, the media, and the judiciary. A planned April 2017 referendum would further expand Erdogan's powers as president and enable him to remain in office until 2019.

While personalization is particularly easy to see in the Russian and Turkish examples, the personalization of politics is not unique to these countries. The trend toward personalism is apparent in countries including Bangladesh, China, and the Philippines. Even in the heart of democratic Europe, leaders are taking steps to enhance their power at the expense of political allies: Hungary's Victor Orban and Poland's Jarosław Kaczyński are two of the most frequently cited examples of the growth of personalism in European politics. And this expansion is poised to accelerate. The spread of populist sentiment across Europe is fueling public demand for parties and leaders extolling the virtues of strong and decisive leadership. Similarly, the U.S. election has led political observers to question whether the United States is also ripe for personalization of its political system.[3]

The "Authoritarianization" Model

While increasing personalism is evident across a broad swath of countries, the trend has been most pronounced within authoritarian settings. Data show that personalist dictatorships—defined as those regimes where power is highly concentrated in the hands of a single individual—have increased notably since the end of the Cold War."[4] In 1988, personalist regimes comprised just 23 percent of all dictatorships. Today, this percentage has almost doubled, with personalist dictators ruling 40 percent of all authoritarian regimes.[5]

We tend to think that all dictatorships fit the strongman mold. Vivid anecdotes and mental images of infamous and eccentric leaders, such as Libya's Moammar Qaddafi and the former Zaire's Joseph Mobutu, have given rise to and reinforced this perception. But the reality is that there are different types of dictatorships—including monarchies, dominant party regimes, and military juntas—and most dictatorships since 1946 have not been ruled by personalist dictators. Instead, since the end of World War II, most dictatorships have been governed by strong political parties, such as Mexico's Institutional Revolution Party (PRI), or military juntas, as in much of Latin America throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Over

time, however, there has been an evolution in authoritarian politics, and personalist regimes have become the dominant form of authoritarianism.

How do we explain the rise of personalism in authoritarian regimes? Part of the answer lies in shifts in the geopolitical environment in the post-Cold War period. First, during the Cold War, two types of authoritarian regimes predominated: Communist Party systems on the left, such as in the Soviet Union, and military governments on the right, including those in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s. Both of those types of systems were discredited by economic and other policy failures in the 1980s and lost most of their hold (with of course the grand exception of China, and the lesser exceptions of Vietnam, Laos, North Korea, and Cuba). The decline of these ideology-based regimes has led to a post-ideological moment in authoritarianism, with personalization as its main form.

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The strength of communist parties in Cold War Eastern Europe illustrates this dynamic. These parties provided a powerful constraint on the ability of leaders to expand their personal power. In Czechoslovakia, for example, high-ranking party officials forced Anton Novotny from power in 1968 amid concerns he was concentrating too much power in his own hands.[6] Novotny had taken steps to eliminate rivals, including purging several party members who disagreed with his policies.

Second, and closely related, the growth of personalized dictatorships has stemmed from a shift in the way that autocrats are coming to power. Historically, most dictatorships have come from coups or insurgencies. In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, 75 percent of dictatorships emerged in these ways. Over time, however, more and more autocrats are assuming power through a process we call "authoritarianization," or the slow and incremental dismantling of democratic systems by *democratically-elected* leaders. In the 1970s and 1980s, authoritarianization accounted for less than 10 percent of new autocracies. Since 1990, this figure has more than doubled: authoritarianization accounted for more than a quarter of all authoritarian onsets from 2000–2010. This was the pathway to dictatorship for Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, Russia's Vladimir Putin, and Turkey's Recep Erdogan. If current trends persist, authoritarianization is likely to become the most common pathway to autocracy.

The way a dictator comes to power matters for the extent of personalization because the strength and cohesion of the group that supports a leader's ascent to power help determine the institutional constraints the leader faces, and therefore their latitude to consolidate control. Broadly speaking, personalization occurs when a leader emerges who is intent on expanding executive power at the expense of their allies. According to political scientist Milan Svolik, the only real deterrent

to a leader's ability to expand executive power is the extent to which the inner circle can credibly commit to oust a leader for their opportunistic efforts. (Svolik discusses this in the context of an autocracy, but the dynamic also applies outside these regimes.) If a leader succeeds in several power grabs, s/he may accumulate enough power that regime officials will no longer be able to resist. This is because with each power grab, a leader's threat to eliminate non-compliant members of the inner circle becomes more credible, making regime officials less inclined to resist.[7]

Historically, personalist dictatorships have been less prevalent than other forms of autocracy because leaders entering office via coup or insurgency had to contend with and satisfy members of the insurgent movement or military. Both of these organizations are well-organized and armed, which enable them to credibly threaten to remove ambitious new leaders seeking to consolidate control and build personal power. In Ethiopia, for example, the military ousted emperor Haile Selassie in a military coup in 1974; and a military junta, known as the Derg, appointed Aman Andom, a senior and respected former general, as head of government. However, Andom began building support for himself outside the Derg structure in order to reduce his dependence on it, leading the Derg to oust him less than two months after he assumed power.

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In contrast to the cohesive elite structure that tends to surround leaders that seize power through coups or insurgencies, the rise of authoritarianization has meant that a growing number of autocrats are facing weaker, less coherent elite inner circles, paving the way to greater personalization. First, the political parties surrounding autocrats who emerge through authoritarianization are often weak and fragmented. In fact, in many cases of authoritarianization, ruling parties are newly created around the time that the leader assumes power, and are built by co-opting opponents and merging with other parties. This enables autocrats to negotiate with factions, as opposed to a united front, and therefore more easily divide and conquer potential threats to personal power.[8] Russia's United Russia party, for example, was formed in 2001 through a merger of two pre-existing parties, the Unity Party and the Fatherland–All Russia Party. Similarly, Hugo Chavez's Fifth Republic Movement was created in 1997, just before Chavez came to power in 1999, and was comprised almost entirely of loyalists. Neither party was able to constrain the leader's efforts to personalize power.

Second, in addition to benefiting from weak and fragmented political parties, leaders who come to power via authoritarianization are also well-positioned to

expand executive control because they eliminate most other constraints on their power in the process of emerging as autocrats. In contrast to the sudden and decisive breaks with democracy that result from coups (which often leave intact many of the governing institutions), leaders who authoritarianize have already eliminated potential rivals and autonomous centers of power including the judiciary, media, and civil society. The rise of authoritarianization, therefore, has meant that democratically-elected leaders who slowly dismantle democracy are most likely to transition to the most personalized form of autocracy. From 2000–2010, 75 percent of the instances of authoritarianization led to personalist as opposed to other forms of dictatorship.

The Perils of Personalism

This rise in personalism is cause for concern. Personalist dictatorships tend to produce the worst outcomes of any type of political regime. Whether leaders rule largely at their own discretion or face institutional constraints from a powerful party or influential military dramatically affects how policy decisions are made.

A robust body of political science research shows that relative to other forms of dictatorship, personalized leaders pursue the most risky and aggressive foreign policies; they are the most likely to invest in nuclear weapons, the most likely to fight wars against democracies, and the most likely to initiate inter-state conflicts more generally.[9] As the adventurism of Saddam Hussein, Idi Amin, and Kim Jong-un suggests, the lack of accountability that personalist leaders face translates into an ability to take risks that dictators in other systems simply cannot afford.[10]

All leaders require support.[11] For democratic leaders, this support extends broadly to include the voting public. Within non-personalist authoritarian settings, leaders are accountable to ruling party elites, senior military officers, or an extended royal family. Personalist dictators, in contrast, have a very narrow

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set of backers—frequently a small clique of family or loyal friends.[12] With such minimal restraint from elites or the public, these leaders have wide latitude to initiate provocations without the risk of facing consequences or being punished for their words or actions.[13] Personalist dictators also prioritize loyalty over competence and dole out government positions as well as promotions accordingly. This strategy decreases their access to accurate information, raising the risk of miscalculations that can lead to conflict.[14] The incentive structures that personalist dictators produce create aggressive foreign policy choices that are often difficult to anticipate.

Russia underscores the link between rising personalism and aggressive foreign policy. While Putin's actions in Crimea in 2014 and military intervention in Syria in 2015 were designed to advance a number of key Russian goals, it is also likely that Putin's lack of domestic constraint and accountability increased the level of risk he was willing to accept in pursuit of those goals. The Kremlin has refined a number of tactics to reduce Putin's accountability for his foreign policy decisions. For example, Putin's tight control over the media ensures that the public receives only the official narrative of foreign events. Limited access to outside information makes it difficult for the Russian people to access unbiased accounts of what happens outside of Russia and gauge Putin's success in the foreign policy arena. Putin's elimination of competing voices within his regime further ensures that he faces minimal accountability for his foreign policy actions.

The personalization of politics in authoritarian China shows many of these same trends and causes for concern. During his four years in control, President and General Secretary of the Communist Party Xi Jinping has used an aggressive anti-corruption campaign to sideline his political opponents and boost his own public standing. Referred to as the "The Chairman of Everything," Xi has amassed more power than any Chinese leader since Mao Zedong.[15] Xi's increasingly aggressive posture in the South China Sea has occurred alongside the rising personalization of the political system. If he is able to further consolidate control and limit accountability—particularly over military and foreign policy bodies—research suggests that he, too, will feel free to escalate his aggressive rhetoric and actions in the South China Sea.

Not only do personalist dictatorships pursue aggressive foreign policies, but they are also often difficult and unpredictable partners. Research on authoritarianism underscores that limited constraints on decision-making in personalist settings means that leaders have the latitude to change their minds at whim, producing volatile and sometimes even erratic policies.[16] Moreover, personalist leaders are among those autocrats most suspicious of U.S. intentions, and view the creation of an external enemy as an effective means for boosting public support. Anti-U.S. rhetoric, therefore, has been most pronounced in more personalist settings. Personalist leaders including Russian President Putin, Venezuelan President Maduro, and Ugandan President Museveni have used anti-U.S. rhetoric to distract technology-empowered publics from economic decline and other regime shortcomings.

Finally, personalist regimes are the most likely types of autocracies to defy the efforts of the democracy community. Data show that personalist regimes are the least likely of all autocracies to democratize upon their collapse.[17] These leaders cling to power in the face of domestic challenges, often leading to violent and protracted transitions.[18] Recent events in Iraq, Libya, and Syria illustrate this dynamic. The violence that so often accompanies the downfall of personalist

dictators, coupled with these leaders' tendencies to dismantle institutions and sideline competent individuals out of fear of threats to their power, creates an environment that bodes poorly for democracy. Instead, personalist regimes tend to give way to new dictatorships, as in the Democratic Republic of Congo post-Mobutu, or a complete breakdown of order, as in Somalia since Siad Barre.

The Paradox of Personalism

In some ways, the personalization of autocracies appears to run counter to popular arguments about the international diffusion of power. Many scholars argue that power is now being shared more widely by a growing number of actors—to non-government organizations, corporations, and wealthy or even technology-empowered individuals. The diffusion of power has led many to suggest that the age of authoritarianism is over. For example, Moises Naim in *The End of Power* writes, "dictators, plutocrats, corporate behemoths…are more constrained in what they can do than in the past, and their hold on power is increasingly less secure. In politics…the rise of political freedom is obvious; authoritarianism is in retreat."[19] He and other political observers have argued that current dictators will soon find themselves unable to build and maintain the level of power that autocracies—particularly highly personalized ones—require to maintain their repressive systems of rule.[20] So what is the future of personalism?

It may be that power is diffusing. And it may be that many leaders are finding it harder to impose their will and pursue their preferred course of action. But autocrats possess a distinct set of skills and strategies that are allowing them to slow the dissipation of power in ways that democracies cannot. In *The End of Power*, Moises Naim also notes that power needs a captive audience—that where citizens have few or no alternative outlets, they have little choice but to consent to the terms of the institutions they face.[21] By quashing alternative centers of power, controlling the media, and degrading institutions, authoritarian regimes—and those leaders in the process of dismantling democracy—are actually well positioned to insulate power.

For example, autocrats can limit the influence of technology-empowered individuals through filters and controls, surveillance, repression, and self-censorship. Similarly, autocrats create incentives that lead the myriad actors who can chip away at power—including governors, judges, and entrepreneurs—to support rather than work against regime goals. Because autocrats are less likely to be affected by the dispersion of power than their democratic counterparts, they are likely to avoid much of the disruption, interference, and other governance challenges that power diffusion is creating in more democratic environments.

While autocrats of all breeds may be poised to expand their ranks, personalist leaders appear especially well positioned. Political forecasts suggest that the world is likely to become increasingly turbulent over the next ten to twenty years, given increasing levels of violence, economic disparity, and polarization.[22] These trends could elicit a widespread backlash against core democratic values of freedom of expression and individual empowerment if a greater share of citizens worldwide comes to see strong leaders as a better option than volatility and chaos. In fact, academic research suggests that as individual fears of societal change and external threats grow, so too does their preference for strong, decisive leaders who are willing to use force to maintain order.[23] As people view the traditional order and their basic security as being under threat, there is a tendency to increasingly favor and support autocrats. Rising global volatility, therefore, has the potential to further fuel the rise of personalized authoritarian politics.

Warning Signs: Indicators of Personalist Dictatorship

The personalization of authoritarian regimes is likely to remain a significant foreign policy challenge. Given the continued movement toward personalization and the dangers inherent in this trend, we reviewed all dictatorships since 1946 to identify features that distinguish personalist dictators from other forms of dictatorship.[24] These five indicators can be used as "alarm bells," to gauge the extent of personalization in autocracies. (It is worth mentioning that we do not include indicators, such as control of the media, that do not consistently vary across types of dictatorships; we identify factors that distinguish one type of autocracy from another–since all autocracies control the media to some degree, it does not help differentiate between types.)

> Five indicators can be used as "alarm bells" to gauge the extent of personalization in autocracies.

The first is to *install loyalists*. Leaders seeking to consolidate their personal control over the political system install loyalists in key positions of power including in the courts, the security apparatus, the military, the ruling political party, and the bureaucracy. Individuals with viewpoints that run counter to those of the leader are replaced with individuals the leader can trust, even if they lack competence. In Venezuela, for example, President Hugo Chávez placed his *chavistas* "in key positions of power across the judiciary, army, central bank, and the state-owned oil industry…Technical ability [was] a secondary consideration to fealty."[25]

Next is to *promote family*. Leaders looking to amass power seek to place close family members in influential positions, regardless of government experience.

Like other loyalists, family members help insulate a leader from opposing views and are reliable implementers of a leader's agenda. Iraq under Saddam Hussein provides an extreme example: Hussein's son Qusay controlled the Revolutionary Guard, his son Uday ran the Fedayeens, and his cousin Barzan Abd al-Ghafur led the Special Republic Guard. None of these family members had the experience or qualifications necessary to run an elite military force; all were considered lacking in aptitude.[26]

Another feature is to *create a new party or movement*. Personalist dictators also tend to create new political organizations or movements. Leaders use these movements to signal their break with the political establishment and create a new base for their support. In Peru, for example, Alberto Fujimori ran as a self-professed anti-establishment candidate in the 1990 presidential election and created the *Cambio 90* movement to support his candidacy. Fujimori stacked *Cambio 90* with his own personal acquaintances, enabling him to develop a base of power independent of pre-existing political parties. Fujimori's marginalization of the traditional political establishment paved the way for one-man rule following his assumption to power.

Use of direct rule or referendum is a fourth feature. Leaders intent on concentrating power also seek to appeal directly to the public through referendum or plebiscites to legitimate their rule or extend their time in office. In Nazi Germany, for example, the German government used the referendum of 1934 to gain public approval for Adolf Hitler's illegal combination of the powers of the President of the Reich with the office of the Chancellor following President Paul von Hindenburg's death.[27] Just under 90 percent of voters voted "yes," and the media reported that the referendum gave Hitler "dictatorial powers unequaled in any other country, and probably unequaled in history."[28]

A final indicator is the creation of *new security services*. Personalist dictators create new security services outside of the domain of the traditional military command. This gives leaders direct access to an armed organization that is personally loyal and that has the capacity to counterbalance the formal military. In Haiti, Francois (Papa Doc) Duvalier created the *Tonton Macoute* in 1959, a militia comprised of a consortium of young illiterate men from the countryside who were fiercely loyal to him. The group functioned as a security police in Haiti, eventually becoming more powerful than the military. Such a tactic increases the leader's grip on power by lessening the credibility of the threat of military ouster.

Democratic Decay and the Rise of Personalism

The personalization of today's autocracies has clear implications for the conduct and behavior of these regimes. However, the personalization of politics is not confined to autocracies; it is increasingly evident in a growing number of democratic

systems. Many of today's democracies that have experienced a decline in respect for democratic principles, like Hungary and Poland, feature strong and decisive leaders, like Viktor Orban and Jaroslaw Kaczynski, who enjoy a disproportionate share of power.

The consequences of personalism in democracies are not yet well understood. There is currently a lack of academic research that looks at how personalism affects the behavior and conduct of democratic governments. However, our review of cases where democratic leaders amassed personal power and ultimately crossed the threshold into autocracy—or, again, what we call authoritarianization—reveals a significant implication of the rising personalization of democracies: once personalization gains momentum, it becomes difficult to counter.

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Preventing a rise in personalism, even in previously liberal democracies, from resulting in the onset of autocracy is hard; the subtle and incremental ways in which these leaders expand control rarely provide a clear triggering point that serves to mobilize resistance. These leaders are careful to avoid actions that could create a focal point around which opposition can coalesce. And in cases in which vocal critics do emerge, personalizing leaders have learned to discredit them as "agents of the establishment" or other provocateurs seeking to destabilize the system.

Moreover, many of today's personalist democrats are popular, which provides a broad base of support for their proposed changes. In some cases, their appeal stems from their populist policies; in others, they have learned to master assertive, nationalist rhetoric that plays well with aggrieved domestic audiences. This popularity, combined with distrust of traditional sources of power—including long-standing political parties, civil bureaucracy, and even the media—gives personalist democrats a window of opportunity to dismantle institutional checks on executive power. Nominal allies on day one, such as elites in politically-aligned parties and among the public, often acquiesce to initial power grabs by personalist leaders in the hopes that such moves will further diminish the future power of opposition groups.

Allies on day one, however, soon become enemies as personalist leaders amass power. Once these leaders change the rules of the game to abolish well-established institutional constraints on their behavior, even initial allies lose their ability to check the leader. Turkish President Erdogan's recent purge of Gulenists, for example, was really a narrowing of his support coalition, expelling one-time allies from its ranks.[29]

For this reason, it is imperative for organized groups, both in civil society and traditional political parties, to mobilize against changes in the rules of the game. In democratic settings, initial signs that leaders seek to personalize power—making moves toward authoritizanation—have become quite easy to spot. These signs are distinct from the indicators above, which distinguish highly personalized autocracies from other forms of dictatorship. These leaders tend to follow an increasingly well-trodden path blazed by once democratically-elected leaders such as Putin, Chavez, and Erdogan. In these instances, leaders look to grab power from the courts or local elected leaders such as governors; they shut down the legislature or banish opposition parties from policymaking; they shut down opposition journalists and media firms while creating new media organizations under direct control of regime insiders; and, ultimately, they change the rules of how elections are run, such as who gets to stand for elections, who gets to vote, and how the votes are counted.

Personalist rule is not a new phenomenon. If anything, it has been the norm for much of history, ranging from the Pharaohs of Egypt to the monarchs of Europe. In the past century or so, however, more collegial forms of autocratic rule, like single party and military dictatorships, gained traction and were the most common type of dictatorship. As long-time chronicler of dictators Paul Brooker noted in 2000, what differentiated late-20th century dictatorships from earlier forms of authoritarianism was the very fact that monarchs and chiefs were no longer the sole individuals in power.[30]

We highlight here that the tide is changing back. Personalism is rising. And it does not appear to be limited to autocracies anymore.

Notes

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14. Frantz and Ezrow, *The Politics of Dictatorship.*

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